

Becoming
Lady Washington

A Novel

Betty Bolté

About

Becoming Lady Washington

Martha ôPatsyô Custis manages an immense eighteenth-century plantation in the Virginia colony. But as a young widow she's hard pressed to balance her business and to care for her two young children. They need a father and protector. She needs a husband and business partnerë one she can trust, especially now as tensions rise between the motherland and the American colonies. Her experience and education have sustained her thus far but when her life veers in an unexpected direction, she realizes she has so much more to learn.

Colonel George Washington takes an interest in her and she's surprised to find him so sociable and appealing. They form an instant bond and she is certain he'll be a likeable and loving husband and father figure for her children. She envisions a quiet life at Mount Vernon, working together to provide for their extended family.

But when trouble in the form of British oppression, taxes, and royal arrogance leads to revolt and revolution, George must choose between duty to country and Martha. Compelled to take matters into her own hands, Martha must decide whether to remain where she belongs or go with her husbandë no matter what the dangerous future may hold.

Also by Betty Bolté

Notes of Love and War

Fury Falls Inn

The Haunting of Fury Falls Inn

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Desperate Reflections

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Dedication

To the memory of Lorel Bolté, my mother-in-law and who was a great example of a Generalös
granddaughter, daughter, and wife

Acknowledgements

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of to help me write a well-rounded and informative story. But mostly for his patience and support during the years it has taken me to bring Martha's story to life for my readers.

Betty Bolté

Huntsville, AL

2020

Mount Vernon Plantation, Virginia – 1802

Our love nestled in my hands. Pen and ink applied to linen pages were the only tangible evidence remaining of the love I shared with my husband. He called to me, softly, urgently. I sensed him more than heard his voice, but he summoned me nonetheless. Alone in my chamber, I knew the time drew near for me to answer his command, but delayed doing so until I'd done what I'd come upstairs to my bedchamber to do. I owed him that and so much more.

Voices along with the parakeets' incessant chatter floated up from the portico below, the reassuring sounds drifting up and into my room. Another more subtle voice in my mind urged me to follow George's private secretary's circumspect example for far different reasons than to protect that awful Jefferson. I'd left everyone below to escape to my private space, using my ailment as an excuse to rest. I didn't tell any one my true intention because I'm sure they'd try to stop me.

I gripped one of the many packets of letters stacked on my bedside table, each tied with a red satin ribbon faded to dusty rose. The papers were creased and stained from their travels from one state to another, from the multitude of hands which passed on the letters, and from the repeated reading of their contents. Words of love. Of private jokes between a man and his wife. Words of anger and dismay, of fear and courage, all kept mostly secure from the eyes of strangers. Safe from being abused and published in the paper, their meaning twisted and contorted to suit nefarious aims by my husband's enemies. Men like that blasted betrayer, Thomas Jefferson. I shall never forgive him for intentionally working to defame my precious life mate. The wounds from Jefferson's actions never healed. How could Tobias Lear have wanted to protect that man's reputation? Nonetheless, I'd defend George's reputation until the day I died. Maybe longer.

I looked around my bedchamber. Not the one I had shared for so many years with my love. No, that one I'd closed up tight upon his death three long years ago before moving into this

third floor chamber. I smiled at the sight of the four-post bed with its pink roses dominating against a cheery yellow backing. They brought a bit of my garden inside to keep me company, now that I no longer had the interest or strength to work among the flowers. My gaze rested on the dark wood dresser, a looking glass framed above it. The fire snapped and crackled, its flames dancing merrily along the logs. The sound of the greedy flames reminded me of my mission.

Pulling a chair away from the writing desk, I positioned it close to the fire with one hand, clutching the treasured missives against my chest. Sitting, I tugged on the ribbon, freeing the folded pages to tumble into my lap. I leaned forward, and began feeding the letters into the fire. Watched the ancient pages burn and curl as they blackened into ash. As each letter shriveled and disappeared, my mind drifted back over my life. A life of love, grief, and peril. Starting with the precocious decision that set the rest into motion.

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Williamsburg, Virginia – 1746

Which one would suit my desires best? I wouldn't let such an important decision be made by any one else. Least of all the foppish young men ogling me from across the room.

Suppressing a shudder of revulsion with an effort, I skimmed the offerings in the form of the eligible men in the large open room overflowing with people. My breath caught in my throat at the very idea I'd actually be allowed to take such an important matter into my own hands. I'd convinced my parents it was time, despite only having reached the age of fifteen years to be presented to society. I knew what I did and didn't want out of marriage and had taken the reins in hand to steer the course of my future as I did my pretty mare. I'd marry, but on my terms.

The first strains of the musicians tuning drew my attention away from the array of colorful and bedecked ball gowns of the older women to the festively decorated dance floor. The large table and chairs used by the lower and upper houses of the government to discuss the colony's legal business had been removed from the upstairs of the Capitol. Not that I knew from my personal experience. No, my father had to tell me since women were not normally permitted in the upstairs meeting room. I didn't understand the reasoning behind such a silly restriction, but defying it was not worth the effort. I had little to no interest in politics. I'd rather select fabrics and ribbons for a gown than worry about ordinances and laws.

