

MARGARET MERCER  
(1791-1846)

Educator & Abolitionist



# MERCER FAMILY

- Daughter of John Francis Mercer (1759-1821) & cousin to Charles Fenton Mercer (1778-1858)
  - John Francis Mercer—Member of Virginia House of Delegates & Governor of Maryland
  - Charles Fenton Mercer—Member of Virginia House of Delegates and Member of U.S. House of Representatives
- Father was a Virginian who moved to Anne Arundel County, Maryland after marriage to Margaret's mother, Sophia Sprigg Mercer (1766-1812)
- Margaret was John & Sophia's fourth child
  - Margaret had at least 3 brothers, one being John Mercer Jr.

# EARLY LIFE

- Margaret grew up on the Sprigg family estate called Cedar Park
  - Cedar Park is a historic home (listed on the National Register of Historic Places) located in Galesville, Anne Arundel County, Maryland
  - The home was originally constructed in 1702 and was known by other names including Ewen Upon Ewenton and West River Farm
- Margaret received the same rigorous education as her brothers and made frequent use of her father's library
- She was also an avid writer and sent correspondence to her paternal family in Essex County, Virginia



Cedar Park (ca 1933) by Langenbach, Randolph and Pickering, E. H.

## DEATH OF HER FATHER



- John Francis Mercer died in 1821, and with his death, Margaret and her brothers inherited some of the 72 enslaved persons owned by the Mercer family
- Margaret despised slavery and considered it immoral despite her father and grandfather's reliance on enslaved labor to operate their Maryland and Virginia plantations
- She wished to free the enslaved but due to her father's debts could not pay for their freedom at this time

# ESSEX COUNTY

- Following her father's death, Margaret moved to Essex County, Virginia to live with her uncle, James Mercer Garnett (1770-1843), a former Congressman and a planter/farmer
- James Mercer Garnett was a major advocate of agriculture and education which would play a large influence on Margaret
- During her time in Essex County, she stayed at the Garnett's estate, Elmwood, located in Loretto, Virginia
- Elmwood was a large plantation that operated with over 100 enslaved persons in the 1820s

# ELMWOOD SCHOOL

- Margaret began her career in education while living with her uncle in Essex County
- She began teaching at the Elmwood School, a school for boys, established by James Garnett
- Margaret taught at the Elmwood School for 4 years, working alongside her cousins, James Garnett's daughters
- During her time as a teacher at Elmwood, Margaret also started a Sunday School in Loretto where she taught Free Blacks

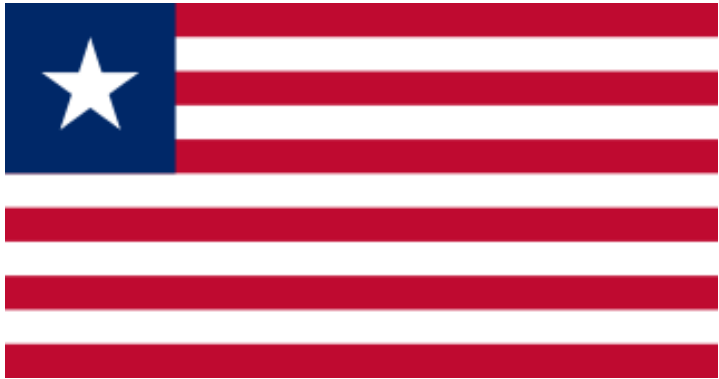


Elmwood, Loretto, Essex Co., Virginia

# CEDAR PARK

- In 1825, Margaret left Elmwood and returned to her family's estate in Maryland
- Upon returning to Cedar Park, she set up a girl's school at the family home
- The school was very successful and so well attended that Margaret had to hire several assistants and build a new wing exclusively for the school
- The Cedar Park School was in operation for over 10 years, and with the school's profits, Margaret was able to pay off her father's debt and purchase the freedom of all the enslaved persons that she had inherited from her father

# COLONIZATION SOCIETY



Flag of Liberia

- The American Colonization Society (ACS) was founded by Margaret's cousin, Charles Fenton Mercer in 1816
- The Society was established with the purpose of relocating Free Blacks to another country or territory where they would not face prejudice
- The Society encouraged the manumission or freeing of the enslaved so that they could be relocated
- The newly settled West African nation of Liberia was chosen as the place for relocation in 1822
- The ACS was primarily made up of Quakers and slaveholders. Many founding and prominent members of the ACS had different motives/intentions for supporting the relocation of free blacks...



