

The Wonderful Lady and the Fourth of July: Popular Culture in the Early National Period

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In 1790 a young Philadelphia woman named Anna Maria Brodeau married physician William Thornton of the British West Indies. After Thornton, the successful contributor to a design competition for the new capitol to be built in the Federal District, was named a commissioner for the federal city, the couple moved in 1794 to Washington where they set up housekeeping. Anna Maria began to keep a diary of her life in the new city¹ that was forming in the ten-square-mile district ceded by Maryland and Virginia.

Many of Thornton's activities were domestic and solitary in nature: she sewed, knitted, quilted, and drew for her own amusement.² She read domestic and European newspapers and magazines, novels, travel accounts, and plays. A great portion of her time was spent in visiting or in entertaining visitors who came for dinner (a midday meal) or for tea (an evening meal) or both; the entertainment often included songs played on her pianoforte, or the gatherings might feature hired musicians and dancing. Her husband and his friends passed many hours playing backgammon, or went off together to attend the races at courses laid out in Washington and in Alexandria. Larger groups assembled for balls held at taverns in both Washington and Georgetown; for theatrical performances, both at Georgetown College (1789) and by touring companies; and for band concerts on Capitol Hill. Thornton's daily routines were often broken by excursions of one kind or another. Parties were made up to go out to Great Falls to see the progress of the Pawtomack Canal company or to view the bridge at Little Falls. In May a group traveled to the construction site of the President's House to be weighed on the scales in use by the workmen, and in December they ventured down to Mr. Tayloe's to see "chimney pieces of artificial stone" that were waiting incorporation into Octagon House. In July they received an invitation to "a fish feast at the Little Falls" to celebrate the Fourth of July. At other times, Thornton visited the Capitol to hear the president address the Congress or to listen to the congressional debates. And on February 22 she attended ceremonies held in honor of George Washington, who had died the previous year and whose birthday was commemorated at services in both Washington and Georgetown churches.

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