I smoothed my gloved hands down the yellow silk taffeta skirts of my gown adorned with flowers in the latest fashion with fine gold satin ribbons. The skirts split to reveal the blue quilted petticoat beneath. I tapped the toe of one of my adorable shoes, made from sequin-studded yellow satin with Louis heels, anxious to have the first dance over and done with. I had more important things to contemplate than correct dance steps. Like which of the bachelors in the room might make a suitable husband, one who could provide a finer house for a family than the simple plantation house my father had given my mother when they'd first moved to the area.

Chestnut Grove plantation overlooked the Pamunkey river and was considered to be a respectable size. Yet the manor house could not hold a candle to the house and grounds my Aunt Unity lived in upriver. Elsing Green boasted a hunting lodge, a small building for occasional use, which was about the size of my childhood home. Uncle William Dandridge had built the new manor house to dwarf the original building, which it did in grand style and elegance. Even the wood floors inside were of better construction and design. I wanted to marry a man I could respect and admire, one who had the wherewithal to elevate my status in the colony and enable me to have the brood of children I longed for. Only I wanted more than a loving relationship and a house by the river. After all, marriage is a partnership more than anything else. I'd not want an abusive or boastful man, but one I could trust to keep me safe and sheltered while I managed his household and large family. Would I find a potential life mate on the night of my first presentation to the governor and our society? Not likely, but I'd decided to begin the search.

The musicians played the first notes of a minuet to open the ball and the first couples, led by Lieutenant Governor William Gooch and his wife Rebecca, stepped off into the intricate and decorous movements. I swallowed a sigh. Ladies making their first appearance, including me, were required to participate in the dance, but not until the higher ranking guests performed for the spectators. Clasp my gloved hands together, I glanced at my parents standing a few paces from me, adorned in their finest garments.

My parents, known as Jack and Fanny Dandridge by their friends, had settled into the colony and made deep connections through his work and charitable efforts, in particular as vestryman and churchwarden for St. Peter's Church. Mother loved having the house filled with children, and hoped to have more than the six of us keeping her busy. With good fortune, one day I'd have my own husband and family. Like Mother, I longed for a flock of children to love.

My mother received glances of approval as she stood in her pale green confection with

silver stomacher and scattering of seed pearls on the skirt. All around the edges of the floor, burgesses and the other respected gentility of Virginia, resplendent in their finest attire, chatted amongst themselves as the dance continued. The other ladies, all young women older than me, huddled together with their mothers as chaperones. None of my friends had the courage to make their first presentation yet, so I stayed close to my parents, grateful for their support. The Birth Night Ball, celebrating the king's birthday, was the biggest night of the year and everyone who was any one made an appearance. Fresh dampness moistened my palms and I swallowed the nervousness threatening my composure. I'd begged for this opportunity, so I better not flag in my own courage. My friends would never let me forget if I didn't go through with my plan. I prayed for the strength to make it through the festivities without embarrassing myself or my family.

The beautiful gown gave me confidence, but would I remember the steps when the time came to move onto the floor with my father? I studied the movements of those dancing, rather than comparing the dancers' attire to my own. Mother had assured me the dress, the flowing silk brocade swishing gently with each step, served the purpose, maybe even better than the others. But did my manners and movements meet the mark of a young lady? I squared my shoulders, determined to present my best self.

Keeping a smile firmly in place, I perused the crowd engaged in watching the performance. A sea of heads nodded to the beat of the music, all eyes on the dance. Except for one pair of startling eyes gazing back at me, surprise and perhaps interest apparent even across the space between us. Something in his gaze drew me, but I dismissed it as whimsy. Still, I couldn't deny the familiar man continued to study me.

Daniel Custis. Tall and strong, and so handsome in his finery my heart skipped a beat before plunging into a gallop. The suit he wore reflected his prominence in the colony. Impeccable tailoring created the very essence of wealth and esteem in the lines and quality of the fabric of the coat, the sheen of the breeches and stockings. Highly polished gold shoe buckles reflected the light from hundreds of candles. I approved his appearance, recognizing it for the statement it was. He was the most eligible bachelor in Virginia. I'd known him in passing all of my life, aware of the mature, thoughtful, and much older man. Goodness, he couldn't be interested in me, though, not at twenty years or so my senior. Could he? He angled his head ever so slightly, enough to convey his appreciation. Never had a man looked at me with such a light

shining from his soul. Warmth flooded my neck and crept to my cheeks. Goodness, how should I respond? Flustered, I clutched my fan with both hands. I blinked and then returned the nod before forcing my gaze to slide away from his. It would be unseemly to express too much interest. But I must admit to curiosity regarding his intentions.

“Patsy, it is time.” Father appeared at my side, holding out one gloved hand.

