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Eliza Ridgely: More Than Her Portrait

Introduction

Lady with a Harp, painted in 1818, is one of American artist Thomas Sully's best known portraits.¹ Eliza Ridgely poses with her harp in front of a window opening onto a pastoral scene. For some, the harp in the portrait may be seen simply as an instrument of beauty, emphasizing Eliza's grace and elegance. For others, the inclusion of the harp is a signal of wealth, highlighting Eliza's class and social status. The harp was not a prop; Eliza was an accomplished harpist and a dedicated musician, but it is impossible to separate the harp from its significance as an indicator of privilege. Eliza Ridgely lived a life in which music could be both a rewarding and serious artistic pursuit and a superior accomplishment that secured an elevated position in society. However, these cultural benefits were only made possible by Eliza's position of privilege in a society dependent on chattel slavery.

Childhood

Elizabeth Eichelberger Ridgely, called Eliza, was born in 1803 in Baltimore, Maryland. Her mother, Eliza Eichelberger, died three days after giving birth. Young Eliza, an only child, was raised by her father, Nicholas Greenberry Ridgely, a wealthy merchant and prominent citizen of Baltimore.² Eliza's maternal grandparents lived on the same street with their youngest daughter Henrietta Eichelberger, who was close in age to Eliza.³ Consequently, Henrietta and

¹ Torchia, Robert Wilson, Deborah Chotner, Ellen G. Mills. "Thomas Sully." In *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century, Part II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 152.

² Torchia, "Thomas Sully," 151.

³ Shipe, Bess Paterson. "Eliza Eichelberger Ridgely, the 'Lady with a Harp,'" *Maryland Historical Magazine* 77,

Eliza had a relationship that more closely resembled sisters than the aunt and niece that they were.

When Eliza was thirteen years old, she and Henrietta were sent to Miss Lyman's Institution, a boarding school for young women in Philadelphia. This institution, similar to many European finishing schools for young ladies, offered a basic course of study for all of its pupils that included reading, writing, and arithmetic.⁴ The opportunity for such an education was far removed from what many other young ladies were offered, as "most American women who grew up during the first decades of the nineteenth century received little formal schooling and were taught only basic literacy and housekeeping by their mothers."⁵

For an additional cost, further opportunities were available and Eliza's wealthy background enabled her to take full advantage of these. She studied French, drawing, singing, piano, and harp in addition to her regular studies.⁶ Tuition at Miss Lyman's for basic instruction, room, and board for one quarter came to forty-five dollars. For Eliza, with all of the additions to her education, "the entire bill... totaled \$142 for the quarter."⁷ By comparison, many artisans and laborers working in Washington D.C. during the same period earned one dollar a day,⁸ putting even the base cost of tuition at Miss Lyman's Institution far beyond their reach. Many Americans felt that this kind of exclusivity was antithetical to their national values, and that giving women an education associated with European aristocracy emphasized empty accomplishments over

no. 3 (Fall 1982): 231.

⁴ Brandt, Tova Karissa. "Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867." (Master's Thesis, University of Delaware, 2001), 7.

⁵ Wetzel, Kristen Lynn. "Susan Jane Gaston Donaldson and the Pedal Harp in the Early Republic." (Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 2003), 7.

⁶ Brandt, "Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867," 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Giles, Leah R. "Entertaining and the New Republic: Music and the Women of Washington, 1800–1825." (Master's thesis, University of Delaware, 2011), 82.

practical skills and knowledge. In particular, the study of a musical instrument was referred to derogatorily by critics as an “ornamental accomplishment” rather than viewed as a substantial artistic accomplishment.⁹ Despite this, Eliza’s father encouraged these controversial studies, especially Eliza’s study of music, drawing, and French.¹⁰

In 1818, when Eliza was fifteen, her formal schooling ended and she was launched into adult society. Her education stood her in good stead in 1824 when she had the opportunity to meet the elderly Marquis de Lafayette while he was traveling through the United States. Her virtuosity on the harp and fluency in French reportedly won his admiration.¹¹ Eliza and Lafayette became friends and some of their correspondence survives to this day, including this tribute from a letter sent by Lafayette in 1825: “You have inspired me ... with sentiments of the highest admiration, affectionate friendship, and I will also allow myself to add of tender gratitude. I was anxious to obtain the permission you give me to call you my dear young friend.”¹²

Erard Harp

Throughout her young adulthood, Eliza continued her musical studies. Bills from this period include fees for music lessons, piano tuning, sheet music, and harp strings.¹³ One of the most costly purchases was an Erard double-action pedal harp, purchased by her father for almost \$600 in June of 1817 and shipped from London to Baltimore,¹⁴ Since Sébastian Erard had

⁹ Torchia, “Thomas Sully,” 152.

