

Université de Montréal

**Under the Roof and the Pen of Elizabeth Willing
Powel**
**Material Culture, Sociability, and Letters in Revolutionary
and Early Republican Philadelphia**

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Ce mémoire intitulé:

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Material Culture, Sociability, and Letters in Revolutionary and Early Republican
Philadelphia

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Résumé

Ce mémoire a pour toile de fond Philadelphia à la fin du dix-huitième siècle et couvre les périodes de la Révolution américaine et les débuts de la République. Trois thèmes s’y entrelacent: la culture matérielle, la sociabilité, et l’agentivité des femmes. Ces trois thèmes sont explorés au travers de Elizabeth Willing Powel, une femme éduquée faisant partie de l’élite de Philadelphie, et des moyens avec lesquels elle s’auto-projetait auprès de la société au travers l’environnement matériel de sa maison – la Powel House – and au travers de sa correspondance. Elizabeth Powel était reconnue pour son intelligence, son art de la conversation et ses qualités d’hôtesse. Ce projet explore les interactions entre une femme de l’élite et son environnement matériel durant les périodes révolutionnaires et postrévolutionnaires. Le but est d’observer comment la culture matérielle représentait des positions sociales, culturelles et politiques. Ce mémoire observe les interactions sociales et les façons dont Elizabeth Powel se représente en société par une analyse de sa correspondance, analyse qui porte une attention particulière aux discours de Elizabeth sur les questions du rôle des femmes en société, de l’éducation des femmes. Enfin, ce mémoire explore comment la culture matérielle et l’écriture épistolaire étaient des vecteurs d’agentivité pour Elizabeth, des moyens de participer aux important changements qui transformaient la société américaine de la fin du dix-huitième siècle.

Mots-clés : Powel House, Elizabeth Willing Powel, George Washington, sociabilité, culture matérielle, écriture épistolaire, agentivité féminine, élite, Philadelphie, dix-huitième siècle.

Abstract

Set in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia, covering the American revolutionary and the early republican eras, this thesis explores three major and interrelated themes: material culture, sociability, and female agency. It focuses on Elizabeth Willing Powel, a privileged and educated woman of Philadelphia, and on the ways she projected herself to society through the material environment of her house –Powel House - and through her correspondence. Elizabeth Powel was renowned for her intellect, her conversations and her hostess qualities. This project explores the interaction between an elite woman and her material environment during the eventful revolutionary and post-revolutionary era, and how material culture conveyed a social, cultural and political stance. By a careful analysis of Elizabeth Powel's correspondence - with a particular attention to her discourse on women's social role, female education, politics, and goods - this thesis observes Elizabeth's social interactions and self-presentation to society. It also explores how material culture and epistolary activities provided Elizabeth with means of agency, and ways to participate to late eighteenth-century American society, then undergoing crucial transformations.

Keywords : Powel House, Elizabeth Willing Powel, George Washington, sociability, material culture, letter writing, gender roles, female agency, Philadelphia, elite, eighteenth-century.

Table of Content

Résumé.....	i
Abstract	ii
Table of Content	iii
List of Illustrations	iv
List of Abbreviations	v
Acknowledgement	vii
Introduction.....	1
<i>Survey of the Literature</i>	5
1. Living In A Material World: Being and Receiving the Elite	17
<i>a) Introducing the Powels and Philadelphia’s elite</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>b) The Powel House</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>c) Fit to Receive: Adorning and Furnishing the House, and Setting the Table.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>d) Elizabeth Powel: Salonnère, Hostess</i>	<i>57</i>
2. Epistolary Conversations	66
<i>a) The Participative Act of Writing</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>b) Being a Woman, a Wife, and a Mother.....</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>c) Female education</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>d) Politics, Patriotism, and George Washington</i>	<i>92</i>
3. Conclusion: Where the Cultural Signification of Object Encounters Epistolary Discourse	109
Bibliography.....	124

List of Illustrations

Figure 1, The Powel House, front.	25
Figure 2, The Powel House, back.....	27
Figure 3, Entrance Hall, picture by Sarah Templier.....	29
Figure 4, First Floor Grand Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier	30
Figure 5, Chimney and mantel piece, First Floor Grand Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier	31
Figure 6, Dinner Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier.....	32
Figure 7, Chimney and mantel piece, Dinner Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier ..	32
Figure 8, Ballroom, picture by Sarah Templier.....	33
Figure 9, Details of the stucco ceiling, Ballroom, picture by Sarah Templier.....	34
Figure 10, Exact copy of the original mantel, Ballroom, picture by Sarah Templier	35
Figure 11, Details of the chimney, and mantel piece, Second Floor Drawing Room, picture by Sarah Templier	36
Figure 12, Scale bought by Benjamin Franklin for Samuel Powel, Powel House, picture by Sarah Templier	41
Figure 13, Sewing box that Martha Washington gave to Elizabeth Powel, picture by Sarah Templier	43
Figure 14, William Huston tall clock 1761-1771, Philadelphia, MET online collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Art states that this tall clock by William Huston, a Philadelphia artisan, dated of 1767-1771, might have belonged to the Powels.....	43
Figure 15, Queen Anne Armchair, 1740-1750, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art Online Collection.....	45
Figure 16, Blue Nankin exposed at the Powel House, picture by Sarah Templier ..	48
Figure 17, French China dessert ware, Powel House, picture by Sarah Templier...	51
Figure 18, Powel Carriage, Mount Vernon Estate, picture by Sarah Templier	56

List of Abbreviations

HSP: Historical Society of Pennsylvania

LCP: Library Company of Philadelphia

*Pour mon Papa, Jean Pierre Templier
(1960-2011), dont les derniers mots
et souffles d'encouragement m'ont
soutenu tout au long de ce projet.*

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Introduction

Philadelphia and its historical sites are seen each year by millions of visitors, and high are the chances that they take a tour of Independence Hall offered by guides of the National Park Service.¹ Once in the room in which the debates of the Constitutional Convention took place, the visitors, just as I was, might be treated with an anecdote. The day the Constitution was adopted, so the story goes, when the delegates came out of the Pennsylvania State House - today known as the Independence Hall - an anxious and eager woman approached Benjamin Franklin, and asked him what type of government America would have. Franklin is said to have answered: "A Republic, madam, if you can keep it." The lady of this oft-told anecdote is Elizabeth Willing Powel. The tourist who visits her house - the Powel House, another of Philadelphia's historical landmarks - might be entertained with the same tale. This story features in the biography of Benjamin Franklin by Walter Isaacson, in *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* by Richard Brookhiser, and even in elementary schoolbooks.² Curiously, the tale originated in *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser* in 1814, when Elizabeth was still alive. She even addressed the story when asked about it by her niece:

I found myself embarrassed to answer his inquiries respecting a conversation supposed to have passed between Dr. Franklin, and myself respecting the goodness, and probably permanence of the Constitution of the United States, somewhat similar to a conversation some time published in Poulson Paper [...].

¹ George W. Boudreau, *Independence : A Guide to Historic Philadelphia*, Yardley, Westholme, 2012, p. xii-xiii.

² "According to a tale recorded by James McHenry of Maryland, he made his point in a pithier way to an anxious lady named Mrs. Powel, who accosted him outside the hall. 'What type of government', she asked 'have you delegates given us?' To which he replied, 'A republic, madam, if you can keep it.'" Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, New York, London, Tokyo, Sydney, Singapore. Simon & Schuster, p. 459. Also see, Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father. Rediscovering George Washington*, New York, The Free Press, 1996, pp. 122-123; McGrawHill, *United States: Adventures in Time and Space*, Glencoe House Publication, 1999, p. 349, 351.

I have at present no recollection of such conversation, neither that related by the State Secretary of War, or of that alluded to in the Daily Advertiser. Yet I cannot venture to deny that after so many Years have elapsed that such conversations have passed. I well remember to have [been] frequently associated with the most respectable, influential Members of the Convention that framed the Constitution, and that the all important Subject was frequently discussed at our House; but my memory is not now sufficiently retentive to be confided on with regard to particular observations or rejoinders that might have been made at that time that either by the justly venerated patriotic philanthropic Dr. Franklin or any other Person.³

This widely repeated anecdote suggests the centrality of Elizabeth to the momentous events of early American political liberty. And yet she remains a largely unknown figure - private in life as in posterity. As we will see, this irony is closely connected to the norms of gender and femininity central to her life. Whether or not the interaction between Elizabeth Powel and Benjamin Franklin occurred, the anecdote highlights Elizabeth's familiarity with Franklin and many actors of the revolutionary and early republican politics. It shows that she was not only very interested in political events like the birth of the American Constitution, but that crucial debates on this topic were discussed in her house, and in her presence.

Elizabeth Willing Powel was an important member of the Philadelphia elite in the revolutionary and early republican eras. She was a respected hostess who frequented and corresponded with the highest political figures of America, amongst them many Founding Fathers. She also received them in her highly regarded house: the Powel House. She was also a close friend of George Washington, who, in 1792, asked for her advice serving a second term as president. Because of this, Elizabeth is sometime mentioned in biographies of

³ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 11, Elizabeth W. Powel to Martha Hare, 25th of May, 1814

George Washington.⁴ While her name, or the names of her family and relatives, can be found in various books related to the history of Philadelphia of the revolutionary era, she is at most described in a few pages. Only David Maxey has provided a good biographical source of Elizabeth through a study of a portrait of her by Matthew Pratt.⁵

One purpose of this thesis is thus to shed more light on Elizabeth Willing Powel in order to understand her place in late eighteenth-century America. Elizabeth's life covers a long time span of the American history; she was one of the wealthiest members of Philadelphia's elite at a time when Philadelphia was the first city in America. This thesis, consequently, presents itself as a close study of Elizabeth Powel and as an attempt to situate her in her historical context. It contributes to our knowledge of how Philadelphia's elite handled – on a material level – the passage from being British-American colonists to American citizens. More specifically, it explores the agency, identity formation, and the social participation of this elite woman in an era of important change. To accomplish these purposes, this thesis studies two forms of language: material culture and epistolary writing. Consequently, this thesis also aspires study material culture in relation to interactions in social circumstances. Indeed, the house in which Elizabeth lived her most influential years as a Philadelphian hostess – the last three decades in the eighteenth century – is today known as the Powel House and still stands, preserved by the Philadelphia Society of Preservation of Landmarks. The first part of this thesis will thus focus on the Powel's material culture and its

⁴ For mentions of Elizabeth Willing Powel in biographies of George Washington, see Brookhiser, *Founding....*, p. 94, 109, 133 ; Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency : George Washington*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 220-265.

⁵ Working in real estate and serving on the board of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, amateur historian, David W. Maxey's *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel (1743-1830)* is a well researched biographical work on Elizabeth Willing Powel as well as an interesting analysis of her c.1793 portrait by Matthew Pratt. David W. Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel (1743-1830)*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 2006.

connection to their social status. It will also analyze material culture as a means of agency for elite women such as Elizabeth. Elizabeth's own correspondence is a rich source, for its content as much as for its role as a medium of communication and social participation. My analysis of this correspondence hopes to contribute to the emerging historiography that studies letters not only for their contents, but for their role as bearer of agency and identities. Through these two forms of expression, this thesis touches on numerous themes: sociability, agency, women's roles, and consumption.

In this thesis, I argue that Elizabeth used diverse means of agency in order to share her vision of American society, and to establish her place in that society. I explore how the Powells' material environment projected their important social status, and suggested elaborate social performances. Contextualized in the revolutionary and early republican eras, I analyze how the consumption habits of the Powells are to a certain extent reveal their political stance during this conflict. I argue that Elizabeth Powel used her control over the material environment of the Powel House, and later on her activities as a patron of Philadelphia silversmiths, as a means of agency to showcase and share her – and her household's - virtue and taste. Exploring Elizabeth's letters as a medium of communication and agency, I explore how Elizabeth used epistolary activity to forge and inscribe her identity in time and people's memory, as well as to project herself as a refined woman of taste and cultured mind. I argue that Elizabeth used her correspondence as a means of expression and agency, as a way to act upon and influence the shaping of American society on many levels – gender roles, education, politics, and consumption - without interfering in the male public sphere.

Survey of the Literature

Philadelphia serves as the backdrop of this study. Studies address the process that enabled the American colonies, and especially its main cities – including Philadelphia - to envision American independence, and how inhabitants of all social classes started building an American identity. With *Rebels and Gentlemen*, Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh were among the first to tackle Philadelphia's ascent as a cultural, political and economic capital, studying how influential its elite was in the revolutionary and republican era. Exploring the elite's education, forms of sociability, and their appropriation of diverse European influences, Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh argued that Philadelphia was the site of a cultural and intellectual ferment. Much influenced by the Enlightenment, this ferment allowed gentlemen to refine and elaborate their thinking, express themselves, distance themselves from their Mother Country, and, eventually, consider the Independence of the Thirteen Colonies.⁶ Carl Bridenbaugh, with *Cities in Revolt, Urban Life in America, 1743-1776*, also explored the expansion and development of the five major port cities of the American colonies – including Philadelphia - and how it created an environment favorable to the setting off of the American Revolution. He stated that by 1776, between the elegant urban landscape, the commercial and economic powers of the merchants, the elaborate civic institutions that sometime were superior to European ones, and the refined lifestyle of the Americans aristocracies, urban groups and elites had developed a proper American identity.⁷

⁶ Carl Bridenbaugh and Jessica Bridenbaugh. *Rebels and Gentlemen; Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p.ix-xii, 365-371.

⁷ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt : Urban Life in America, 1743-1776*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1964 [1955], p. 248-49, 331, 291, 372, 417-425.

In opposition to Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh's descriptive narration of the cultural and intellectual ferment, Gary B. Nash, in *The Urban Crucible*, investigated and analyzed the social, political and economic evolution of America's three main cities: Boston, New York, Philadelphia. Nash explored how, in a succession of wars throughout the eighteenth century, the three cities evolved differently - economically, politically and socially - and thus reacted differently to the early crises that led to the American Revolution.⁸ Nash particularly examined the respective economic context, and the rise of a class-based political awareness and culture in the three cities. When analyzing Philadelphia, Nash emphasized its economic stability – in comparison to Boston or New York - hence its important demographic growth, the formation of a strong politically active group of artisans, and the establishment of a burgeoning cultural and intellectual life.⁹ More recently, Gary B. Nash, with *First City. Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*, explored how social groups – including the elite – and institutions of Philadelphia actively built the memory of the city and participated in the creation of its history.¹⁰

Following these groundbreaking works, historians more closely explored the formation and identities of Philadelphia's most prominent social groups during the Revolutionary era. Thomas M. Doerflinger, in *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, focused on Philadelphia's merchant class, including the merchant elite that Samuel Powel was part of. He showed how Philadelphia's merchant-based society greatly participated to the important economic growth of America after the Seven Years

⁸ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1986.

⁹ Nash, *The Urban...*, p. 76, 11, 141-159, 202, 240-246.

¹⁰ Gary B. Nash, *First City : Philadelphia and the Forging of Historical Memory*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

War and how it reacted and took part in the Revolution.¹¹ When describing the merchant elite that dominated Philadelphia, Doerflinger notably highlighted the role that consumption, and the display of luxury and taste, played in the construction of merchants' social.¹² In *The Marketplace of Revolution*, T.H. Breen explored the politicization of consumption that made the wealth and mediated the identity of Philadelphia's merchant elite.¹³ Philadelphia's wealth was built on the rise of consumer economy in the American colonies, a topic of recent interest to historians.¹⁴ Breen thus navigated the different meanings given to goods, and to the consumption - or boycott - of these goods. He also studied consumerism as forms of identity and mode of communication. Finally, he demonstrated that the colonists' consumerism played a part in the transition from a British identity to an American identity.¹⁵

The analysis in this thesis is set in this context of rising consumerism that enriched Philadelphia's merchant class and forged the lifestyle of its elite. The thesis draws on the study of material culture in order to explore the material environment of the Powells. Historian of art Jules David Prown defined material culture and its study as "the manifestation of culture through material productions. And the study of material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover beliefs - the values, ideas, and assumptions - of a

¹¹ Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia*, Chapel Hill, published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, University of North Carolina Press, 1986, p.5, 62, 167, 206-207, 180-190.

¹² Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit...*, p. 20-45.

¹³ T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹⁴ Breen, *The Marketplace...*, p. 18. For a founding book on the study of consumerism in eighteenth-century Europe and North America, see Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982; and John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds, *Consumption and the World of Goods*, London, New York, Routledge, 1993.

¹⁵ Breen, *The Marketplace...*, p. xv.

particular community or society at a given time."¹⁶ Material culture stopped being exclusively studied by historians of art, archaeologists, museum curators, and anthropologists when historians developed interests for topics such as appearance and consumption. As Karen Harvey well defined:

Unlike 'object' or 'artefact', 'material culture' encapsulates not just the physical attributes of an object but the myriad and shifting contexts through which it acquires meaning. Material cultures are not simply objects that people make, use, and throw away; it is an integral part of – and indeed shapes – human experience.¹⁷

The examination of artefacts engages the historian with a past reality of the senses and the physical conditions of life. Objects can be read and counted; possession reveals character, interest, and quality of life while furniture and clothing can reflect "specific attitudes to the body."¹⁸ Richard Grassby argued that "[m]aterial culture sheds lights on how people understood themselves."¹⁹ It offers insight into the formation of social status and the construction of group identities.²⁰ Historian Giorgio Riello, exploring the integration of material culture in historical narratives, rightly highlighted that from the study of consumption emerged different analyses of consumer culture and commercial society, based on "gender, domesticity, politeness, urban living, the press, clothing, luxury, [...] political economy, manufacturing, and the history of specific commodities."²¹ It is from the angles of

¹⁶ Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History of Fiction?", in Kenneth Haltman and Jules David Prown, eds, *American Artifacts : Essays in Material Culture* East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000, p. 11.

¹⁷ Karen Harvey, "Introduction: Practical Matters", in Karen Harvey, ed., *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 3

¹⁸ Richard Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 35, no. 4, Spring 2005, pp. 593-594

¹⁹ Grassby, "Material Culture...", p. 594 Objects, as "ideas, beliefs, and meanings interpose themselves between people and things", they can reveals individual motives, desires, tastes, the social utility of objects, their role as mediator between humans." Grassby, "Material Culture...", p. 595

²⁰ Grassby, "Material Culture...", p. 596.

²¹ Giorgio Riello, "Things That Shape History. Material Culture and Historical Narratives," in Karen Harvey, ed., *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*,

gender, domesticity, politeness and luxury that we will analyze the material culture of the Powells.

The concepts of “civilization” - genteel politeness and refinement - are central to this narrative. Sociologist Norbert Elias interpreted the eighteenth-century definition of civilization as the emergence in the West of unifying concepts by which the elites – aristocratic and bourgeois – expressed their superiority in opposition to lower classes, who lived by a more primitive and less refined lifestyle. It was expressed through a code of behaviour that followed principles of courtesy, civility, and politeness.²² Historian Richard Bushman, in *The Refinement of America: Persons Houses, Cities*, elaborated on the process of refinement and civilization of the American gentility during the 18th century until 1850.²³ Gentility as he understood it was about manners and body regulation - the marks of a “civilized” being. The elite of a new republican society lived and acted by the idea that virtue and talents were the elements by which one can rise to the highest rank of society, attainable by a refinement of knowledge, manners, and lifestyle.²⁴ Genteel culture was thus about appearance. Bushman depicted the refinement of the appearances of persons, houses, and city planning, emphasizing the importance of specific spaces, and material culture in the pursuit of a genteel lifestyle.²⁵ Touching upon similar themes, historian Woodruff D. Smith wrote a complete study of how, in Europe from 1600 to 1800, consumption played a crucial part in defining respectability, through the concepts of gender, luxury,

London; New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 33

²² Norbert Elias, *La Civilisation Des Moeurs*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1991, pp. 11-12,58. On a similar topic, Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p.40-43.

²³ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America : Persons, Houses, Cities*,. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993.

²⁴ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, chap. 2

²⁵ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. 10, 18-19, 61-99, 118-127.

virtue and gentility, while historian Maxine Berg focused on the place of luxury in British consumption.²⁶

The display of material culture was intrinsic to the genteel lifestyle and its practices of sociability. Historian Bernard L. Herman used the concept of “tabletop conversations” to illustrate the interaction between material culture and sociability:

Tabletop conversation evoked a world of relationship in which objects and behaviors intersect around outward show and the material culture of sociability. Tabletops, metaphoric fields of social play, strategically enabled assertions of self, as actors, witness, and judge through the deployment of objects and the ability to enact their rituals.²⁷

The combination of practices of sociability and material environment highlights how people acted in society, evaluated and identified each other, and projected and identified themselves. For Herman, although historians have made great strides in understanding the changes in consumption habits in the eighteenth century, in “the growing availability and affordability of commodities,” and in the material life in urban areas of the eighteenth British Atlantic, “we continue to have a tenuous grasp on urban life as lived experience, as having the substance of its many, many occasions.” Two obstacles shape this lacuna: “the desire to find pattern in human action sustains a distrust of individual stories in more than

²⁶ Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800*, New York: Routledge, 2002; Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2005;; Maxine Berg, "New Commodities: Luxuries, and Their Consumer in Eighteenth-Century England," in Berg, Maxine and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury : Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999, p. .63 - 85.

²⁷ Bernard L. Herman, “Tabletop Conversations: Material Culture and Everyday Life in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World”, in John Styles and Amanda Vickery, *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America*, New Haven, London, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 42

illustrative role,” and “to always insert the study of material culture in notions of power, “hostage to dominant methodological, theoretical, and critical ideologies. Even the language of resistance and transgression emerges from an acceptance of authority and community as driving engines in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.”²⁸ The present thesis attempts to respond to these obstacles by analyzing the material environment and sociability of an individual - Elizabeth Powel – and by exploring the place of material culture in social interactions.

A second body of literature on which this thesis builds is the literature on the place and role of women in revolutionary and early republican America. Because the thesis focuses on the domestic sphere and female sociability, it necessarily addresses the concept of separate spheres, and the distinction between public and private. The concept of separate spheres concept is one of the primary ways by which eighteenth-century society conceived of gender. However, where feminist studies for a long time associated the separate spheres as a physical and oppressive division, early Americanists and gender historians like Mary Beth Norton and Linda K. Kerber have emphasized that the separated sphere was a separation based the ideas of gender.²⁹ While some studies, dominated by Mary Beth Norton’s work, explored the place of women during the revolution, and how this event reshaped their lives, some specifically focused on their social and political impact, and forms of agency.³⁰ The combination of a growing consumer

²⁸ Herman, « Tabletop... », p. 42.

²⁹ Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, “Introduction: Converging History,” in Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby, eds. *Gendered Domains : Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History : Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 2, 12-17 ; Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. eds. *Quataert Connecting Spheres : Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic : Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, New York, Norton, 1986. Mary Beth Norton, *Separated by Their Sex. Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World*, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 2011. On how to write gender history in the broader context of cultural history, see Brown, Kathleen M. "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 2, April 1993, p. 311-328.

³⁰ Mary Beth Norton’s *Liberty’s Daughters* is a fundamental work on the impact of the American

society with the creation of an independent nation left spaces to be filled and opened ways for women to redefine their roles. Historian Carole Shammas, among others, notably explored the relationship between women and consumption at this time.³¹ Historians have also explored women's familial roles, notably in the new early Republic. Linda K. Kerber's work on the "Republican motherhood" - a conception of women's role in society that preserved the traditional roles of mothers and wives, while carving a political role for women as the educated wives and mothers of citizens - is fundamental, and well completed by Rosemarie Zagarri's work on the ideological origins of this conception.³²

With this gendered angle of analysis, this thesis focuses on the practices of sociability dominated by women in households, outside of formal public institutions (courts, government) and of public affairs (politics, diplomacies, lawmaking, application of justice). Tea, dinner, salons, and epistolary sociability are thus the main forms of sociability explored. Just as this thesis follows Bushman in exploring the place of refined material culture in the American elite's lifestyle and social practices, and it follows David Shields in exploring how "manners, fashions, and modes of conversation" offer new insight into American society.³³ In the same

Revolution on the life of women. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980; Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America." *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3, Jun 1984, 593-619.

Also see Hoffman, Ronald, and Albert, Peter J. eds. *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, Charlottesville, United States Capitol Historical Society, University of Virginia Press, 1989. Rosemarie Zagarri explored the significant role of women in the making of the American republic's political life. Rosemarie Zagarri, "Gender and the First Party System," in Ben-Atar, Dorion and Oberg, Barbara B. eds. *Federalists Reconsidered*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1998, p. 118-34.

³¹ Carole Shammas, "Consumer Behavior in Colonial America." *Social Science History* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1982), p. 67-86; Carole Shammas, "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America." *Journal of Social History* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 3-24.

³² Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, New York, Norton, 1986 ; Rosemarie Zagarri, "Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother." *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2, June 1992, p. 192-215.

³³ David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America*, Chapel Hill, University of North

vain as Deena Goodman, who explored the French salons, American historians such as Shields, Susan Stabile, Susan Branson, and Catherine Allgor have explored the salons and other late eighteenth-century American social institutions where women performed in society, and developed a certain kind of social and political agency.³⁴

Since the 1980s, many historians have explored epistolary activities, focusing primarily on British and French published correspondence or epistolary novels.³⁵ The French historiography on eighteenth-century correspondence and the act of writing as a mean of social, political, and economical agency, especially for women, is well-developed.³⁶ While some historians have examined epistolary

Carolina Press, 1997, p. xix.

³⁴ Where Allgor explored the political salons of the early Republic in Washington, Shields, Stabile, and Branson explored the salon culture in Philadelphia in the second half of the eighteenth century. Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics : In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2000; Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001; Anne M. Ousterhout, *The Most Learned Woman in America a Life of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004; Shields, *Civil Tongues...*, 99-139; Stabile, Susan. "Salons and Power in the Era of Revolution: from Literary Coteries to Epistolary Enlightenment", in Larry E. Tise, ed., *Benjamin Franklin and Women*, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p.129-171.

³⁵ For early literature that explored the nature of letters and correspondence, see Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daglian and Irvin Ehrenpreis, eds., *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, Lawrence, The University of Kansas, 1966; Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity. Approaches to a Form*. Columbus, Ohio State University, 1982, and Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen. Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter*, Chicago and London, The Chicago University Press, 1986. For the historiography that explored the social and gendered implications of letter writing in European culture, see Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2006; Elizabeth Hechendorff Cook, *Epistolary Bodies. Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996; Susan Dalton, *Engendering the Republic of Letters Reconnecting Public and Private Spheres in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, and Rebecca Earle, éd. *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter Writers 1600-1945*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999.