Four simple words set my pulse pounding in my ears, damping the sound of the music. I put my hand in his, glad for the warmth and strength flowing into my fingers. I followed Father’s lead and took my position, feeling as if all eyes rested upon me. The moment had arrived for me to be judged on my comportment and grace.

Father squeezed my hand, raised a brow, and smiled. “You’re a beautiful and kind young woman, a prize for any man here. This is your night. I’m honored to be your first partner.”

“Thank you, Father.” Heat rose to my cheeks again. Lifting my chin, I vowed to do my best. The music signaled the beginning of the set and I fell into step, mirroring my father’s movements as he led me through the dance.

We circled each other, first to the left, then to the right, clasping hands and then separating. In time, the rhythm of the music and the swish of my skirts combined with the repetitive movements to calm my agitation. Faces peering at me from the sidelines blurred into an indistinct image. As long as I paid attention to my actions I would retain my composure and with good fortune not trip over my feet. My father, the man who all my life had supported and encouraged, beamed his approval and pride.

The tune ended and the dancers performed their acknowledgements to one another, the men bowing, the women curtsying. I rose from my deep curtsy and my father crooked his arm to lead me off the floor, allowing the next set of eager couples to take their positions.

“That was lovely.” Mother smiled, bumping her fan closed against one gloved palm. “You’ve made us both proud.”

“I was so very nervous. Could you tell?” I needed something to do with my hands to conceal my nervousness. I retrieved my fan from where it dangled at my wrist, opening it to move slowly before my warm face.

“Not at all.” Mother dropped her fan to hang from her wrist as she folded her hands before her. “Jack, darling, I’d adore a cup of punch.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “Patsy, would you care for some?”

Could I keep it down? Or would I spill it on my dress? Visions of terrible and mortifying results made me shake my head. "No, thank you. I believe I'll move closer to the window for some air."

"Very well. We shall return shortly." Father wrapped his hand around my mother's elbow and propelled her toward the array of delicacies spread on tables in the open space at the top of the stairs.

I made my way through the throng of guests to stand by the open window. A cool breeze bathed my cheeks, bringing the scent of dried leaves and the smoke of many fires to tickle my nose. Moonlight splayed across the formal garden and the buildings of the town in the distance. Naked trees stood starkly against the deep black of the starry heavens in the soft light. In a few months snow would blanket the land, but for now the ground remained hard and dry, making road travel possible if not pleasant. Aunt Unity had graciously invited us to ride to Williamsburg with her in a fine coach pulled by four matched black horses. Arriving in such a high fashion lent a different level of elegance to the ensuing events I hadn't dreamed of. Maybe one day I'd have my own coach-and-four to take me places.

Turning my back to the window, I observed the crowd. Through the arched door to one side, I spotted tables surrounded by seated card-playing guests. The music changed to a lively tune, announcing the beginning of the less formal English country dances. My parents eased through the crowd, stopping often to chat. They knew most everyone in the room as a result of their involvement in the colony's church and government.

I surveyed the other guests, feeling part of the society in an entirely new way. Not as a child looking through the window, but as an active member with my own role. Then my heart leapt into my throat when Daniel Custis separated from a circle of men, probably assemblymen of one rank or another, and strolled in my direction. What did he want? What would I say to him? Oh, how I wished my mother were at my side. I wasn't as ready as I'd thought.

He seemed intent on me in a way he'd never been before. Not when I'd seen him at church, or floating past the plantation in his schooner, or even when I accompanied my parents to Williamsburg for market day. I swallowed hard, clasping my trembling hands. When I'd been preparing for the ball it never occurred to me someone like the man drawing nearer with each beat of my heart would take any interest. He'd make a fine partner, with his sterling reputation and financial security.

On the other hand, becoming involved with him would mean having to deal with his quarrelsome and volatile father. My skin itched at the thought. Where was the old man, anyway? I skimmed the crowd, finally detecting John Custis, eyes narrowed, watching his son approach me. The man had a colony-wide reputation for his temper and vengeful attitude. I'd witnessed it at church on more than one occasion, given he and my father both served as vestrymen. No love was lost between them, either.

“Good evening, Miss Dandridge.” Daniel greeted me with a bow. “Congratulations on fascinating every man in the room with your dancing and your charms.”

“How kind of you to say so. However, I cannot imagine you are correct, sir.” I spread my fan open and moved it lazily back and forth, heat once more on my cheeks. Acting as mature and grown as possible. Having something repetitive to do with my hands also calmed my sudden anxiety. “But I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Verily, I say, you bewitched the bachelors with your grace and pleasing manners.” Daniel shifted his weight, subtly closing the distance between us.

“Now I know you jest.” I espied a new intensity in his gaze. His nearness set my heart aflutter, stealing my breath for a moment. “Where is your companion for the evening?”

