

The Carroll Family and the Civil War, Part 2

July 13, 1863 – April 15, 1865

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The death of William T. Carroll on July 13, 1863, cast a dark shadow on the household. Elizabeth Blair Lee wrote in a letter to her husband that Alida Carroll had come for a visit to their summer house in Silver Spring, noting that the family “had sadly broken down by the death of their father.”¹ His stature in the capital city, his acquaintance with so many members of the government over the years, his financial wherewithal that kept the family afloat and afforded them a comfortable life in turbulent times was now taken from them. Did the family think of escaping from Washington the rest of the summer? It was rumored after his death that the house had been rented for the astounding price of \$4,000 a year, “the highest rent ever paid for a house, and this for a house of two stories, not worth \$10,000.”² But if the house had been rented for the late summer, the Carrolls were back in it by winter when Mrs. Carroll advertised in the local newspaper for a new cook.³

In May or June, Sally Griffin had worried about the health of both her husband, who was then on sick leave from the army,⁴ and her young son, then less than a year old. She and the family may have pressured Gen. Griffin⁵ to resign his position in the military in the field and seek a transfer to a position closer to their home.⁶ This seems not to have been accepted, and Gen. Griffin, on sick leave during the Battle of Gettysburg, returned to his unit by the end of the battle and was cheered by his troops.⁷ After Carroll’s death in the middle of July, Sally again



A carte de visite made of Gen. Griffin by P. B. Marvin for the Addis Gallery, 308 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, probably during the time he was living with the Carroll family.

wrote the president on July 18, asking Gen. Griffin to be furloughed to that he could be with the family,⁸ mentioning the death of his father. Griffin, then in the field, sent a telegram to Fanny Eames,⁹ the wife of Charles Eames, both of whom were friends with the Lincolns,¹⁰ to ask that she petition Lincoln for a leave of absence, which she did the following day, also citing the death of William Carroll and the distress of the family.¹¹ It is unclear whether either letter was answered, and it wasn't until October than Griffin was granted a second sick leave from the army. Subsequently he was transferred to "court martial duty" in Washington, lasting until the spring of 1864.

Griffin's work with the court martial juries in Washington is not mentioned in the few biographies of him. The juries were panels of military officers, not civilians; he seems to have attended them as a presiding officer, not as a panelist. A few of the cases in which he was involved were recorded in the local papers. He was present at the court martial of Captain George Ely, quartermaster of the Washington Arsenal, who was accused of fraud and corruption in the purchase of food and fuel.¹² He was also president of the court in the court martial of Col. William S. Fish, accused of abusing his power as Baltimore provost marshal.¹³ His absence from the Fifth Corps, whose second division he had commanded, was much noted by his soldiers.¹⁴



Maj. Gen. Griffin with staff of the Fifth Corps, whose banner, at left, was the Maltese cross.
Courtesy Library of Congress.

Griffin stayed in the Carroll household long enough to see the birth of their second son on February 24, 1864. He was named William Carroll Griffin in remembrance of her much-lamented father. On April 3rd, he was back in the field, commander of the 1st Division of the Fifth

Corps, at the beginning of the Overland Campaign.¹⁵ Despite his temper, which got him into trouble with his fellow commanding officers, he was greatly admired and trusted by his troops. In the ensuing campaign, he and the Fifth Corps acquitted themselves at the Battle of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, pushing on toward Petersburg where they were halted and forced to lay siege to the town.

Sally Carroll's eldest son, Sprigg, or Col. Samuel Sprigg Carroll, had carved out a name for himself during the war. During his time in Shenandoah Valley in 1862, he had come close



Maj. General Samuel Sprigg Carroll and his staff (No. 4 is William McKinley, future president of the U.S., standing to the left of Carroll). Library of Congress.

to capturing Gen. Stonewall Jackson at Port Republic in Virginia – had he succeeded, it might well have changed the course of the war. Nonetheless at this battle, his horse had been wounded and it fell on Carroll, dislocating his shoulder. Later at a battle near Rapidan River he was shot in the chest and may have spent some of his recovery back at his mother's home in Washington. Recovered, he was at the Battle of Gettysburg, and fought valiantly on Cemetery Ridge, pushing back a Confederate charge. In 1864, at the Battle of the Wilderness, Carroll was wounded three times, the last shot hit his elbow which shattered it, and his left arm had to be amputated.