¹⁰ Torchia, Robert Wilson, “Eliza Ridgely and the Ideal of American Womanhood, 1787–1820,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 90, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 406.

¹¹ Torchia, “Thomas Sully,” 151.

¹² Foster, James W. “Lafayette’s Letters to Eliza Ridgely of Hampton,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 53, no. 2. (September 1957): 235.

¹³ Brandt, “Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867,” 9–10.

¹⁴ Brandt, “Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867,” 8.

patented his double-action mechanism only seven years earlier, Eliza's new harp was on the cutting edge of technology.¹⁵ Erard's innovative design allowed each string to produce three pitches through his use of two rows of cleverly designed forked discs. These two-pronged discs alter the pitch by a half-step without negatively impacting the alignment of the strings or sacrificing tone quality.¹⁶ They are still in use today. Eliza's father also purchased a very fine pianoforte for \$600.¹⁷ Eliza's harp and pianoforte were beautiful instruments, with great technical capabilities and ornamental appearances. Both were intended to add elegance to their surroundings, and possibly to emphasize the wealth of Eliza's father. By comparison, in nearby Washington D. C. "advertised prices ranged from \$100 for a secondhand piano to \$300 for a Geib piano."¹⁸ Many families were unable to afford harps or pianos and settled for less expensive instruments, as "flutes sold in the \$1–\$14 range and guitars cost \$8–\$30."¹⁹

In 1828, upon Eliza's marriage, her Erard harp was moved from her father's house in Baltimore to her new home just outside the city, Hampton Mansion. Eliza's harp, one of the oldest double-action pedal harps in the United States, has a permanent home in the music room at Hampton Mansion. In the fall of 2018, the harp was shipped to the Metropolitan Museum in New York City in a custom-made crate. Conservators there began conservation treatment the following spring. Efforts to raise awareness and funds for this crucial work were led by

¹⁵ Rensch, Roslyn. *Harp and Harpists*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1989), 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 148–149.

¹⁷ Brandt, "Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867," 8.

¹⁸ Giles, "Entertaining and the New Republic: Music and the Women of Washington, 1800–1825," 122. Johannes Geib was a German-born instrument builder who built organs and pianos in New York City.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

Baltimore harpist Elaine Bryan, the Women's Committee of Historic Hampton Inc., and the staff at Hampton National Historic Site.²⁰

Thomas Sully Painting

In May of 1818, when Eliza was fifteen years old, her portrait was painted by Thomas Sully, one of America's premier portrait painters. Eliza's father commissioned the painting for a fee of \$500.²¹ Rather surprisingly, Eliza's Erard harp is not the harp seen in the portrait. Instead, it is generally believed that Thomas Sully used a harp he had access to in the Philadelphia area, possibly a single action pedal harp.²² The harp remains the strongest iconographic feature of the painting, clearly linking Eliza with a European ideal of femininity. From the middle of the eighteenth century the harp was an instrument especially popular with women, and it "was widely believed and published that the harp, of all instruments, was best suited to the display of an elegant young woman's figure."²³ Furthermore, the harp in Eliza's portrait is a clear status symbol, as "the harp exuded wealth, status and refinement. Associated with Europe's most fashionable cities of Paris and London, the harp epitomized civilized society."²⁴

Sully was well aware of these ties. He had painted several earlier subjects with harps, and made notes for himself about British portrait painter Thomas Lawrence's use of the harp in paintings.²⁵ Sully's skill as a painter is undeniable in *Lady with a Harp*, one of his best-known works. Sully, by his own account, was also adept at flattering his subjects, saying "from long

²⁰ Bryant, Elaine "Baltimore Chapter of the AHS Helps to Save Historic Harp," *American Harp Journal* 26, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 53.

²¹ Torchia, "Thomas Sully," 151.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wetzel, "Susan Jane Gaston Donaldson and the Pedal Harp in the Early Republic," 32.