He lifted a shoulder and let it drop. “I have not the honor of a companion but have arrived alone, as usual.” He shot a glance over his shoulder, in the vague direction of where his father stood observing our conversation. Then his eyes returned to me, his lips curving into a seductive grin. “I shall be honored if you'd give me the pleasure of a dance.”

I couldn't help but look at the older Mr. Custis. I was not at all surprised to note disapproval in his expression. My back went up, much like I'd seen the hunting dogs do when strangers approached the property. Hackles standing away from their necks as a warning. I am not quick to anger, which proved useful in times such as this. A slow burn started in my stomach at the continuing frown from across the room. Despite his opinion, what harm would one dance possibly do? Daniel was a man and could make his own decisions. Lifting my chin to meet Daniel's gaze as much as show his father how much I thought of his opinion, I nodded. “I'd enjoy dancing with you.”

He held out a gloved hand with a smile on his lips. “Miss Dandridge.”

I accepted his arm and followed him onto the floor as the musicians started a new tune. I intended to thoroughly enjoy myself. The weight of the elder Custis's glare threatened to make

me stumble, but I ignored him, keeping my attention instead on his charming son. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my parents exchange a look before turning to witness the dance. Daniel extended one leg to bow—a movement designed to demonstrate the strength of his legs—as I curtsied and lowered my eyes. Daniel's leg proved nice, indeed. Returning to a standing position, we regarded each other for a beat as the music wrapped around us. The dance soon drew my entire attention and had my feet flying. My heart raced with the touch of his hand guiding me to perform a turn in first one direction and then the other before parting for several steps.

Was it the idea of me being a woman now prompting me to search his face for signs of interest? Or perhaps the question of whose wife I wanted to be? Surely, he would not be truly interested, not when my father's financial situation could not hold a candle to John Custis's wealth. Yet something had changed inside, making my breath catch each time Daniel's twinkling eyes lit upon me. Making me notice the classic qualities of his face and long, straight nose. Making me wish for some miracle to make it possible such a distinguished man would consider me a suitable life companion. I imagined he asked me to dance as a charitable action, seeing that I stood alone while the dances continued. That thought settled in my stomach like a day-old biscuit, weighting my feet as well as my heart.

When the dance ended, Daniel and I bowed and curtsied again before he offered to escort me from the floor. Feeling suddenly silly and embarrassed, I laid my fingers on his steely forearm. He led me toward my parents, while a flutter of nervousness filled me.

Father cautiously greeted Daniel as they approached. Daniel returned the greeting, including Mother in his bow. Straightening, he relinquished my hand. "I surrender your daughter to your care, Colonel Dandridge."

"Thank you, Mr. Custis." Father lifted his cup of punch in salute. "Are you enjoying the ball?"

Daniel nodded, ending with a quick sideways look at me. "Congratulations on your daughter's successful presentation."

Father inclined his head to accept the compliment. "I never doubted her ability to win over any one. She is a very special young lady in our view."

Daniel cleared his throat and shifted closer to me, keeping his gaze on my parents. "Would you object if I were to wait upon your daughter?"

I inhaled sharply, converting a gasp of surprise into a deep breath. My heart bumped in

my chest with alarming speed. What would Father say to such a request?

Father's brows arched, then relaxed. "We'd have no objection to your courtship, so long as she agrees." He turned to me and waited as I grappled with the concept.

Did Daniel's father know of his desire to visit me? I refused to look toward the elder Mr. Custis. Daniel, not his father, wished to call on me. Me! The earlier flutter stretched its wings like an eagle preparing to take flight. Daniel, the handsome, kind man beside me, wanted to become better acquainted. His fortune and management skills provided a solid foundation for a couple to carve out a life together. His plantation, White House, was only four miles from Chestnut Grove, and while not nearly as comfortable and inviting as Uncle William's Elsing Green, it was a step up from my home. As long as he wanted lots of children it might work. Daniel had everything to recommend him, other than his disagreeable father. Indeed, where would I ever find a better man to be my husband?

I tilted my head so I could meet his eyes, yet again wishing I was taller. I saw only approval and hope in Daniel's expression. There was only one thing I wished to make clear. "I have no objection."

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What had I expected, after all? I swung the straw broom harder, sending dirt careering across the wood floor, a cloud of dust rising to make me cough. I sighed, realizing my childish expectation for what it was. I had hoped he'd come riding up to the front door the very next day. But an entire month had melted away into the return to daily tasks. I could kick myself for being so wanton. The glamor of my first ball existed only as a memory. The dance with Daniel one more event to recall, one relived countless times in the ensuing weeks.

Patient. I must be patient. I didn't want to be, but apparently I had no other option. Dirt scattered again. Taking a deep breath, I forced calm into my chest and slowed the movement of the broom. Creating more work for myself would not make Daniel visit any sooner. Besides, I had other work to do after I finished sweeping the parlor. Candles to dip, for instance. A quilt to finish the edging on. My brother's socks to darn. Unfortunately, they were all tasks requiring no dedicated thought to perform which wouldn't keep me from listening for the sound of hoof beats.