That summer he returned to his mother's house to recover. Many years later, President McKinley, who had been on Carroll's staff at some point in the war, recounted a story about him to a cheering crowd at a reunion of the 8th Ohio Volunteer Regiment in 1894.¹⁶

I remember to have heard from his dear old mother, a noble woman, tell the story of how he received his commission of brigadier general. She was living in Washington. Twice had Carroll been wounded, but he was not in favor with the authorities at the War Department. One day he was brought home on a stretcher sorely wounded. As he was being carried by the war office¹⁷ to his old mother, a clerk looking out the window saw him. Here is poor Colonel Carroll being taken home. Secretary Stanton went to the window, looked upon the wounded man and turning to the Commission Clerk said, "Issue a Commission of Brigadier-General for Colonel Carroll." It was taken to his mother, and going to the bedside of her son, said, "Sprague, the Secretary of War has sent you a commission of Brigadier General." He asked her to repeat it, and after he had done so, Colonel Carroll said, "Mother, they don't believe I'll live, but I'll disappoint them, and I'll live." And he did, to gain greater glory on the field of battle (prolonged applause). I was always glad to take my hat off to him, for no braver man, no more loyal man ever lived.

Other sources indicate that Carroll received his promotion in May 1864, before he was so badly wounded. In any event, Carroll was never able to return to the battle front, and he spent the rest of the war on temporary assignments in West Virginia, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. He officially retired from the army in 1869.¹⁸ One of the defensive fortifications surrounding Washington was named after him in 1864.¹⁹

During the summer that Mrs. Carroll was nursing Sprigg, Sally Griffin lost her baby son, William Carroll Griffin, in August. By this time, her husband was commanding troops around Petersburg, and she paid several visits to see him, probably in the fall of 1864, but certainly



Gen. Charles and Mrs. Griffin, detail, with staff at the Cummings House in Petersburg, 1865.
Image courtesy The Petersburgproject.org.²⁰

in March 1865, when a famous incident happened. The president and Mrs. Lincoln had come down from Washington, probably with Mrs. Griffin in the entourage, and she was asked or assigned to ride in the carriage of the president, by herself. When Mrs. Lincoln learned of this, she flew in a rage, and said indignantly to Gen. Adam Badeau, on the president's staff, "What do you mean by that, sir? Do you mean to say that she saw the President alone? Do you know that I never allow the President to see any woman alone?"²¹ It was about this time that a rare photograph of Sally Carroll Griffin as a young woman was taken, showing her with her husband in front of the Cummings House in Petersburg. She was then considered one of the most elegant women of Washington and often seen by officers out riding with Gen. Griffin whenever she visited his quarters.²²

Also in the fall of 1864, Alida Carroll, the youngest Carroll daughter, made the acquaintance of Capt. John Marshall Brown, who was recovering from a wound received before the siege of Petersburg. She had attracted the attention of a number of Union soldiers during the war years, including the son of Gen. John H. Martindale, the military governor of the District 1862-64, but Capt. Brown caught her fancy. They may have met out horseback riding in Rock Creek or been introduced by Associate Justice Nathan Gifford of the U. S. Supreme Court, who knew the Carrolls from his acquaintance with William Carroll and whose daughter was married to Brown's brother. When he was sufficiently recovered to travel, Brown returned to Portland, and he and Alida carried on their long-distance romance via mail and mutual visits. They were married in December 1866 in the Carrolls' house.

Charlie Carroll, the Carrolls' other surviving son, was twenty-three at the beginning of the war, fresh from college studies. He enlisted in the 5th Artillery Regiment in Washington, probably influenced by Capt. Charles Griffin, who was courting his sister Sally and had been transferred into the regiment in May 1861. Charlie was stationed at Washington Barracks in the early months of the conflict, but he eventually followed the regiment to many dangerous engagements in course of the war. He was at Gettysburg, where his older brother fought with distinction, and a year later in Petersburg, where his brother-in-law continued to prove his mettle and win promotions. During his sister's visits to her husband, did they meet? While the many memoirs of the war mention his brother and brother-in-law, Charlie went unnoticed, and, unlike his older brother and his sister's husband, his efforts in for the Union were uncelebrated. After the war, he went to Philadelphia, and thereafter began a vagabond life, living in hotels and occasionally visiting his mother in Washington. From his medical records, and a report from the doctor who attended him at the end of his life in 1904, it is clear he suffered much from the war. But about these, we have no personal record, and Charlie remains the least known Carroll of the family.

