

Jane Austen's Virginia Connections

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Jane Austen (1775-1817) has one major and four lesser-known connections with Virginia, where the Annual General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America was held in Richmond on October 11-13. The major link is a milestone in American Austen literary criticism.

Chief Justice John Marshall (1755-1833), one of Virginia's most distinguished sons, was among her earliest American champions. His appreciation of Austen's artistry is practically unknown to American Austen scholars. Marshall's tribute is also presumably the earliest on record in the United States.

Marshall was twenty years old when Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, in the rectory of her father, the Rev. George Austen, at Steventon in Hampshire, England. He lived to see the first publication of her novels in this country, beginning with *Emma*, published by Mathew Carey of Philadelphia in 1816. It was followed by *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion* brought out by Carey & Lea in Philadelphia in 1832, while *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* were printed by the same firm in 1833. An edition of *Emma*, the second American printing, was also issued by the same firm in the latter year.

The printings of the novels brought out in 1832 and 1833 were not the ones Marshall read, as his appreciation was written before their publication. The copies of the novels Marshall read, apart from the 1816 *Emma*, were undoubtedly imported English editions brought out by London publishers either during Austen's lifetime or after her untimely death of Addison's disease in Winchester, England, on July 18, 1817.

It is obvious from Marshall's tribute that he was one of the first of the generations of discriminating American readers who have relished Austen's humorously ironic delineations of the human comedy. Unfortunately, Marshall's copies of the novels are apparently no longer in existence. A recent check of the restored Marshall House in Richmond, the Virginia State Library, and the Virginia Historical Society failed to turn up any evidence of their having survived.

Marshall's tribute to Austen took the form of a letter to Joseph Story, one of the associate justices of the United States Supreme Court. Story had delivered the annual oration before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in August 1826. His subject: "The Literary Condition of the Age."

In the lecture, Story praised the writings of several female British authors, but did not mention Austen's novels. When Story sent Marshall a copy of his discourse, the latter noted the omission and set about rectifying the matter. His letter to Story is dated "Richmond, November 26th 1826," and reads in part:

I have deferred thanking you for your copy of your Discourse before the Society of Phi Beta Kappa, until there was some probability that my letter might find you at Salem. . . . But it is time to return to your discourse. I have read it with pleasure, and am particularly gratified with your eulogy of the ladies.

It is a matter of great satisfaction to me to find another Judge, who, though not as old as myself, thinks justly of the fair sex, and commits his sentiments to print. I was a little mortified, however, to find that you had not admitted the name of Miss Austen into your list of favorites. I had just finished reading her novels when I received your discourse, and was so much pleased with them that I looked in it for her name, and was rather disappointed at not finding it.

In concluding, Marshall expressed this still valid criticism of Austen's unique fictional style: "Her flights are not lofty, she does not soar on eagles' wings, but she is pleasing, interesting, equable, and yet amusing. I count on your making some apology for this omission. . . . Farewell, With esteem and affection, I am yours, J. Marshall."

The four little-known Austen connections with Virginia can be handled more briefly.

In 1779, during the Revolutionary War, British Brigadier General Edward Mathew—whose daughter Anne later married Jane Austen's eldest brother James—captured Fort Nelson, which stood on the site of the present United States Naval Hospital in Portsmouth. Mathew also conducted several raids throughout Southside Virginia that temporarily halted the flow of supplies by way of the Chesapeake Bay to George Washington's army.

During the War of 1812, John Knatchbull, a scapegrace half-brother of Sir Edward Knatchbull, who married Austen's favorite niece, Fanny Knight—served with the British fleet in Norfolk-area waters and helped burn Washington in 1814. Several years later, he was hanged for murder in Australia.

Much later in the nineteenth century, Catherine Anne Hubback, a daughter of Sir Francis Austen, one of Jane Austen's naval brothers, and also a novelist like her aunt, lived with a son in Richmond until her death in 1877.

Finally, Helena Lefroy Caperton—a direct descendant of Irish Chief Justice Thomas Langlois Lefroy, one of Austen's few identifiable beaux—was a well-known Richmond author and book reviewer. Her *Legends of Virginia* (1950) is still fascinating reading. Mrs. Caperton also has many descendants living in Virginia today.