

# The Female Stranger

The story of the Female Stranger has enchanted locals and visitors in Alexandria for almost 200 years. While there are very few facts, two city locations are connected to the story: Gadsby's Tavern Museum, where the story claims the lady passed away, and St. Paul's Episcopal Cemetery, where the Female Stranger's tomb remains today. No one knows the true identity of the woman buried here, but many theories have been suggested over the years.

## Final Resting Place

The St. Paul's Episcopal Church Cemetery is located on Wilkes Street near many other historic cemeteries. Among the gravestones is a table-top stone for the Female Stranger. Inscribed on top:

To the memory of a  
Female Stranger  
Whose mortal sufferings terminated  
On the 14<sup>th</sup> day of October 1816  
Aged 23 years and 8 months.

This stone is placed here by her disconsolate  
Husband in whose arms she sighed out her  
Latest breath and who under God  
Did his utmost even to soothe the cold  
dead ear of death.

How loved, how valued once, avails thee not  
To whom related or by whom begot  
A heap of dust alone remains of thee  
Tis all thou art and all the proud shall be.

To him gave all the Prophets witness that  
Through his name whosoever believeth in  
Him shall receive remission of his sins  
Acts 10<sup>th</sup> Chap 43<sup>rd</sup> verse

The third section in the epitaph is a quote from an Alexander Pope poem, *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, lines 71-74.

## The Legend Emerges

While one might assume this local gossip would make the newspapers of the time, it doesn't appear in the local paper until July 20, 1866. The article describes a couple staying in the City Hotel. The woman was ill and died in spite of the efforts of a local doctor and some kindly ladies. The article goes on to call the gentleman a "cheat and a swindler" as the bank notes he wrote were returned unpaid. Some years



afterwards, the bank owner, Mr. Hill saw the husband of the Female Stranger in the state prison in New York. Even in this article, facts are confused as the unknown author dates the couple's visit to 1818 rather than the tomb's date of 1816. Since the publication of this article, the story has become more elaborate and details that are claimed as fact change regularly.

Even though this newspaper article from 1866 states that she stayed at the City Hotel, there are no surviving hotel records to prove these claims.

## The Female Stranger's Identity

There are many theories as to who the Female Stranger could have been. One is that she was Theodosia Burr Alston, daughter of Aaron Burr. In 1813, Theodosia boarded a ship that was lost at sea between South Carolina and New York. However, Theodosia was born in 1783, making her 33 years old in 1816, not 23 as is inscribed on the tomb.

The second theory comes from "The Narrative of John Trust," published in 1882 by William F. Carne. In this story, John Trust is one of four orphans separated in childhood. Trust and his unknown brother, John Wroe, both fall in love with one of their unknown sisters, Blanche Forden. She elopes with Wroe, then dies shortly after from illness in Alexandria, becoming "the Female Stranger."

Written in 1912 by Charles T. Johnson Jr., a third version claims that the Female Stranger was the ward of an English lord who fell in love with her. When the older man found the young woman embracing her young lover, John, the two men fought. In the fray, the lord accidentally tripped and hit his head. It was a deadly blow and the couple quickly eloped and fled to America to escape any blame for the lord's death. They lived happily for a time in a cabin near Georgetown (now known as Cabin John), before the woman fell ill with Typhoid fever. John took her to nearby Alexandria, but he was too late.

## Ghost Stories

In 1992, the Alexandria Gazette newspaper advertised ghost tours that focused on the Female Stranger story. However, it was the 1993 book *Ghosts of Virginia* by L. B. Taylor that advanced the supernatural story of the Female Stranger. According to Taylor, a ghostly woman is sometimes seen holding a lit candle in the window of the room she reportedly died in. Also, Taylor tells a story of a man that came to visit Gadsby's Tavern for a ball and sees a woman, dressed in period clothing, holding a lit candle in the ballroom. As he watches, she walks down the hallway and into the east bedchamber. The man follows only to find the room empty and the candle extinguished. When he brings an employee to the room, the candle wick is clean and white as if it had never been lit, but still hot to the touch.



*Theodosia Burr - Portrait  
by St. Memin  
Smithsonian National  
Portrait Gallery*

## The Mystery Continues

Each of these three stories has variations through time. With so little evidence, the identity of the Female Stranger is likely to remain shrouded in mystery and a source of stories for decades to come.

Whichever version, the telling of the story continues as an Alexandria tradition. Even without documentation as to her identity, she remains an important piece of Alexandria's folklore.