²⁴ Giles, "Entertaining and the New Republic: Music and the Women of Washington, 1800-1825," 115.

²⁵ Torchia, "Thomas Sully," 154.

experience I know that resemblance in a portrait is essential; but no fault will be found with the artist, at least by the sitter, if he improve the appearance.”²⁶ Indeed, Eliza appears in the painting as an “ideal female beauty,”²⁷ dressed in a fashionable white satin empire gown, standing next to a harp in an expensively furnished room, in front of a window with an extensive vista beyond. This exaggerated feminine form, with its backdrop of taste and privilege, exemplifies the ideal harpist of the time period. It is fair to say that, without this portrait, interest in Eliza Ridgely would not be what it is, and her legacy would not have been so carefully preserved and examined.

The portrait hung in Nicholas Ridgely’s house in Baltimore upon its completion. Most likely, sometime between Eliza’s marriage in 1828 and Nicholas Ridgely’s death in 1829 it was moved to Eliza’s new home, Hampton Mansion. A copy of *Lady with a Harp* hangs there today and can be seen during public tours, while the original painting resides at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

Marriage

The study of music was thought to “prepare young women for courtship and enhance their prospects for marriage”²⁸ and when combined with the idea that “women who played the harp were asserting themselves as members of the country’s social elite... highly marriageable and apt symbols of American prosperity,”²⁹ Eliza was well-positioned. Her exclusive education

²⁶ “Overview: Lady with a Harp: Eliza Ridgely by Thomas Sully,” National Gallery of Art, accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.32577.html#overview>.

²⁷ Torchia, “Thomas Sully,” 154.

²⁸ Giles, “Entertaining and the New Republic: Music and the Women of Washington, 1800–1825,” 83.

²⁹ Wetzel, “Susan Jane Gaston Donaldson and the Pedal Harp in the Early Republic,” 6.

and expensive launch into society apparently had the desired effect, and she married a man named John Ridgely in 1828.

Eliza and John happened to share a last name, which the Marquis de Lafayette summed up quite neatly in one of his letters to Eliza, offering his congratulations on, “the information that Miss Ridgely had changed if not her name, at least her situation and that the happy man has been found who was to fix her choice.”³⁰ John Ridgely was no relation,³¹ but certainly a fine match. His father, Charles Carnan Ridgely, was former governor of the state of Maryland and held an estate which reached its peak of 25,000 acres under him. John Ridgely inherited a portion of this, the primary residence, Hampton Mansion, and 4000 acres.³² Eliza was an excellent match for John Ridgely as well. In addition to her elite social status, she brought a substantial dowry to the marriage. Many improvements took place at Hampton Mansion with these funds.³³

As the third mistress of Hampton Mansion, one of the “largest and most ornate Georgian houses”³⁴ in America at the time, Eliza kept excellent records. They afford a glimpse into the extensive estate, which included an iron works, a farm, stables, and formal gardens.³⁵ Eliza and her husband John traveled periodically to Europe, and Eliza frequently imported furnishings to suit her cosmopolitan tastes. Substantial improvements were made to the estate, including the installation of gas lighting, plumbing and the building of additional stables.³⁶ Eliza was also

³⁰ Foster, James W. “Lafayette’s Letters to Eliza Ridgely of Hampton,” 239.

³¹ Torchia, “Thomas Sully,” 151.

³² Scharper, Julia, “An Honest Reckoning,” *National Parks Conservation Association*, Winter 2020, <https://www.npca.org/articles/2389-an-honest-reckoning>.

³³ Hastings, Lynn Dakin, *A Guidebook to Hampton National Historic Site* (Towson: E. John Schmitz & Sons, Inc., 1986), 14.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

³⁵ Shipe, “Eliza Eichelberger Ridgely, the ‘Lady with a Harp’,” 232.