Opening the back door, I swept the dirt outside and down the steps leading into the yard. I rested the broom on the ground, my cheek pressed against the pole handle, and pondered the

Pamunkey flowing past the dock in the distance. Smoke rose in separate columns from the chimneys and the smokehouse, a rising whirlpool spinning in place before drifting away. The scent of smoking hams hung heavy in the air. A flock of geese honked a chorus on their way by, their distinctive V formation wavering as they crossed the ashen sky. Snow clouds formed on the horizon and I shivered at the mere hint of the white flakes. Every winter the cold and damp seeped into my bones, refusing to be banished until the spring sun thawed the ground.

I thought back to when Iäd voiced my intent to find a husband who would help me elevate my station in life and let me achieve my yearning for having many children. Mother had nodded and agreed with my intent, telling me sheäd done a similar thing when sheäd accepted my fatherös hand. Given my desires, she started teaching me what Iäd need to know to become an efficient plantation mistress.

The months before my presentation had been filled with both academic and dance lessons with the itinerant tutor and the endless routine of daily tasks. But I did them with a new sense of purpose. I even paid closer attention to the subject I disliked most: managing the health of the family and slaves, including how to prepare and distill the various cordials, marmalets, and other medicines. I detested the pungent smell of the concoctions. My mother, however, insisted my duty as mistress of a plantation incorporated the wellness of every member of the family, which also meant the servants.

Mother told me of the need to oversee the food and drinks consumed by every member of the household, as well as preserving food and smoking hams, brewing beer, and knowing how much of each to give to the slaves and overseers. Doling out the precious and expensive foods and flavorings that could only be obtained via England from the West Indies or Spain, like wine, gin, raisins, bitter almonds, and ambergris. Every task, every bit of work, represented the necessary activities of a well-run plantation. There were so many tasks, too.

Motherös patient instruction would enable me to be a successful plantation mistress, but I still worried about how to be a wife. Of what exactly would happen behind the closed door of the bedchamber. Of what a husband would expect or demand from me. I wouldnät solve those mysteries until I married, a thought that shook my confidence each time it flitted through my mind.

Iäd been so sure of Danielös interest. I hoped he meant it when heäd expressed a desire to court me. Every day I listened for his approach on the wide dirt carriage-way leading up to the

front door. So much so, ghost hoof beats filled my ears. When I could sneak away from a task, I'd spy out a window to see if maybe I actually did hear them. Unfortunately, only the usual slaves and kin going about their days appeared in the front yard. Even now, the sound of the distant one-two, one-two beat of a trotting horse echoed in my mind. I shook my head and chastised myself for fanciful ponderings. On a sigh, I went back inside.

Placing the broom in its place, I strode into the main hall then crossed into the parlor and took my seat to do the darning. One of my least favorite duties, I'd put it off as long as possible. What did my brothers do to their stockings? I held up one and peered at the good sized hole and grimaced. Slipping the ball into the toe, I grasped the darning needle and began the task of closing the gap in the knitted garment. As soon as I stuck the needle between the threads, hoof beats sounded in my ears again. I ignored them, chiding myself for succumbing to such childish nonsense, but they grew louder until I couldn't dismiss the sound. Raising my head, I listened closely but they stopped. Again. I bent over my work.

“Patsy, Patsy!” Nancy, my seven-year-old sister, ran into the parlor, her face alight. Little Frances, her long white baby dress dancing about her ankles, toddled in behind her. “He's here!”

Surprise. Joy. Disbelief. Dismay. All flashed through me at Nancy's declaration. Goodness, I hadn't expected him to show up now. I glanced at my day dress, relieved to see one of my prettiest ones. Fortunately, I'd heeded my mother's instruction to always be prepared for company as people journeyed past the plantation. With no decent boarding homes or road houses, hospitality required the planters to entertain and house the travelers. That expectation also made it necessary for lessons in music and dancing, so we could entertain our guests. Setting aside my sewing with trembling hands, I rose and faced my sister.

“Who is here?” I fought to suppress the insistent urge to run to the window to see for myself. I had my pride, too.

“Daniel Custis, who else?” Nancy propped her fists on her slim hips and stared at me. “Don't be pretending you haven't been praying he'd come courting.”

Caught in the act of prevaricating. “I can't very well go running to the door, now can I?”

“No, but you should get ready instead of arguing with me.” Nancy's frown shifted to a grin when we heard the deep voice of the doorman invite Daniel inside. “Too late.”

“Do I look all right? Is my hair in order?” I peered at Nancy, holding my breath and patting at my hair until she nodded. Thank goodness. “Take Frances and go on up to our room.”

Nancy arched her brows. "You wish to be alone with him?"

"I'm sure Father will arrive in due order, but little girls do not need to be underfoot." Booted steps neared in the passageway. Heart racing, I took hold of Nancy's shoulders and spun her around. "Now go!"