³⁶ For the French historiography, see Georges Bérubé and Marie-France Silver, eds., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996; Mireille Bossis, éd., *La lettre à la croisée de l'individuel et du social*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, 1994; Anne, Chamayou, *L'esprit de la lettre, XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999; Marie-France Silver et Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, eds., *Femmes en toutes lettres. Les épistolaires du XVIIIe siècle*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2000; Paul Servais, Laurence Van Ypersele et Françoise

writings in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world, it is only recently that attention has turned to the activity of writing as a site of sociability and agency.³⁷ Konstantin Dierks, in *In my Power*, has argued that the act of corresponding was a social practice that empowered a larger part of America's population to participate in society during important changes.³⁸ Practices of sociability – in person or through correspondences- were thus spaces of refinement in which women evolved, forged their identity, displayed their qualities, and used their agency.

The first chapter, "Living in a Material World," addresses the material refinement of the Powels, and explores the role Elizabeth played its display. The Powel House and its contents are what is the most known and researched about the family, but have been rarely, if at all, studied in an historical perspective. I largely draw from George Tatum's architectural history of the Powel House; on Nicholas B. Wainwright's study of the house of the Cadwaladers, which offers several comparisons with the Powel House; and on Robert Moss's work on the architecture and decoration of Philadelphia's historical houses.³⁹ I interpret the

Mirguet, *La Lettre et l'intime. L'émergence d'une expression du for intérieur dans les correspondances privées (17e-19e siècles)*, Louvain-La-Neuve, Academia Bruylant, 2007.

³⁷ Historian Eve Tavor Bannet studied the different ways in which letters were written through an examination epistolary manuals in circulation across the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. This approach allowed her to determine the reasons for which one would write, and how one would write a letter. Elizabeth Hewitt is an historian who placed correspondence at the core of her analysis and highlighted the importance of studying non-fictional correspondence from a non-literary point of view. While David Shields explored the social role of letter in a polite society, historian Konstantin Dierks studied eighteenth-century letter-writing in America as a social practice and as a medium of empowerment. Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters. Letter Manual and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009; Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004; David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

³⁸ Dierks, *In my Power...*, p. 1-7.

³⁹ Roger W Moss and Tom Crane. *Historic Houses of Philadelphia : A Tour of the Region's Museum Homes*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998 ; George B Tatum, and Cortlandt Van Dyke Hubbard. *Philadelphia Georgian : The City House of Samuel Powel and Some of Its Eighteenth-Century Neighbors*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976 ; Nicholas B. Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur in Philadelphia; the House and Furniture of General John Cadwalader*,

information in the late eighteenth century context of consumerism, politics, and most importantly of social performance. This interpretation is inspired by the work of Richard Bushman, whose *Refinement of America* opened the gate of cultural and social understanding of consumerism and material culture in late eighteenth century America. Some recent works that explore the political, social and cultural meanings of objects were particularly influential as well. Kate Haulman focused on fashion as a site of power, increasingly feminine, and as a way of expressing and interpreting political allegiance.⁴⁰ Zara Anishanslin Bernhardt, draws a broader picture of the transatlantic network of production, circulation, and use of goods from a single portrait of Ann Shippen Willing, Elizabeth Willing Powel's mother. Analysing architecture, cultural landscapes, and decorative arts, Anishanslin reveals how material culture was used to fashion, and display various ideologies.⁴¹ Finally, Amy Henderson, studying the material environment and culture of the Republican Court that dominated Philadelphia's sociability in the first decade of the Republic, explores it as a venue for performance, a medium of visual communication, and a way of displaying political affiliation, social status, and reputation.⁴² The description and analysis of the Powel House is also based on many museum collections and studies. Indeed, objects that belonged to the Powels are today preserved at the Powel House, in the Mount Vernon Collection, at the Yale University Art Gallery, at the Philadelphia Museum of Arts, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These institutions' collections, as well as their publications, were useful sources.⁴³ In 1931, the former Philadelphia Museum of

Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1964.

⁴⁰ «Although fashion can include forms of bodily performance such as gender relations, social order, and political authority, and a vehicle through which they expressed those ideas during an era in which traditional hierarchies were deeply in flux.» Haulman, *The Politics...*, p. 3

⁴¹ Zara Anishanslin Bernhardt, "Portrait of a Woman in a Silk Dress: The Hidden Histories of Aesthetic Commodities in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World." Ph.D., University of Delaware, 2009.

⁴² Amy Hudson Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican Court: Building and Decorating Philadelphia Homes, 1790--1800." Ph.D., University of Delaware, 2008.

⁴³ "The New Museum of Art Inaugural Exhibition." *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 23, no. 119

Art - the Pennsylvania Museum - held in 1928 an exhibition of goods that belonged to the Powels, for which they borrowed multiple objects from heirs of the Powel. Although one article on the Powel exhibition by Joseph Downs, curator of the Philadelphia Museum of Arts, provides a not very detailed list of some of the objects exhibited, few traces remain of the content of the exhibition. Still, this small trace of the exhibition is one of the most complete sources on the Powel's belongings.⁴⁴ The visit of the Powel House itself, which is preserved as closely as possible to condition in the time of the Powels, also furnished information for chapter 1.⁴⁵ As for primary sources, where wills and inventories are often very informative, it is not the case with the Powels. Inventories are near absent, and Elizabeth will's mostly contains very generic terms (mahogany furniture, silverware, books, china). Nevertheless, the account books maintained by Samuel Powel, and then by his widow, provide useful information that completes the research of Tantum, Wainwright, and the aforementioned museums' collection.

(March 1928): 2-31 ; David L. Barquist, "'Well Made from English Patterns': Richardson Silver from the Powel Family." *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (1993): 76-85 ; Carol Borchert Cadou, and Union Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the. *The George Washington Collection : Fine and Decorative Arts at Mount Vernon*, Manchester: Hudson Hills Press : Distributed in the United States by National Book Networks, 2006; Marshall B. Davidson, "American House Warning." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series* 3, no. 7 (Mars 1945): 176-84 ; Joseph Downs, "Some English and American Furnitures in the Inaugural Exhibition." *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 23, no. 121 (May 1928): 10-21 ; Phoebe Phillips Prime, "Exhibition of Philadelphia Silver 1682-1800 at the Philadelphia Museum of Arts, April 14 to May 27, 1956." *The Philadelphia Museum Bulletin* 51, no. 249 (Spring 1956): 3-34.

⁴⁴ Joseph Downs, " The Powel Exhibition ". *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 27, no. 144 (December 1931).

⁴⁵ On how interpreting and analysing historic houses and present a tour of such a house, see Jessica Foy Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002 ; Schlereth, Thomas J. *Cultural History and Material Culture : Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1990.

1. Living In A Material World: Being and Receiving the Elite

a) Introducing the Powels and Philadelphia's elite

Elizabeth Willing Powel lived a long life. Born in 1742, she lived through the Seven Years' War, the revolutionary and Federalist eras, the War of 1812, and saw the election of President Jackson in 1828, before dying in 1830. Sixth in a family of 11 children, she came to the world of an eminent Philadelphia family. Hers was part of a merchant-based elite then in formation, increasingly imitating the English gentry in its consumption, manners, leisure, and social practices. Elizabeth's father, Charles Willing, born in England, became a central member of the merchant elite of Philadelphia that made the city, by the mid-1700s, the most important commercial port in North America.⁴⁶ This commercial activity not only built the wealth of Philadelphia's elite, but it gave its members access to an important flood of British and colonial goods, thus enabling it to emulate the material lifestyle of the British elite. Elizabeth's mother, Ann Shippen, descended from one of the most influential families of Philadelphia, and participated in this movement of refinement through her consumption and her social practices: dance assemblies, discussions around tea or dinner, and social visits. The Willings' house was thought of and constructed as a reflection of their importance to the civic, economic, and genteel world of both sides of the Atlantic.⁴⁷ It was through a combination of

⁴⁶ On the merchant community that made Philadelphia the most important port city in eighteenth-century North America, see Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia*, Chapel Hill, published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va., University of North Carolina Press, 1986, and T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, New York:, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 6-7, 46. For a more detailed explanation Philadelphia's trading activities, see James G. Lydon, "Philadelphia's Commercial Expansion." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 91, no. 4, October 1967, p. 401-18; Jane T. Merritt, "Tea Trade, Consumption, and the Republican Paradox in PreRevolutionary Philadelphia." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128, no. 2, April 2004, p. 125

⁴⁷ Zara Bernhardt Anishanslin. "Portrait of a Woman in a Silk Dress: The Hidden Histories of

manners, education, social practices and material environment that Elizabeth's family projected and established its place in society.

Although neither Elizabeth nor any of her five sisters went to school, they benefited from a complete education at home: they were accomplished in the art of conversation, orthography, grammar, and their writing style was refined.⁴⁸ Ann Shippen Willing, like other women of Philadelphia's elite, educated her daughters in order to make them accomplished spouses, mothers, and hostesses, taking her inspiration from the British literature on education.⁴⁹ And although Elizabeth never visited Europe, European influences and people who travelled the Old Continent surrounded her. Elizabeth was never a mother herself, however. All of Elizabeth's children died in birth or at a very early age, a wound that she bore all her life and sometimes alluded to years later.⁵⁰ At the death of her husband, she adopted one of her nephews as heir, John Hare, later known as John Hare Powel, and consequently took an important part in his upbringing.⁵¹

In 1769, Elizabeth married one of the richest merchants and landlords of Philadelphia, Samuel Powel III (1738-1793). Powel's grandfather, Samuel Powell I,

Aesthetic Commodities in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 2009, p. 205-212.

⁴⁸ For more details on Elizabeth's and her sisters' education, see David W. Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel (1743-1830)*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 2006, pp. 15-17. On a more global note, eighteenth-century British literature on education and epistolary manuals were increasingly addressing feminine epistolarity, and this literature was imported in America, and read by Philadelphia's elite. Alain Kerhervé, "L'expression de l'intimité chez les épistolières anglaises au 18e siècle. de la théorie à la pratique", in Paul Servais, Laurence van Ypersele and Françoise Mirguez, eds., *la lettre et l'intime: l'émergence d'une expression du for intérieur dans les correspondances privées (17e-19e Siècles)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia-Bruylant, 2007, pp.81-84. On the refinement of the bodies and the minds that were part of the educative refinement process, see, Bushman, *The Refinement...*, Chapter 3.

⁴⁹ Sarah Fatherly, *Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies. Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*. Bethlehem, Lehigh University Press, 2008, pp. 27-37, 68-91.

⁵⁰ Maxey, *A Portrait...*, p. 23-24; Mount Vernon Collection, Washington Papers, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, July, 1786, Philadelphia."

⁵¹ It is not clear if there actually was a legal adoption per say, but John Hare did adopt the name of Powel and inherited the major part of the Powels' estate, Maxey, *A Portrait...*, pp.41-42.

was known as “the rich carpenter,” and owned 90 houses in Philadelphia. Samuel Powel II enlarged that estate and called himself a merchant, as did Samuel Powel III. He was amongst the first young Americans from a prosperous family to do a *Grand Tour* in Europe after his studies at the College of Philadelphia. Between 1760 and 1767, he visited London, where he witnessed George III’s coronation; Scotland; Paris, where he met Voltaire; and Italy, where he studied classical art and architecture in Rome. He married Elizabeth soon after his return. Although Elizabeth’s marriage at the age of 27 may seem late, anti-marital ideas circulated at that time, as well as aspirations to marry on emotional, affectionate and egalitarian basis, and late marriages were therefore not uncommon.⁵² According to the Marquis de Chastellux, who visited the couple, Elizabeth and Samuel seem to have formed a strong and happy union:

It would be difficult to separate two persons who have for twenty years lived together in happiest union, I shall not say as man and wife, which would not convey in America the perfect idea of equality, but as two friends, unusually well matched in understanding, taste and knowledge.⁵³

As if to confirm this view, in her letters Elizabeth referred to her late husband as “her dearest friend” or her “best friend” years later, and frequently expressed her sadness at his loss.⁵⁴

⁵² Fatherly, *Gentlewomen...*, p. 39, Karin A Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2000, chapter 1; Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1980, pp. 228-38.

⁵³ Francois Jean marquis de Chastellux *Travels in North America* Translated by Howard C. Rice, Chapel Hill, Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va, University of North Carolina Press, 1963, p. 136.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth notably referred to her late husband as her dearest of best friend in HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 3, folder 3, Elizabeth Powel to Bishop William White, July 30th, 1807, Philadelphia,” “Elizabeth Powel to her ‘dear niece’, November 20th, 1810, Philadelphia.”

The Powels, through their eminent families, their wealth, and their social engagement, were well connected to Philadelphia's social, political, intellectual and economic networks. It was in this context that Elizabeth became a respected hostess and participant to Philadelphia's social life. Samuel Powel was the last mayor of colonial Philadelphia, and the first mayor of republican Philadelphia - and known as the "Patriot Mayor." He was involved in the public life of Philadelphia: as vice-president of the American Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge, he was involved in the reorganization of the American Philosophical Society and contributed in the erection of the Philosophical Hall in 1785. Samuel Powel was also trustee for a Negro school in Philadelphia, and was particularly involved in the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture.⁵⁵

Samuel Powel bought the Powel House five days after he married Elizabeth in 1760; she sold it in 1798, five years after her husband died from the yellow fever epidemic that hit Philadelphia in 1793.⁵⁶ Elizabeth's life as a leading hostess was linked to this 33-year period as a married woman running the Powel House. Coming from important families in the British colonies, both Elizabeth and Samuel aspired to be recognized as part of the British establishment. However, just as the Powels ascended Philadelphia's society, the American colonies had entered a long period of conflict with the Mother country. The Revolutionary era had begun. Eminent Philadelphia merchant families such as the Powels, the Willings, the Shippens, and the Chews, were joined by political and intellectual figures from other colonies such as the Adams, the Washingtons, the Schuylers. All of them

⁵⁵ On Samuel Powel and the context of his education and traveling in Europe, see the introduction of Powel, Samuel, *A Journal of Samuel Powel: Rome, 1764*, Sarah Jackson, ed., Firenze: Studio per edizioni scelte, 2001, p. 1-41. For more details of the biography and fortune of Samuel Powel, see George B., Tatum, and Cortlandt Van Dyke Hubbard. *Philadelphia Georgian: The City House of Samuel Powel and Some of Its Eighteenth-Century Neighbors*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1976, pp. 6-25; Carl Bridenbaugh and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen: Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 207-212.

⁵⁶ George W. Boudreau, *Independence : A Guide to Historic Philadelphia*, Yardley, Pa.: Westholme, 2012, p. 101, Maxey, *A Portrait...*, p. 51 ; Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 16.

faced difficult questions that demanded a constant adaptation of their lifestyle. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals and European courtesy books disseminating ideas of civility, virtue, and politeness, Philadelphia's merchant-based elite confronted vexing questions about the political nature of their consumption. Indeed, the policies for the boycott of British goods, like tea, the condemnation of luxury in time of war, and the rise of the homespun movement as a patriotic support for the military effort during the War of Independence led them to recognize the political value of their consumption habits.⁵⁷ The Declaration of Independence, the War of Independence, and the birth of an American Republic shook the Philadelphia elite's British identity and required the formation of a new one.⁵⁸ The refinement of Philadelphia's society took on new meanings. Genteel refinement was no longer the mark of belonging to the British gentry. Now, it signalled membership in a civic and republican society, in which refinement gave the possibility "of elevation from ordinary existence into an exalted society of superior beings."⁵⁹ In many ways, Philadelphia's elite distinguished itself from the mass by following genteel codes of behaviour, by consuming certain types of goods, by living in the same neighbourhood, and by participating in the same forms and networks of sociability.⁶⁰

The Powells took their time before clearly declaring themselves as Patriots.⁶¹ While some of Elizabeth sisters were active in the boycott and homespun

⁵⁷ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution...*, p. 221-226, 242-261; Doerflinger, *A Vigorous...*, Chap. 4; Carole Shammas, "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America." *Journal of Social History* 14, no. 1, Fall 1980, p. 11

⁵⁸ Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution...*, p.7, 166-172. For a transatlantic comparison of manner among social classes, see C. Dallett Hemphill, "Manners and Class in the Revolutionary Era: A Transatlantic Comparison." *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Series* lviii, no. 2, April 2006, p. 345-72.

⁵⁹ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. xix

⁶⁰ Doerflinger, *A Vigorous...*, p. 20-45; Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 3, 34-40; Herman, "Tabletop...", p. 43

⁶¹ On the variety of positions in Pennsylvania during the revolutionary era, and their gradual evolution from the Stamp Act Crisis to the Declaration of Independence and throughout the war, see Anne M. Ousterhout, *A State Divided : Opposition in Pennsylvania to the American Revolution*,

movements, there is no evidence of Elizabeth joining them.⁶² One of Elizabeth's closest friends before the Revolution was the Reverend Duché, who returned to England after expressing openly Loyalist opinions.⁶³ And while her brother, Thomas Willing, was ambivalent in his loyalties, his partner, Robert Morris, was among the merchants overtly advocating for Independence. Her husband, although later known as the Patriot Mayor, did not fully throw himself into the cause before the 1780s.⁶⁴ The Powels thus seem to have been navigating the waters of neutrality for most of the 1760s and 1770s. The late 1770s, with the occupation of Philadelphia (September 1777-1778), the British seizure of their house, and the beginning of their friendship with the Washingtons and other key figures of the American society, seem to have catalyzed the Powels' patriotism and support for Independence. By the 1780s, when the war ended, Elizabeth was one of the leading hostesses of early Republican Philadelphia.⁶⁵

Throughout the early Republican era, the Powels, and later Elizabeth as a widow, moved in conservative and Federalists circles. The society that surrounded George Washington at the time of his presidency – known as the Republican Court – sought to adapt Philadelphia's elite sociability to a new republican country: the expression itself embodies the paradox of reconciling the refined practices typical of an aristocratic way of life with an increasingly democratic political culture.⁶⁶ The

New York, Greenwood Press, 1987, p. 6-7, 304-315.

⁶² Norton, *Liberty's Daughters...*, p. 180

⁶³ Boudreau, *Independence...*, p. 110-112.

⁶⁴ Most of Philadelphia's merchants seem to have preferred a moderation path in the early days of the revolutionary era, following the boycott policies and being patriotic went it suits their economic interests. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous...*, p. 180-196 ; Breen, *The Marketplace...*, p. 245-254.

⁶⁵ In 1784, Elizabeth attended the French Ministers' Bal. "This morning was entirely Waken up in preparing to go to a Ball at the French Ministers; I went with Mrs (p. 171) Powel, & passed a delightful evening – Mr Washington my partner – danced a minuet, I believed I look'd well at leaser My Partner Told me so – came home at one.»" Ethel Armes, ed. *Nancy Shippen, Her Journal Book. The International Romance of a Young Lady of Fashion of Colonial Philadelphia With Letters to Her and About Her*, New York and London, Benjamin Blom, 1968, p. 171-172.

⁶⁶ The 'Republican Court,' was a term introduced by nineteenth-century historian Rufus Wilmot Griswold in his book *The Republican Court or American Society in the days of Washington*, New

Republican Court centered on the events held by the Washingtons at the presidential house in Philadelphia, but is also often associated with the sociability surrounding Elizabeth's niece, Ann Bingham. Because of her friendship with the Washingtons, as well as her familial connection with the Bingham, Elizabeth became a major figure in the Republican Court's sociability. However, Elizabeth also frequented many of Philadelphia's influential Federalists and leading men of fashion, economy, and politics, such as Thomas Willing, Tench Francis Jr, George Harrison, John and Abigail Adams, the Hamiltons, John Nicholson, and Benjamin Rush, who avoided, even disapproved, the most ostentatious practices of the Republican Court, such as those practiced by the Bingham.⁶⁷

Elizabeth thus came to prominence in a society in transformation, in which political debates were increasingly publicized. It was also in a consumer society. The Philadelphia elite's use of coded manners and consumption habits were a means to distinguish, identify, and project itself. The signification and interpretation of material life were heightened in this time of increased politicization, social expression, and cultural definition. Taste and luxury defined fashion and were important factors of expression through material culture. Taste appealed to the senses, and was a "form, style, or manner' for the demonstration of a sense of beauty, excellence, fitness, and [property]".⁶⁸ From the second half of the 18th century, the Powells, like much of Philadelphia's elite, focused their activities in a new neighbourhood, called Society Hill, a more open and pleasing area with refined architecture and garden spaces.⁶⁹ In this neighbourhood, the

York, Appleton & Company, 1855. The term was later historians reinterpreted to characterize "the society revolving around the first two presidents, their families, and associates". Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican...", p. 36; also refer to 69-70.

⁶⁷ Robert J. Cough, "The Philadelphia Economic Elite at the End of the Eighteenth Century." In Catherine E. Hutchins, ed., *Shaping a National Culture. The Philadelphia Experience, 1750-1800*, Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1994, p. 16-17.

⁶⁸ Herman, "Tabletop...", p. 43.

⁶⁹ It is to note though, that Society Hill takes its name from having been the lands of the Free Society of Traders, who bought the lands from William Penn in the late 17th century. Boudreau,

material environment - interior decoration, furnishing - and consumption habits not only showcased one's status and wealth, but also served as a common denominator, and gave a sense of belonging.⁷⁰ The material environment of the Powels is thus culturally significant and reveals their lifestyle, ideologies, social standards, and aspirations: it also portrays how Elizabeth understood and displayed these ideologies, standards, and aspirations. The rooms in which the Powels received other members Philadelphia's elite were hers to maintain.

Considering the importance of consumption and of the political changes in late eighteenth-century America, the rest of this chapter describes and analyzes the Powel House and its contents. The purpose is to understand how and why it was the site of refined practices of sociability, and how material culture, consequently, was a medium of social communication.⁷¹ The Powel House, its architecture and interior decoration, and the refinement, luxury and exoticism of its contents sheds important insight on how Elizabeth, as an elite woman, perceived and received society in her house, and projected herself and her household to her guests.

Independence...., p.99 ; Nicholas B. Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur in Philadelphia; the House and Furniture of General John Cadwalader*, Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1964, p. 8-9 On how architecture and gardens were elements of choice in the refinement process, see Bushman, *The Refinement...*, pp. 110-138.

⁷⁰ Hemphill, "Manners and Class..." , p. 345-345; Smith, *Consumption...*, pp.25-27

⁷¹ Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican..." , p. 218.

b) *The Powel House*



Figure 1, The Powel House, front.

The Powel House stands on the 244 Third Street (originally 112 Third Street) (fig. 1). It was built in 1754 for Charles Stedman, who sold it to Samuel Powel in 1769, after his wedding with Elizabeth.⁷² A classic example of the Georgian architecture common to this neighbourhood of Philadelphia, John Adams famously qualified it as a “splendid seat.”⁷³ The Powel House is considered one of the finest

⁷² Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican...”, p. 84

⁷³ John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, by his Grandson Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856). 10 volumes. Vol. 2. Chapter: DIARY: WITH PASSAGES FROM AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. Online. Site Internet The Online Library of Liberty. Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/2100/159580/2819731> on 2013-01-11; Boudreau, *Independence...* p. 102; Joseph Downs, “The Powel Exhibition”, *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum*, vol. 27, no. 144, December 1931, p. 41; Roger W. Moss, and Tom Crane. *Historic Houses of Philadelphia: A Tour of the Region's Museum Homes*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p. 34-39;

examples of this architectural style to the extent that, in the 1920s, the original panelings of two of its rooms were removed and reconstructed as period rooms in two American museums: the drawing room of the Powel House can be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, while the ballroom is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.⁷⁴ Threatened with destruction in 1931, the House was bought and rescued by the Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks. The Society recreated the ballroom and drawing room to its original style and preserves the house today as closely as possible as it was in the Powels' time.

The Powel House is formed in a reverse “L” shape, and built around a “piazza” – a square or an open space for a garden. The piazza itself, an outdoor space for leisure and social gatherings is an example of the luxurious places of comfort that such a house provided.⁷⁵ The base of the reverse “L” is the front building and is built on three floors, whereas the wing of the back building has two floors (fig. 2).⁷⁶

Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p.6

⁷⁴ Amelia Peck, "The Powel Room. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1765-66," Amelia Peck, Metropolitan Museum of Art, eds., *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art and H.N. Abrams, 1996, p. 190-95 ; "The New Museum of Art Inaugural Exhibition." *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 23, no. 119, March 1928, p. 2-31.

⁷⁵ Crowley, John E. "Inventing Comfort: The Piazza." In *American Material Culture : The Shape of the Field*, edited by Ann Smart Martin, J. Ritchie Garrison and Museum Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur. Winterthur, Del.; Knoxville, Tenn.: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum; Distributed by University of Tennessee Press, 1997, p. 277

⁷⁶ Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur...*, p. 8



Figure 2, The Powel House, back.

The house was built around a particular spatial configuration: the further the visitor penetrated into the house, the more intimate were the rooms. The front rooms were meant for receiving guests and displaying wealth and sophistication, while the back building was intended for utilitarian purposes. Samuel and Elizabeth bought 112 Third Street with the intention of embellishing and renovating the house by adding expensive and tasteful elements of decoration. Samuel Powel hired the architect-builder Robert Smith to oversee the embellishment of these rooms (most of the artisans who worked on the Powel House were also hired by other eminent Philadelphian families).⁷⁷ The four main rooms of the house (on the first two floors of the front building) were extraordinarily ornate, with pediments, mahogany doors, sumptuous fireplaces, stucco ceilings and cornices, and “pedestal

⁷⁷ Moss and Crane, *Historic House...*, p.34-39 ; Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur...*, p. 10.

high” wainscoting.⁷⁸ The third floor of the front building consisted of large chambers, probably family bedrooms. The back building consisted of more functional rooms we know much less about: the kitchen, other bedrooms and chambers (one was a nursery), and the servant quarters.⁷⁹

The entrance door, ornate with a knocker and linked to a bell system, is still flanked by two ivory columns and a Doric cornice atop.⁸⁰ Once inside the house, two elements strike any visitor who entered: the splendid entrance passage, overhung by imposing Indian mahogany stairs. Its appearance - with one turn at the end of its bannister – and the exoticism of its material made the staircase a clear statement of grandeur and luxury.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Henderson, “Furnishing the Republican...”, p. 223.

⁷⁹ In a letter to Mrs. Fitzhugh dated 1783, Elizabeth mentioned the presence of a nursery next to her bedroom. Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, George Washington Collection, “Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, December 24th, 1783, Philadelphia.” See also Maxey, *A Portrait...*, p. 21-23.

⁸⁰ The main door and its ornamentations were probably the work of Joseph Emslie. On the door was set a now lost knocker bought by Powel to Daniel King, and a bell system to call the housekeeper was probably install and made by Alexander Smith. Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur...*, p. 16, 29-30 90.

⁸¹ On mahogany’s value and symbol of exoticism and luxury, see Jennifer L. Anderson, “Nature’s Currency. The Atlantic Mahogany Trade and the Commodification of Nature in the Eighteenth Century.” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 1, Spring 2004, 47-80.



Figure 3, Entrance Hall, picture by Sarah Templier

The entrance passage was large, the ceiling was high, and to reach the stairs the visitor passed through an imposing arch flanked by Corinthian pilasters (fig. 3).⁸² If the visitor was not a guest, and was, for example, a worker, an artisan, or a craftsmen working on one of Samuel Powel's construction sites coming to get his wages, a supplier coming to present bills to Powel, or a tenant coming to settle his rent, he or she would only see the stairs and the arch. Guided to their left, the visitors would pass through a door topped by a pediment and framed with mouldings leading to the first floor grand parlour (fig. 4).