³⁶ Hastings, *A Guidebook to Hampton National Historic Site*, 14.

passionate about gardening, and, under her supervision, redesigned the formal gardens surrounding Hampton Mansion, including the construction of greenhouses, which allowed for citrus fruits to be cultivated in the winter, a rare luxury.³⁷

Together, John and Eliza had five children, but only two, Charles and Eliza “Didy” Ridgely, survived to adulthood. The elder Eliza fulfilled her roles as wife and mother with care and dedication. Both children were educated by private tutors and at schools in Baltimore, and the study of music was included in their education. Charles went on to study first in Paris and then at Harvard University, and would eventually inherit Hampton Mansion from his father.³⁸

Music at Hampton Mansion

Although many women in America at this time pursued the study of music quite seriously, they did not perform publicly or professionally. Instead, they performed at private social occasions for the entertainment of their friends and family. Hampton Mansion had a dedicated music room, just off the main hall, where Eliza kept both her harp and her piano. This room was used by the family on various occasions. Eliza’s daughter Didy kept a childhood journal which includes a lighthearted entry stating that “we got mother to play for us and Aunt Henny [Henrietta Eichelberger] danced with us.”³⁹

At other times, the music room was used socially, as in this account by guest Elizabeth Wirt Goldsborough, “We had some music after dinner – [with Eliza Ridgely] singing some Italian songs for me & I playing some of my best pieces for her.”⁴⁰ However, not all married

³⁷ Shipe, “Eliza Eichelberger Ridgely, the ‘Lady with a Harp,’” 235.

³⁸ Hastings, *A Guidebook to Hampton National Historic Site*, 16.

³⁹ Shipe, “Eliza Eichelberger Ridgely, the ‘Lady with a Harp,’” 233.

⁴⁰ Brandt, “Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867,” 13.

women found time to keep up with their musical studies. Benjamin Rush, a civic leader, social reformer, and one of the major opponents to young women studying music, warned that married women would find that “their harpsichords [would] serve only as sideboards for their parlors.”⁴¹ For Eliza, this appears to be partly the case: guest Elizabeth Wirt Goldsborough goes on to say in her recollections that Eliza Ridgely’s “harp stood there uncovered – She said she scarcely touches it. I begged her to string it again.”⁴²

Also found in the music room was Eliza’s extensive music collection, consisting of over 400 pieces of music for voice, piano, and harp.⁴³ As music making was frequently a social occasion, not all of these are solo works, but include harp and piano duets, and songs for multiple singers with accompaniment. Much of this music was purchased as individual sheet music, and then bound together into volumes, as was common practice at the time.⁴⁴ Some of this music was also hand-written. Teachers at the time would frequently write out music by hand for their students, especially if it was music from their personal collections and otherwise inaccessible.⁴⁵

Many of the works in Eliza’s collection are popular songs, or reductions from well-known operas, including *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Lucia de Lammermoor*. Other pieces are by familiar composers, including Franz Liszt, Felix Mendelssohn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Gioachino Rossini. Of particular interest to harpists are works by François-Andrien Boieldieu, Jan Ladislav Dussek, and François-Joseph Naderman. Eliza’s music collection has been preserved and is housed at Hampton Mansion.

⁴¹ Wetzel, “Susan Jane Gaston Donaldson and the Pedal Harp in the Early Republic,” 9.

⁴² Brandt, “Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867,” 13.

⁴³ Weidman, Gregory R, “Eliza Ridgely’s Historic Erard Harp,” *American Harp Journal* 26, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 52.

⁴⁴ Brandt, “Penned and Printed: The Sheet Music Collection of Eliza Ridgely 1803–1867,” 17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

Slavery at Hampton

The privilege and life of luxury enjoyed by Eliza and her family were not simply the result of hard work or inherited wealth. Instead, “the Ridgelys held hundreds of people in bondage, and almost every aspect of their wealth was created through forced labor.”⁴⁶ Although the state of Maryland did not secede with the confederate states during the Civil War, slaveholding was an accepted practice in Maryland, and the Ridgelys of Hampton Mansion held one of the largest populations of enslaved people in all of Maryland.⁴⁷

Enslaved people were held at Hampton Mansion beginning with Colonel Charles Ridgely (1700–1772), followed by Captain Charles Ridgely (1733–1790), and then by Charles Carnan Ridgely (1760–1829).⁴⁸ The enslaved people “cooked the food, cared for the children and [. . .] provided the labor that sustained the family’s various business enterprises, enduring the fierce heat of the forge, plowing the fields and driving the cattle.”⁴⁹ Carnan Ridgely, Eliza’s father-in-law, held at least 340 enslaved people at Hampton Mansion during his lifetime. Slaveholding in no way impeded Carnan Ridgely’s career. On the contrary, he rose to be a man of prominence, serving in the Maryland House of Delegates, the Maryland State Senate, and as the governor of Maryland throughout the course of his life.⁵⁰

For reasons we can only conjecture, Carnan Ridgely manumitted the enslaved people he held after his death through his will. Some suggest that this was due to religious principles, the

⁴⁶ Scharper, Julia, “An Honest Reckoning.”

