

Easter at the Carroll House, 1880

Terence Walz

A letter found in the John Marshall Brown Papers in the Maine Historical Society library in Portland, Maine describes the celebration of Easter at the home of Mrs. William T. Carroll.¹ It was written by her youngest daughter, Alida (Carroll) Brown, to her husband, John Marshall Brown, who was left alone in Portland when she traveled to Washington with her three children to spend the Easter holiday with her mother. Bearing no date, it can nonetheless be dated through internal references to March 28, 1880. The letter is written in a rushed style, with little attention paid to punctuation or phrasing, while clearly displaying Alida's emotions for her mother, her children,² her husband, and the house. It also bears witness to the importance of religion in the Carroll family.³



1801 F Street as photographed in 1895.

Image courtesy Maine Historical Society (Brown Papers).

Alida Carroll was born in the house on the corner of 18th and F Streets in Washington on April 5, 1844, the seventh of nine children of William and Sally Sprigg Carroll.⁴ She grew up in the house, was tutored privately or perhaps attending Miss Hogan's classes nearby⁵ and then sent off to finishing school at the Patapsco Female Institute in Ellicott, Maryland.⁶ The Civil War interrupted her studies and she returned home during the war years. One of her girlfriends during these years was Elizabeth Blair Lee, who lived nearby in the Blair House and who mentions in her letters to her husband how Alida had caught the attention of several dashing young men during the war – Washington was full of soldiers – though she wasn't interested in any of them in particular. In 1864 she met a young general from Maine who did interest her. He was John Marshall Brown, who was recovering from a war wound. They met out riding, as family legend

has it, or through the intermediary of Supreme Court Associate Justice Nathan Clifford, several of whose children married into the wealthy Brown family. Clifford would have known the Carrolls through William's work as Clerk of the Supreme Court and would have socialized with them. Alida and John were married in December 1866 at the Carroll house in a lavish society wedding. When Alida started having children of her own in Portland, she asked the Black woman who had been her "mammy" in the Carroll home to come stay in Maine to look after her own children. We think this might have been the enslaved woman in the Carroll household named Nellie Warren.⁷ It is likely she accompanied Alida on her visit to Washington during the Easter holiday 1880 so that she could visit with her own family who lived on 16th Street after they were emancipated. Alida and John Marshall Brown offered Sally Carroll steady counsel and love throughout her lifetime and until she died.

Mrs. Carroll, or "Gramma" as she's referred to in the letter, was sixty-eight in 1880. She had been widowed for seventeen years. Living with her at the time were her daughter Carrie Haggard, who was in the throes of divorcing her second husband, British diplomat William H. Doveton Haggard, then on assignment to Persia; the two sons of her eldest daughter Violetta Mercer who died in 1872: Carroll Mercer, 23, and John F. Mercer ("Jack"), 19;⁸ and at least three servants: Delia Noonan, who acted as her lady's maid, her sister Julia Noonan, who was cook, and Jimmy Jackson, a Black man from Maryland who served as waiter and houseman. The Noonan sisters were Irish and had worked for Mrs. Carroll for at least ten years. Jimmy had been a member of the household since the late sixties when he was a teenager. They occupied the servants' quarters on the ground floor, where the kitchen and their dining room were located. There may also have been a coachman, who probably lived outside the premises. From 1871 to 1875, he had been John Finn, and when he married in 1876 Annie O'Neil, one of the Irish serving women that Mrs. Carroll employed, they moved out of the house to their own apartment nearby.⁹ Another of the rooms in the house – most likely upstairs – would have been occupied by "Mammy," if she came with Alida and the children on this trip to Washington.

Alida begins the letter to her husband noting how much she missed him, and then she confessed she had done her "utmost" to make this Easter day a success and a day to remember. First, she had given a "dollar or so" to each of the servants so that they could buy something new for Easter-Day; and then she wrote cards to each of the children in the house—her three girls, and the two Mercer boys, Carroll and Jack; in Carroll's card, she tucked in some gilded four-leaf clovers; and to Jack, she gave a book on art. She also gave a "nest egg" card to Carrie and another to "Gramma" who also received a "banner."