⁸² On the staircase passage of the Powel House, see Tatum and Hubbard, *Philadelphian Georgian...*, pp. 55-61 ; Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur...*, p. 92.



Figure 4, First Floor Grand Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier

Inside the room were pedestal high wainscoting. The focal point of the room was the elaborate chimney dominated by a panelled structure with a tabernacle frame and a dentil cornice. A carved rococo frieze between two leaf-and-scroll friezes supported the tablet of the chimney (fig. 5). This parlour served as an office space for Samuel Powel, and can therefore be interpreted as the public business space of the house.



Figure 5, Chimney and mantel piece, First Floor Grand Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier

Behind the parlour, and past the arch of the entrance, was the dining room, where the Powels' guests would be welcomed for dinner, either formal or familial (fig. 6). The dinner parlour resembled the business parlour in that it had the same dentil cornice, wainscoting and main ornamental element of the room was the chimney, which also had a tabernacle chimney breast, and friezes supporting the tablet (fig. 7).⁸³

⁸³ Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican...", p. 223; Wainwright, *Colonial Philadelphia...*, p.94



Figure 6, Dinner Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier



Figure 7, Chimney and mantel piece, Dinner Parlour, picture by Sarah Templier

Reaching the second floor, visitors were either guided to their right to the main drawing room, or straight to the ballroom.⁸⁴ Climbing the grand stairs, large enough to let a ball gown pass, could only create anticipation on the way to the ballroom.⁸⁵ Made of mahogany, the ballroom door was also framed with plain mouldings, and its cornice contains a carved flowery motif. The Powels' redecoration of the house was mostly focused on this room.⁸⁶ It was the most lavishly decorated, and thus the most impressive (fig. 8). Wainscoting covered the walls up to the ceiling. Friezes composed of guilloche, Greek key chain and lozenge patterns run all around the room. Looking up to the ceiling, visitors would have appreciated the delicate stucco design bows and ribbons, flowers, and musical instruments, a "hallmark of the greatest houses" (fig. 9).⁸⁷



Figure 8, Ballroom, picture by Sarah Templier

⁸⁴ The original panels and chimney of the ballroom are preserved at the Philadelphia Museum of Arts and is part of their Period Rooms exhibition. The ballroom in the present Powel House is an accurate reproduction.

⁸⁵ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, pp. 114-115

⁸⁶ Henderson, « Furnishing the Republican... », p. 224

⁸⁷ James Clow was in charge of the design of the plaster stucco ceiling. Wainwright, *Colonial*



Figure 9, Details of the stucco ceiling, Ballroom, picture by Sarah Templier

The main focus of the room was its rich chimney, framed by two pilasters, a rare example during the colonial period. Shell-designed carvings framed the mantel and the tablet was carved with the classical fable of Aesop “A Dog and A Shadow” (fig. 10).⁸⁸ Its tabernacle frame and dentil cornice were particularly elaborate in a rococo style.

Grandeur..., p. 26. 98 Henderson, « Furnishing the Republican... », p. 224

⁸⁸ The very talented carver Hercules Courtenay was probably the artisan of the chimney of the Powel House Boudreau, *Independence...*, p. 103; Maxey, *A Portrait...*, p.20 ; Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur...*, p. 24, 96. On Hercules Courtenay, see S. W. Woodhouse, « Benjamin Randolph of Philadelphia » in Alice Winchester, ed. *The Antiques Book: Outstanding, Authoritative Articles on Ceramics, Furniture, Glass, Silver, Pewter, Architecture, Prints and Other Collecting Interests*. New York: Bonanza, 1950, p. 100.



Figure 10, Exact copy of the original mantel, Ballroom, picture by Sarah Templier

The adjoining drawing room was also decorated in a rococo style, and also had an eye-catching chimney. It was similar to the one located in the two rooms of the first floors. However the rococo friezes of the tablet and of the tabernacle frame were highlighted in green (fig. 11).



Figure 11, Details of the chimney, and mantel piece, Second Floor Drawing Room, picture by Sarah Templier

During Samuel Powell's Grand Tour, the rococo style was going out of fashion in England; he was exposed to classic and neoclassic architecture while travelling in Europe. His travel notes even reveal a taste for it. Despite this, he and Elizabeth opted for rococo style, still fashionable in the colonies, for the embellishment of their house. Historian Jules Prown has argued that, as England and its colonies grew further and further apart during the 1760s and 1770s, the Powells' turn to an old-fashioned British aesthetic might be a mark of the values and virtues that the British embodied before going astray. Indeed, the neoclassic aesthetic blossomed

in America only once the Republic was founded, when embracing this style could be interpreted, not as conforming to British fashion, but as establishing an aesthetic appropriate to the new republican society and its form of government.⁸⁹

c) Fit to Receive: Adorning and Furnishing the House, and Setting the Table

Furniture completed architecture and interior decoration, providing an attractive environment for entertainment with a utilitarian purpose. Samuel Powel shopped in Europe for the elements with which he desired to furnish his house. Other objects were inherited by him or Elizabeth. Chastellux suggested as much in his *Travels in North America*: the Powels' "handsome house was furnished in the English manner and [...] adorned with fine prints and some very good copies of the best Italian paintings."⁹⁰ Further studies of Samuel Powel's time in Europe tend to confirm Chastellux's observations. It is certain that Powel brought several pieces of art back from Italy: he notably purchased an Antique sculpture from Naples.⁹¹ He had his portrait painted by Angelica Kauffman, a painter originally from Switzerland known for her early neoclassic style, and who was particularly in favour in London society. She also offered Powel her self-portrait. Three pictures that still hang in the Powel House today are traceable to Powel's trip in Europe: two from Antoine Coyppel, a French artist, and one from the Italian artist Carlo Maratti featuring a small Madonna and the infant Christ. Powel bought several prints as well, and a pair of English neoclassic bronze vases set on marble stand.⁹² As for the furniture

⁸⁹ Jules David Prown. "A Course of Antiquities at Rome, 1764." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol 31, no. 1 (1997): 90-100. For more details on how Samuel Powel was exposed to classic and neoclassic architecture and arts in Italy, see Sarah Jackson, « Introduction » in Samuel Powel, *A Journal of Samuel Powel: (Rome, 1764)*, Firenze: Studio per edizioni scelte, 2001.

⁹⁰ Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels ...*, p. 136

⁹¹ Jackson, « Introduction » in Powel, *A Journal...*, pp. 2, 32-35.

⁹² On the Powels' European prints. Jackson, « Introduction » in Powel, *A Journal...*, p. 35. Jackson even specifies that one of these prints was Charles Le Brun's *Alexander's Battle*, and that after Samuel Powel's death, Elizabeth gave it to George Washington. It would be today in the Mount

“in the English manner,” it could mean that Powel bought some in England - he wrote his uncle Samuel Morris in 1765 that he planned to do so- or that he followed his uncle's advice and had his furniture made in Philadelphia according to English patterns.⁹³ It is known that Dr. Morgan, Samuel Powel's travel companion, sent a lot of English furniture to Philadelphia, and that these shipments, in the context of the Stamp Act crisis, were not well received.⁹⁴ Jules David Prown argued that, just as Powel rejected the classical aesthetic that he studied in Italy and the neoclassic aesthetic in fashion in London when he directed the rococo-influenced architectural embellishment of his house, he may have wanted to avoid bruising local preferences at a time of political tension. He might consequently have followed his uncle's recommendation and hired Philadelphia cabinetmakers to equip his house with English-inspired furniture.⁹⁵ But we also know that Powel did send some furniture to his uncle and paid fees for arts and furniture when coming from London in 1771.⁹⁶

Next to European works of art, portraits also played an important role in adorning the Powel House's walls. Elizabeth's family, the Willings, were particularly

Vernon Collection. If the collection indeed contains such a print, it also precised that the provenance the print is unknown. Jackson does not identify the provenance of that information. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, George Washington's Mount Vernon, Estate, Museum and Garden, E-museum, Online, Series of five engraving of Alexander the Great's triumphs by Le Brun. <http://emuseum.mountvernon.org/code/emuseum.asp?style=browse¤trecord=1&page=search&profile=objects&searchdesc=Charles%20le%20Brun&quicksearch=Charles%20le%20Brun&sessionid=6DEFC9E-8C95-4749-8CF1-9DED46A8D582&action=quicksearch&style=single¤trecord=1>. Accessed Online June 3rd, 2013. [On the bronze vases, Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, Powel House Collection Details, P64 08.01 and P64 08.02; Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 133](#)

⁹³ “Household goods may be had here as cheap and as well made from English patterns. In the humour people are in here, a man is in danger of becoming Invidiously distinguished, who buys anything in England which our Tradesmen can furnish. I have heard the joiners here object this against Dr. Morgan & others who brought their furnishings with them.” Samuel Morris, Samuel Powel III's uncle, quoted in Prown, « A Course... », p. 96-97.

⁹⁴ Downs, “The Powel...”, p. 46, Jackson « Introduction » in Powel, *A Journal...*, pp. 36-37 ; Prown, « A Course... », pp. 96-97.

⁹⁵ Prown, « A Course... », p. 96-97 ; Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p.112

⁹⁶ Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 114.

fond of portraiture, and it is possible that some of the numerous portraits of the Willings hung on the walls of the Powel House at the time.⁹⁷ It is highly probable that Samuel Powel's portrait by Kauffman and the Kauffman self-portrait were also on display. Around the time of her wedding (1768-1770), Elizabeth commissioned a portrait of herself by Matthew Pratt, which was also probably on view. The second portrait she commissioned from Matthew Pratt in the early 1790s must also have been available to be seen by visitors.⁹⁸ The Powels also owned a portrait of George Washington by Joseph Wright, painted in May 1784, which was either commissioned by Elizabeth or a gift of Washington to Elizabeth. The portrait was said to be the most faithful to George Washington's figure.⁹⁹ Finally, three carved head silhouettes, one of John Washington, one of George Washington and one of Benjamin Franklin, all of them probably traced by Samuel Powel during the 1780s, might also have adorned the walls of the Powel House.¹⁰⁰ Very fashionable at the time, these carved portraits are interesting for the intimacy they suggest. Indeed, the carving process took place among these four men; presumably close friends, either in the front parlour or in the drawing room of the Powel House. Carving silhouettes is also an act of memory. The person carving the silhouette of the other contoured and cut the projected silhouette into paper, a gesture that imprinted one's physiognomy into the carver's memory.¹⁰¹

Like pieces of art, portraits were an important expression of taste, wealth, and social standing. Portraits were a way of inscribing one's appearance as a

⁹⁷ Anishlanslin, "Portrait of a Woman...", p. 52-53, 60-67. Maxey, *A Portrait...*, p. 15.

⁹⁸ Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 110.

⁹⁹ Downs, « A Powel... », p. 43 ; Tantum and Hubbard, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 11 ; Nicholas B. Wainwright, "The Powel Portrait of Washington by Joseph Wright." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 96, no. 4 (October 1972), p. 421.

¹⁰⁰ Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, Powel House Collection Details, GW P96.02 .03 Constance Cary Harrison, *The Home and the Haunts of George Washington*, New York, Century Co., 1887, p. 167.

¹⁰¹ On tracing silhouette shadows, see Susan M. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters : The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 170-175.

lasting reminder to posterity.¹⁰² Through this impressive collection of art, the Powels established their social status to visitors. They also established their discernment in European art, and the connection that Samuel Powel had with the renowned European artist Angelica Kauffman. The Powels also promoted a young American artist – Joseph Wright, a student of Benjamin West - and displayed their close friendship with important political and revolutionary figures such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington.

Some decorative objects also manifested prestigious friendships. Benjamin Franklin sent an inland base and shaving lens to Samuel Powel from London. In addition, Franklin also sent him scales and weights, that are today in display at the Powel House (fig. 12).¹⁰³

¹⁰² Anishlanshlin, "The Portrait of a Woman...", p. 52-53. On John Cadwalader commissioning portraits for similar reason, see David L. Barquist, "'The Honours of a Court' or 'the Severity of Virtue' Household Furnishings and Cultural Aspirations in Philadelphia." Catherine E. Hutchins, ed., *Shaping a National Culture. The Philadelphia Experience, 1750-1800*, Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1994, p. 317

¹⁰³ Downs, "A Powel..." , p. 43; Tantum and Hobbard, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 134.

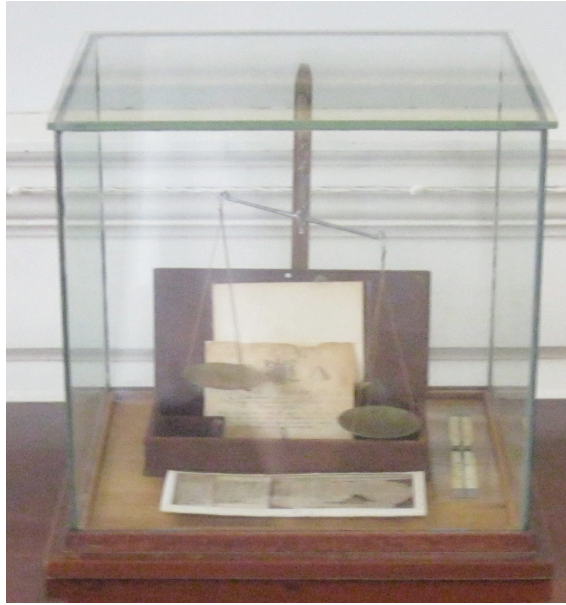


Figure 12, Scale bought by Benjamin Franklin for Samuel Powel, Powel House, photo by Sarah Templier

Washington gave the Powels a pair of oval gilded Hepplewhite mirrors.¹⁰⁴ The nature of the gift - useful yet luxurious and tasteful - confirms the elevated social status of the giver and receiver. Looking glasses were desirable as a symbol of refinement, and also for their effect. Mirrors generated brilliance, luminosity, the illusion of depth, and a sense of grandeur to a room, “and they offer[ed] visitors intimate glimpses into their public personas and a chance to view and regulate their facial and body language to suit the mood and activities at hand.”¹⁰⁵ This pair of Hepplewhite oval mirrors testified to an intimate friendship, the way the elite organized its rooms to assert its place in society. At the time that Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson – a poet and influential Philadelphian salonnière - was liquidating her estate and belongings, Elizabeth bought from her “a pair of silver candlesticks made by Joseph Richardson” that was probably displayed in the Powel House.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Downs, “A Powel...”, p. 43; Tantum and Hubbard, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁵ Henderson, « Furnishing the... », p. 252. On the role of looking glasses in refined household, see Stabile, *Memory's Daughters...*, p. 150-155.

¹⁰⁶ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powels Family Papers*, Series III, vol. 8 [account book], September 1795. On Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, see Anne M. Ousterhout, *The Most Learned Woman in America a Life*

Finally, the Powels added glass girandoles to the mirrors' and candles' luminous effect to provide a glittering illusion of multiplied light and reflections that projected an image of grandeur.¹⁰⁷

As for the furniture, much less is known. It is possible to have a general idea of the type of furniture the Powels owned by studying the content of contemporary houses of the elite.¹⁰⁸ But enough is traceable to draw some conclusions. Again some furniture was the mark of friendship: Benjamin Franklin sent Samuel Powel a mahogany table with drop leaves from London, and Martha Washington gave to Elizabeth a sewing box, today part of the Mount Vernon collection and exhibited at the Powel House (fig. 13).

of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ For the purchase of glass girandoles that enlightened the Powel House, see LCP, *The Powels Family Papers, Series II, 1783-1785* [receipt book], 6th of March 1784; HSP, Coll. 1582, *The Powel Family Papers, Serie III, vol. 8* [account book], January 1794.

¹⁰⁸ Historian Nicholas Wainwright, studying the familial home of the Cadwalader, also did a very good comparison of this house with other grand Philadelphia houses, and thus de Powel House; see Wainwright, *Colonial Grandeur....*; Amy Henderson, focusing on the Willing, does similar comparative work as well; see Henderson, "Furnishing the Republican...". As for the content of the Presidential house and of Mount Vernon, see Carol Borchet Cadou, *The George Washington Collection. Fine and Decorative Arts at Mount Vernon*, Manchester, New York, Hudson Hills Press, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2006; For the consumption habits and the house of Robert Morris, see Marko Junkkarinen, "Living in an American Lifestyle in 18th Century Philadelphia - Robert Morris, Prosperous Merchant and Family Man." *EuroAmerica* 35, no. 3, September 2005, p. 459 - 98.



Figure 13, Sewing box that Martha Washington gave to Elizabeth Powel, photo by Sarah Templier

It is highly probably that the Powels had a tall clock, such as the one exhibited in the Powel room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art “the Powel Drawing room” (fig. 14).



Figure 14, William Huston tall clock 1761-1771, Philadelphia, MET online collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Art states that this tall clock by William

Huston, a Philadelphia artisan, dated of 1767-1771, might have belonged to the Powels.¹⁰⁹

Mahogany furniture was practically a requirement for people of the Powels' status, demonstrating wealth and refinement.¹¹⁰ Also, many chests of drawers, high or double, designed with architectural rococo references, must have furnished the house and served as storage spaces for house linens. At least one, made around 1765-1775 by the American cabinetmaker John Gostelowe, is linked to a Powel history.¹¹¹ Gostelowe was a popular Philadelphia cabinetmaker amongst the elite who favoured an English rococo style.¹¹² Among the furniture that the Powels might have inherited from their respective families, a Queen Anne armchair of the 1740s, today preserved at the Philadelphia Museum of Art is thought to have been bought by Samuel Powel, Jr. (our Samuel Powel's father). On the 25th of March 1786, Samuel Powel paid cabinetmaker George Claypoole to repair two elbow chairs: one of those might well have been this Queen Anne armchair (fig. 15).¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, Online Collection, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/8158?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=Powel+Clock&img=2> Accessed May 22nd, 2013; Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 111

¹¹⁰ Berg, "New Commodities..." , p. 70-73. On the luxury of mahogany, see Anderson, "Nature's Currency..." , p. 47-50.

¹¹¹ Hubbard, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 112-113.

¹¹² Deborah Anne Federhen, "Politics and Style. An Analysis of the Patrons and Products of Jonathan Gostelowe and Thomas Affleck." In *Shaping a National Culture. The Philadelphia Experience 1750-1800*, edited by Catherine E. Hutchins. Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Museum, 1994, p. 283-285, 307.

¹¹³ LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Series II, 1785-1788 [receipt book], 25th March 1786.



Figure 15, Queen Anne Armchair, 1740-1750, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art Online Collection

In June 1786, the Powels ordered six Windsor chairs from the Philadelphia cabinetmaker Joseph Henzey, and it is possible they possessed many more of them.¹¹⁴ The Windsor chair is an English model that became popular in the American colonies from 1750 to 1790. Considering their book collection, today partly exhibited in the Powel House, the Powels also had bookcases.¹¹⁵ In the early 1790s, they bought a writing table from George Claypoole.¹¹⁶ Finally, in 1793, the Powels ordered some new mahogany furniture from the Philadelphia cabinetmaker John Douglass: chairs, a commode, a sideboards, a pine table, and window rails.¹¹⁷ Furniture such as tables, chairs, and sideboard were essentials in the houses Philadelphia's elite - for receiving large dinner parties or to adapting a

¹¹⁴ LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Series II, 1785-1788 [receipt book], 2nd of June 1786. On the Windsor chair and its popularity, see Nancy A. Goyne Evans, "The Philadelphia Windsor Chair. A Commercial and Design Success Story." In *Shaping a National Culture. The Philadelphia Experience, 1750-1800*, edited by Catherine E. Hutchins, Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1994, p. 335-62.; Nancy A. Goyne, « Francis Trumble of Philadelphia: Windsor Chair and Cabinetmaker », *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 1 (1964), pp. 221-241; Wallace Nutting, «The Windsor Chair», in Alice, Winchester, ed. *The Antiques Book : Outstanding, Authoritative Articles on Ceramics, Furniture, Glass, Silver, Pewter, Architecture, Prints and Other Collecting Interests*. New York: Bonanza, 1950, pp. 79-85.

¹¹⁵ Samuel Powel paid John King for a bookcase and for repairing an old one. LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Serie II, 1785-1788 [receipt book], 5th of June 1787.

¹¹⁶ LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Series II, 1790-1792 [receipt book], 29th of September 1791.

¹¹⁷ HSP, Col. 1582, Powel Family Papers, Serie III, vol. 6 [receipt book], 1st of March 1793.

ball room for many different social occasions.¹¹⁸ Little was written on John Douglass's style as a cabinet and chair maker, but he exercised his craft mostly during the Federal period.¹¹⁹ The timing of the Powels' order to Douglass, the early 1790s, could indicate that they were buying furniture in the latest fashionable style. This Federal style flourished in the United States between 1790 and 1820; it became highly fashionable precisely when the American Constitution was adopted, and it is strongly associated with the new political life of the country.¹²⁰

Thus, the furniture of the Powel House highlights different aspects of their life: the luxurious and exotic wood, mahogany, pine, confirmed their wealth, transferred from one generation to another. The writing desk and the bookcases offer insight to the literary and intellectual activities of the Powels. Chairs, seats, tables and sideboards pointed out the social activities held in the various parlours of the house, where the furniture could be moved as desired, for dinner, tea, or even a ball.

All these practices of sociability necessitated specific, and equally refined, dishes. The Washingtons, around the late 1780s early 1790, gave the Powels an extensive dinner set of China (Jingdezhen, Jiangxi). Today, this Nanking China is

¹¹⁸ Barbara G. Carsin, *Ambitious Appetites. Dining Behavior and and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington*. Washington: The American Institute of Architects Press, 2006 [1990], p. 42

¹¹⁹ Nancy Goynes Evans, *Windsor-Chair Making in America : From Craft Shop to Consumer*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006, p. 233, 248; Helen Maggs Fede, *Washington Furniture at Mount Vernon*. Mount Vernon, Va.: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 1966, p. 55

¹²⁰ "Furniture encompassed by the term "Federal" can generally be referred to as American cabinetwork in a combination of the styles of George Hepplewhite, Thomas Shearer, and Thomas Sheraton. These three Englishmen published books of engraved furniture designs, beginning in 1788, which popularized, and - in the latter case especially - rapidly altered, the high style decoration introduced in England by Robert and James Adams in the late 1750's. Federal furniture can also be said to encompass examples more in the French taste - Louis XVI and Directoire styles - because some of the important characteristics of this American furniture are found in - and perhaps derive from - French pieces in these styles. [...] Morrison H. Heckscher, "Philadelphia Furniture, 1760-90. Native-Born and London-Trained Craftsmen." In *The American Craftsman Ad the European Tradition 1620-1820*, edited by Francis J. Conforti Michael Minneapolis Institute of Arts Carnegie Institute Puig, 92-111. Hanover and London, The Minneapolis Insitute of Art, University Press of New

part of the Mount Vernon collection, but is partly displayed at the Powel House (fig. 16).¹²¹ Hand-painted in blue on white porcelain with gilded shell-shaped highlights, the set features classic Asian scenes of rivers and landscapes that nourished Westerners' imagination of an exotic East. The set included coolers (with liner and cover), covered dishes of various formats and purposes (vegetables, fish etc.), custard cups and lids, square and oval service dishes, plates, soup plates, saucers, sauce tureens and sauce tureen stands. Today, the Mount Vernon Collection has approximately 100 pieces of this set. Given the age and the fragility of porcelain, it is safe to assume that the original set was even more imposing.¹²²

England, 1989, p. 67-69

¹²¹ Downs, « A Powel... », p. 43, Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 116, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Collection of George Washington's Mount Vernon. Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, Powel House Collection Details, PL50A.05a&b.

¹²² Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, George Washington's Mount Vernon, Estate, Museum and Garden, E-museum, Online, <http://emuseum.mountvernon.org/code/emuseum.asp?style=browse¤trecord=1&page=search&profile=objects&searchdesc=powel&quicksearch=powel&sessionid=222D5801-988A-4159-8117-1CE1DD7D9047&action=quicksearch&style=single¤trecord=6>, Accessed Online May 22nd, 2013.



Figure 16, Blue Nankin exposed at the Powel House, picture by Sarah Templier

Another porcelain gift the Powels received was a Chinese covered bowl that was, apparently, of great size, with a matching plate, decorated in polychrome Oriental paintings of western buildings, landscape, and people. This bowl, as described in Downs's paper on the *Powel Exhibition*, might be the "large China Punch Bowl" that Elizabeth left to her brother Richard Willing in the 1795 version of her will.¹²³ Throughout the eighteenth century, Europeans envisioned China as a highly civilized place that escaped the rules of the market. Luxury, in Europe and North America, was the subject of critics because of the immorality and excess it could signify. Chinese luxurious goods seemed exempt from these critics, as they were partly sought after for the ethics, harmony, and virtue that Europeans associated with Chinese culture.¹²⁴ Considering that the elite of the newly founded United States wished to avoid connections between their lifestyle and an aristocratic and regal one, it is probable that Chinese porcelain was appropriated for similar reasons: as a vector of fashion, refinement and civilization that avoided connotations of corruption. The Powels' porcelain was of an attractive, luxurious

¹²³ HSP, Coll. 1582, Powel Family Papers, Series III, Flat File FF 4, "Elizabeth Powel's Will of 1795."

¹²⁴ Berg, *Luxury...*, p. 51-52

exoticism, evoking a foreign and virtuous civilization. The softness of porcelain was associated with quality and desirability, while the number and specific purpose of each piece enhanced the sophistication of their dinner service.¹²⁵

If the blue Nanking china was Elizabeth's best, the one used on social occasions, imposing enough for large parties, the Powels also bought some unnamed china from Joseph Stansbury, Queen earthenware from Alexander Bartram, and Japanese painted wares from Mifflin & Dean. None have been traced.¹²⁶ A show-stopper of today's tour of the Powel House, however, is an elegant dessert set of French china dated c. 1790 (fig. 17), which can be considered a quintessential piece of the Powels' refinement. This French China set is decorated with Cupid and Hymen imageries: flaming hearts, crossed arrows, gilded bows, and leafy branches, alternating with amorous trophies and crossed quiver and flaming torches and arrows: all symbolizing marital happiness. For a time, it was rumoured that the service was a gift to Elizabeth from the Marquis de Lafayette, but the decoration of the porcelain suggests either that Samuel Powel gave the set to his wife, or that Elizabeth chose and bought it, maybe once she was a widow, as a remembrance of her past marital harmony.¹²⁷ The use of Greek mythology to decorate the set hints that the Powels were moving toward a neoclassic aesthetic.¹²⁸ The set is composed of 34 plates, 4 fluted circular dishes, 4 scalloped oval dishes, 4 shell shaped dishes, 4 square dishes, 1 lozenge shaped

¹²⁵ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. 71

¹²⁶ Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 116.