⁴⁷ Lancaster, R. Kent, “Chattel Slavery at Hampton/Northampton, Baltimore County,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 95, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 409.

⁴⁸ Lloyd, June, “The Lady with a Harp and Her York County Ties,” *York Daily Record*, March 12, 2018, <https://www.ydr.com/story/opinion/columnists/2018/03/12/lady-harp-and-her-york-county-ties/416968002/>.

⁴⁹ Scharper, Julia, “An Honest Reckoning.”

⁵⁰ Hastings, *A Guidebook to Hampton National Historic Site*, 9.

influence of his wife, or possibly a simple act of altruism, although it was an act which in no way inconvenienced him personally.⁵¹ Regardless, many stipulations surrounded the manumission of these enslaved people, which negated or complicated the process for many. Of those who were freed, many had to wait years for their freedom or had to see their families split apart. No one received any sort of financial support to start a new life.⁵²

John Ridgely, Eliza's husband, immediately set about purchasing enslaved people to fill the void left by his father's actions. Given that his father's will had split Carnan Ridgely's assets among seven heirs, John's inheritance was not a robust one and the wealth Eliza brought to their marriage was crucial in many of these purchases.⁵³ Eliza was no stranger to the slave trade; it is believed that John and Eliza inherited enslaved persons upon the death of her father, Nicholas Ridgely.⁵⁴ John Ridgely purchased seventy-seven enslaved persons over time.

As mistress of the house, Eliza held an active role in overseeing the enslaved people of Hampton, and her record keeping provides details about this disturbing aspect of her life. Records include lists of clothing and shoes provided to enslaved people. These lists show that enslaved servants working inside the house received higher quality shoes than those who worked on the land, as they were on public view. There are also records of medical services provided to the enslaved people, which may have had more to do with "protecting investments" than providing humanitarian aid.⁵⁵ As no records exist from the enslaved people themselves, many facts about their lives, their thoughts, and their feelings are lost to history.

⁵¹ Lancaster, R. Kent, "Chattel Slavery at Hampton/Northampton, Baltimore County," 411–412.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 412–413.

⁵³ Lloyd, June, "The Lady with a Harp and Her York County Ties."

⁵⁴ Hastings, *A Guidebook to Hampton National Historic Site*, 15.

⁵⁵ Lancaster, R. Kent, "Chattel Slavery at Hampton/Northampton, Baltimore County," 417–421.

In Eliza's later years, she lived in "mortal dread of slave insurrection and violence."⁵⁶ The Civil War brought about the freedom of the enslaved people of Hampton in 1864, when Eliza was sixty-one years old. After the war Eliza and her husband hired workers for the estate and Eliza complained that she was "not satisfied with the output of the servants."⁵⁷ Just a short time after this, in 1867, Eliza and her husband died several months apart from each other.⁵⁸ Their son John inherited Hampton Mansion, which remained in the family until the mid-twentieth century.

Conclusion

Eliza Ridgely's music and harp playing served both as an artistic pursuit and signifier of status. Thomas Sully's portrait of her not only immortalized her through art, but was also significant in preserving her legacy. *Lady with a Harp* remained at Hampton Mansion until 1945 when Eliza Ridgely's great-grandson, John Ridgely, Jr., sold it to the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. The sale of this painting facilitated the purchase of Hampton Mansion by the National Park Service, which designated it and forty-three adjoining acres a National Historic Site. The acquisition ensured the preservation of much of the material culture associated with the estate as well as records documenting the people, free and enslaved, that lived there.⁵⁹ This single portrait, *Lady with a Harp*, offers a glimpse into a vastly different time. By looking beyond the surface of the painting, and digging deeply into the reality behind the idealized image, a fuller understanding can be reached of Eliza Ridgely's life, of the role of the harp in

⁵⁶ Lancaster, R. Kent, "Chattel Slavery at Hampton/Northampton, Baltimore County," 424.

⁵⁷ Hastings, *A Guidebook to Hampton National Historic Site*, 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Lloyd, June, "The Lady with a Harp and Her York County Ties."

defining her advantaged position, and of the enslaved people who made this life of privilege possible.