

A STEELE TRADITION OF LAFAYETTE

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This member reports to the Maryland Original Research Society a find in the way of a family tradition which, until its publication in an illustrated article, over her name, contributed to the *Baltimore Sun* of October 8, 1911, entitled "Heirlooms from the Handsomest Drawing-room in America,"¹ had never been made a matter of public record and was not known to Marylanders outside of the Steele family connection.

Until then few were aware of the fact that in a stately old home of Annapolis is a room which, according to the Steele tradition, Lafayette, when visiting there, pronounced "The handsomest drawing-room I have seen in America."

This historic home was, at the time, the winter residence of Mr. James Billings Steele, the grandfather of Mr. Charles Steele, a partner of J. Pierpont Morgan of New York, and the father of Maryland's eminent lawyer, the late I. Nevett Steele.

This tradition, which was told to the writer by Mrs. Van Rensselaer Dickinson of Cambridge, Md., a granddaughter of James Billings Steele the first and daughter of the second bearer of that name, lends a great additional interest to the old mansion which was built and occupied by Samuel Ogle, three times Proprietary Governor of Maryland—in 1731, 1733 and in 1747. Mr. Steele had bought this house for the purpose of spending "the season" at the gay State capital, residing the rest of the year in Dorchester County.

In this Annapolis home were used, Mrs. Dickinson tells us, the chairs now sometimes spoken of as the "Chippendale Key chairs" but which never for a moment belonged to Key; having been bought in England for Mr. James Billings Steele the first, by his brother-in-law, Richard Rush, when the latter was United States Minister at the Court of St. James's.

Eight of these chairs were sold, in 1903, at the Crim sale in Baltimore, at the record-breaking price of \$1000 apiece and were bought by the late C. H. Pond of New York for Mr. Charles Steele of that city. It was at the Crim sale that they were first designated "Key" chairs.

The sole remaining member of this notable set of chairs, now known locally as the "last chair," is still in the possession of Mrs. Dickinson, who inherited it from her father and who loyally declines to discuss the question of letting this treasured relic go out of her own keeping. She also has the India punch bowl, unique Sheffield candelabrum and mahogany tea table that once formed part of the furnishing of the old Ogle mansion when owned by her grandfather and occupied by him when entertaining Lafayette; and besides these she cherishes many other beautiful mahoganies, "old blue" china and kindred treasures from notable old Eastern Shore estates, "The Point," "Hambrooks," "Hansel" and "Eldon," that were formerly the homes of her family.

Mrs. Steele, the hostess to whom Lafayette made his bow in "the handsomest drawing-room in America," was the daughter of Major John Rider Nevett, of Dorchester County, and her three half-sisters were Mrs. Lloyd, of Wye, Mrs. Richard Rush, of Philadelphia, and Mrs. John Mason, of Virginia.

Mrs. Dickinson's cousin, the late Sarah Catharine Rush, of Philadelphia, had in her possession at the time of her death a rare engraving of Queen Victoria, taken when she was ten years of age and that was presented to Miss Rush's mother by the Queen's mother, the Duchess of Kent. There also hung in Miss Rush's dining-room a picture of Louis Philippe and his family, presented to her father by the King.

But as rare as her cousin's Victorian and Bourbon heirlooms may be, they lack that degree of patriotic interest attaching to the more notable ones belonging to Mrs. Dickinson herself, associated, as they are, with the names of Lafayette and Key; for while he did not own the chairs Key must many a time have sat upon them in intimate conversation with his host; as Key's daughter married the brother of the first owner of these heirlooms.

And surely we may take pleasure in the fact that not only did

Maryland's more sterling virtues of valor and steadfastness win her the friendship of the intrepid Lafayette, but that he, with the trained perception of a French courtier, found within her borders those evidences of gracious living and that appreciation of beauty and elegance which, according to the Steele tradition, made him admire a Maryland drawing-room more than all the others in which America had welcomed him.

COLONIAL OFFICERS

During the Colonial period in Maryland the courts of all grades were patterned after English models. In England a large number of the magistrates were noble and practically all were gentlemen having the right to bear arms. In Maryland the magistracy was composed of men distinguished in the records as "Gentleman" or "Esquire." The same was true of those who were chosen to discharge the duties incident to all other offices of trust and responsibility in the Palatinate, and, so far as our researches have extended, they were generally descendants of British armorial families.

This sensitive apportioning of public responsibility among those who by blood and lineage were elevated above the masses naturally inspired among the people respect and awe for law and government inasmuch as both were administered by members of an aristocracy that had ruled the English race by right for many generations. The effect of this hereditary practice, while it had its faults, was, on the whole, salutary for the people of Colonial Maryland and particularly so with reference to the judiciary and other high offices of the Palatinate government. The people were not then ripe for a democracy.