# VIRGINIA COLONIZATION SOCIETY

- The Virginia Colonization Society (VCS) was a subgroup of the American Colonization Society
- Virginia had the largest number of free and emancipated emigrate to Liberia
- Margaret Mercer first began working for the VCS while living at Elmwood
  - Margaret's uncle, James Garnett was a member of the VCS and would become Vice President of the Society
- She paid for six formerly enslaved persons to emigrate to Liberia
- The six individuals traveled to Monrovia, Liberia on a schooner (a type of sailing vessel), the *Margaret Mercer*, named for her contributions to the Society



Schooner, *Effie M. Morrissey*, ca 1894

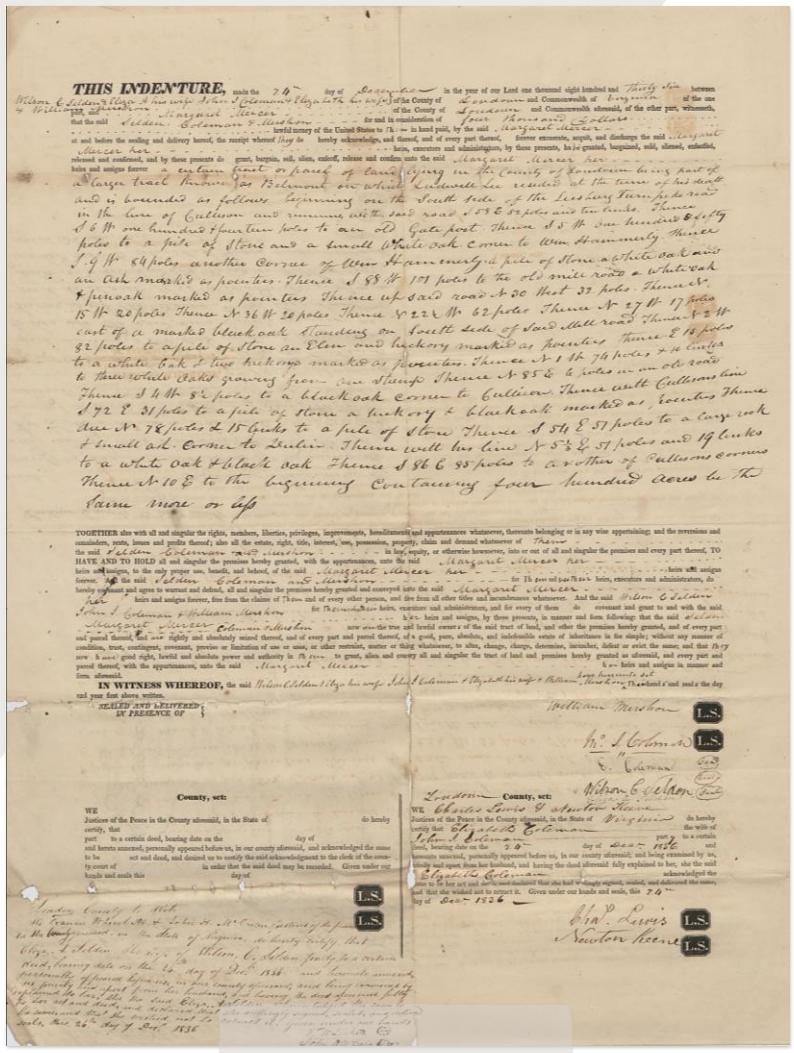
# WILLIAM TAYLOR

- William Taylor was an enslaved man who Margaret paid to assist her at the Cedar Park School
- Margaret noticed that Taylor was very skilled at nursing the sick
  - She paid for his freedom and arranged an apprenticeship under Dr. Lindsley of the Medical College in Washington City (Washington D.C.) and obtained employment for him as a waiter
- Taylor was one of the six who emigrated to Liberia, hoping that his medical expertise would help the colony
- Margaret corresponded with Taylor while he was in Liberia, unfortunately he died from consumption 3 years after his arrival in Liberia

Among those thus brought into her household, was a coloured man named William Taylor, whose superior intelligence and lofty bearing attracted the attention not only of Miss Mercer, but of all who observed him. In speaking of him, one remarks, "his eye was as an open window, radiant with the light which shone out from his soul;" and another, "I never could look at him and ask him to serve me." Such an one could not fail to attract the attention, and enlist the feelings of Miss Mercer in his behalf, and his assiduous attentions in nursing the sick, suggested to her the idea of seeking a medical education for him, and sending him to minister to his emigrant countrymen in Liberia. Her