¹²⁷ Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, Powel House Collection Details, P01.01.01 55;

¹²⁸ Howard Cutts, *The Art of Ceramics : European Ceramic Design, 1500-1830*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001, p.193-207. On the more general move from rococo to neoclassic, see, David L. Barquist, "'The Honours of a Court' or 'the Severity of Virtue' Household Furnishings and Cultural Aspirations in Philadelphia." In *Shaping a National Culture. The Philadelphia Experience, 1750-1800*, edited by Catherine E. Hutchins. Winterthur, Delaware: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1994, p. 313-333

dish, 2 tureens, 1 fruit cooler with lid and liner. As with the blue and gilded Nanking China, one element that makes this dessert ware sophisticated and luxurious is the functional specificity and innovative aspect of certain pieces. The fruit cooler is a good example – it was used to serve desserts as delicate, fashionable, and rare for the time as ice cream.¹²⁹ Later, before she moved out of the Powel House, Elizabeth bought other French China that was used on social occasions in the Powel House.¹³⁰ The Powels' purchase of French China concurred with the stronger commercial connections between Philadelphia and France during the early Republic. As the influence of French fashion grew stronger, they enhanced their China collection with the newest and trendiest porcelain in America: French China.¹³¹

¹²⁹ On the specificity of dinnerware, and the relation between specificity and gentility and luxury, see Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p.74-78; Carsin, *Ambitious Appetites...* p. 59

¹³⁰ On the 21st of March 1794, Elizabeth «Paid for a Set of French Tea China”. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, vol. 8 [account book], March 1794. On the 12th of October 1795, Elizabeth paid to Inskeeper for “ French Table China, consisting of One large Turene & Dish _ one small Turene & Dish_ Eight table Dishes, two Dozen and nine shallow Plates _ Eleven soups Plates”. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, vol. 7 [receipts book]. This entry in the receipt book concurs with the corresponding entry in the account book HSP, Col. 1582, *The Powel Family Papers*, Serie III, vol. 8 [Account book].

¹³¹ On Philadelphia’s growing commercial connections with France, see Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 11-12. On the trendiness of French China, see Coutts, *The Art of Ceramics...*, p. 211-12, Henderson, “Furnishing...”, p. 226-257.



Figure 17, French China dessert ware, Powel House, picture by Sarah Templier

If porcelain was important for receiving guests for tea or dinner, so were tableware, cutlery and silverware. The Powels' cutlery survives in 125 pieces and is currently part of the Mount Vernon Collection. The surviving set contains dinner forks and knives, dessert forks and knives, dessert knife blades, carving forks and knives, and silver caps. The handles are of carved ivory; the blades or tines are of steel, and the ferrules of silver, carved with the Powel family crest. The tableware was either made in America or in England.¹³² Even the storage of knives provided an elegant and decorative piece of furniture. The Powels imported pair of ornate mahogany knife boxes from England with silver claw-and-ball feet and silver wrought mounts.¹³³ These boxes are a fine example of high-quality English

¹³² In their newsletter of summer 2002, that has for subject the Powel ivory and silver tableware set, Mount Vernon states that the set is more likely to be of English manufacture. « A Woman of Influence: How Eliza Powel could twist the Arm – with Grace and Charm – of an American Hero, *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, summer 2002, p. 6. However, the information on the online collection, on the set, is vaguer.

<http://emuseum.mountvernon.org/code/emuseum.asp?style=text¤trecord=1&page=search&profile=objects&searchdesc=Powel&quicksearch=Powel&sessionid=1C1D21FC-C031-408E-A499-7101C4EE3729&action=quicksearch&style=single¤trecord=3>

¹³³ This pair of mahogany knife boxes is today exposed at the Powel House. Tantom, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 116.

furniture. Shortly after their wedding, they also ordered some luxurious pieces of silver from London: a hot water urn and coffee pot of rococo style by Erik Romer, and a set of six candle sticks by James Carter.¹³⁴ Most of the Powels' silver is, however, American. Indeed, the Powels bought pieces from eminent American silversmiths such as Joseph and Nathaniel Richardson, Philip Syng Jr., Richard Humphreys, Philip and John K. Garrett, and James Howell. Some were for them, while others were inherited, or commissioned and given as gifts.¹³⁵ Around 1780, the Powels purchased from the Richardsons a teapot and coffee pot inspired by English patterns, both designed very similarly, with rococo ornaments. Even the lids were ornate with shell work, flowers and foliage.¹³⁶ The most striking decorative elements were the cartouche on the body of both pots, identical even in size. The coat of arms is topped by a crest and surrounded by flowers and scrollwork.¹³⁷ Made as a pair, the teapot was at one point given to Ann Willing, Elizabeth's niece, daughter of Charles Willing and Elizabeth Hannah Carrington. The coffeepot most likely descended through Elizabeth Powel's heir John Hare Powel.¹³⁸ Around the same time, the Powels also purchased silver teaspoons from Philip Syng Jr, which were probably also used for receiving guests.¹³⁹ Vegetables were served in the Powels' set of four silver vegetables dishes by Joseph Richardson Jr. Made in the early 1790s, decorated with a serpentine hedge, two are currently preserved in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Arts.¹⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, most of the Powels' silverware that we can trace was

¹³⁴ David L. Barquist, "'Well Made from English Patterns': Richardson Silver from the Powel Family." *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (1993), p. 81 ; Downs, « A Powel ... », p. 46.

¹³⁵ LCP, *Powel Family Papers, 1685-1884*, Series III, vol. 39 [account book]; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 5, folder 10; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, vol 8 [account book], July 1798; Downs, "The Powel Exhibition..."p. 45

¹³⁶ For a complete description of the physicality and decorations of both pots, see, Barquist, « "Well Made From..." », pp. 77-78.

¹³⁷ Barquist, « "A Well Made..." », p. 78-79.

¹³⁸ Barquist, « "A Well Made..." », p. 78-80.

¹³⁹ Philip Syng jr is known for having made the inkstand that served the signature of the Declaration of Independence. Tatum and Hubbard, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, p. 118

¹⁴⁰ Phoebe Phillips Prime. "Exhibition of Philadelphia Silver 1682-1800 at the Philadelphia Museum

purchased by Elizabeth once she was a widow. While some fulfilled the same purpose as the Powel House silverware – drinking tea and serving dinner in a refined manner - most was commissioned as gifts or as objects of remembrance. Indeed, Elizabeth gave the silver teapot to her niece Ann Willing, beautifully decorated and engraved with the familial crest, probably as a mark of affection and as a memorial object of the family's status. As we will see, because of their longevity and engraving potential, silver objects often passed through generation, bearing the memory of the wealth, refinement, and affection of a family.

The Powels went in society for tea as much as they received guests for tea, usually for the “afternoon tea and punch.”¹⁴¹ Among others, the Washingtons frequently attended the Powels for tea in the 1780s, as did prominent families like Bishop White and his wife, the Shippens, the Dickinsons, the Merediths, the Cadwaladers, the Morrises, the Hamiltons, the Franklins, the Wilsons, the Willings, the Francises, the Bingham, and the Griffiths.¹⁴² Throughout the eighteenth century, tea-drinking was extended to, and accessible for, people different social classes. The materiality surrounding the ritual of tea, therefore, became increasingly important for establishing class markers, to distinguish the elite from the masses.¹⁴³ Elizabeth's account books shows that she frequently bought tea, and, sometimes, purchased “tea for the kitchen,” maybe signifying a tea of lesser quality destined for her domestics. She also acquired a steel kettle and tea earthenware, less luxurious materials, again maybe for the use of her domestics.¹⁴⁴ By contrast, she and her guests would have used the adorned silver tea and coffee

of Arts, April 14 to May 27, 1956." *The Philadelphia Museum Bulletin* 51, no. 249, Spring 1956, p. 30.

¹⁴¹According to Rodris Roth, Americans were particularly fond of afternoon tea. Rodris Roth, *Tea Drinking in 18th-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution, 1961.

p. 66

¹⁴²Roth, *Tea Drinking...*, p. 70

¹⁴³Roth, *Tea Drinking...*, p. 63-64; Meritt, “Tea Consumption...”, p. ; Breen, *The Marketplace...*, p.

¹⁴⁴HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, vol. 8.

pots, the refined glasses and silver tea spoon, the fine chinese porcelain, and the mahogany furniture was added. To this was added fine food: sugar, cake, exotic fruits such as limes, oranges, coconut, with chocolate and coffee as side beverages.

More than the refinement of the cuisine, it was the service, the material environment, and the manners around the dinner table that allowed the aspiring and the elite to mark their position.¹⁴⁵ And just as the act of shopping and choosing certain types of goods provided a means for women to expose their social status, the display of a profusion of colours, textures, and tastes gave women a way to be creative and artistic.¹⁴⁶ The genteel aesthetic was based on the regulation of the body, and “thus took over the process of dining in its entirety [...]. The advance of regulated and refined dining can be measured through the proliferation of the tools that made it possible: tables and chairs, knives and forks, porcelain plates and serving dishes.”¹⁴⁷ The Powels, with their tableware, china, silverware, and flatware, were fully equipped to receive in a genteel and luxurious manner. They possessed enough goods to host large dinner parties, to present clean dishes for every service, and specific dishes for a specific meal and food. This profusion highlights the importance the Powels placed on refined social performance.¹⁴⁸

In one letter, Elizabeth gave instructions to her housekeeper Amy Roberts on the preparation of a dinner hosted by her nephew John Hare Powel.¹⁴⁹ Although the time (1808) and setting of the planned dinner were not those when

¹⁴⁵ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. 74; Carsin, *Ambitious Appetites...*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁶ Louise C. Belden, *The Festive Tradition: Table Decoration and Desserts in America 1659-1900*. New York: W.W.W. Norton, 1983, p. 3-5.

¹⁴⁷ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. 76

¹⁴⁸ “To a large extend, performance depends upon objects. The possibility of behaving in some ways but not others may be intimately bound up with the straightforward presence or absence of an item or it may depend upon specific characteristics of design and choice of materials.” Carsin, *Ambitious Appetites...*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁹ At the time of Elizabeth's sociability, dinner was slowly getting later, and was often served in the evening. Carsin, *Ambitious Appetites...*, p. 75; Palmer, *Movable Feast...*, p. 12-17, 97.

Elizabeth lived in the Powel House, the letter suggests how she received for a small dinner party. Elizabeth established a menu composed of “fine Ham boiled,” “fine Cod Fish,” “Calves Head Turtles Soup,” “fine apple pie” to be served warm, and “Cream Cheese and Olives.” Elizabeth also instructed Amy to have ice to cool the wine, to use the best silver wine cooler, and to also “Have the Wine prepared to day in the best cut glass Decanters.” “Liquors,” “Ale,” and “Porter” were also to be available for the guests to consume, but not cooled.¹⁵⁰ “Silver tureens” were to be used for the melted butter, as well as the “blue Image China with covered Dishes.” As for the tablecloths, “Rolls in Damask Napkins, and two fine table Cloths, One to be removed with the first Course, the other for the Dessert” were to be displayed. Elizabeth finished her instructions by writing: “[t]he neatness and elegance of the whole arrangement I confide to you, with a confidence that I shall not be disappointed.”¹⁵¹ Even though Elizabeth was not hosting that dinner herself, her directives illustrate how she received guests. They highlight in particular her attention the neatness and elegance of the setting, menu, and material environment. The repetition of the adjective “fine” qualifying the menu is illustrative. The variety of alcoholic beverages, the care to service temperature for the pie and the wine, as well as the luxurious tableware, the richly patterned napkins of damask and the two tablecloths, were all carefully thought of and chosen for the occasion to reflect her gentility and respectability, and that of her household and of her heir, John Hare Powel.

¹⁵⁰ On the connections between drinking and sociability, and between drinking and the assertion of gentility and masculinity for gentlemen, see Peter Thopson, “‘The Friendly Glass’: Drink and Gentility in Colonial Philadelphia”, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 113, no. 4, October 1989, p. 549-573. ON the Powel’s consuming Madeira wine, beer, rum, and spirits, see HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, vol. 8.; LCP, *Powel Family Papers, 1685-1884*, Series II, vol. 28-29-30.

¹⁵¹HSP, Col. 1582, Series III, box 4, folder 4, “Elizabeth Powel to Amy Roberts, 24th September, 1808, Germantown”.

The last important object that characterized the Powels' lifestyle was not in the house, but used to leave it: their carriage. The Powels' carriage, today exhibited at Mount Vernon, was made in England by Scotsman David Clarke, and imported in 1789. The Washingtons ordered a coach at the same time and from the same artisan, and both were similarly designed, but ornamented differently: the Powels' arms were featured on the doors of their carriage (fig.18).¹⁵² Carriages were a crucial and highly luxurious element for the elite when circulating in urban or rural settings in fashion.¹⁵³



Figure 18, Powel Carriage, Mount Vernon Estate, picture by Sarah Templier

The material environment of the Powels, tastefully created by Elizabeth, displayed their social status, wealth, refinement, and cosmopolitanism. It also suggests a prudent equilibrium between British goods and local goods, and between luxury and moderation. If, in the revolutionary era, the Powels aesthetic choices might reflect their willingness to avoid the wrath of Patriots, after the war

¹⁵² Mary Stevens Beall, *The Story of the Washington Coach and of the Powel Coach Which is Now at Mount Vernon*, Washington D.C., The Neale Publishing Company, 1908, p. 23-24

¹⁵³ Doerflinger, *A Vigorous...*, p. 24-25

they never firmly rejected British goods or aesthetic. This transitory lifestyle – from British colonial to republican America - combined European influences that echoed cosmopolitanism, taste, morality, refinement and civility, with some more specific American elements.¹⁵⁴

d) *Elizabeth Powel: Salonnère, Hostess*

Women's role in the domestic environment manifested itself not only through the goods they bought and displayed, but also through the forms of sociability they hosted or in which they participated.¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the height of Elizabeth's years as a leading hostess - the 1780s - coincides with the years for which her letters and account books are the most scarce. It is known that Elizabeth was a major figure in the so-called Republican Court. After Samuel Powel's death in 1793, though, Elizabeth appeared in society and hosted society less frequently. Moreover, accounts describing her sociability are rare, and raise the question: was she a proper salonnère, leading an institutionalized salon, or simply a leading and admired hostess? What kind of hostess was she, influenced by whom, and by what models of salon?¹⁵⁶ The combination of glimpses drawn from various secondary

¹⁵⁴ Conforti, Michael. "Introduction: The Transfer and Adaptation of European Culture in North America." In *The American Craftsman and the European Tradition, 1620-1820*, edited by Francis J. Conforti Michael Minneapolis Institute of Arts Carnegie Institute Puig, xiii-xxi. Minneapolis, Minn.; Hanover, N.H.: Minneapolis Institute of Arts ; Distributed by the University Press of New England, 1989, p. xiv On the British values that Philadelphians looked upon, see Barquist, « ' The Honours... », p. 328-329.

¹⁵⁵ Carole. Shamas, "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America." *Journal of Social History* 14, no. 1 (Fall 1980), p. 13-19.

¹⁵⁶ On the study of American salons as a place where women could express themselves, notably on a political level, see Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics : In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2000; Susan Branson, *These Fiery Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001; David Shields, *Tongues and Polite Letters*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p.99-139. On the first literary salons of Philadelphia, and on the Europeans salons influences in America, see Anne M. Ousterhout, *The Most Learned Woman in America a Life of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University

sources, from correspondence, and from the Powels' account books help explain how Elizabeth socialized while confirming her place in Philadelphia's elite.

The study of American salons is often centred on two characters that Elizabeth knew: Elizabeth Laura Graeme Fergusson and her niece Ann Bingham. The salon of Elizabeth Graeme, writer and poet, was modelled after those she encountered while traveling in England in the early 1760s. Historians often designate Graeme's social activities as the first literary salon in America; it made Graeme a leading salonnière in Philadelphia's society from the middle of the 1760s until the War of Independence, when political, familial, marital, and financial difficulties made it difficult for Graeme to pursue her social activities.¹⁵⁷ Graeme disliked discussing politics in her salon, although the topic became increasingly unavoidable in the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence. The world of the American salons was at first inspired by the British model of literary salons, such as the one frequented by Benjamin Franklin and Graeme in the 1760s. However, Franklin often corresponded with other Philadelphia salonnières – Annis Stockton, Susanna Wright, Deborah Logan - and also described his experience of French salons. This correspondence probably influenced Philadelphia's sociability in the Revolutionary era, including Elizabeth Powel's practices of sociability.¹⁵⁸ As for Ann Bingham, after travelling Europe in the 1780s, she became an influential hostess in the 1790s in Philadelphia when Elizabeth was progressively retiring from an active social life. Bingham was known for her refined and French-influenced fashion, manners, and etiquette in society. Bingham's entertainment was probably influenced by both Elizabeth's sociability and by her own European travels.¹⁵⁹

Press, 2004; Stabile, Susan. "Salons and Power in the Era of Revolution: from Literary Coteries to Epistolary Enlightenment", in Larry E. Tise, ed., *Benjamin Franklin and Women*, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000, p.129-171.

¹⁵⁷ Branson, *These Fiery...*, p. 127; Ousterhout, *The Most Learned...*, p. 122, chap. 5

¹⁵⁸ Stabile, "Salons and Power...", p. 137-145.

¹⁵⁹ Branson, *These Fiery...*, p. 135.

We know relatively little about Graeme and Elizabeth's relationship. Only one letter from Elizabeth to Graeme survives at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. We know that Elizabeth bought Graeme's Richardson silver chandelier at a time when the latter was in need of money.¹⁶⁰ Because the two women had many friends in common - Reverend Duché and his wife, Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin - it is highly probable that Elizabeth, as a young woman and in the early years of her marriage, attended Graeme's salon. Elizabeth Graeme even dedicated her fifth common book (1789) to the "five Willing sisters," revealing a friendly relation between Graeme and Elizabeth.¹⁶¹ The most important testimony of their friendship and mutual respect, however, is the poem that Graeme wrote for Elizabeth's fiftieth birthday. Washington, also present at the event, had it copied by his secretary Tobias Lear, and sent it to Elizabeth, saying that "The sentiments [of the poem] are just."¹⁶² In this poem, Graeme described Elizabeth – represented by Mira - as being admired because she is, at fifty, an accomplished woman, and still "no Traces of Decays/ On Mira's Face are shown." The youngest "rejoice because they hope/Like her to please & shine." Although some people might have thought that Elizabeth, at the age of fifty, should retire from the social stage and let younger ones blossom: "But Mira comes and we're forsook/ And left to mope alone/ No more can We such Usage brook/ Unnoticed were she's known/ Her fascinating Tongue does more/ Than Youth and Vernal Bloom/ I fear she'll charm at dread Fourscore/ Descending to the Tomb."¹⁶³ Elizabeth was adorned with "Eloquence," "wit," and "Virtue," "For Virtue in a

¹⁶⁰ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powels Family Papers*, Series III, vol. 8 [account book], September 1795

¹⁶¹ The five Willing sisters were Ann, Mary, Elizabeth, Abigail and Margaret. Ousterhout, *The Most Learned...*, p. 122.

¹⁶² Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Library, Washington Collection, , «George Washington to Elizabeth Powel, February 1793 ».

¹⁶³ Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Library, Washington Collection, "Lines by a Friend addressed to Mrs. Elizabeth Powel on her Birth Day Fifty years, February 22nd 1792", by Elizabeth Laura Graeme Fergusson.

pleasing Dress/ Has Charms for all Mankind.”¹⁶⁴ Graeme presented Elizabeth as a person on whom age has left no traces on her face, and as a person who still exemplifies to youth entering society how to “please and shine.” Her presence in society rendered the other “unnoticed,” and her talent for conversation dismissed the fact that she was aging, for her wit, charm, virtue, and knowledge, wrapped in a pretty dress, were shinier in society, in Graeme's sentiment, than the beauty and freshness of youth. Those lines reveal the friendship and admiration that Graeme had for Elizabeth, and give the sense that Elizabeth, in the early 1790s, was established in Philadelphia's society as a woman of taste, of strong presence in social gatherings, and talented in conversation.

Commentators who knew Elizabeth's hospitality shared similar observations, which help us to better understand her persona in society. The Marquis de Chastellux, who dined at the Powels in 1780, depicted Elizabeth in this way:

Mrs Powel [...] has read a great deal, and profitably: it would be unjust perhaps to say, that she differs in this respect from most other American ladies; but what chiefly distinguishes her is her taste for conversation and the truly European manner in which she uses her wit in knowledge.¹⁶⁵

Although vague, Chastellux's observations suggest that Elizabeth emulated French and English salons from the information she had. Abigail Adams, writing to her daughter Abigail Adams Smith in 1790, said: “Mrs. Powell, I join the general voice in pronouncing a very interesting woman. [...] is one of the ladies you would be

¹⁶⁴ Washington Collection, Mount Vernon, “Lines by a Friend addressed to Mrs. Elizabeth Powel on her Birth Day Fifty years, February 22nd 1792”, by Elizabeth Laura Graeme Fergusson.

¹⁶⁵ Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels...*, p. 136. This version of Chastellux's comment on Elizabeth is the one officially published in 1786. A first draft of this comment, circulated in a private edition of the marquis's travels, goes this way: « for contrary to American custom, She plays the leading rôle in the family – *la prima figura*, as the Italians say. [...] she has wit and good memory speaks well and talks a great deal ». Chastellux, *Travels...*, p. 302 n.30.

pleased with. She looks turned of fifty, is polite and fluent as you please, motherly and friendly.”¹⁶⁶ Abigail Adams also said: “of all the ladies I have seen and conversed with here, Mrs. Powell is the best informed. She is a friendly, affable, good woman, sprightly, full of conversation.”¹⁶⁷ Three poems preserved in the Powel Family Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania sing Elizabeth's praises with similar comments. One of them, probably written for Elizabeth's fiftieth birthday as well, expressed: “That her well cultured Mind is as full of good Sense/As any Mans Mind in creation/That her stile is correct and her/eloquence pure/That her fancy is warm – like her heart/That her friendships are few – but forever endure.”¹⁶⁸ Given the gendered norms that prevailed at the time – and which we will further explore in the next chapter – the poem is startling. Elizabeth seems to be detached from the women's sphere of thinking to join the male sphere of rationality.

It is possible to guess the subjects of Elizabeth's conversation. Indeed, the familiar letter can be considered and analyzed as a “handwritten analogue to salon discourse”¹⁶⁹. Elizabeth, in her letters, frequently discussed literature, recommended readings, and shared books, which suggests that similar conversation and exchanges of literature might have been an important part of Elizabeth's sociability. Despite the fact that numerous letters do not mention the title of a particular text, Elizabeth read, shared, and commented on a great variety of literature.¹⁷⁰ Her favourite topics included women's place in society, female

¹⁶⁶ *The Adams Papers*, Digital Edition, ed. C. James Taylor. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, “Abigail Adams to Abigail Adams Smith, 26 December, 1790”.

¹⁶⁷ Abigail Adams quoted in Boudreau, *Independence...*, p. 105.

¹⁶⁸ Anonymous « A Conversation the 23rd of February 1792 », 23rd February 1792, HSP, *Powel Family Papers*, Coll. 1582, Series III, Box 7, folder 7. For the two other poems mentioned, see « Anonymous Undated Ode to Mrs. Powell » and “Undated Ode to Mrs. Powell by Emilia”, HSP, *Powel Family Papers*, Coll. 1582, Series III, Box 7, folder 7.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Stabile, “Salons...,” p. 130.

¹⁷⁰ For some letters in which EP is exchanging, recommending, and discussing some unnamed texts, see Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Library, *Washington Collection*, “Elizabeth W.

education, and politics. While Graeme was reluctant to discuss politics in her salon, Elizabeth frequently mentioned the subject in her letters, and stimulated others' interest in it: she told her niece, for instance, that members of the Constitutional Convention discussed the Constitution at the Powel House.¹⁷¹ She also exchanged poetry – *Vision of Columbus* - with George Washington, recommended writings of religious topic to Bushrod Washington (*Conversation and Apostleship of St. Paul*), and purchased and recommended a *History of Rome* by Goldsmith to her niece Mrs. Maria Page.¹⁷² Elizabeth Powel also discussed scientific writings – especially medical ones - writing to and frequenting physicians such as Benjamin Rush, Dr. Physick, and Dr. Chapman.¹⁷³ Elizabeth often discussed health as an important part of happiness in her letters, as testified by one of Elizabeth Hamilton's

Powel to Bushrod Washington, January 1st 1785"; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Bushrod Washington, June 22nd 1785"; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Thomas Ian esq. Philadelphia, November 21st, 1807 "; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 4, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Mrs. Samuel Meredith, Philadelphia, 19th of January 1808"; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 5, "Elizabeth W. Powel to John Hare Powel, Philadelphia January 26th 1809"; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 6, "Elizabeth W. Powel to her dear niece, Philadelphia, February 28th 1810"; HSP, Coll. 1852, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 6, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Walter Stirling, Philadelphia, June 25th, 1810" .

¹⁷¹ HSP, Coll. 1582, Series III, Box 4, folder 11, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Martha Hare, 25th of May, 1814."

¹⁷² *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN> Accessed July 24th, 2013, "George Washington to Elizabeth Powel, 6th of June, 1787"; HSP, Coll. 1582, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth Powel to Bushrod Washington, 22nd June, 1785, Philadelphia"; HSP, Coll. 1582, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth Powel to Mary Byrd, 29th November, 1785, Philadelphia";

¹⁷³ On Elizabeth's perception and the importance of wealth, see " Health and happiness are the legitimate Offspring of Industry". HSP, Coll. 1582, Serie III, Box 4, folder 6, "Elizabeth Powel to her niece [a daughter of Mary Byrd], 28th February, 1810, Philadelphia." Elizabeth recommended to George Washington *An Account of the Method of Making a Wine, Called by the Tatars Koumiss; with Observations on its Use in Medecine* by John Grieve, for the benefice of Washington's nephew, George Augustine Washington, suffering from tuberculosis, *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN> Accessed July 24th, 2013, "Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, Philadelphia, 9th January, 1792." In a letter to her nephew John Hare Powel, Elizabeth mention the visit of Dr. Chapman, and how he thinks that John H. Powel's costiveness is caused by an inadequate diet. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, "Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 18th July, 1809, Philadelphia".

correspondents: “Remember Mrs. Powel on the *advantages* of health and *disadvantages* of the want of it.”¹⁷⁴

Commerce and business were also a frequent subject of Elizabeth's correspondence, notably because as a widow, she managed her late husband's estate.¹⁷⁵ Although she managed her bonds, stocks, and properties through men of her family (her cousin Edward Shippen Burd, her brother Thomas Willing, his son Thomas Mayne Willing, her nephew Thomas Willing Francis, and her nephew-in-law George Harrison), she seems to have the last word, and made successful choices. Edward Shippen Burd, when enclosing in a letter Elizabeth's dividend from her four shares in the bank of Pennsylvania, even called her “a lady of business.”¹⁷⁶ The compliment might have reflected, to a certain extent, Elizabeth's abilities in business. In 1811, Elizabeth wrote to her nephew Thomas Mayne Willing that, against his advice, she sold all her United States Stock to George Harrison. Although often seeking advice from men in her entourage and family, Elizabeth made financial decisions by herself.¹⁷⁷ She also read on the subject in pamphlets, and most likely in the newspapers, and certainly developed opinions on economic matters, which she might have discussed in society. In one letter she wrote to Bishop William White that he and Edward Shippen Burd were entrusted with her estate in order to “prevent its being dissipated should a fatal spirit of speculation

¹⁷⁴ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011, “Albany to Elizabeth Hamilton, 1783-1789.”