The night before, Carrie and her new beau, Navy lieutenant Timothy Dix Bolles,¹⁰ dyed thirty-two Easter eggs and hid them in nooks and crannies in the drawing and dining rooms downstairs; with the eggs that her husband had sent from Portland for their three girls, Mrs. Carroll added two gold dollars.¹¹ Alida asked "Mary"¹² to make five little muslin bags for the



Gold dollar from 1880, similar to the ones Mrs. Carroll gave her granddaughters.

one gold dollar that Alida contributed and then filled them with candies. For Jeanine Duvall,¹³ who had stayed in the house the night before and was probably a friend of Alida's eldest daughter Sallie (then about 13 years old), she made a separate muslin bag into which she put a dollar bill – and candies too.



A vintage Easter card with a egg nest, resembling the card that Alida gave to her sister Carrie.

Image: Courtesy Library of Congress.

On Easter Day, the children woke early and started their hunt for the Easter eggs – “looking into every crevice, corner and fold in every curtain,” Alida wrote. “Papa” had sent a special box for the children, but Alida wouldn’t let them open until the evening and only after dessert. Easter Sunday fell on the 28th of March that year, but Alida remembered that the 27th was her mother’s birthday, and so she ordered “beautiful flowers” from the market which she personally arranged. She also gave Sally a long-handled fan “to keep the light out of her eyes,” and gave her two older daughters fans that they could take to church. She set aside for “Lillie” a separate bag with eggs and candies. This may be a reference to Lillian Carpenter, the only daughter of Wisconsin senator Matthew Carpenter. Sally had given a reception in her honor in the previous year¹⁴ and she was clearly a favored young woman in the Carroll household.



Colored eggs dyed before artificial dyes were invented. However, by the 1880s aniline dyes were being marketed for the dying of eggs.¹⁵

Image: see footnote.¹⁶

At eleven that morning, Alida and her two daughters, her sister Carrie, and her mother – for the first time since Alida had come to visit – went to St. John’s Church on Lafayette Square for the Easter service. Sally and William Carroll had been members of the church since 1836,¹⁷ the year after they moved into 1801 F Street, and both were devout Episcopalians.¹⁸ Three years later, when the vestry decided to install stain glass windows in the church., Sally donated a window in the South Transept “in memoriam William T. Carroll and his daughter Violetta L. Mercer and his sons William T. Carroll and Howard Carroll.”¹⁹ Alida, who had been married by the rector William V. Lewis, found his sermon disappointing but somehow the service was “impressive”: perhaps she realized, along with the rest of the congregation, that Dr. Lewis would be leaving his position the following month after being head of the parish for fifteen years;²⁰ if so, she said nothing about it in her account. However, “the music was frightful,” she complained, without mentioning why. They returned to the house for the meal, the dessert, and the opening of the box from Portland. “Papa” had included a “Lizard au chocolat” for her, which was “so tasty – like my thoughtful old hub,” she wrote.

At eight that evening, Alida and maybe Carrie went in pouring rain with their cousin Philip Lansdale and his wife Olivia, who had dropped in for the evening, to St. John’s for an evening service.²¹ When they returned to the house after the service at nine-thirty, they found to their surprise a visitor in the house: Col. Joseph Audenreid. He had called on the family – he had become friends with the family through his long friendship with the Carroll’s eldest son, Sprigg Carroll, a near classmate at West Point, and during the Civil War period when he served on Gen. Grant and Gen. Sherman’s staff. He was suffering from a bad cold, Alida wrote. He said he had gone to Atlantic City to get rid of it, only it was worse.²²

After he left, Carrie summoned Lt. Bolles “from the ‘Studio’²³ up to the dining room,” and Alida took her leave and headed upstairs to her mother’s room and to check on little Alida

whose cold, though better, needed “dosing.” She included a PS from Mollie “to Helen”²⁴ and enclosed letters from Sallie and Mollie.

