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Out of the Attic

Hannah Griffith: The making of a businesswoman

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Image: Part of a letter written to Hannah Griffith from her husband, Rev. Dr. David Griffith, during the Revolutionary War. Courtesy, Virginia Museum of History and Culture.

Hannah Griffith was between 38 and 44 years of age in 1789 when her husband, Rev. Doctor David Griffith, rector of the Episcopal congregation now known as Christ Church, suddenly died. Transformed into a widow and single mother of eight children – age 19 and younger – Mrs. Griffith embarked upon an uncommon business venture.

From the smaller building that now comprises the Gadsby's Tavern Museum complex, she operated the Alexandria Coffee-House from 1794 to 1800. During that chapter of her life, she would utilize knowledge she had acquired years earlier as a “deputy husband” during the American Revolutionary War.

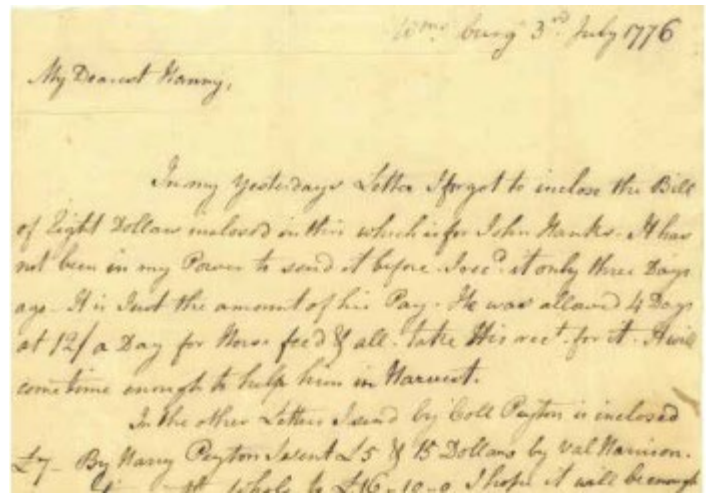
Popularized by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the term “deputy husband” describes wives of the colonial period who assumed duties typically assigned to their husbands. Based upon nineteen surviving letters written to Griffith by her husband, a Continental officer, between April 1776 and November 1778, she managed the family plantation, including all domestic and financial matters. These letters are part of the “David Griffith papers” currently in the manuscripts collection at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture in Richmond. From that correspondence, the extent of Hannah Griffith's role is uncovered. In a letter he penned on Nov. 6, 1777, Rev. Griffith reminded his wife of his decision to:

“... leave the Management of Plantation Affairs entirely to Your discretion. I am sorry you find them so bothersome: But you may remember that my desire was, when last at Home, to disencumber you of that Care by selling off the Stock. You have only your self to blame; & you may be assured I shall not wish you to continue it longer than is agreeable to yourself.”

Mrs. Griffith's wide-ranging responsibilities were often alluded to:

“There is something in what you say concerning the Accts. of Peyton that I cannot understand. Was it Coll. Peyton or Craven that you call'd upon: I shoud be glad to be informed, & wether there was not a Balance sufficient to discharge his Demand or Herberts.”

“The Season is now Advancing when it is necessary to make Provision for the Winter...you must endeavour to provide on the best Terms you can...Is Salt to be had? I fully intended sending you some Money by Coll. Peyton but he went off before I expected it...I am much obliged to you for your Care in





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sending me my flannel waistcoat...I enclose you the measures you desire of a Collar & Wristband for Shirts...I think if you make me half a Doz.n New Ones it will be sufficient.”

Then, on Sept. 23, 1778, Griffith’s husband wrote seeking her “Sentiments” regarding an offer of employment he had received from Fairfax parish. By early 1779, with military service behind them, the Griffith family left Shelburne parish of Loudon, Virginia and resettled in their final home together, the glebe which sat between the two churches of Fairfax parish – Alexandria and Falls Church.

In time, as “Widow Griffith,” she would apply her wartime experience to the coffeehouse business in that bustling port city of the new republic.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests. This week’s column is by Kristy Huettner, Office of Historic Alexandria.