¹⁷⁵ On widows at the head of their household and managing their late husbands' estate, see Wulf, *Not All Wives...*, Chap 3, and Wilson, *Widows...*, Chap. 2. In a letter to John Hare Powel, then travelling in England, Elizabeth recommend to him *An Inquiry Into the Causes and Consequences of the Orders in Council: and a Examination of the Conduct of Great Britain Towards the Neutral Commerce of America* (1808) by Alexander Baring, HSP, Col. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 5, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 26th January 1809” and “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 7th April, 1809”.

¹⁷⁶ HSP. Coll. 1582, Series III, box 3, folder 8, Edward Shippen Burd to Elizabeth Powel, July 16th, 1799, Philadelphia”.

¹⁷⁷ HSP, Coll. 1582, Series III, box 4, folder 7, “Elizabeth Powel to Thomas Mayne Willing, 6th January, 1811, Philadelphia”.

possesses the Americans in future, as it has done hitherto.”¹⁷⁸ Reading and conversations in society about business and economy were probably at the origins of Elizabeth’s knowledge and management of her estate.

The Powel House was decorated and furnished in the image of its owner. Both Samuel and Elizabeth Powel came from Philadelphia's merchant elite. They were well educated, wealthy, and raised in a refined and European-influenced environment. Through their material environment, the Powels asserted their elite status and taste. Luxurious and exotic goods testified to their wealth. Elizabeth exposed the virtue, taste, and civility of the household. The same environment also revealed their social connections with contained gifts from well-known characters of the revolutionary era. Cosmopolitanism and European refinement were also a constant in the Powels’ material environment, for they imported many European goods at different points in time. More importantly, elements of the Powels material culture indicated a major transition in American society. When privileging locally made goods over imported ones, or when decorating their home using a rococo aesthetic, the Powels probably took in consideration the tense political climate of the Stamp Act, boycott campaigns, and sensed the politicization of goods during the age of the American Revolution. They maintained an equilibrium between imported and American goods. Since the material environment of the house and shopping was mainly Elizabeth's responsibility, setting the house to receive guests appropriately was a means of expression and self-representation. Praised by her contemporaries for her wit, heart and conversation, Elizabeth's sociability seems comparable to the Parisian Enlightenment salon.¹⁷⁹ Providing a

¹⁷⁸ HSP, Coll. 1582, Series III, box 4, folder 3, “Elizabeth Powel to William White, 30th July, 1807, Philadelphia”.

¹⁷⁹ Dena Goodman, “Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions”, *Eighteenth-century Studies*, vol. 22, no. 3, Special Issue: The French Revolution in Culture, Spring 1989, p. 329-350.

refined space for conversations to take place, Elizabeth discussed various topics - commerce and business, health and happiness, literature, men and women's place in society, education, and politics.

The following section will further explore conversations on the American society in which Elizabeth engaged. Moreover, it will explore, through her letters, how she took part in society and the vision she developed; as well as how epistolary conversations were a means of agency and identity-formation.

2. Epistolary Conversations

Taking charge of her material environment allowed Elizabeth to forge her household's identity and project its social status. But her engagement in material culture was not the only way she expressed her agency. She also did so through her correspondence. In many ways, just as we observed a continuous European influence on the refined material environment of the Powel House, we will explore how Elizabeth's cultural and literary references, in her correspondence, still reflected a European state of mind when it came to separate social spheres, taste, refinement, and civilization.¹⁸⁰ In her letters, she elaborated her vision of a civilized, refined, and happy society in which educated women took on the role of being mothers of male citizens and future republican women, while the gentlemen ran public affairs took on an increasingly American flavour, however, as it became more and more closely linked to establishing and solidifying the republic.¹⁸¹ While historians of early American history are familiar with correspondence as a source of information, the study of letters as historical object, and as a means of communication and agency in society is a newer feature in the historiography. Corresponding is increasingly studied as an empowering way of circulating information, ideas, news, and goods.¹⁸² The focus here is thus the letters of

¹⁸⁰ Michael Conforti, "Introduction: The transfer and Adaptation of European Culture in North America." in Francis J. Puig and Michael Conforti, eds. *The American Craftsman and the European Tradition, 1620-1820*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts Carnegie Institute, Minneapolis and Hanover, Minneapolis Institute of Arts; University Press of New England, 1989, p. xiv.

¹⁸¹ Darnton, *George Washington's False ...*, p. 85-90; Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. xix.

¹⁸² For the historiography that explored the social and gendered implications of letter writing in European culture, see Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2006; Elizabeth Hechendorff Cook, *Epistolary Bodies. Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996; Susan Dalton, *Engendering the Republic of Letters Reconnecting Public and Private Spheres in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, and Rebecca Earle, éd. *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter Writers 1600-1945*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1999. Historian Eve Tavor Bannet studied the different ways in which letters were written through an examination epistolary manuals in circulation across the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. This approach allowed her to

Elizabeth, as much as for the discourses they contain as for their importance as a medium of expression and self-construction. The nature of letters is thus an important element of this analysis. The topics, the tone, and the recipients of Elizabeth's letters, as well the ways with which Elizabeth described herself in these letters are revealing the different intentions Elizabeth had in corresponding, and the variations with which she presented herself. This chapter analyzes Elizabeth's epistolary activities as a means of agency and participation in American society, then undergoing crucial transformations. It will explore how these activities contrast the social status and refinement of the Powel House in order to conform to Elizabeth's vision of American civilization. Many of the topics that Elizabeth discussed in her letters were also discussed in the Powel House. Through Elizabeth's epistolary activities, this chapter explores the notion of gender, and the role of women in the late eighteenth-century American society. It will argue that epistolary writing allowed Elizabeth to elaborate, defend, and represent the "Republican Motherhood" concept, while still developing and sharing strong views on politics, education, and American society's path to civilization and happiness without trespassing the male public sphere.

The first section of this chapter introduces Elizabeth's correspondence and investigates the act of writing and the nature of letters. While the second section focuses on Elizabeth's perception of the female character, and on her vision of the place of women in society, the third section examines her thoughts on female

determine the reasons for which one would write, and how one would write a letter. Elizabeth Hewitt is an historian who placed correspondence at the core of her analysis and highlighted the importance of studying non-fictional correspondence from a non-literary point of view. While David Shields explored the social role of letter in a polite society, historian Konstantin Dierks studied eighteenth-century letter-writing in America as a social practice and as a medium of empowerment. Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters. Letter Manual and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009; Elizabeth Hewitt, *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865*,

education. Overall, these sections explore how Elizabeth participated in the elaboration of the “Republican Motherhood.”¹⁸³ The fourth section highlights how Elizabeth, perhaps in contradiction to her ideal Republican motherhood, was also an active patriotic being. The last section, finally, addresses the economic empowerment that came along with corresponding and networking with the aim of ordering goods, with asking for commissions. It also analyses the connections between the content of letters and the meaning of gift giving, and how these gifts reflected Elizabeth’s vision of American society.

a) The Participative Act of Writing

In order to understand Elizabeth’s epistolary activities, it is important to understand her motivation for writing and copying letters intensively. Indeed, many of Elizabeth's letters that can be found in the archives bear the mention “copy,” and this helps to explain why her correspondence is so well-preserved. In certain cases, both the original and the copy exist. In comparing the letters for which I had access to both the original and the copy, I observed that Elizabeth stayed true to her original letter in her copying process: at most, she forgot a word, or corrected a mistake. Establishing the time line of Elizabeth’s existing correspondence provides interesting insights into Elizabeth’s interactions with epistolary writing, and suggests how important events and the passage of time may have affected Elizabeth’s epistolary activities. Elizabeth Powel’s correspondence contains letters written between the late 1760s and the early

New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004; David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

¹⁸³ This concept will be further explored, but historian Linda K. Kerber defined Republican Motherhood as a way for women to give a « political congruent » to their familial obligations. Kerber, *Women of the Republic...*, p. v.

1820s.¹⁸⁴ Half a dozen letters date from 1760s to 1780s. Between 1780 and 1800, approximately 25 to 30 letters exist, mostly ones exchanged between Elizabeth and the Washingtons. Most of Elizabeth's letters are dated between 1807 and 1817; and a few were written between 1817 and 1823. Her first transcription of a letter, dated from 1781, even bears the mark: "A true copy."¹⁸⁵ Philadelphia, at this point, had been the theatre of the beginning of the Revolution – an event that affected the circulation and preservation of texts and letters. From September 1777 to June 1778, the British occupied Philadelphia. The Powel House was, in fact, requisitioned for a couple of weeks by British Commissioner the Earl of Carlisle, during which time the Powels were confined to the back of their house, in the domestic quarters.¹⁸⁶ We have some indication of the Powels' feelings concerning the invasion from a letter by Joseph Reed, writing the latest Philadelphia news to his wife, briefly mentioned, "Ld. Carlisle with his Girl has taken Possession of the Front Part of Mr. Powel's House much to Mrs. Powels Mortification I dare say."¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, in a letter written to her sister in April of 1778, in the midst of the occupation of Philadelphia, Elizabeth expressed her dismay and anger at the devastation of the city and the destruction of goods:

¹⁸⁴ Elizabeth Powel's surviving letters number between 300 and 350, perhaps more. Parts of these letters were published in the collected correspondence of George and Martha Washington, and some are preserved at the Mount Vernon Library, in the *Martha Washington Papers* and the *George Washington Collection*. However, the core of Elizabeth's correspondence can be found at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. See Joseph E. Fields, *Worthy Partners: the Papers of Martha Washington*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1994; Theodore J. Crackel, éd, *The Papers of George Washington*, The Digital Edition, the University of Virginia Press. Access Online <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN.xqy>; Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Library *Martha Washington Papers* and *George Washington Collection*; HSP, *Powel Family Papers*, Collection 1582, Series III.

¹⁸⁵ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Mrs. Alexander Wilcocks, January 8th, 1781, Philadelphia."

¹⁸⁶ Maxey, *A Portrait...*, p. 24-25; Tantum, *Philadelphia Georgian...*, pp. 20-22; Boudreau, *Independence...*, pp. 103-104.

¹⁸⁷ The Library of Congress, *American Memory, A Century of Lawmaking For a Nation, U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, Letters of Delegates to Congress*, Volume 10, June 1, 1778 - September 30, 1778, Joseph Reed to Esther Reed, p. 103; http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?hlaw:6:./temp/~ammem_adXg (accessed 18th of July 2013).

[the] Town-Side has undergone the same Fate Mr. Powel bears it like a Philosopher & I like a very mortal. At first I was much oppressed as I cou'd have been for the loss of any intimate Thing but Rage soon succeeded Grief and I absolutely raved and ever shall when I speak on the Subject.¹⁸⁸

Not only does this statement imply a gendered distinction in the attachment to the materiality of life, it also suggests that Elizabeth's concern with copying and preserving her correspondence may have arisen in reaction to the destruction she witnessed, and the ruins that surrounded her thereafter. This constant reminder of the break between the pre- and post-war period, between the past and the present, may have led her to seek some form of continuity by carefully preserving her personal archives.¹⁸⁹

Numerous studies concerned with epistolary fiction in eighteenth-century published correspondence have highlighted the double nature of the letter: public and private. Letters provided correspondents with an opportunity to engage in private conversations in spite of the physical distance that separated them. They could also enable correspondents to discuss topics considered inappropriate in face-to-face conversation. In these cases, the letters were confidential, intimate, destined to one person.¹⁹⁰ For the letter writer of the eighteenth century, this implicit confidentiality made the letter a space to escape mundane sociability and

¹⁸⁸ HSP, Collection 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Anne W. Francis, Philadelphia, April 2nd, 1778."

¹⁸⁹ Historian Peter Fritzsche is interested in the productions of the past and in the ways by which the past becomes a historical artifact. He develops the idea that the French Revolution created such fracture that it generated a "prise de conscience" of historicity, just as ruins of various forms and nature multiplied the modes of memorization, commemoration, and the production of past's memories. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present. Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004, Introduction, chapters 1 and 3. On women trying to maintain and adapt the elite's identity despite the challenges and rough times of the War of Independence, see Fatherly, *Gentlewomen...*, chap. 6

¹⁹⁰ Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters ...*, p. 3-9; Cook, *Epistolary Bodies...*, p. 8-13; Howard Anderson, et Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century: Some Generalization", in Anderson, Howard, Philip B. Daglian et Irvin Ehrenpreis, eds., *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, Lawrence, The University of Kansas, 1966, p. 273-274.

be more authentic, sincere, and spontaneous.¹⁹¹ Eighteenth-century epistolary manuals often, if not always, advised that letters be written as if the writer was speaking to his correspondent, in a frank discourse, without the wit and mundane spirit that characterized conversation in society.¹⁹² In reality, while the content of a letter could have a more sincere and simpler tone than oral conversations, it could not be completely spontaneous and authentic, if only because one learned to write letters by imitating those contained in epistolary manuals in circulation. Moreover, these manuals differentiated and classified the types of correspondence according to their purpose, and proposed diverse opening and closing formulas depending on the level of intimacy between the correspondents.¹⁹³ The distance and the absence of the recipient of the letter defined the epistolary act. The letter writer was required to project himself into the moment that his correspondent would receive the letter. He had to annihilate the distance with his words, to imagine his correspondent's reactions to the letter, and to represent himself through the letter. As a result of the amount of structuring, reflection, and performing that writing a letter required, epistolary writing could never be truly spontaneous.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ On the secretive and confidential aspect of the letter, see Brigitte Diaz, « L'épistolaire et la connivence féminine: lettres de Manon Phlipon aux sœurs Cannet (1767-1780) », dans Georges Bérubé et Marie-France Silver, éd., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996, p. 142-143; Altman, *Epistolarity...*, p. 47.

¹⁹² Although letters are less and less read aloud the tone of letter remained conversational since it is a dialogue between two correspondents. Bannet, *Empire of Letters...*, p. 48, 76-77, 89-90. Kerhervé, «L'expression de l'intimité...», p. 86; 110-116.

¹⁹³ Kerhervé, «L'expression de l'intimité...», pp. 91-106; Hewitt, *Correspondence...*, p. 2

¹⁹⁴ Historian Catherine Cusset, studying letter writer Sophie Cottin, explored the themes of confidentiality and intimacy in the familiar letter through Sophie Cottin's quest to be utterly and completely honest, sincere and authentic when she wrote to her close friends. Cusset concluded that Sophie Cottin herself realized that her enterprise and her strategies undermined the sincerity and authenticity that she pursued and thwarted her intentions. Catherine Cusset, «La lettre ou l'utopie de l'amitié : le cas de Sophie Cottin (1770-1807)», dans Georges Bérubé et Marie-France Silver, éd., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996, p. 133. On the same themes, see Michel Bareaud, « Pour une sociologie de la lettre au XVIIIe siècle », dans Georges Bérubé et Marie-France Silver, éd., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996, p. 257-258; Mireille Bossis, «Introduction», dans Mireille Bossis, éd., *La lettre à la croisée de l'individuel et du social*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, 1994, p. 10; Chamayou, *L'esprit ...*, pp. 48-54; Hewitt, *Correspondence...*, p. 8.

The letter was also public. A letter could circulate among family and social circles for information or entertainment. For example, writing to her niece Patty Hare, Elizabeth enclosed a letter from her nephew Walter Stirling for the entertainment of Patty and her mother Margaret Hare: " I enclose for her perusal a Letter I have just received from my nephew Walter Stirling Jr. in which she is interested. He speaks of John in very pleasing terms."¹⁹⁵ Additionally, real or fictive correspondence, epistolary manuals, and novels made up a large part of British and French literature of the eighteenth century. The elite classes knew that there was a distinct possibility that their letters would be published.¹⁹⁶ It is even likely that Elizabeth contemplated the possibility that some of her correspondence would be published. She was aware of the historical importance of the changes that took place in the revolutionary era, and was a friend of, and corresponded with, prominent people who generated great public interest, such as George Washington.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, she read published correspondence herself.

¹⁹⁵ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 6, folder 4, "Elizabeth Powel to Patty Hare, October 27th, 1810, Philadelphia."

¹⁹⁶ On the importance of the publication, circulation and reading of epistolary literature during the 18th century, see Bannet, *Empire of Letters...*, p. 4-6; Georges Bérubé and Marie-France Silver, «Introduction», dans Georges Bérubé et Marie-France Silver, éd., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996, p. 1; Chamayou, *L'esprit...*, p. 31-33, 71-72. On the importance of epistolary manuals and their evolution, see Janet Gurkin Altman, «L'évolution des manuels épistolaires en France et en Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle : reflet des mentalités» dans Bérubé, Georges et Marie-France Silver, éd., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996, pp. 21-33; Alan T. McKenzie "Introduction", dans Alan T. MacKenzie, éd., *Sent as a Gift. Eight Correspondences from the Eighteenth Century*, Athens & London, The University of Georgia Press, 1993, p. 3.

¹⁹⁷ Writing to her friend Manon Philpon in 1776, the future Mme Roland, Sophie Cannel, evoked the possibility that their « foisonnante correspondance » could be read and published. These 2 letter writers rejected the possibility though, thinking modestly or conventionally that their humble writings were of no interest. Historian Brigitte Diaz, however, concluded that some indications in their correspondences suggest the potential of a " publicité toujours latente » in epistolary writing attracted letter writers. Diaz, « L'épistolaire et ... », p. 141, 155. Historian Mary Beth Norton argued that the revolutionary war had a great impact on the lives of American women. These experiences affected their writing and the content of their letters. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Boston & Toronto, Little, Brown and Cie, 1980, p. xv. Elizabeth's correspondence contains passages in which Elizabeth praises her close

In the end though, Elizabeth's main motivation for copying her letters was likely a practical one: these copies constituted her personal archives, to which she could always refer.¹⁹⁸ Patrick Hutton has explored mnemonics in order to understand the connections between memory and history, and how one comprehends the past, and an individual's place in it. It is possible that Elizabeth's letter writing and copying were a mnemonic, and even unconscious, way of registering her memory, and thus a means through which to comprehend the past.¹⁹⁹ If Elizabeth thought that her letters could serve posterity, it is most likely that she defined this posterity within the circle of future generations of her family.

Beyond its material role of communicating and preserving information on paper, letters were also a medium of agency that projected a constructed discourse and representation of the letter writer. Letter writing also contributed to Elizabeth's own understanding and defense of her place in society. As historian Konstantin Dierks has argued, toward the second half of the eighteenth century, the increased accessibility of letter writing as a means of socializing brought about by better communicative infrastructure and greater literacy enabled a greater part of the American population to participate, consciously or not, in society: the letter became a medium of agency.²⁰⁰ Moreover, the growth of print culture, of the reading of newspapers and correspondence bearing news, brought with it an increased awareness of time and change on the part of the reader. As explained by

friend and revolutionary hero George Washington. See Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Library, *George Washington Collection*, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh December 24th, 1783;" HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 8, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Mrs. Curtis, Philadelphia November 1812".

¹⁹⁸ "[M]ost letters develop and extend a correspondence already under way – a record of a friendship, a family narrative, or a history of a business or a political transaction," Alan McKenzie, "Introduction"..., p.4.

¹⁹⁹ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1993, p. xv.

²⁰⁰ Dierks, *In My Power...*, p. 3-8.

historians Marie-France Silver and Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, for women, correspondence became a space in which they could act upon reality and blossom without “heurter de front la vision traditionnelle du rôle féminin.”²⁰¹ In this epistolary space, they could define familial, social, cultural, economic, and political roles for themselves.²⁰² The epistolary act thus generated a sense of awareness and of self-creation: the fact that Elizabeth appears to have started to copy her letters after the War of Independence might indicate that witnessing the American Revolution and the birth a new republican society triggered in her an awareness of the historical importance of these changes. Writing allowed Elizabeth to both place and create herself within this American society, and to participate in it. Epistolary writing also provided temporal continuity, a way for her to reconnect with her past. This could explain why most of Elizabeth's surviving letters (both copies and originals) date from her widowhood, and not from the time when she was an active Philadelphia hostess. As she aged, Elizabeth gradually retreated from society. Corresponding became a way of reconnecting with her past, of reconstructing her identity as a woman who had actively and recognizably participated in Philadelphia's sociability.²⁰³ Indeed, in a letter she wrote to one of

²⁰¹ Marie-France Silver et Marie-Laure Swiderski, «Introduction», dans Marie-France Silver et Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, éd.s., *Femmes en toutes lettres. Les épistolaires du XVIIIe siècle*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2000, p. 4.

²⁰² Béatrice Didier, «Écrire pour se trouver», in Marie-France Silver et Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, éd.s., *Femmes en toutes lettres. Les épistolaires du XVIIIe siècle*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2000, p. 246-247; Rebecca Earle, “Introduction: Letters, Writers, and the Historians,” in Rebecca Earle, éd. *Epistolary Selves, Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600-1945*, Aldershop, Brookfield USA, Singapore, Sydney, Ashgate, 1999, p. 1; Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven, “Introduction”, in Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven, éd.s., *Epistolaries Histories. Letters, Fiction, Culture*, Charlottesville & London, University Press of Virginia, 2000, p. 6; Marie-Claire Grassi, «Épistolaires au XVIIIe siècle», dans Georges Bérubé et Marie-France Silver, éd.s., *La lettre au XVIIIe siècle et ses avatars. Actes du Colloque international de Glendon*, Toronto, Éditions du Gref, 1996, pp. 101-103; Robert Halsband, “Lady Mary Wortley Montagu as Letter-Writer”, in Anderson, Howard, Philip B. Daglian et Irvin Ehrenpreis, éd.s., *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, Lawrence, The University of Kansas, 1966, p. 51-52.

²⁰³ George Bérubé analyzed the correspondence of Mme de Graffigny when she was at Cirey and frequenting eminent names of the intellectual and literary French society. He showed that she was, at this moment of her life, writing a lot to mark her importance among this esteemed society, and to break away from the usual boredom that characterized her life. She also allowed herself to

her nieces to thank her for the pens and writing paper she sent, Elizabeth stated that the attention made her feel appreciated, much as had felt when she had been more active in society: “Beloved by my Relatives; and ever cordially greeted by the best Societies that the Capital of America justly boasted as preeminent for virtue talents and, the refinement of polished life. I now may be only said to vegetate in domestic retirement.”²⁰⁴ Elizabeth highlighted the preeminence of Philadelphia and alluded to her place in the city's elite circles. Doing so, Elizabeth sought to draw attention to her own virtue, talents, refinement, and importance. This statement not only indicates the qualities that Elizabeth aspired to, but also how she wanted to be remembered.

In reading and analyzing Elizabeth's correspondence, it is essential to consider that she came of age in a society undergoing important changes. The extent of the rupture that she experienced, as well as the destructive aspect of the War of Independence, seems to have awakened in Elizabeth a concern with preservation and a certain consciousness of her place in the city that witnessed the birth of the United States. In the end, whatever Elizabeth's intentions, or her level of consciousness of the potential impact of her epistolary activities, these intentions were more deeply inscribed by that fact that Elizabeth was copying her letters. Her act of corresponding was social and participative, a means of communication, agency and self-expression, whereas the correspondence itself was a carrier of self-representation, identity, and recollection that existed in time and space.

critique, under the mask of confidentiality that letters provided, her hostess at Cirey. Georges Bérubé, « Mme de Graffigny à Cirey : écrire pour exister 'par procuration', dans Marie-France Silver et Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski, édés., *Femmes en toutes lettres. Les épistolaires du XVIIIe siècle*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2000, p. 23, 26-28. On the same subject, see Redford, *The Converse...*, p. 31-39.

²⁰⁴HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 6, “ Elizabeth Powel to 'her dear niece', November 20th, 1810, Philadelphia.”

b) Being a Woman, a Wife, and a Mother

If Elizabeth Powel found a certain kind of agency through her correspondence, the question arises: to what use did she put that agency? To a great extent, the answer is that she put it to use promoting strong gendered norms for women. Indeed, in her letters, Elizabeth emerges as a forthright spokeswoman for “Republican Motherhood” as analyzed by Linda Kerber, a concept derived from the European Enlightenment, which integrated a politicized role for the women without disrupting their traditional place in the domestic sphere, as mothers and wives.²⁰⁵ Elizabeth consistently singled out women’s roles as mothers and wives as their proper place in society. As we will also see, she further promoted women’s education on these grounds as well.

Elizabeth’s conception of the female character was shared among many of her contemporaries. Mary Beth Norton, working with the correspondence of numerous women contemporary to Elizabeth, established a list of the qualities that were thought to define femininity: purity, tenderness, delicacy, irritability, affection, flexibility, patience, chastity, modesty, joy, sympathy, affability, and sensibility.²⁰⁶ This conception can be found in a 1785 letter that Elizabeth wrote to her niece Maria Byrd, the newlywed Mrs. John Page, taking the pen to advise her niece on marriage. Her letter provides a good idea of Elizabeth’s view of female character, and of which character traits a woman should emulate in marriage and society:

²⁰⁵ “The Republican Mother was an authentic republican, as Tom Paine had defined it: a mature person able to make independent judgement, dedicated to the good of the commonwealth and to civic virtue. But the Republican Mother was also a mother, who displayed her politics [p. vi] within the family circle, rather than by entering the public world.” Kerber, *Women...*, p. v-vi, p. 27, 32.

²⁰⁶ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters...*, p. 112, 117-118.

To fix the variable Heart of a Man, to fan and keep alive that Affection by which alone, a Woman can hope to preserve her Empire with a Man of Sense and Sensibility requires many Sacrifices great Dignity of Conduct without assuming, greater Condesention in Trifles, a scrupulous Adherence to the Principles of Virtue & Integrity, a Chastity of Manners the nicest Delicacy of Conversation & Behavior even in the most private Hours, & an unbounded Confidence in the Honor & conjugal Fidelity of the Man on whose supreme Will you must eventually rest all your hopes of Happiness in this World. Sweetness of Temper, Patience, an accurate Degree of personal Neatness, with proper Attention to domestic Comforts have more fascinating Charms in the Eyes of Men than the most brilliant and showy Talents unaccompanied by these engaging feminine Qualities.²⁰⁷

This is a strong statement about how the success of a marriage depended on how a woman sustained her husband's affection by respecting her typical female traits and place. Elizabeth clearly confined the women to the domestic sphere and dependent of her husband. Virtue - evaluated according to the chastity, integrity, and neatness of a woman -, manners and behaviours - to be temperate, delicate and dignified-, and conversation skills - thoughtful, but not have the same level of thinking as men-, were all expected from the Republican woman.