Nancy recovered her balance, and grasped Frances's hand. "Don't be so high-handed."

I leveled a stern look at my sisters, hoping I'd mastered my mother's expression demanding prompt obedience. Nancy huffed and led our youngest sister out of the room at a run. I hurried to my seat by the fireplace and smoothed my skirts. Snatching up my sewing, I stared at the stocking and the needle, unable to concentrate on the simple task with the sound of boots in the passage.

Then Daniel filled the open door, his hat in his hands, and a polite smile on his lips. My father appeared behind our guest. Daniel started, glanced over his shoulder at my father, and then stepped into the room. Father strode over to stand by me and regarded the visitor with a lifted brow. Surely my heart would burst into view, it pounded so hard in my chest. Anxiety set off a flurry of butterflies in my midsection, waiting to hear what he had to say. He'd finally made an appearance. While I was overjoyed to see him, I'd give him a piece of my mind for not honoring his own request for so long.

"Hello, Miss Dandridge. You are looking fine." Daniel bowed, sweeping his hat behind him, then straightened to regard me. "Your father has given his permission for me to properly court you."

"I believe he granted the privilege a while back, Mr. Custis." I held the sewing in my lap, burying my fingers into the soft wool. I didn't want to put him off, but he must understand my feelings regarding his actions. "As did I."

Daniel had the grace to appear abashed. "Indeed, Miss Dandridge. I regret my attention has been unavoidably consumed by more pressing matters at various farms. Matters requiring my immediate attention. My thoughts, however, have not strayed from you since I last beheld your beauty."

Doubtful, what with all the responsibilities the planter managed, but a pleasing compliment. I gestured to the cushioned chairs positioned facing each other over a low cherry table to form a cozy group in front of the fireplace. Could he see how nervous I was at the thought of actually being courted by him? "Please, gentlemen, have a seat. Would you enjoy

tea?ô

At his nod, I rather clumsily signaled Old Sally, waiting in the passageway, to bring in the tea tray. I had yet to master the subtleties of managing the household. Mother had much to teach me yet. As the servant turned to do as bidden, Mother made her entrance into the parlor, greeting our guest with a smile as she sat beside me. We exchanged pleasantries until Old Sally returned with the oversized tray, containing a silver tea pot and an array of small plates bearing biscuits, jam, and dried fruits. She placed it on the low table and then left the room. Mother served the tea, smoothly pouring the amber fluid into the flowered china cups and handing them round. All this while I tried not to stare at Daniel, not reveal how elated I felt at his presence, and not tremble when he caught my eye.

All the lessons I had learned over the years melded in my mind as I listened to the ebb and flow of conversation. Lessons on appropriate topics and ways to make a guest comfortable. Lessons on proper posture and how to sit, hold a cup, and even position my feet. The subtle lessons of interpreting a person's social rank based on their manners and clothing, as well as how they expressed themselves, I'd learned through observation and paying careful attention. All of them blended into a seamless desire to be polite, caring, and sociable, the hallmarks of hospitality. Most of all, if I could demonstrate my ability to be a proper wife and mistress, perhaps Daniel would indeed offer for me. The first step of my life plan might be at hand.

Daniel spoke with the confidence befitting his station. His regard made me bubble inside each time his eyes turned my direction.

ôI'm on my way to Williamsburg, to Six Chimneys House for several days.ô Daniel set his cup and saucer on the table. ôMay I wait on you upon my return?ô

I could easily forgive his neglect after his apology and explanation. I wanted to know him better. Was he as decent a man as he seemed to be? By all accounts, the answer would prove to be a resounding yes. ôI will look forward to your visit.ô

We engaged in the first of many conversations right there in the parlor, with my parents as chaperones. The longer we talked, the more certain I became our acquaintance could lead to a friendship and, with good fortune, mayhap something more.

ò ò ò ò ò ò

Over the course of the next year, we grew closer as we became better acquainted. I didn't

fret about the length of time, needing to assure myself and my parents Daniel would be a faithful and good husband. I took advantage of the time to refine my mannerisms, my conversational skills, and most of all my knowledge of household management.

One fall day, Daniel and I went riding along the river. I enjoyed the motion of my little gray mare with her black mane and tail. I'd chosen my favorite riding habit, its long maroon skirts with black lace trim draped over the sidesaddle, a black coat with short split skirts over a white shirt, and topped with a smart black tricorn hat with ribbons down my back. I'd put the outfit together to create an air of maturity and competence as well as to complement the coloring of my mount, Darby. Daniel's dapple gray stallion, Arrow, pranced impatiently under the control of the big man. Our horses crushed red, gold, and brown fallen leaves under their hooves with each step. Half-barren trees guarded the river banks, the forests dotted with swamps stretching away on both sides of the flowing water. We reached our favorite copse and dismounted, holding the reins and each other's hands as we strolled together.