Excerpt from The Memoir of Margaret Mercer, Caspar Morris, 1848

# BELMONT



- In 1836, Mercer returned to Virginia and purchased the Ludwell Lee (1760-1836) estate known as Belmont

- Belmont is located near Ashburn, Loudoun County, Virginia near what is now Belmont Country Club
- She hired and paid enslaved workers to help develop Belmont into a school
- She had hoped the enslaved would be able to use their wages to buy their friends and families freedom
- Margaret was now suffering financially—much of her income had been spent on emancipating the enslaved; a disappointing school venture in Baltimore; and the purchase of the Belmont plantation

Belmont Deed, Deed Book 4H

# BELMONT ACADEMY

- Belmont Academy, a school for girls, began holding classes and lectures shortly after Mercer purchased the estate
- The students boarding rooms and classrooms were both located in the Belmont Manor house
- The Academy was known for its high academic standards, and religious ethics and morals
- Other subjects taught included: philosophy, French, Latin, geography, geology, & astronomy
- Tuition was \$250 a year
- Seven additional assistants were hired to assist with teaching

## BELMONT ACADEMY CONT.

- Margaret was a devout Christian and an advocate of agriculture
  - Margaret believed that educating her students about Christian values would help them grow into upstanding citizens
  - She believed that someone of strong ethical and moral character would not support or abide slavery and the Slave Trade
  - Many of Margaret's lectures were religious in tone and spoke about how and why religion should be applied to everyday life
- She advocated agriculture and new scientific techniques in planting/farming as a means to end slavery
  - Inspired by her uncle, James Garnett's advocacy of agriculture, she believed new techniques would reduce reliance on slave labor and eventually lead to slave labor being obsolete

# LECTURES

OF MISS MARGARET MERCER. 305

and let him purify us, and make us fit for the presence of God.

Thus *fear* checks presumption, and *hope* nourishes faith, and stimulates to active efforts to please God; and the two principles work together for the perfection of the human soul.

## LECTURE XX.

### PRAYER.

Men ought always to pray, and not to faint.—LUKE, xviii. 1.

#### MY DEAR YOUNG FRIENDS:

That men should pray is not contained as a *command* in the Decalogue, nor in any other law of Moses. This may surprise you, unless you consider well what prayer is. It is the natural expression of religious affections, and consequently cannot be commanded to those who have none, and need not be to those who have. It is as needless to *command* men to pray, as to command them to ask for food or drink when they are hungry or thirsty. If prayer is merely an expression of the soul's sincere desire, why urge a man to ask for what he wants, when you have placed a Being before him, as the object to whom his prayers may be freely addressed, and from whom he may be certain of meeting with perfect sympathy and the full accomplishment of his wishes. If

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OF MISS MARGARET MERCER. 199

## LECTURE XIX.

### THE FEAR AND LOVE OF GOD.

The fear of the Lord is to hate evil, pride, and arrogancy.—Prov., viii, 13.

If we measure civilized man, as a species, with Christ, and consider his words, "If ye are as I am in this world, ye shall be with me in the world to come," we cannot but be astounded, and say, "Who then can be saved?" At long intervals, however, some men have arisen as witnesses for God, to show that the law is holy, just, and honourable. That it is made by the Omniscient, who knows what powers he has conferred upon his creatures, and consequently what he has a right to require. Such as Howard, such were Swartz, Oberlin, Felix Neff, Martyn, and many others: a sufficient number to prove that God requires nothing more than the best use to be made of the powers he bestows. We have then to ask, with increased anxiety, why, if God has given both the command and the power to obey it, men are living so without God in the world? Because we have most of us parted with the freedom of conscience which we all have by nature; "we have sold ourselves for naught," "we are sold under bondage to sin," "and no man hath wherewith to redeem his soul," or "ransom his brother." We

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- Examples of lectures at Belmont Academy

*The Memoir of Margaret Mercer*, Caspar Morris, 1848

# BELMONT SUNDAY SCHOOL

- Margaret also operated a Sunday School at Belmont Academy
- Current students and alumni of the Academy taught and helped with the operation of the Sunday School
- The school's teacher taught African Americans of all ages how to read and write
- Margaret also taught the paid enslaved employees of the Academy how to read and write, which at the time was illegal in Virginia
- Margaret would later build an Episcopal church, Belmont Church on the property and the Sunday School was held at the church thereafter

