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
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…
The Virginia Colonization Society (VCS) was a subgroup of the American Colonization Society.

Virginia had the largest number of free and emancipated persons 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.
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

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

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).

---

Margaret Mercer’s Will, Will Book 2C
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.
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.