The tenor and cadence of his voice had become my favorite sound in all the world. He had shared his plans for White House, including the horse breeding efforts, expanding the orchard, and clearing more of the forest to increase the tobacco crops. I had learned about his childhood, the animosity and arguing between his mother and father until the poor woman died of smallpox in 1715 when he was but four years old. He shared his hopes for finding a wife who would make him happy, not angry and suspicious like his father. He was the youngest child: two others had died in infancy, and his poor sister Fanny, who had died four years ago. The story he told of Fanny's former suitors and marriages had set off a warning bell in my mind.

His father, John Custis, wasn't only quarrelsome and mean, but suspicious. He eyed potential suitors with an unhealthy dose of chariness. Fanny's first suitor, a ship's captain, declared his intention to marry her. John suspected the man wanted her fortune, not her person. His suspicion was confirmed when the captain started pestering John about Fanny's dowry, specifically how much land and money would be settled on her. John declared that if she married the captain, she'd do so without any dowry, which sent the captain back to his ship and out of her life. Before long, another man claimed he wished to marry Fanny, but John again threatened to disinherit her, and the man departed two days prior to the wedding. Ultimately, Fanny chose to marry twice, both times without their father's blessing or money. She had a difficult life as a result of John Custis's miserly suspicions, until she died in 1744.

Suddenly, Daniel stopped, tugging me to a halt.

“Patsy, my darling, I have a confession.” He stood calm and serious, gazing at me with an intensity unusual in his countenance.

“Yes, Daniel?”

He squeezed my fingers and leveled a solemn look at me. “I feel we make a good match. I enjoy your company, find you easy to be with, to talk to. You’re pretty and capable and a pleasure to be around. I adore you and wish to marry you, if you’ll consent to be my wife.”

I wanted to squeal with delight, but my upbringing forbade such a childish reaction. “I agree we have a good foundation for a successful marriage.” I smiled at him, happiness flooding my heart and soul. He’d finally asked for my hand, to join our families and fortunes, such as they were, together. “I’m fond of you, as well.”

“If our marriage is like that of your parents, we’ll grow to love each other over time.” Daniel kissed me, a quick press of his lips to mine, then gazed at me for several moments before sighing. “There is only one obstacle to our marriage.”

I moistened my lips, savoring the fleeting yet tantalizing touch of his to mine. My first kiss from a man and it was very pleasant. I smiled confidently at him, pleased we shared a willingness to allow our relationship to grow naturally. Joining our families benefited all parties. As for the obstacle, I could guess at the hurdle before us. “Whatever it may be, I’m sure we can overcome it.”

He glanced away, shaking his head slowly. After a few seconds he snared my gaze again. “I’m not sure we will.”

Curious, I raised a brow in question. “What is it?”

“My father has objected to every woman I’ve ever courted.” He studied my expression, judging my reaction to his confession. “I know not how to tell him I fully intend to marry you. You must be patient until I can persuade him of my sincerity and receive his blessing of the union.”

“Do we need his blessing? Are you not of age to make such a decision on your own?”

“My father’s own bad marriage to my mother left a bitter taste in his mouth and distrust in his soul. He fears fortune hunters will steal away his wealth.”

“I’m no fortune hunter, Daniel.” I desired to improve myself, but I had no intention of marrying for money. I wanted friendship, security, and a large family with a kind and caring

man. With *this* man. óWhat are you afraid of?ô

óYou don't understand how he is.ô He ran one hand down his jaw as he gazed over his horse's head, silent, thinking. Then he looked at me again. óWhen I told Father the slaves at White House needed shoes, he flew into such a rage over the expense, and supposedly my poor management, he tried to free his favorite son, my half-brother, Mulatto Jack, then give him a tract of land near Queens Creek, a tract which once belonged to my mother. He even tried to give Jack his own mother, young Alice.ô He shook his head, remembered anger evident in the furrows and tension on his face. óIt took months of arguing with him, both by me and his friends, about the illegality of his actions before he rescinded his gifts and his new will that left everything to Jack. Do you understand? He tried to take my inheritance and give it to a slave, all because I dared to tell him the other slaves needed shoes.ô

óOver shoes?ô I was aghast. The man had lost his sense.

Daniel shook his head, his expression immeasurably sad and pensive. óI detest having to reveal how malicious my father can be. I'm told he heard rumors of my courting you, then flew into yet another rage and began giving away his most precious items. Most recently, he presented to Matthew and Anne Moody, his neighbors in town, a dozen black walnut chairs and a table among other furniture, a roan horse and chair harness, and most grievously the collection of silver plate bearing the family crest.ô

Anger swept through me on Daniel's behalf. How dare the old man give away family heirlooms? Had he no sense of what it meant to be a family? óDid they not protest? They shouldn't have accepted such valuable and precious items.ô

óMrs. Moody attempted to make him desist, butë ô Daniel swiped a hand over his head, loosening a few strands from his queue.