In April 1865, when news reached Washington that Richmond had surrendered and the end of the war was nigh, Washingtonians celebrated by illuminated public buildings and private houses all over town. The Evening Star reported, "The private residence of Mrs. Carroll (mother of General Carroll, mother-in-law of General Griffin of the 5th Corps) on F near 18th was

brilliantly illuminated and generally admired for the tasteful manner in which it was decorated. The 5th Corps badge and floral baskets were suspended from the windows, while the outside of the building was festooned with large flags and evergreens. A transparency, which was encircled with evergreens, occupied a prominent position on the portico, and bore the inscription "Griffin."²³

Gen. Lee surrendered to Gen. Grant in the town of Appomattox on April 9, 1865. In some drawings and prints of the surrender, Gen. Charles Griffin is pictured, sitting to the left of Grant. However, this is erroneous, as Griffin was not present at that particular event in the McClean House. He was asked by Grant to be one of the three commissioners to carry out the stipulations of the surrender, namely the surrendering of arms and artillery by the Confederate troops.²⁴ They met the following day at the McClean House, and the disarming took place April 9-12, the last day being the stacking of guns by the defeated infantrymen.²⁵



One of the many prints depicting the surrender of Lee at the McClean House in Appomattox, Virginia, April 9, 1865.

On April 14, 1865, President Lincoln was assassinated, and on April 15, the day he died, Sally Carroll's mother, Violetta Sprigg, died in her old farm in Prince George's County. The house on F Street began the war on April 12, 1861, with the death of its youngest member, and end the war on April 15, 1865, with the death of its oldest. The house reverberates with moments of glory and remembrance.

¹Virginia Jeans Lass, ed., *Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 301. Letter is dated August 24, 1863.

² *Evening Union*, November 12, 1863, p. 3.

³ Evening Star, December 15, 1863, p. 4.

⁴ “Gen. Griffin remains in town, in ill health”: *Daily National Republican*, May 20, 1863, p. 2.

⁵ He had been promoted to brigadier general in June 1862: <https://civilwarintheeast.com/people/charles-griffin/>.

⁶ Mentioned in Sally Griffin to Abraham Lincoln, July 1, 1863: Library of Congress, Abraham Lincoln Papers: <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal2461000/>.

⁷ Biography of Griffin by Kennedy Hickman, <https://www.thoughtco.com/charles-griffin-4046958>.

⁸ Sally Griffin to Abraham Lincoln, July 18, 1863: Library of Congress, Lincoln Papers: <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal2498200/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal2498100/>.

¹⁰ The Eames and the Orville Brownings would visit the Lincolns at the Soldiers’ Home, where they passed the Washington summers: Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln’s Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers’ Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 48-49.

¹¹ Library of Congress, Abraham Lincoln Papers, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal2500200/>. Alida Carroll may also have enlisted the help of the Blair family; her brother Montgomery Blair, Lincoln’s post-master general, was reluctant to “dance attendance in the president’s antechamber,” and thus he may not have intervened: Lass, *Wartime Diaries*, 291.

¹² *New-York Semi-Weekly Tribune*, February 2, 1864, p. 4.

¹³ *Daily Times*, April 5, 1864, p. 1.

¹⁴ “They have taken Gen. Griffin away from us, which the boys do not like very well”: report from the 32nd Massachusetts regiment, which had served in the Vth Corps: *Gloucester Telegraph*, December 2, 1863, p. 2.

¹⁵ <https://civilwarintheeast.com/people/charles-griffin/>.

¹⁶ Newspaper clippings in the John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 18A, folder 3. The paper may be the (Sandusky) *Register*. The meeting of the veterans was held in Margareta, Ohio, which is near Sandusky.

¹⁷ Situated on 17th Street, a block from the Carroll mansion.

¹⁸ https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/America/United_States/Army/USMA/Cullums_Register/1754*.html.

¹⁹ <https://www.nps.gov/places/fort-greble-and-fort-carroll.htm>.

²⁰ <http://www.petersburgproject.org/blog-and-updates/newly-identified-photograph-of-gen-charles-griffin-and-staff-at-petersburg>.

²¹ Adam Badeau, *Grant in Peace: From Appomattox to Mount McGregor. A Personal Memoir* (Hartford, CT: Scranton, 1887), 357; repeated in Michael Burlingame, *An American Marriage: The Untold Story of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd* (New York: Pegasus, 2021), 251-52.

²² “Mrs. General Griffin was out on horse back, looking charming and causing the General to be the most envied man there”: E. Gifford Taylor, *Gouverneur Kemble Warren: the life and letters of an American soldier, 1830-1882* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), 200.

²³ *Evening Star*, April 12, 1865, p. 2.

²⁴ <https://civilwarintheeast.com/people/charles-griffin/>.

²⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/apco/learn/historyculture/the-commissioners-meeting.htm>;

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/bitter-end>; for a story about Gen. Griffin needing a sword for the ceremonial, Joshua Chamberlain, *Passing of Armies* (New York, G P Putnam’s, 1915), 107-08. I am grateful to Gordon Thorsby for this reference and numerous other details of Gen. Griffin’s life.