On other occasion, however, Elizabeth showed her more impulsive side, as to highlight other female traits.²⁰⁸ The most notable example stems from a curious incident. In 1797, Elizabeth purchased a writing desk from George Washington, and when she received it, she discovered a bundle of letters addressed to Washington in Martha Washington's handwriting in one of the drawers. Writing to Washington,

²⁰⁷ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 5, folder 4, "Elizabeth Powel to her niece Page, 1785 (?), Philadelphia".

²⁰⁸ On the impulsiveness of women, when Elizabeth's niece Mrs. Sophie Harrison asked her to return some French and Indian china that Elizabeth had taken into her possession because Sophie had originally decided that she did not want it, Elizabeth complied with her niece's request, stating: "I find that like a true Woman you avail yourself of the Privilege of our Sex. To change our minds as fancy dictates on trifling subjects. I also have claimed and acted [...] the same privilege." It was the woman's prerogative to change her mind on frivolous unimportant topics, a privilege granted because of allegedly female impulsiveness. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 7, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Sophie Harrison, September 14th, 1811, Philadelphia".

Elizabeth introduced the situation this way: “Like a true Woman [...] in the Moment of Exultation, and on the first Impulse (for you know we are never suppose to act Systematically or from attentive Consideration,[]) I take up my Pen to address you [...].”²⁰⁹ The rest of the introduction has a similarly feverish tone as Elizabeth builds an atmosphere of anticipation around her discovery, perhaps to highlight the seriousness of the situation, or the potential ill effects that could have resulted from Martha's letters. “[B]ut to keep you no longer in Suspense, tho’ I know that your nerves are not as irritable as a fine Ladies, yet I will with the Generosity of my Sex relieve you, by telling you – that upon opening one of the Drawers of your writing Desk I found a large Bundle of Letters from Mrs. Washington,” Elizabeth finally revealed to Washington.²¹⁰ She reassured her correspondent that Martha Washington did not have to worry, for no third eye had read her letters: “tho’ Curiosity is suppose to be a prominent feature of the female mind, yet it will ever be powerfully counteracted when opposed by native Delicacy, or sense of Honor, and I trust a pious Education.”²¹¹ Interestingly, Elizabeth made mention of specifically feminine characteristics in order to build suspense around her dramatic announcement. Indeed, Elizabeth referred to her reactions as typically feminine. She admitted her exaltation at finding the letters, and referred to the irritability of a lady's nerves as opposed to a man's poise, rationality, and steadiness. For Elizabeth, curiosity was a typical female trait. She affirmed, however, that generosity, delicacy, honour, and a pious education would overcome indiscrete curiosity, another female feature. In this letter, Elizabeth presented herself to her close friend as a typical and honourable woman, who countered her natural curiosity with her just delicacy and generosity. She sent back, as safely as possible, the unread correspondence between George and Martha Washington.

²⁰⁹ *The Papers of George Washington*, Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, “Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, 11-13th, March, 1797, Philadelphia”. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-06-01-02-0020> [accessed 24 Jul 2013].

²¹⁰ *Ibid*

Between Elizabeth's advice on how women should behave to ensure the success of their marriage, and her dramatization, through female traits, of the situation with Martha's letter in the Washington desk she purchased, we have a good idea of how Elizabeth perceived female character, women, including her, were impulsive, curious, virtuous, honourable, sweet, curious, delicate, sensible, and dignified. They were responsible for the domestic comfort, and, overall, for their husbands' happiness. It is on these characteristics that Elizabeth distinguished the sexes, and defined their abilities, and the roles they played in society.²¹²

Elizabeth used this conception of a woman's role in society to criticize certain actions taken by her sister Mary Willing Byrd. The revolutionary era was not kind to Mary Byrd: the Patriots questioned the loyalty of her husband, Colonel William Byrd III, and so did the British. Crippled by debt, he committed suicide in 1777. The Patriots seized the property of the widowed Mary Byrd. Because she took a neutral stance during the conflict, with leanings to the Patriot side, Byrd considered her treatment unjust, and went in front of the Civil Court of Virginia to defend her cause. In order to do so, she used a well-forged discourse that highlighted her femininity and status as a widowed mother, as well as her patriotism: "she claimed the right to redress of grievances 'as a female, as the parent of eight children, as a virtuous citizen, as a friend of my country, and as a person, who never violated the laws oh her Country.'"²¹³ She drew attention to her patriotism, and the fact that she was not a traitor, without tip-toeing too far outside the sphere reserved for women: domesticity.²¹⁴ Despite her attempt to

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Norton, *Liberty's Daughters...*, p. 110-112; Kathleen M. Brown, "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 2, April 1993, p. 313.

²¹³ Mary Byrd, quoted in Norton, *Liberty's Daughters...*, p. 226.

²¹⁴ "Byrd's recital of her qualifications was peculiarly feminine in its attention to her sex and her role as a parent [...], but it was also sexless in its references to her patriotism and her character as a 'virtuous citizen,'" Norton, *Liberty's Daughter...*, p. 226.

claim justice by framing her defense in the realm of domesticity, her appearance in court placed Mary Byrd in a public role. Elizabeth wrote to her sister about the situation, appealing to the theories of Joseph Addison to express dismay at her sister's participation in a trial:

There is something in the delicate female Character that revolts at the Idea of being called into a Court Judicature at any Occasion. Indeed, such is my timidity, that I was summoned to a Court of Justice to answer any charge however ill founded, I verily believed I should die tho I was possessed Of the most substantial Facts to [...] & invalidate the Charge. [...] I cannot conceive what could have indued you to involved yourself with such an Affair. [...] For, as for the sublime Addison has emphatically expressed [...] a fine Woman is totally unfit for Government & what is commonly called the great Affairs of the public life.²¹⁵

Elizabeth clearly saw an important barriers between the public and the private sphere that was not to be crossed by women. She implies the unnaturalness of doing so by using strong verbs such as “revolts” and “die” to describe how she, or any woman, would react a public space such as a judicial court.

Elizabeth’s appeal to Addison in order to defend her view is striking and revealing. Joseph Addison was an intellectual and a writer who was, along with Richard Steele, an important contributor to the periodicals the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. His writings significantly influenced eighteenth-century definitions of genteel characteristics of men and women in society.²¹⁶ Addison defended the notion that women should aim to distinguish themselves within the family sphere, as they were not meant to play a public role.²¹⁷ Drawing on these ideas, Elizabeth conceived that, even when faced with an unjust situation, and in possession of a

²¹⁵ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, “Elizabeth W. Powel to Mary W. Byrd, November 29th, 1785, Philadelphia.”

²¹⁶ Lawrence E. Klein, “Addisonian Afterlives : Joseph Addison in Eighteenth-Century Culture,” *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.35, no.1, 2012, pp. 101-118.

²¹⁷ Mary Beth Norton, *Separated by Their Sex. Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic*

good defense and of “substantial Facts”, a woman was still too “delicate” and “timid” to participate in government and in “the great Affairs of the public life”. Although compassionate and understanding with regards to her sister's unfortunate situation, Elizabeth could not understand how Mary Byrd could bring herself to cross such a social barrier.

Elizabeth's conceptions of gender and of women's roles were constant through her life. Years later, writing to her nephew sir Walter Stirling, Baron of Faksine and Member of Parliament, Elizabeth vehemently criticized Mary Wollstonecraft for defending the rights of women, and claiming a place in public affairs that did not, in Elizabeth's opinion, suit them:

We ought not to wish the Rights so strenuously contented for by Mrs. Wollstonecraft. Such privileges could they be establish would not be promotive of our happiness. Indeed it would be to overstep the bounds of nature – to pervert the order of society, and to silence the finest feelings of the female Heart that a mental sexual distinction exists will not be denied by those that have attended to the character of the Infant mind.²¹⁸

Again, Elizabeth defended the view that women's minds were not fit to fulfill the requirements of public life. She based her argumentation on the natural and gendered order of society. Simply put, Elizabeth thought that to undermine that established fact would undermine the promotion of women's happiness and jeopardize that order.

World, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 147-148.

²¹⁸HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series 3, box 4, folder 6, “Elizabeth Powel to Sir Walter Stirling, June 25th, 1810, Philadelphia.” Elizabeth Powel bought “Mary Wollstonecraft letters” from Thomas Dobson in August 1799, HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series 3, Box 5, folder 13, “Loose receipts”.

In the same letter in which Elizabeth criticized Mary Wollstonecraft's views, she also referred to Anne McVicar Grant's *Letters from the Mountains*.²¹⁹ Elizabeth expressed her gratitude for the moments:

When the well informed and amiable part of my Sex evince by their writing and conduct in life that we are entitled to hold in that rank in the Scale of intelligent Beings that I believe God intended that the Mothers of Mankind should fill. Certainly he pre-eminently distinguished one of our Sex [...] and another not unimportant distinction is I think that your Sex must rest the parental pretensions on the honor, and veracity of Women.²²⁰

Women were mentally made for motherhood, and it is to fulfill that role that women were endowed with particular qualities. If Elizabeth defended the idea that women should have nothing to do with the public affairs, she also admired women whose intelligence and writings shone. For her, it showed that God had conferred to women an intelligence that enabled them to fulfill their primary role: “ Mothers of Mankind.” Finally, “ [t]o Educate a Child in such a manner as to fit her for receiving & communicating Happiness is certainly the most arduous Task that can devolve on the female Character.”²²¹ Women's inherent qualities were connected to their motherly role, their most important one, which explained their preeminence in the domestic sphere. Just as a woman's happiness depended on retaining the affection of her husband, she was also in charge of raising her

²¹⁹ Anne MacVicar Grant (1755-1838) was a Scottish author who spent a part of her childhood in colonial New York city. *Letters from the Mountains* were a highly successful edition of a selection of her letters from 1773 to 1803. Pam Perkins, "Anne Grant". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 2001 <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1838>, accessed 17 July 2013.

²²⁰ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 6, "Elizabeth Powel to Sir Walter Stirling, June 25th, 1810, Philadelphia."

²²¹ Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Collection, *George Washington Papers*, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, July 1786, Philadelphia".

children to be happy. Indeed, Elizabeth saw the happiness of both male and female citizens as a key element in the well being of a society.²²²

Answering a request concerning educational literature from her sister Mary Byrd, Elizabeth delivered a critique of *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his Son* in which she drew a connection between the refinement and the happiness of society. Elizabeth advised: "The Oeconomy of Human Life and the Misses Magazine are certainly unexceptionable; tho in my humble Opinion, the Preceptor Mr Addisons Works, and some Papers in the Tatler are infinitely superior, both as to Precept and Stile."²²³ In expressing her views of *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his Son*, one of the great literary successes of the eighteenth century, her attack against the publication was well-argued, and placed under the banner of duty: "As to Lord Chesterfields Letters, I must take the Liberty of dissenting from you and all his Admirers."²²⁴ Expressing an opinion similar to that of Mercy Otis Warren, Elizabeth disapproved of Chesterfield's representation of the female sex, declaring "His Maxims [concerning women] are such as were they adopted, would subvert the Happiness of Society in every Instance."²²⁵ She pointed out that Chesterfield focused solely on the "external Graces" of women, without acknowledging their far more valuable "Graces of the Mind," and lamented the fact that Chesterfield considered the pursuit of a woman's affection to be simply a means of satisfying men's "Vicious Desires."²²⁶ In Elizabeth's view, men should view the pursuit of women's attention as a search for affection, virtue, and morality, since women were the guardians of society's virtue. However, women could fulfill that role only

²²² On the importance of the concept Enlightenment concept of happiness in the conception of America, see Robert Darnton, *George Washington's False Teeth : An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2003, p. 89-90.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Mary W. Byrd, December 1st, 1783, Philadelphia". On the importance and success of *The Letters of the Lord Chesterfield to his Son*, see Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letter...*, pp. 68-92.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

if they were respected by the opposite sex. A man responding to his instincts by abusing women's innate weakness threatened the social order, and thus the happiness of its members. If a woman stepped out of her domestic role - in which her specific female traits shone - she would corrupt society, and her own happiness. By the same token, a man abusing those specific weaker female traits for unrighteous purposes also corrupted society.

Elizabeth's logic pertaining to female education revolved around the causal connection between the presence of education and the level of civilization and refinement of a society. Education led men and women to understand and respect the features defining their distinct place in society, thus preserving happiness. Cultivating female intelligence also enabled them to be better mothers for the future male citizens, republican daughters, and better wives, guardian of their husband's virtue.²²⁷

By the same token, an educated female mind could also help to keep a husband's affection:

When the Virtues of the Heart [of a woman] are adorned by personal Accomplishments & a Mind well cultivated by a liberal Female Education, no doubt the female Character derives an additional Degree of Lustre from them But Men destined by Opinion and uncontroled Custom, for the severer Studies which to fit them to the public walk of Life with all the Honors & Privileges annexed to a superior class of Beings do ... love to find a Competitor in the softer Sex.²²⁸

Elizabeth here presented a new role for women. Even if granted with an appropriate liberal female education, women were still not mentally apt for the

²²⁷ On the importance of education in the Republican Motherhood model, see Kerber, *Women...*, chap. 7.

²²⁸ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 5, folder 4, "Elizabeth Powel to her niece Page, c. 1785, Philadelphia."

severer studies that fit men's mind and enabled them to the public affairs. But an educated female mind with conversational skills made her an appreciated "Competitor," meaning that men tended to appreciate the challenges that the female mind represented, and valued to a certain extent their ideas and contributions in conversation. Elizabeth also mentioned this role when discussing the presence of her sister Mary Byrd in a trial with Martha Washington: " I am clearly of the Sentiment that our Sex were never intended for the great Affairs of Life. They have happy talents for suggesting & see the ends of the chain, but it requires masculine Powers to discern the intermediate Link & connect them with Property."²²⁹ Elizabeth thus viewed the role of educated female mind, in conversation, as one that could suggest of challenge the male mind in order to enhance the men's abilities in fulfilling their role in the public affairs.

By advising her newlywed niece, criticizing her sister's presence at a trial, and suggesting what constitutes good educational literature, Elizabeth imposed herself as an authority in suggesting and counselling on gender norms. These norms reflect a traditional take on women's role, as defined by the "Republican Motherhood." For Elizabeth, nature distinguished men and women, providing them with certain abilities and traits that defined their sphere of activities. This state of facts naturally ordered society, and moving away from this model would be disruptive of society's happiness. Elizabeth thus strongly advocated that women were not made for the public affairs, and that their role was to ensure their husbands' and children's happiness. However, women were also confided in with a very important role: that of mother. Given by God, this role demonstrated that women were provided with intelligence and entitled to an education that would enhance their motherhood. Moreover, a well-cultured female mind was enabled to suggest and challenge men, to hold conversation with them in the private sphere.

²²⁹ "Elizabeth Powel to Martha Washington, November 31st, 1787, Philadelphia," in Fields, *Worthy*

As we will further explore, in elaborating a model of female education, and in sharing political opinions, Elizabeth will not only showcase her own educated mind, but her use of it to discuss, counsel, and challenge on public affairs with men.

c) Female education

Consistent with her views on women's role as wives and mothers, Elizabeth was a strong proponent of female education. Elizabeth was an inspiration for and supporter of Benjamin Rush's *Thoughts Upon Female Education* (1787). She promoted his ideas to her friends and correspondents. Once again, the "agency" she constructed for herself through her correspondence was put in the service of strongly defined gender norms.

First of all, for Elizabeth, education was the basis upon which the refinement of a society was built; conversely, the lack of it was the mark of a declining, almost barbarous civilization. Indeed, Elizabeth felt that the colonies were lacking in schools. Moreover, writing to her sister Ann Francis in the midst of the occupation of Philadelphia by the British, it appears that witnessing the effects of war heightened Elizabeth's concerns about the level of refinement of her society:

I cannot but regret amidst the thousand Distresses that America feels in this time the want of proper school for the instruction of youth, indeed it must be lamented by every Creature & as the good of the human Species at Heart, especially when the Barbarities of War have almost made Manhood Savage & if any thing can humanize them we most suppose it to be the refinements of Education and true Religion.²³⁰

Partner..., p. 198.

²³⁰ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth W. Powel to Anne W. Francis, April 2nd, 1778. Philadelphia."

Elizabeth's concern with the level of refinement and civilization of American society is not a new theme. We observed it in her care for the material environment of the Powel House and in her advocating of the respect of the gendered separate spheres as the basis of happiness. The absence of war and the presence of education are other factors that led to civilization and happiness in Elizabeth's view.

Elizabeth's conception of gendered norms led her to elaborate a model of female education that responded to these norms. The elaboration of her ideas must have processed – or at least partly - through her discussion on femininity and female education with Benjamin Rush. In 1787, Rush published his *Thoughts upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government, in the United States of America*, which he indeed dedicated to Elizabeth W. Powel: "Madam/ Some of the opinions contained in the following pages are so contrary to general prejudice and fashion, that I could not presume to offer them to the publick, without soliciting for the patronage of a respectable and popular female name."²³¹ In this work, Rush articulated a vision of a female education adapted to the new republican American society.²³² He particularly stressed the utilitarian aspect of female education in order to avoid the excessive erudition of women, framing women's education around their roles as mothers and wives. Rush restricted the subjects they could study to English literature, geography, and history. He also prescribed the learning of some basic accounting skills so that woman could assist their husbands with the management of their properties. Since this education prepared women for their civic duties as mothers

²³¹ Benjamin Rush, *Thoughts upon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government, in the United States of America. Addressed to the visitors of the Young ladies' academy in Philadelphia, 28 July, 1787*, Philadelphia, Prichard & Hall, 1787, p. 4.

and wives, it empowered them to participate in the happiness of their families and of their society. In this way, they were enlisted to help protect the recently-won liberty of the newly formed American republic.²³³

It is of course difficult to evaluate the extent of Elizabeth's influence on *Thoughts Upon Female Education*, but the dedication and the compatibility of Elizabeth's and Rush's vision make their inter-influences evident. In a 1786 letter, penned shortly before the publication of Rush's book, Elizabeth voiced ideas similar to those expressed in the work. "The Groundwork of Education with both Sexes rests on the Mother," wrote Elizabeth, reaffirming the interrelation with motherhood and education. She considered the learning of sciences and dead languages useless, even for most men: "I should be sorry to see my own throw away their Time & Health in Pursuit of Objects which perhaps are not essential to the Happiness of Mankind; & indeed, I believe the natural Vivacity of our Sex totally unfits us for those severer studies."²³⁴ Rush recommended refinement through the study of the arts and dance, and expressed concerns regarding the dangers of a frivolous and lavish education.²³⁵ One element that stands out in Rush's text was his reference to the specifically American character of his model: women had a role to play to sustain the American republican society, and their education should be geared towards this. An admirer of Addison, Rush based his educational model on the idea that only virtuous and civilized beings could support the Republic, and that the acquisition of knowledge and refinement made women better wives and mothers of citizens.²³⁶

²³² Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female...*, p. 75

²³³ Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female...*, p. 76-77

²³⁴ Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Collection, *George Washington Papers*, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, July 1786, Philadelphia".

²³⁵ Rush, *Thoughts Upon Female...*, pp. 83-85; Norton, *Liberty's Daughter...*, p. 267-268.

²³⁶ Rush, *Thoughts upon Female...*, pp. 89-90

In his dedication, Rush identified Elizabeth's patronage of the text as essential to its success, which suggests that Elizabeth's ideas and the conversations they had on the topic of female education influenced *Thoughts Upon Female Education*. In a 1795 letter addressed to Rush, Elizabeth expressed modesty, but also a certain sense of pride, in giving her approval to the contents of the work. Indeed, Elizabeth distributed Rush's treatise with enthusiasm: "I well recoiled that you did me the Honor to present me with a Number of Copys of your excellent Treatise on Education. The Work so entirely met my Ideas on that interesting Subject that I dispersed it with avidity."²³⁷ Elizabeth was writing to Rush precisely to request another copy of the work for a friend, who asked her for advice on his children's education:

To give my Opinion a Subject that I have not any practical Knowledge of; and that may eventually involve the Happiness of Millions both here and hereafter. I therefore wish to send him your Treatise on female Education as I think it comprises the Essentials for the american Woman.²³⁸

It is interesting to note that, in recommending and distributing the book, Elizabeth was playing the patronage role that Rush had attributed to her in his dedication. Elizabeth underlined the importance of the circulation of ideas and books on education, measuring their impact by the "Happiness of Millions both here and hereafter."

As this letter demonstrates, Elizabeth wanted to disseminate her ideas on female education. In order to do so, she participated in discussions on the formation of the future wives and mothers of the newly founded American Republic. In her correspondence, Elizabeth expressed her ideas on femininity, on women's place in society, and on their need for education, something for which

²³⁷ LCP, Coll. 134, *Benjamin Rush Papers*, vol. 26, p. 101, "Elizabeth Willing Powel to Benjamin Rush, January 24th, 1795, Philadelphia."

her contemporaries asked her advice on. She often based her ideas on literary works – Addison, Chesterfield – and her sisters and friends sought her recommendations. She cleverly promoted Rush’s vision of female education, which she shared, and diminished the importance that she may have had in the elaboration of Rush’s idea, staying behind the main scene.

In stating that she had "no practical Knowledge" regarding the education of children, Elizabeth might have been alluding to the fact that she never became a mother, which was a source of grief to her. Expressing her grief to Mrs. Fitzhugh, Elizabeth regretted having neglected her physical well-being in favour of her mind. If she had not done so, she suggested, she might have prevented the “miserable Deficiency” that prevented her from having children.²³⁹ Indeed, Elizabeth asserted that no matter how well educated her mind, she had failed as a woman by not becoming a mother. However, she was keen to give advice and help: to her niece who was getting married, to her sisters, to correspondents asking for advice. Being unable to fulfill a proper maternal role, Elizabeth took part in the education of her nieces and nephews, especially John Hare Powel, whom she adopted. Notably, she financed his Grand Tour of Europe. An analysis of the letters that she wrote to her nephew during his travels allows us to draw a portrait of educational experience that Elizabeth wanted him to have. Elizabeth's advice suggests that she thought that European influence could play an important role in self-improvement. Indeed, Elizabeth was constantly reminding John Hare Powel that the purpose of his journey was to become an accomplished gentleman.²⁴⁰ She urged him to visit Scotland, the “Cradle of Science and Virtue,” where many of her own Philadelphia acquaintances had gone to study, and to employ his time in Britain “usefully, by an

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, Mount Vernon Collection, *George Washington Papers*, “Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, July 1786, Philadelphia.”

²⁴⁰ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 26th January, 1809, Philadelphia”.

investigating and critical attention to internal improvements – such as the construction of Canals, Roads, Bridges Manufactures, and the modern improvements in Agriculture.”²⁴¹ Elizabeth expressed some disappointment in her nephew's decision not to study law, and encouraged him to attend some hearings at the Inn Courts in London, for “as a Gentleman every Man ought to be well acquainted with its Spirit [of the Law] and its obligations attached to its civil rights.”²⁴² While she warned her nephew against having a too strong “party spirit,” where she hoped that he would always carry a “publick spirit” in his “breast.” Her advice to him to pursue a genteel life of “activity and Industry” sheds some light onto the nature of public affairs from her point of view. For her, the gentleman's role was to engage in public affairs. Understanding politics and law was therefore essential to good republican citizenship, as was knowledge of science, technology, transportation, and commerce. Elizabeth repeatedly criticized John Hare Powel's handwriting; she even recommended that he read Chesterfield's Letters for advice on good penmanship, for it was necessary for a gentleman to communicate skilfully and clearly.²⁴³ She prompted her nephew to perfect his French, and to refine his taste for “Science, and the fine Arts”, and for Antiquities in Paris and other “classic ground.”²⁴⁴ The letters she wrote to her nephew during his travels in Europe provide a great deal of insight into how Elizabeth viewed male education and the role it played in preparing men for their lives in the public sphere.

Elizabeth's participation in the construction of the ideal of “Republican Motherhood” is thus continued by her evolvment in the elaboration of a model of

²⁴¹ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box4, folder 4, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 8th November 1808, Philadelphia; box 4, folder 5, “Elizabeth to John Hare Powel, 7th August, 1809, Philadelphia”, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 7th April 1809, Philadelphia”.

²⁴² HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, 18th July, 1809, Philadelphia”.

²⁴³ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, August 7th, 1809, Philadelphia.”

²⁴⁴ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, “Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, August 31st, 1809, Philadelphia.”

female education. She expressed her agency and participated to the formation of American society by advising her family on these topics, and by commenting and distributing Rush's *Thoughts Upon Female Education*. More than the advice that she distributed to various members of her family, her involvement in the education of her nephew John Hare allowed her to take on a motherly role, and developed her ideas on how a young American gentleman should be educated and what his role in society should be.

d) Politics, Patriotism, and George Washington

Despite Elizabeth's insistence on sharply demarcated gendered spheres, she frequently commented on politics and political texts, and she often gave her vocal opinion on controversial political matters. The experiences of the American Revolution and of the War of Independence affected women's lives, and politicized many aspects of their lives. Consumption and boycotts were one of these aspects. Political conversation invaded the conversations held at various social gatherings such as salons to which women participated. Elizabeth's letters contain discussion on political texts or events that suggest a strong female awareness – if not role – in the early Republican era.

Elizabeth's awareness of the political debates surrounding the tensions between the British-American colonies and their Metropole arisen early on. In the late 1760s, rumours circulated that Elizabeth Powel was promised to the author of *Letters from a Farmer of Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies*, American Quaker and lawyer John Dickinson. Along with Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, it figures among the most popular political pamphlets of the American Revolution. It helped define the liberties and rights of the American colonists, drew attention to the repressive nature of certain British laws over the colonies – the

Townshend Acts, for instance – and called for resistance and change. Although he did not call for revolution and was never in favour of it, his ideas motivated a number of revolutionaries.²⁴⁵ Writing in 1768 to her sister Mary Byrd, Elizabeth addressed the rumours of her engagement to Dickinson and made mention of his *Letters*:

Your Farmer Letter I did not send by Mr. Foxcross? But shall now have them so my dear you think me so interested that I commend those excellent Letters because I am supposed to be attached to the amiable Author no far from it if he was my greatest Enemy I wou'd admire or at least seem to approve a performance that breathes the true spirit of Liberty & I believe every one will applaud.²⁴⁶

Elizabeth here dismissed the rumours surrounding a relationship to the author, for the importance of the text, in her opinion, resided in Dickinson's description of the "true spirit of Liberty." This letter brings to light Elizabeth's early political awareness. It also highlights Elizabeth's intention of sending the *Letters from a Farmer of Pennsylvania* to her sister, and thus her involvement into the circulation of the political texts that forged her vision of American liberty and happiness.