óWhat is it, Daniel? What did he do?ô

óHe's been speaking against your father, my sweet dear, and even your caring person. He's been abusing your father's reputation, disparaging his good name and his position.ô He dragged in a deep breath and released it in a rush. óI must tell you, to prepare you for his claims. He said he'd dispose of his property as he pleased and throw everything into the street for any one to pick up rather than allow any Dandridge's daughter or any Dandridge have them.ô He shook his head again, eyes glittering as he peered at me. óI must not aggravate him further or all will be lost.ô

The revelation chilled me first, then fueled a fire of indignation. How dare the man spread such evil and hurtful lies regarding my father? I glanced at the river, then up at the puffy clouds drifting across the blue sky. Delaying until I had tamed my temper. All the while, my stomach churned and my cheeks flamed.

Blast the man. Heð prevented Daniel from having a decent childhood with all his anger and spite, and now he actively sought to ensure his son never found happiness and contentment with a companion. Well, not if I could help it. All my ability to influence another's actions or opinions may be put to the test, but Iðl give it my best effort. I lifted my chin and studied Daniel's aggrieved countenance while silently counting to ten.

óBut your duty is to marry and provide heirs. Doesn't your father wish for you to have a companion and children?ô

óI do not believe so, not after all these years. Iðm tired of trying to find someone heðl approve of, which he doesn't seem inclined to ever do. Instead I will insist upon marrying a woman who makes me happy. You, my dear, make me happy. Iðl have you as my wife even if our fathers cannot get along.ô

Ah, there it was. The other shoe hitting the floor. The animosity John Custis had for my father, the disdain and disregard. Colonel John Dandridge commanded respect throughout New Kent County as both a military leader and eminent planter. He was commander of the militia and served as the Clerk of the Court. Yet his wealth, while sufficient for a large family on a five-hundred-acre plantation, could not match that of John Custis with his two plantations totaling more than nineteen thousand acres spread over six counties. But if I married Daniel, then our fathers would be forced to have an intercourseò to talk and engage in social contactò whether they wanted to or not. An uncomfortable situation would result in the joining of the families. On the other hand, perhaps the union would also bring an end to the animosity.

óWhat would you have me do?ô

óBe patient. I will find a way to convince him to bestow his blessing on our union.ô

óAnd if you can't?ô Patience and I did not always get along well. I searched his eyes, descrying uncertainty and concern. óWhat then?ô

He gripped my hands and kissed my cheek. óTrust me to find a way in my own time. In due course, we will marry. You have my word as a gentleman.ô

óVery well. I will attempt to be patient. But heed my words.ô I stared at him, trying to

convey the extent of how serious my next words would be. “You cannot expect me to wait forever for your father’s approval. I want to start my own family while I’m young enough to do so.”

He kissed my cheek again, then helped me mount. “I understand. Now it is time I return you to the safety of your home.”

Did he understand how far I would go to ensure his happiness? I took up the reins and urged my mare to turn toward the stable, Daniel soon beside me. I’d bide my time, but if he didn’t manage to persuade his father of our intentions, then I may have to take the matter into my own hands.

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About the Author

Bestselling, award-winning author Betty Bolté is known for authentic and accurately researched historical fiction with heart and supernatural romance novels. A lifetime reader and writer, she’s worked as a secretary, freelance word processor, technical writer/editor, and author. She’s been published in essays, newspaper articles/columns, magazine articles, and nonfiction books but now enjoys crafting entertaining and informative fiction, especially stories that bring American history to life. She earned a Master’s Degree in English in 2008, emphasizing the study of literature and storytelling, and has judged numerous writing contests for both fiction and nonfiction. She lives in northern Alabama with her loving husband of more than 30 years. Her cat, Calliope, serves as her muse and writing partner, and her dog, Zola, makes sure she goes outside frequently. Get to know her at www.bettybolte.com.

Reviews of *Becoming Lady Washington*

In *Becoming Lady Washington: A Novel*, author Betty Bolte inhabits the body and mind of her

subject, giving strong voice to the first First Lady, more than two centuries after her passing. Bolte writes exceptionally well in this well-researched narrative of Martha Washington, telling the reader, in the first person, of her subject's amazing but challenging life. The author uses poetic license sparingly, imagining what might have happened to lead to certain pivotal events in the life of her subject, but doing so in a manner that remains well within the realm of the plausible.

Potus Geeks Book Review July 31, 2020

This is a fictional book about Martha Washington but it felt like I was reading a great history book. If you enjoy history with a fictional twist then you will want to pick up this book.

Goodreads Reviewer

This fictional novel of [Martha Washington's] life weaves the facts with an absolutely beautifully written narrative, bringing that amazing woman to life. It reads like fiction and the fact that it is based on actual events she experienced in her life just makes it a better piece of writing. I highly recommend this very impressive historical novel.

Jennifer Hackett, Book Reviewer

As historical fiction is one of my favorite genres, American history in particular, this was one of my favorite books read over the last year. Highly recommended, well written, well researched.

Ethel Fagin, Book Reviewer