Looking back on the day, she wrote, “I think so bright an Easter has not for years been spent in this house – and I am so glad I was here.”

¹ Sally Sprigg Carroll lived at 1801 F Street 1835-1895.

² The three children were Sallie (b. 1867), Alida (b. 1870), and Mary (“Mollie”) (b. 1876). She would give birth to her son, Carroll, in March of 1881.

³ Undated letter, beginning “Dear Papa,” in Alida C. Brown Correspondence, John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 28A, Folder 12, Maine Historical Society Archives, Portland. The letter can be dated to March 28, 1880, through a reference Alida’s made to her mother’s birthday, which was March 27. Alida notes the names of her three daughters in the letter but not her son, Carroll, who was born in 1881. “Papa” was a term of affection Alida called her husband.

⁴ In another letter found in the Brown Papers is one from Sally mentioning that she had lost one of her children. Her last child was born in 1861 when she was 49.

⁵ Miss Hogan’s English and French Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies on F Street between 13th and 14th. When she advertised in the local newspaper, she listed William T. Carroll as a referee: *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 10, 1852, p. 4.

⁶ The 1860 census shows she was a student there. On the institute, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patapsco_Female_Institute.

⁷ On the Warren family, see my posting: https://www.dacorbacon.org/docs/Carrolls'_Enslaved_Warren_Family.pdf.

⁸ Carroll is listed in the 1880 census as a “Clerk”: later that year he enlisted in the Marines; Jack was listed in the census as a civil engineer. In 1884 he went west to seek in fortune in Montana and Idaho.

⁹ See my article, “Irish Workers in Mrs. Carroll’s Household.”

¹⁰ Lt. Timothy Dix Bolles, son of John Bolles, a politician and later Civil War general, who lived in Washington with his wife, two daughters and two sons. They lived at 936 G Street NW, according to the Washington Directory of 1880. Timothy was a graduate of Annapolis and remained a Navy man throughout his life.

¹¹ The gold dollar was in regular circulation from 1849 to 1886.

¹² Unidentified. During the later 1880s there was a “Mary Wall” who was a servant in the household, according to the Washington Directory for that year.

¹³ There were many Duvalls living in the District at this time; some may have been members of the well-known family in Prince George’s County and therefore connected with the Sprigg family for many years.

¹⁴ *Times-Picayune*, February 11, 1879, p. 6.

¹⁵ https://www.monroehistorical.org/articles_files/2012_04.html.

¹⁶ <https://www.dupageforest.org/hubfs/Places-to-Go/Photos/Kline-Creek-Farm/Natural%20dyes/eggs-in-basket-table-1000x600.jpg>.

¹⁷ Richard F. Grimmett, *St. John’s Church: The History and Heritage of the Church of the Presidents*, Washington DC (Minneapolis, MN: The Mill City Press, 2009), 139.

¹⁸ A copy of *The Communicant’s Companion, containing Prayer and Meditations* inscribed by William was kept by Alida and is now part of the Brown Papers. It was published in 1841.

¹⁹ Grimmett, 139. The deaths of these members of the family: William T. Carroll, 1863; Violetta L. Mercer, 1872; William T. Carroll (Jr.), 1857; Howard, 1857.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, 156.

²¹ Alida called this “Ascension” but perhaps she meant Evensong.

²² In fact, he died three months later. In his memory, his widow gave a window in the North Transept to St. John’s.

²³ Sally rented a room in the basement to Lt. Bolles to use as a “studio.” It seems unlikely he was living there. He and Carrie were married shortly after her divorce from William Haggard was granted in Washington. He

was 33; she was 39. The divorce in Washington was not recognized in Britain for two years, at which point Haggard was granted a divorce on the grounds of his wife's bigamy.

²⁴ Unidentified.