In 1788, Elizabeth Powel wrote to James Wilson to ask of him if he could lend her a copy of "a Pamphlet, written by him, many Years since, against the Power of the British Parliament to tax America." Elizabeth explained that she had mentioned it to a gentleman who was unfamiliar with and curious about, the text, but she was unable to lend him a copy since hers in England in the hands of

²⁴⁵ On John Dickinson, his positioning and *Letters from a Farmer of Pennsylvania*, see Jane E. Calvert, "Liberty without Tumult: Understanding the Politics of John Dickinson", *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. CXXXI, no. 3, July 2007, p. 233-262; Pierre Marambaud, "Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer of Pennsylvania* As Political Discourse: Ideology, Imagery, and Rhetoric", *Early American Literature*, vol. XII, 1977, p. 63-72.

²⁴⁶ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth Willing to Mary Byrd, 11th August 1768, Philadelphia."

acquaintances.²⁴⁷ Written in 1768, published in 1774, *Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament* was another treatise criticizing British taxation policies in its Anglo-American colonies. It helped define the liberties and rights that the revolutionary Americans felt entitled to, and suggested that they ought to resist the legislation that threatened them.²⁴⁸ James Wilson was a signatory of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. He was a leading force in the establishment and definition of the Federalist themes and visions of American government and policies.²⁴⁹ We do not know when Elizabeth read Wilson's pamphlet, but it appears that she approved of his views enough to share his treatise with English acquaintances, and to discuss and recommend it years after it was first published.

Her willingness to participate in the definition of the new American society by circulating tracts like these strengthened with time and crossed the Atlantic. In 1789, Elizabeth wrote to Bushrod Washington, to distribute political news and pamphlets, and to express her admiration for James Wilson's ideas:

Pray inform me whether you received a Letter & Pamphlet from me in June last, I then wrote to you and send the Debate of Our Convention. As a knew you were a Member of the Virginia Convention I thought it might be agreeable to you to see in how masterly a Manner Mr. Wilson had treated the Science of Government.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth Powel to James Wilson, 17th February 1788, Philadelphia."

²⁴⁸ James Wilson, *Collected Works of James Wilson*, edited by Kermit L. Hall and Mark David Hall, with an Introduction by Kermit L. Hall, and a "Bibliographical Essay" by Mark David Hall, collected by Maynard Garrison, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2007, Vol. 1. Chapter: "Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament, 1774". Accessed from <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/2072/156335> on 2013-06-18; Jean-Marc Pascal, *The Political Ideas of James Wilson, 1742-1798*, New York: Garland Pub., 1991, chap 1.

²⁴⁹ Pascal, *The Political...*, p. vii-xxii.

²⁵⁰ Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Collection, *George Washington Papers*, "Elizabeth Powel to Bushrod Washington, April 1789, Philadelphia."

Clearly, the Constitutional Convention was of great interest to Elizabeth. Again, she demonstrated her awareness of the political scene, and her readiness to share political readings. She had read literature about it, and had developed an opinion defied enough to express her appreciation of James Wilson's performance in the Constitutional debates. Her intentions in sending this to Bushrod Washington might have been to enlighten the mind of the young man and to have a conversation on the subject later on with him. It also highlights how Federalist thinking shaped Elizabeth's political mind.

In April 1792, Elizabeth wrote to George Washington, enclosing a federalist pamphlet with which she disagreed : *Strictures and Observations upon the Three Executive Departments of the Government of the United States...* by "Massachusettsensis", today identified as Sir William Temple.²⁵¹ In Elizabeth's opinion, this "Pamphlet appears to have been written either by an imprudent Friend of Mr. H. or by Enemy to the Government who wishes to create Disgust between the Heads of the great Departments."²⁵² "Mr. H." probably referred to Alexander Hamilton, since *Strictures and Observations* praised Hamilton's financial policies and criticized Henry Knox, then Secretary of War, and Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, for the policies that favoured France, and which had a negative impact on American trade with Great Britain.²⁵³ Elizabeth's letter reveals

²⁵¹ "If this attribution is correct, then *Strictures and Observations* must be viewed as a bold effort by a British agent to alter the course of American foreign policy by arraigning Jefferson in the court of public opinion for allegedly betraying the national interest by favoring France over Great Britain." Editorial endnote, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Digital Edition, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. Canonic URL: <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-23-02-0352> [accessed 22 Jun 2013] " Henry Remsen to Thomas Jefferson, April 11th, 1792, New York."

²⁵² *The Papers of George Washington*, Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05-10-02-0184> [accessed 24 Jul 2013], "Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, April 21st, 1792."

²⁵³ Editorial endnote, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Digital Edition, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. Canonic URL: <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-23-02-0352> [accessed 22 Jun 2013] " Henry Remsen to Thomas Jefferson, 11th April, 1792, New York"; Editorial endnote, *The Papers of George*

some hidden details of her friendship with Washington: they were close enough that she felt comfortable suggesting readings of a political nature to him. Evidently, she was concerned that the pamphlet would affect Washington in some way. As for her thoughts on its contents, although it was written from a clear Federalist point of view and contained a fierce attack on the Republican members of the government, Elizabeth, who was generally a proponent of federalist thinking, criticized the text's divisive partisanship. She also drew attention to the impartial tone of the text, implying that the author must either be a good friend of Hamilton's, or someone for whom the harmony of the government was not a primary concern. In his response to Elizabeth's letter, what expressed his gratitude for bringing the pamphlet to his attention, and assured her "that the sentiments and charges therein contained, have not given me a moments painful sensation."²⁵⁴ Washington also provided his thoughts on the tract: "the Author, if his object was to convey accurate information to the public mind had not devoted a little of time and pains he appears to have employed in writing this Pamphlet in the investigation of facts."²⁵⁵ Washington evidently was appreciative of Elizabeth's suggestions and comments, and the exchange between the two implies that they often discussed political texts of debates.

Almost two decades later, Elizabeth remained constant in her logic on civilization being threatened by dishonesty, bad faith, and ultimately, war. Consequently, she criticized the policies that endangered civilization. In the years preceding the War of 1812, relations between the United States and Great Britain

Washington, Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05-10-02-0184> [accessed 24 Jul 2013], "Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, April 21st, 1792."

²⁵⁴ *The Papers of George Washington*, Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05-10-02-0191> [accessed 24 Jul 2013], "George Washington to Elizabeth Powel, April 23st, 1792."

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

were becoming very tense on the commercial front. Elizabeth continued to discuss political texts that described the tense situation, and her patriotism-infused general opinions. She discussed these tensions in her correspondence with her nephew, then travelling Europe. Twice, she suggested that he read Alexander Baring's work. Husband of her niece Anna Louisa Bingham and Member of Parliament, Alexander Baring, Esquire, wrote *An Inquiry into the Causes and Consequences of the Orders in Council and an Examination of the Conduct of Great Britain Towards the Neutral Commerce of America* (1808). Elizabeth qualified it "a correct and liberal Pamphlet on the conduct of G. Britain towards the Neutral Commerce of America," and she wished "that the truths it contains may strike a forcible conviction on the hitherto infatuated English Administration."²⁵⁶ It contained "extensive commercial information" and "was read here with great pleasure by all true Patriots."²⁵⁷ She then expounded upon her view of the British attitude towards America in these recent years, and the dangers she dreaded. To her, the British were blind, and their willingness to destroy American commerce would only help serve Napoleon Bonaparte's plans.²⁵⁸ Elizabeth also lamented the ill will and lack of honesty of British diplomats, which could only lead to inefficient treaties: "[t]reaties to be of lasting stability must be founded on the broadest basis of good faith, sincerity and mutual interest."²⁵⁹ Lack of honesty and the inability to produce strong treaties on the part of "those at the Helm of Governments" had "deluged the civilized World in Blood, and rapine, and abhorrent to think threaten

²⁵⁶ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 5, "Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, January 26th, 1809, Philadelphia."

²⁵⁷ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 5, "Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, July 18th, 1809, Philadelphia."

²⁵⁸ "They seem blindly to have pursued every measure that could alienate the regards of the People of this Country; and that would most effectually promote the interests and views of Bonaparte. To destroy our Commerce has long since been evidently the policy, and wish of France; thereby implicating the most essential interest of Great Britain as a commercial Nation, whose evidence defends its naval strength." Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

to reduce it to a State of barbarity.”²⁶⁰ She also believed that England was unaware of the consequences of their lack of regard for America's neutral commerce policy. In fact, she described England as being “blind” and “infatuated”, as if England was not in its usual civilized and rational state. Discussing the same situation with her nephew Sir Walter Stirling, Earl of Faksine, in April of 1810, Elizabeth expressed her worries about the decisions that the British government was taking, judging them to be more and more destructive towards American commerce, and not conducive to peace.²⁶¹ These exchanges with her nephews not only show Elizabeth’s consistency in her vision of civilization and happiness, but also a definition of her patriotism, here associated with Baring’s text. These letters also illustrate her use of epistolary writing to develop and share opinions on such controversial and complex topics as England’s disrespect of the United States’ neutrality and the course of actions of Bonaparte.

It appears that Elizabeth’s opinion that held Bonaparte responsible for the regression of the European society was known, or that her political thinking in general was valued. Writing to Charles J. Ingersoll, the author of the *Inchiquin's Letters* (1810), we learned that Ingersoll send his text to Elizabeth. Thanking him, she said that although she had previously purchased the text, she “read [it] not only with pleasure; but exultation.”²⁶² First published anonymously in 1810 as *Inchiquin the Jesuits' Letters*, Ingersoll intended to describe the American character and morality in order to instruct Europe on the American reality, hoping to enlighten Europe on its own injustice. Using Montesquieu’s strategy of describing a place from a fictional stranger’s point of view, Ingersoll depicted America's political balance, diverse society, admirable principles of republicanism and freedom, and

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 6, “Elizabeth Powel to Sir Walter Stirling, April 4th, 1810, Philadelphia.”

²⁶² HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 7, “Elizabeth Powel to Charles

high degree of civilization. Ingersoll also emphasized America's ability to resist foreign belligerent intentions through its spirited patriotism and its resources.²⁶³ Considering Elizabeth's patriotism and opinion on Baring's text - Great Britain's attitude towards America's neutral commercial policy was unfair, dangerous and irrational - it is not surprising that Ingersoll's comments resonated with her: "Europe enslaved by prejudice, and still more by the overwhelming power of that Monster of iniquity Bonaparte seems to have taken a retrograde direction, and to be fast verging to its pristine state of barbarity."²⁶⁴ Ingersoll's comment touched Elizabeth's patriotism as well as her perception of a declining and irrational Europe. More importantly, this letter is interesting for the relationship it suggests between Elizabeth and Ingersoll. *Inchiquin's Letters* were at first published anonymously. Elizabeth purchased the work because of her interest in the question, perhaps without even knowing who the author was. It is not clear why Ingersoll sent this text to Elizabeth, since it seems that she did not ask for a copy. Did Ingersoll, knowing Elizabeth's position on the subject, or simply aware of her willingness to read and discuss politics, want to have Elizabeth's opinion of his work, or her approval of it, or even her patronage? Whatever the case, that Ingersoll took the liberty of sending her a copy of his treatise suggests that many viewed her as a noteworthy female reader of political writings.

From Elizabeth's approval of Dickinson's take on liberty to her vocal disapproval of England's and Bonaparte's actions in the 1810s, it clearly appears that Elizabeth enjoyed sharing on politics throughout her life and that she actively contributed to political discussions and to the circulation of political texts. Patriot,

Ingersoll, March 24th, 1811."

²⁶³ Herbert G. Eldridge, "The Paper War between England and America: The "Inchiquin" Episode, 1810-1815." *Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 1, 1982, p. 49-52.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. On the Ingersoll's text, see Marshall Foletta, *Coming to Terms with Democracy: Federalist Intellectuals and the Shaping of an American Culture*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 2001, p. 79.

federalist, she disapproved of divisive partisanship and warlike policies that threatened the unity and civility of governments. Her opinion was valued by Washington, and maybe even sought by Ingersoll. It may seem that Elizabeth's willingness to express her political opinions contradicted her insistence that women should not take "public" roles and are suited by nature to be wives and mothers. With her pattern of discussing delicate political topics mainly through political texts already published, Elizabeth find a way to develop and defend political views. That same strategy also insured that her political engagement was private. We know that when Elizabeth discussed politics in person, and in private settings, it was at social gatherings such a salons or tea. The letters were also part of the private sphere. The apparent paradox between Elizabeth's political activities and her vision of women's roles highlights the limits and the grey areas of the "Republican Motherhood" conception. As Linda Kerber explains, the republican woman was expected to be "reasonably well acquainted with the public affairs."²⁶⁵ As guardian of morality, Republican Mothers insured the transmission and respect of republican values, and division of society in separate spheres, in their daughters', sons', and husbands' mind.²⁶⁶ However, both Rush and Elizabeth agreed that women's education was to be limited, as some knowledge was inappropriate for women's role of mother and wives. Women's political role was thus limited and restricted to the private sphere.²⁶⁷ And it might be that Elizabeth's opinions and eagerness to read and discuss politics disturbed. Other politically aware letter writers such as Sarah Livingston Jay and Catherine Livingston sensed that the political content of their own letter might appear as inadequate. However, such doubts do not appear in Elizabeth's letter, who probably did not view herself as having entered the public sphere. As we observed, Elizabeth thought that

²⁶⁵ Kerber, *Women...*, p. 235.

²⁶⁶ Kerber, *Women...*, p. 229-231.

²⁶⁷ Kerber, *Women...*, p. 85

women had “happy talents for suggesting & see the ends of the chain.”²⁶⁸ Most likely, Elizabeth considered herself as one on these well-cultured women that were able to suggest men on matters that were related to the public affairs, or even challenge their thinking in order to improve it. In Elizabeth’s mind, doing so in the private sphere, without outshining men, would not constitute public activity. She was merely suggesting, posing as an enlightened counselor with no concrete power.²⁶⁹ The best example of this proper role of “female counselor” – private and behind-the-scenes – can be found in her writings about and to George Washington, embodiment of her patriotism.

Elizabeth first wrote about George Washington in a letter addressed to Mrs. Fitzhugh, written the very day after Washington retired from his position as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, the 23rd of December 1783. Elizabeth designated Washington as the “Favorite of Heaven,” qualifying him a modest, truthful, and righteous man in his “Heart & Conduct.” Her praise for him continued:

God has given him the Power & the Will to serve & save his Country &, what is more glorious a right Sense & Resolution to persevere in virtue which is the only certain Road to Happiness. Few in his Situation after having so successfully played a Game for their Country but would have played an after Game for themselves; but [...], he will be more glorious in his Retirement than he ever when in the Zenith of his Power. [...] He, in the most eminent Degree, possesses the inflexible Virtues of Cato the Graces of Caesar the Valor of Scipio the Pety of an Aneas & the Humility & Moderation of Cincinnatus. A Moderation that I sincerely hope will make him eventually more happy than the greatest Monarch of the most extensive Empire can ever be. I love my Country ... I have Confidence in her Virtue & her Gratitude & if I am not mistaken he will reign in her Heart; this is an Empire worthy of him & honorable to America; it will secure him Happiness here & give him a foretaste of those Joys that must be his in

²⁶⁸ “Elizabeth Powel to Martha Washington, November 31st, 1787, Philadelphia,” in Fields, *Worthy Partner...*, p. 198.

²⁶⁹ Kerber, *Women...*, p. 82-85.

Eternity. Virginia has the exclusive Honor of giving birth & Education to a greater Hero than ancient or modern Times can boast.²⁷⁰

Elizabeth's admiration for George Washington's virtues, of his actions during the War of Independence and after, giving up his powers, is evident, and she clearly depict him as a model for all Americans. The extent of Elizabeth's education can be deduced from her references to the literary, historical, and mythological characters that she referenced to describe Washington: Cato, Caesar, Scipio, Aneas and Cincinnatus.²⁷¹ Elizabeth expressed her concern with Washington's personal happiness, whereas she also stated that Washington's happiness depended on the

²⁷⁰ Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon Collection, *George Washington Papers*, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, December 24th, 1783, Philadelphia."

²⁷¹ Cato the Younger, on whom Joseph Addison's *Cato* was based, is remembered for his vision of constitutionalism and his opposition to Caesar's tyranny. When referring to "the graces of Caesar," Elizabeth might have been alluding to Caesar's oral talents and alleged leadership. Elizabeth was associated Washington with to the warlike valour of either Scipio Africanus or Scipio Aemilianus, both great Roman militaries. Virgile's interpretation of Aeneas depicted the character as full of piety and warlike courage, dutiful and patrioc, qualities that Elizabeth associated with Washington. Finally, Elizabeth also alluded to the classical figure with which Washington was tho most associated with: Cincinnatus, who, after leading wars, left his function and went back to his lands, making him a virtuous figure. Guy Edward Farquhar Chilver and Miriam T. Griffin, "Cato the Younger", Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth, eds., *Who's Who in the Classical World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, Online Version, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192801074.001.0001/acref-9780192801074-e-122> [accessed July 24 2013]; Ernst Badian, "Julius Caesar", Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth, eds., *Who's Who in the Classical World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, Online Version, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192801074.001.0001/acref-9780192801074-e-293?rskey=6GmyjP&result=1> [accessed July 24 2013]; Ernst Badian, "Scipio Aemilianus," Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth, eds., *Who's Who in the Classical World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, Online Version, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192801074.001.0001/acref-9780192801074-e-473?rskey=7qeJgG&result=2> [accessed July 24 2013]; John Briscoe, "Scopio Africanus," Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth, eds., *Who's Who in the Classical World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, Online Version, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192801074.001.0001/acref-9780192801074-e-474?rskey=7qeJgG&result=1> [accessed July 24 2013]; Stephen J. Harrison, "Aeneas", Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, Online Version <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192801074.001.0001/acref-9780192801074-e-474?rskey=7qeJgG&result=1> [accessed July 24 2013]; Tim J. Cornell, "Cincinnatus", Simon Hornblower and Tony Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, Online Version, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601654.001.0001/acref-9780198601654-e-144?rskey=YpwRfS&result=2> [accessed July 24 2013]; Maurie D. McInnis, "George Washington. Cincinnatus or Marcus Aurelius?". In Peter S. Onuf, Nicholas P. Cole, eds. *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*, Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 2011, p. 128-131.

well-being of America. Finally, Elizabeth clearly asserted her patriotism, trust, and love for her country, and successfully guessed the place that Washington would have in the hearts of Americans.

A little less than ten years later, George Washington asked close friends – including Elizabeth - whether they thought he should run for president again in 1792. In his letter to Elizabeth on this topic, he confided that he was considering retiring. Her carefully-composed response to him reflects many of the elements of Elizabeth's political and social vision that we have already encountered. Elizabeth began by saying that she wrote in a spirit of true honesty to their friendship. She then bluntly made clear the “impracticability of carrying [Washington's] intentions [of retirement] into Effect.” Elizabeth first addressed George Washington's concern with his “popularity” and “fame” by basing her argument on the fact that he earned his reputation and the love of the American citizens, and that his retirement would empower his detractors:

invincible Diffidence, and [...] Sensibility with respect to public Opinion [...] Merit & Virtue, when place on an Eminence, will certainly attract Envy [...]. Your Resignation wou'd elate the Enemies of good Government and cause lasting regrets to the Friends of humanity.²⁷²

Anticipating Washington's concern with his own reputation, Elizabeth used a political argument, appealing to his consideration for the government of America. She affirmed that resigning to preserve his own reputation would, in fact, provide the "Antifederalists" with a tool with which to ruin it: they “would use it as an Argument for dissolving the Union, and would urge that you, from Experience, had found the present System a bad one, and had, artfully, withdrawn from it that you

²⁷² *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05->

might not be crushed under its Ruins—that, in this, you had acted a politic Part.”²⁷³ His departure had the potential to destroy the union for which he had worked, which would in turn leave a lasting mark on his reputation. Additionally, Elizabeth envisioned American society as a union and as aware of the fragility of this union. Elizabeth placed Washington above all partisanship, which, as we have seen, she considered divisive and harmful to government. However, she encouraged him to continue to support the Federalists, who trusted him “in rearing and establishing the glorious Fabric of Liberty.” Elizabeth played on Washington’s sense of duty, love for his country, and fear of its ruin.²⁷⁴

Elizabeth then exploited the more personal and emotional thread of her argument. She highlighted the qualities that made him the perfect president in order to flatter him, and reassure him of his abilities and importance:

I will venture to assert that, at this Time, you are the only Man in America that dares to do right on all public Occasions. You are called to watch over the Welfare of a great People at a Period of Life when Man is capable of sustaining the Weight of Government. You have shewn that you are not to be intoxicated by Power or misled by Flattery. [...] the Soundness of your Judgement has been evinced on many and trying Occasions, and you have frequently demonstrated that you possess an Empire over yourself. For Gods sake do not yield that Empire to a Love of Ease, Retirement, rural Pursuits.²⁷⁵

Elizabeth highlighted Washington's sense of righteousness and duty, his incorruptibility through power and flattery, his good heart and judgement, and his self-control, implying his leadership abilities and depicting him as a role model. Her

11-02-0225 [accessed 24 Jul 2013] “Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, November 7th, 1792, Philadelphia.”

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

tone became increasingly imploring and impatient, implying that Washington only had one option - not to resign - if only in order to preserve his own happiness. To ensure the good of the country and reassure Washington of his legacy, Elizabeth encouraged him to follow the truth of his heart: "To do this I am certain that you need only give free Exercise to those Sentiments of patriotism and Benevolence which are congenial to your Bosom. Attend to their Verdict—Let your Heart judge of its Truth—Its Decrees will be confirmed by Posterity."²⁷⁶ Elizabeth moved past Washington's concerns over his reputation to prompt him to seek happiness, which she described as linked to the happiness of the country: "may you, till the extremest old age, enjoy the pure Felicity of having employed your whole Faculties for the Prosperity of the People for whose Happiness you are responsible, for to you their Happiness is intrusted."²⁷⁷ The closeness of the friendship between Elizabeth and Washington, as well as his knowledge and respect for her political awareness and opinions, explain this exchange. It is indeed rather insulate, since Washington directly asked Elizabeth's opinions on his very public role and her response does not refer to political writings. Moreover, her advice is partly based on political arguments. She, however, also used a very feminine domain to enlighten, and maybe influence, Washington's decision: the realm of emotions.

After the president retired, discussion on Washington's legacy remained prominent in the correspondence between the Washingtons and Elizabeth in the years 1797-1798. When Washington decided to retire, Martha reported in one letter that George Washington wrote that he preferred to leave now, "in an apoplectic or any other fit."²⁷⁸ Elizabeth's answer expressed her surprise to learn that Washington was still preoccupied with his public image, and repeated and

²⁷⁵ Ibid

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ "Martha Washington to Elizabeth Powel, December 18th, 1797, Mount Vernon," in Fields,

confirmed her view that Washington would be remembered as a positive and heroic figure in the future:

Surely he [Washington] well knows that Mankind are generally disposed to do justice when the Object of envy is removed; and especially when they have every excitement to truth, [...] and National pride gratified by having produced a Character that concentrated all that valiant, just, and wise; with a disposition to apply those virtues and talents to their benefits.

Washington was an object of national pride, in Elizabeth's view, and that he had made use of his talents and virtues for the nation's benefit enhanced his exemplariness. In 1812, Elizabeth wrote: "You observed that the General must be dear to every Americans. If it is so, I wish that they would evince their attachment by following his precepts and example."²⁷⁹ At a time when her country was at war and faced numerous challenges in international relations, Elizabeth observed that, while Americans continued to admire their revolutionary hero, they did not try to emulate his exemplary qualities. Indeed, Elizabeth tended to associate the qualities she admired in Washington to the qualities and virtues by which American society should live in order to achieve happiness. Consequently, although Elizabeth considered American civilization to be superior to its European counterparts under Bonaparte's thumb, the American society she lived in in 1812 was not the one of liberty, peace and republican virtue she envisioned in the early republic era of the late eighteenth century.

From the beginning of the Revolutionary era, Elizabeth became an

Worthy Partner...., p. 310.

²⁷⁹ Probably the Washington's granddaughter Eleanor "Nelly" Parke Curtis. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, Folder 8, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Curtis, November 28th, 1812, Philadelphia."

opinionated political being and, progressively, an open patriot, reading, commenting on, and discussing political and patriotic texts in society and in her letters. Never intervening in the public sphere, she made use of reasoning and persuasion talents suitable to women to define and defend the Republic. To do so, she only discussed politics in private settings, mainly letters. She often based her opinions of political texts. She also never viewed her opinions as worthy of the public affairs, but as suggestions. Indeed, her political participation mainly resided in the circulation and discussion of political pamphlets. And if her political activities might have bruised some of her contemporaries, her advice and suggestion pleased many of her correspondents, Washington being the most eminent.

Evidently, letters were a medium of agency for Elizabeth, enabling her to discuss many topics and to express opinions, to participate in the elaboration of the American Republican Motherhood conception, and to carve her own space of social and political influence. In an era of changes and of the foundation of an American republican society, letter writing enabled her to develop a vision of this new society. Not only did Elizabeth, as a widow, used letter writing to continue to be socially active and to recall her past days as an eminent hostess, but a way to ensure her own recollection of various events - a concern with preservation that her witnessing of the War of Independence might have triggered – as well as a way to present herself, and to inscribe her identity. Distributing advice and literary suggestions, delivering critiques of literary works, and developing views on female education, Elizabeth elaborated to various correspondents her views on the roles of women in society: responsible for the domestic sphere, they were to be raised and educated to be the mothers and wives in a republican society. Elizabeth herself embraced that motherly role when, through correspondence, she gave advice to her nieces and nephews, and mostly to her heir John Hare Powel. Although firmly defending the fact that women were considered unfit for public

affairs, Elizabeth also defended the fact that women were able to converse on many topics, to suggest and defend views – including on politics -, and to express patriotism. Doing so behind the public scene, in the private sphere was not, in her opinion, disruptive of the separate spheres society she promoted. Many times, her political stances were expressed through political literature that she shared, circulated, and commented on in private correspondence. Her counselling role to Washington, although striking, fitted in this role. It was also through Washington that Elizabeth illustrated the ideal American citizen and patriot.

3. Conclusion: Where the Cultural Signification of Object Encounters Epistolary Discourse

Until this point, the analyses of Elizabeth Powel's material world and her epistolary world have been treated separately. Both are related however, in that they reflect a similar vision of the new American society, and of its transition from the revolutionary era to the early republican one. The confluence of Elizabeth's roles – her responsibility for the material environment of the house, and her ideas about Republican womanhood - can be observed in her practices of sociability: the topics that Elizabeth discussed in her correspondence were also discussed in gatherings she hosted in the Powel House. This confluence can also be observed when goods became the subject of epistolary conversations. Indeed, letters built networks that enabled Elizabeth to commission her correspondents into purchasing goods for her.²⁸⁰ Gifts could also arrive with letters. The value and cultural meanings of commissioned goods or of gifts, the recipients thereof, and the intentions behind these presents reveal a great deal about Elizabeth's interactions with friends and relatives.²⁸¹ It often appears that the utility of the offered object was less prominent than its cultural, symbolic, or emotional value. The purpose with this conclusion is thus to observe and summarize Elizabeth's understanding of refinement, gender, and patriotism through her commissions for correspondents or her gift-giving.