# MARGARET'S DEATH

- Margaret died of consumption or tuberculosis in 1846
- She left all her belongings and remaining wealth to her nephews and nieces, the children of her brother, John Mercer
- The two oldest nephews, Thomas S. Mercer & Richard S. Mercer, received the Belmont property
- In 1851, Thomas & Richard sold the Belmont property to prominent slave trader and enslaver, George Kephart (1795-1870)

*In Court held for Loudoun County 11th Aug. 1846*  
*In the matter of the last will and Testament of the late Margaret Mercer*  
*It is ordered that Joseph Carr William Chambers Washington Baines and Thomas*  
*Each of or any three of them being just duly sworn do inventory and appraise*  
*the personal estate of said decedent, and report to this Court*  
*A Copy Teste J. G. Kephart Clerk*

*Loudoun County*  
*The within named Justices do say that Mr. Chambers was*  
*this day duly qualified before and a justice of the peace for said County to con-*  
*duct the duty required by the within order. Given under my hand Sept*  
*16-1846*  
*Lead Regent*

*The Court held for Loudoun County 15th Decr 1846*  
*The within appraisement, was this day returned to the Court and ordered to*  
*be recorded*  
*Teste J. G. Kephart Clerk*

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*I, Margaret Mercer of Loudoun County in the State of Virginia formerly of*  
*Anne Arundel County in the State of Maryland do hereby publish and declare the*  
*following to be my last will and Testament hereby revoking all other wills*  
*and Testaments First I give devise and bequeath to my two Nephews Thomas*  
*S. Mercer and Richard S. Mercer and to the children of them and to the heirs and*  
*survivors all my real estate called Belmont lying in Loudoun County aforesaid*  
*together with all the personal and mixed estates therein and thereto belonging in*  
*trust nevertheless to sell and convey the same to the purchaser or purchasers thereof*  
*and to apply the proceeds to the payment of my just debts Second I give de-*  
*vise and bequeath to my nine Nephews and Nieces the children of my brother*  
*John Mercer of Anne Arundel County aforesaid all the residue of my personal*  
*personal and mixed estates after my just debts and expenses are paid*  
*to wit Thomas S. Mercer Richard S. Mercer James B. Mercer William B. Mercer*  
*James M. Mercer George D. Mercer Nelson B. Mercer Sophia E. Mercer and*  
*Mary M. Mercer their heirs and assigns forever In trust nevertheless to permit*  
*the said John Mercer and Mary M. Mercer his wife and the survivors of them*  
*during life to receive the rents issues and profits of the said estates and to apply*  
*the same to their own support and to the support of the survivors of them and to the*  
*support maintenance education and advancement in life of my said Nephews and*  
*Nieces and of such other children as may hereafter be born to my said brother*  
*and after the death of my said brother and Mary his wife in the further trust to*  
*divide the whole of the estate then remaining equally shares and shares alike*  
*among such of the children of my said brother born or to be born as may then be*  
*living at the issue of any of such of the said children as may hereafter be born*  
*their heirs and assigns forever the issue of such children to receive the share of*  
*of the estate which his her or their parent or parents respectively would have*  
*received if living at that time Lastly I hereby constitute and appoint my said*  
*two Nephews Thomas S. Mercer and Richard S. Mercer the sole executors of*  
*this my last will and Testament*  
*In Testimony whereof I do hereunto set my hand*



# EMMA MOORE

- Emma Moore and her husband, George Moore were tenants at Belmont in 1860-1861 while George Kephart owned the property
- In Moore's Southern Claim, a petition to be reimbursed for damages during the Civil War (for supporters of the Union), she referred to Kephart's slave business at Belmont as "a dreadful sight...it often made me cry to see how they were treated..."
- Emma Moore moved to the Upperville area (border of Loudoun & Fauquier County) in 1862, a pro-secession/anti-Union area
- From 1864-1865, Emma operated a school out of her home, where she taught African American children reading, writing, and other subjects



## LEGACY

- In 1846, students of the Belmont Academy erected a monument in her honor
- The Belmont Manor House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980
  - Much of the Belmont estate has been developed over the years
  - The Belmont Chapel held regular services until 1936, and was destroyed by arson in 1967
- In 2000, a room at Thomas Balch Library was named in recognition of her
- In 2018, a Virginia Historic Marker was dedicated in Mercer's honor