²⁸⁰ For example, at Martha Washington's request, Elizabeth purchased a "piece of Nett" - a light fabric- that she entrusted to Mrs. Fitzhugh for delivery. "Martha Washington to Elizabeth Powel, 20th September, 1780", Fields, *Worthy Partner...*, p. 184. Similarly, at George Washington's request and expenses, Elizabeth bought some books for him: "I have the Pleasure to send the Book of Prints [...]. I have also taken the liberty to add a few [books] that I admire." *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, "Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, December 3rd, 1798," <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-06-03-02-0164> [accessed 24 Jul 2013].

Epistolary networking was often used as a mean of consumption, to obtain and purchase goods.²⁸² Although it seems that Elizabeth's husband corresponded with London agents to obtain goods, as a widow, Elizabeth also made use of her transatlantic correspondence to commission European goods.²⁸³ Evidence that she placed orders for British goods with acquaintances in London is easily found in Elizabeth's correspondence with her nephew John Hare Powel, and with her nephew Sir Walter Stirling.²⁸⁴

Requesting or fulfilling a shopping commission provided one with economic agency, especially women, who dominated the shopping scene.²⁸⁵ It also implied

²⁸¹ Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. 10; Hartigan-O'Connor, *Ties that Buy...*, p. 167-169

²⁸² Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy. Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, p. 131-133, 140-145

²⁸³ Indeed, in a rare 1783 letter Mr. Bridley, an agent in London, we understand that Elizabeth addresses the topic of some article – including a dress – that she ordered through her husband and that she never received. The letter implies that her writing to Mr. Bridley instead of Samuel Powel is exceptional. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 3, "Elizabeth Powel to Mr. Bridley, September 12th, 1783."

²⁸⁴ In 1809, Elizabeth told John Hare Powel that when sending her British goods, he should seek the assistance of Mrs. Baring or his aunt Miss Hare, both in London at the time. She also warned him to not send her or any of his friends too many British manufactured goods – such as books and jewel plates – that were prohibited under "anti-Intercourse Law." Elizabeth did not specify what she wanted from London, but her mention of books and jewel plates suggests that she would demand, in normal circumstances, these types of goods. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, "Elizabeth Powel to John Hare Powel, April 7th, 1809, Philadelphia". Elizabeth's receipts also suggest the fact that jewellery and jewels plates were articles she ordered from London "Pairs brilliant bracelets to receive Pictory, reverse suit, An elegant Lady's gold Watch Chain with brilliant bare, A fine brilliant hoop ring, A elegant brilliant mourning Ring, An elegant white enameled d', An el. Brilliant un. Ring, A brilliant locket buckle, An elegant silver tea pot, A Hand to Do, A cream pot to suit with cover, 12 large threaded tea spoons, pair Sugar Tongs, Packet Box." HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 5, folder 10. Receipt of the 4th May 1799, from Bob. Of Rundell & Bridges, Jewellers and Goldmish's, No 32 Lugate Hill, London." Through John Hare Powel, she obtained spectacles, books, a second-hand "old fashioned" ink stand and a dictionary. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 5, "Elizabeth Powel to Bradford and Inskeep, November 24th, 1809, Philadelphia"; From her nephew Sir Walter Stirling, she requested a mourning ring, a breast fastener, and a miniature portrait of Sir Walter Stirling to be set in gold. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 6, "Elizabeth Powel to Sir Walter Stirling, May 24th, 1810, Philadelphia".

²⁸⁵ John Styles, Amanda Vickery, "Introduction," in John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, New Haven, London, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 2-14.

trust on the part of the person giving the commission, which reveals a great deal about people's interactions with regards to goods, and what these interactions meant.²⁸⁶ For example, George Washington asked Elizabeth to buy some fashionable articles of clothing for Nelly Curtis, his step-grand-daughter. Elizabeth proposed the purchase of a “Muff and Tippet,” and “a Pattern of Muslin for a Dress,” to which Washington answered: “she is provided with a Muff; of a Tippet I am not so certain; but a handsome Muslin, or any thing else that is not a whim of the day, cannot be amiss.”²⁸⁷ In providing Elizabeth with these shopping commissions, Washington demonstrated his trust in Elizabeth's judgment and her taste when it came to approach women's clothing. Washington also entrusted the Powels with purchasing some chairs for Mount Vernon, a rather significant commission considering the centrality of chairs for guests and residents. Samuel Powel reported to George Washington on this commission, which turned out to be arduous for Elizabeth:

The Fact is, that the Maker living near Trenton, she employed a Friend of her's to communicate her ideas For it to him. But, from some Cause or other, nothing appeared to have been done in the Business [...]. The chair, such as it is, is the neatest I have seen of his making [...]. The tedious Time that you have waited for this Trifle, will not, I hope, deter you from honoring us with any little Commission that you may wish to have executed here; as it will ever give us real pleasure to b, in any way, serviceable to you.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Hartigan – O'Connor, *Ties that Buy...*, p. 167-169.

²⁸⁷ *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, “Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, December 3rd, 1798,” <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-06-03-02-0164> [accessed 24 Jul 2013]; and “George Washington to Elizabeth Powel, December 4th, 1798,” <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-06-03-02-0166> [accessed 24 Jul 2013].

²⁸⁸ *The Papers of George Washington*, Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, “Samuel Powel to George Washington, August 9th, 1788, Philadelphia,” <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-04-06-02-0396> [accessed 24 Jul 2013].

Because fulfilling commissions and rendering services to friends and acquaintances was considered a great honour, Samuel Powel wrote to explain the reasons for the delay in fulfilling this request, in the hope that it did not affect the Washington's trust and friendship with them. Most importantly, this passage also clearly designated Elizabeth as the shopper and as the one who dictated the design of the chair. It thus suggests that the Washingtons had confidence in the authority of Elizabeth's taste, and that they sought it. The story this arm-chair tells thus become attached to the circumstances of its production and to Elizabeth, who commissioned its form and style to her taste. Indeed, once the chair was displayed, numerous topics of conversation could arise concerning this single object: the talent and style of the chair-maker, how the chair reflected the quality and neatness of its owner, the taste of the person who chose it. The correspondence surrounding the acquisition of this armchair demonstrates the close friendship, trust, honor, and desire to serve between the Powels and the Washingtons.

Elizabeth's interest in female education and her tendency to offer advice on this topic was apparent in the goods she offered and purchased. Giving artificial flowers to her nieces Molly (Maria) and Nancy (Anne) Byrd, she explained that these flowers, useless but pretty, represented the blossoming of the two girls, and bore an educational and moral lesson for Molly:

The full blown Roses are for Molly. She may take a useful Hint from them, tho they are more beautiful than the Buds I have for Nancy they will sooner fall to Pieces. I heard that Molly has refused several advantages offers I fear she is too fond of Castle building & is precipitate. She must remember what I said to her on the Subject, Precipitancy is frequently attended with repentance, and justly too. The Bloom of Youth lasts but a short Time.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box, Folder "Elizabeth Powel to Mary Byrd,

Through her gifts, Elizabeth sought to impart moral lessons: that women's happiness relied on being happily married and becoming a mother. Interestingly enough, as we previously analyzed, Elizabeth vehemently criticized Chesterfield, who thought about women only in terms of their external beauty. When Molly actually became Mrs. Page two years later, Elizabeth gave advice to her newlywed niece, stating that to retain the happiness and attention of a man, a woman needed to develop charms of the mind, conversational skills, taste, and a care for the comfort of home.²⁹⁰ However, this did not mean that beauty and youth should be ignored when a woman was courting and looking to be wed. Elizabeth's gift of blooming artificial roses to Molly carried an educational message: not to waste her youthful beauty in refusing perfectly acceptable and advantageous marriage proposals. This line of thought accompanying the rose emphasized the importance of marriage in Elizabeth's perception of the female social role. It recalls Elizabeth's insistence on restraining women to the private, as she did when criticizing her sister Mary Byrd's presence in court, or Mary Wollstonecraft's defense of female rights.

Despite being confined to the domestic sphere, women were to be educated and some goods were tools in that purpose. Elizabeth fulfilled a commission for Martha Washington, sending collars "for the young Ladies," and again explaining the educational purpose of this article of clothing:

Those [collar] I have sent may be raised by means of the Screw. I have made a little Ornament of Ribband, which may be worn over them as a Disguise when ye young Ladies are dressed or go without a Vandike. It is a Pity that a fine Form should be spoiled by a child's not holding herself erect. Indeed I think it is essential to Health and Beauty, to hold up the Head & throw back

December 1st, 1783, Philadelphia".

²⁹⁰ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box, folder "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Page, 1785, Philadelphia".

the shoulders. It expands the chest & prevents those ridiculous distortions of the Face & Eyes.²⁹¹

Adornments such as the vandyke – a lace or fabric ornament that edged the sleeves of the collar of a dress - were highly fashionable in late eighteenth-century America, while collars restrained the movement of the neck, a mark of poise and class distinction.²⁹² Elizabeth invoked the value of beauty and health to justify wearing collars, and to reflect the quality and the grace of the lady who wore them. An elite woman's quality was judged according to the refinement and neatness of her house, and by the regulation of her own appearance – body and clothing. The control of the body was a crucial sign of civility and refinement, hence the presence of the collar in female fashion. Therefore, part of the education of a young lady involved teaching the importance of health, appearance, and beauty as projected through clothing.²⁹³

Buying American goods, or offering patriotic gifts, was also a common feature in Elizabeth's letters, echoing her interest in and her vision of American society. Indeed, from the 1780s, Elizabeth regularly gave gifts, the characteristics and origins, and the reasons and timing behind the giving of which were a testament to her patriotic sentiments. In May 1784, Elizabeth offered a miniature portrait of George Washington set in a medallion to Mrs. Fitzhugh “as the most respectable Testimony of my Attention to you.”²⁹⁴ We are already familiar with

²⁹¹ “Elizabeth Powel to Martha Washington, November 30th, 1787, Philadelphia”, Fields, *Worthy Partner...*, p. 199

²⁹² Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America : The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*, Williamsburg and New Haven, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 219; Valerie Cumming, C. Willett Cunnington, Phillis Cunnington, and Charles Rely Beard, *The Dictionary of Fashion History*, Oxford; New York, Berg, 2010, p. 52, 216.

²⁹³ Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies : Cleanliness in Early America*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 119, 132, 140-143; Bushman, *The Refinement...*, p. 63-69.

²⁹⁴ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, “Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Fitzhugh, May 18th, 1784, Philadelphia.”

Elizabeth's high opinion of George Washington, and although her words to Mrs. Fitzhugh state that the gift represented Elizabeth's affection and respect for Mrs. Fitzhugh, the medallion's subtext is more symbolic. Elizabeth transmitted her love of the country through her admiration of Washington; she promoted his values and valour. Her decision to set a miniature portrait in a piece of jewellery suggests Elizabeth's desire to nourish the memory of George Washington and his heroism. The portrait served as visual identification and memorial of its subject. The medallion was an object worn close to the breast and the heart; its weight and presence also served as a reminder to the person who wore it of the value of the person in the portrait – in this case, Washington. Wearing a unique medallion miniature portrait of Washington not only projected patriotism, but also reflected the closeness of the owner to the person represented therein.

Elizabeth's definition of the model American citizen was closely tied to her admiration of her friend Washington. In 1787, she offered him a reflecting lamp – the Argand lamp - a technological luxury that consumed less tallow, invented in the early 1780s in Switzerland:

I have taken the Liberty to send you a reflecting Lamp for your Hall. I well know your Delicacy on the Subject of accepting the smallest Present even from your best Friend, but as I well know your Patriotism [...]. That Light is an Object of immense Consequences no one will venture to deny, & that the Importation of Tallow takes off a great deal of Money I believe is very certain. Your example will, I flatter myself, be always sufficient to recommend & establish the Use of any articles in America.²⁹⁵

This letter suggests the closeness of the friendship between Elizabeth and Washington - “from your best Friend” - and Washington's modest character. It also

illustrates Elizabeth's strategy of promoting objects that she had a positive opinion of through Washington's fame. Finally, this letter also demonstrates how she made use of gift-giving and networking to participate in the economic and material life of American society and circulate her vision of it. Elizabeth promoted a lamp that generated more light than candles and cost less, which would result in savings for American households. She also wanted the lamp displayed in Washington's hall, placing her refined and luxurious gift in the view of all visitors. Her strategy worked: in the early 1790s, Washington ordered more than a dozen European Argand lamps for his executive residence in Philadelphia, and for Mount Vernon.²⁹⁶

The purpose of the first section of this thesis was to describe how the Powels' material environment reflected their social status, cosmopolitanism, and refined and luxurious taste. The display of English and American silver objects played an important role in that demonstration of power and taste. As a widow, Elizabeth emerged as an active patron of American silversmiths. Not only was this economically wise, since silver was highly valuable and tradable, but it also reflected her willingness to promote American craftsmanship, a willingness shared by many other elite Philadelphians.²⁹⁷ Elizabeth's silver pieces carried initials, family crests. She often offered some pieces as gifts, or passed them on to subsequent generations. In this spirit, she offered her nephew and heir John Hare Powel a pair of sterling silver coolers with an "engraved crest."²⁹⁸ As the engraving of initials and crests on silver was a powerful medium through which to preserve one's identity through time, through this gift John Hare Powel was not only to display the Powel family's reputation, but also carry it into the future.

²⁹⁵ *The Papers of George Washington*, Digital Edition, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008, "Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, 8th September 1787," <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-04-05-02-0293> [accessed 24 Jul 2013]

²⁹⁶ Carol Borchert Cadou, *The George Washington Collection : Fine and Decorative Arts at Mount Vernon*, Manchester, Hudson Hills Press, 2006, p. 150-152.

²⁹⁷ Hartigan-O'Connor, *Ties that Buy...*, p. 167

²⁹⁸ LCP, *Powel Family Papers, 1685-1884*, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], June 1813.

Elizabeth patronized various Philadelphian silversmiths, purchasing goods or having them engraved, which illustrated her social status and wealth, lifestyle, and taste. In the late 1790s, Elizabeth purchased from Richard Humphrey a silver dinner service ornate with serpentine hedges and Elizabeth's monograms that matched the Richardson vegetable dishes Elizabeth owned.²⁹⁹ From Joseph Richardson Jr., Elizabeth also bought twelve silver teaspoons with carved handles, sugar tongs, four salt spoons, gold thimbles, and some engravings.³⁰⁰ In the 1810s, James Howell seemed to have been Elizabeth's favourite, for she ordered a number of silver pieces from him. Elizabeth also ordered pieces from Howell for her own: a silver pie dish, two silver butter plates, a silver waiter, twelve silver forks, a silver porter mug, a silver chocolate mill, a silver fish trowel, a silver wine cooler, fine asparagus tongs, a gold thimble, a silver spectacle frame, a silver ink stand, and a silver sterling tea pot.³⁰¹ Elizabeth had many of her pieces burnished or engraved.³⁰² As opposed to the quantity of silver pieces that we traced, and that had furnished the Powel House, it appears that either Elizabeth was buying more silver objects, or was keeping more detailed account books during this period of her life. These orders indicate that Elizabeth's lifestyle twenty years into widowhood remained refined and luxurious, but since Elizabeth progressively became less and less active in society, her patronage may have been partly philanthropic, partly about building a heritage, and partly about ensuring her refinement, taste, wealth, and social presence in time. Having the economic ability

²⁹⁹ Downs, "The Powel Exhibition..."p. 45

³⁰⁰ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 5, folder 10; HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, vol 8 [account book], July 1798.

³⁰¹ LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], February 1811, May 1812, June 1812, August 1812, October 1812, June 1813.

³⁰² Elizabeth had burnished, for Elizabeth P. Fisher, a coffee pot, and for herself, 26 table spoons, 24 deserts spoons, 12 tea spoons, 12 large knives and forks, 12 deserts knives and forks, forks burnished, and had 4 cyphers engraved, had a crest engraved on 18 forks, and had burnished 18 silver fruit knives with ivory twisted handles with her initials in cypher. LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], February 1811, May 1812, September 1812, March

to shop to her taste and patronize the artists of her choosing was a source of continuous empowerment for Elizabeth. Through the giving of letters and gifts, and through her own legacy, she promoted Howell and other Philadelphia silversmiths, which enabled her to project and transmit her social identity, her taste, her affection, and the memory of herself.

Through her patronage of James Howell, Elizabeth used and offered his pieces as expression of refinement, patriotism, and female roles in society. Elizabeth's extensive patronage of James Howell seemed to have been the subject of dispute. "Notwithstanding your raillery on the subject of what you call my patronage of Mr. Howell" Elizabeth wrote to her niece Peggy Hare, "I request[ed] him to exert his best talents, and imitation powers, in modeling a pair [of silver beakers] after my English one."³⁰³ Elizabeth justified buying Howell's creation by explaining that they satisfied every party: it provided Howell with work and Elizabeth with the pleasure of fulfilling the desires of her niece.³⁰⁴ Whenever she gave a gift, Elizabeth designated it as a mark of "affection," "attention," "esteem." For example, when Elizabeth offered a silver cake basket made by Howell to her niece-in-law, Mrs. Charles Willing Hare, in 1811, she stated that she hoped that these gifts were to their recipient's taste, and were to be "evidence of the attention, and the esteem" that Elizabeth had for her niece-in-law.³⁰⁵ At times, Elizabeth was more outspoken when describing her gift-giving intentions. For example, to Edward Shippen Burd, her cousin, lawyer and business adviser, she offered a silver candlestick similar to one of her own that he had admired, and

1813, July 1813.

³⁰³ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 8, "Elizabeth Powel to Peggy Hare, September 27th, 1812, Philadelphia". For the entry in the account book, "Paid James Howell silver Ink stand, two silver Beakers Tumblers." LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], October 1812.

³⁰⁴ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 8, "Elizabeth Powel to Peggy Hare, 27th September 1812, Philadelphia."

³⁰⁵ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 7, "Elizabeth Powel to Nancy Hare, 31st May 1811, Philadelphia."

hoped that he would accept it “to aid in illuminating your Study. Your understanding I trust has been successfully illuminated by the enlightened Mind.”³⁰⁶ The combination of the refined and luxurious gift and the epistolary discourse accompanying it reveals that Elizabeth and Burd probably enjoyed each other's sociability and that material culture was a topic of discussion between them. Moreover, Elizabeth honoured her friend's intelligence with this gift, drawing an analogy between his enlightened mind and how the candlestick would illuminate his study.

Patriotism was something that Elizabeth discussed when offering a piece of Howell silver, linking the American-made objects to the patriotic qualities of the recipient. To her niece – one of Mary Byrd's daughters – Elizabeth offered a cake basket probably made by James Howell³⁰⁷:

I am told that you make very fine Cake at Page Brook and as you are wise and virtuous I may infer that you are patriotic, although I trust not a female Politician. I have therefore ordered to be made in Silver as a specimen of Philadelphia Manufactures, in the form of a Cake Basket, [...] and which I beg your acceptance of as a testimony of my affection and the pleasing retrospection that I have of your delicacy, and sensibility, at an early period of your life.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 3, “ Elizabeth Powel to Edward Shippen Burd, September 25th, 1807, Philadelphia”. Elizabeth bought some silver candlesticks from Joseph Dawes, Philadelphian silversmith in February 1807, and it is probable that these were the one she offered to Burd: “Paid Joseph Dawes for a Silver chamber candlestick, snufflers and two silver extinguishers and also for engraving the initial of my name on a silver in a cipher”, LCP, *Powel Family Papers, 1685-1884*, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], February 1807.

³⁰⁷ “Paid James Howell for a silver cake basket and for engraving a cipher of a gold thimble, burnishing 4 sauce Tureens, engraving ciphers on Do, polishing a large silver waiter, fixing handles on a Dishes”, LCP, *Powel Family Papers, 1685-1884*, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], April 1810.

³⁰⁸ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, box 4, folder 6, “Elizabeth Powel to a Byrd niece, February 28th, 1810, Philadelphia.”

Elizabeth had ordered this cake basket from a local silversmith specifically for her niece, as an acknowledgement of her pastry talents, but also of her patriotism. Indeed, Elizabeth's niece fully corresponded to Elizabeth's vision of a proper woman in society, one who is patriotic and concerned with the well-being of the nation, but who stayed away from public and political affairs. Finally, Elizabeth clearly associated the object with memory: the silver basket was meant to plunge Elizabeth's niece into "retrospection," into remembering her aunt's appreciation of her "sensibility," and "delicacy." Similarly, on the 4th of July, 1812, Elizabeth offered Edward Shippen Burd a pair of asparagus tongs:

As this is the Anniversary of our Independence, it cannot be ill timed to apail, and test your patriotism, by begging your acceptance of a Silver Asparagus Tongs. It is the Workmanship of an American Artist who I think has executed this trifling token (of my attention to you) with taste and neatness.³⁰⁹

Elizabeth clearly meant to honour Edward Shippen Burd's love of country, and she associated the consumption of American manufactured object with patriotism.³¹⁰ However, Asparagus tongs were also a very refined and specific utensil. Elizabeth designated gift giving as a mark of affection, and consuming local products as a mark of patriotism. Finally, the last trace of Elizabeth offering asparagus tongs is to her niece Mrs. George Harrison:

³⁰⁹ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 8, "Elizabeth Powel to Edward Shippen Burd, July 4th, 1812." For the account book entry, see "Paid James Howell for a pair of Asparagus Tongs for Edward Shippen Burd." LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Serie III, vol. 39 [account book], July 1812.

³¹⁰ Elizabeth gave to other members of her family at least three other asparagus tongs as marks of affection and acknowledgement of patriotism. HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 10, "Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. Francis, March 16th, 1813, Philadelphia." To her godson Joseph Hopkinson, Elizabeth wrote: "I have taken the liberty to send you [...] what I consider a very good specimen of American workmanship in the form of Asparagus tongs, or what might be very properly used as a Fish Trowel. I beg your acceptance of this Trifle, as a proof of my good opinion of your patriotism, and as a token of affection." HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4, folder 10, "Elizabeth Powel to John Hopkinson, April 6th, 1813, Philadelphia". For the entry in the account book, see LCP, *Powel Family Papers*, 1685-1884, Serie III, vol. 39 [account book], March 1813.

Amidst all the elegant appendages of your hospitable Board, I do not recollect seeing an Asparagus Tongs; an Article peculiarly adapted to your taste and habit of neatness, and an essential characteristick of the Table of a Gentleman. As the Asparagus Season is fast advancing will you accept as an evidence of my affection and attention a pair of Tongs that may also be used as a Fish Trowel. Although you do not profess to be a furious Patriot, yet I presume this Trifle might bear an additional value in your estimation as an Article of American manufacture.³¹¹

Interestingly, Elizabeth was giving what she considered a patriotic gift – because of its American manufacture - to someone who did not particularly showcase or profess sharp patriotism. Elizabeth's hope that her niece would value the gift even more because of its American provenance implies that Elizabeth's intention may have been to create a stronger sense of patriotism in her niece. Elizabeth's discourse surrounding the asparagus tongs that she gave to Mrs. Harrison sheds some light on the place of asparagus tongs at the dinner table of an elite house. Although they could be used as a fish trowel, or even as sugar tongs, asparagus tongs were an indispensable tool at the table of every genteel household serving asparagus with “taste” and “neatness.” The elite lifestyle and dinner habits required, according to Elizabeth's standards, the presence of this specific serving tool for asparagus. Even more strikingly, by saying that these tongs would be a perfect addition to Mrs. Harrison's already tasteful dinnerware, Elizabeth implied that she observed and evaluated the material environment of her niece, something that might have been a topic of discussion around the table.

Correspondence also provided a means of economic and material agency, as it formed networks for the purchasing and distribution of goods, and thus of one's taste and refinement. Indeed, either fulfilling commissions or gift-giving,

³¹¹ HSP, Coll. 1582, *Powel Family Papers*, Series III, Box 4 folder 10, “ Elizabeth Powel to Mrs. George Harrison, March 15th, 1813, Philadelphia.” For the entry in the account book, see, LCP, *Powel Family Papers, 1685-1884*, Series III, vol. 39 [account book], March 1813.

Elizabeth's letters echoed the cultural significance of the object, and were a way for her to showcase her taste and refinement through the goods that were sent along with the letters. In congruence with her discourse, Elizabeth sent gifts that often had an educational or patriotic value, as well as serving as a testimony of affection from the gift-giver, as well as a means of remembering that gift-giver. Through her correspondence, Elizabeth not only expressed herself on many topics and literary works, but she also fulfilled different roles to participate in society, and used letters as a means of social, cultural, political, and economic agency.

Although Elizabeth, throughout her life, used material culture as a medium of expression of wealth, refinement, cleanliness, and taste – in the Powel House, for example - it is later on, with her activities as a patron of Philadelphia silversmiths, that she expressed patriotism through objects. Her hosting allowed society to observe the tastefulness of her house, and in return, friends could ask Elizabeth to fulfill commissions for them. The sociability and correspondence subjected the same society to Elizabeth's conversational talents, and to her ideas and opinions on politics, gender roles, and female education. It seems to have established her as a figure of female authority: she constantly circulated texts, gave advice of readings, and distributed her opinions on pamphlets. She even patronized *Thoughts Upon Female Education* by Benjamin Rush. Friend of George Washington, the traces of their friendship are material and written. The Powel House displayed many gifts given by the Washingtons. Giving gifts or fulfilling commissions, Elizabeth's taste and consumerism had a place in Mount Vernon. Through him, his reputation, and the conversations they had on politics and on his presidential role, Elizabeth developed her vision of patriotism and Americanism.

Elizabeth witnessed the birth of the American republic and lived long enough to see President Jackson's elections. Her vision of this society emerges through the significance she gave to materiality and through her epistolary

conversations. According to her, the American society was to be civilized, something ensured by the refinement of manners and lifestyle. The material environment, notably for social practices, played an immense role in that purpose. Civilization was also guaranteed by peace, and by education. Elizabeth encouraged patriotism, but strong partisanship, in her vision, weakens government, and could lead to the failure of the republic. Happiness was also a key concept in Elizabeth's vision, and was mostly the fruit of health, successful marriages, and the respect of the separate male and female roles in society. Disrupting these roles would jeopardize happiness and society. Again, proper education played a major role in inculcating the knowledge and respect of these roles.

I argued that Elizabeth effectively developed and expressed her visions through her discourses, activities, and material environment. The latter indeed reflected social status, an aspiration to refinement and civility, a level of taste, and an awareness of the politicization of goods. Also a means of expression, the material environment provided a refined set for social gatherings and conversations, as well as a topic of conversations. The circulation of ideas, taste, and goods was also accomplished through letters, a medium of agency for Elizabeth. It allowed her to develop and participate to the formation and circulation of various ideas that impacted the young American Republic: literature, health, happiness, politics, patriotism, economy, female education, and gender roles. Her words, her readings and her literary suggestion, as well as her shopping and gift-giving activities conveyed these ideas.

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