

Letitia Preston Floyd: Pioneer Catholic Feminist*

by Harry E. Winter, OMI'

Edited by and with Introduction and Notes by Jim Glanville

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Editor's Introduction

This article presents an updated and lightly edited version of a heretofore unpublished manuscript written by Father Harry Winter in 1990. The original manuscript was written without notes. The endnotes here are by the editor.

As the title implies, Father Winter makes a spirited case for the historical significance of Mrs. Letitia Preston Floyd. Readers should keep in mind that this article is not a formal document of history, but rather the enthusiastic writing of a missionary priest, assigned to rural West Virginia, where on arrival he discovered that an important and under-appreciated co-religionist was buried.

Letitia Floyd is buried on the Lynnside property in Sweet Springs, West Virginia, beside her husband, Governor John Floyd. The cemetery where they lie is located on private property. Because Governor Floyd is buried outside present-day Virginia, and because he today enjoys only a modest historical reputation, the Lynnside site is obscure and rarely visited.

It was only as recently as about 1980 that an accident started Lynnside on a path of modest rediscovery. That accident was the posting of Father Winter as a missionary Catholic priest to Monroe County, where Lynnside is located. After he was posted there, Winter naturally took a strong interest in local Catholic-related places and especially in Sweet Springs, the location of both St. John's Chapel² and the nearby Lynnside Manor³ property, with its two cemeteries where many Catholics are buried. This interest led in turn to his studying the broader story of the Floyd family and Catholicism. Inevitably, Winter soon met Lynn Spellman,⁴ a Catholic lay person who at the time owned the Lynnside property. Sharing a natural interest in Catholic history, Winter and Spellman teamed up and worked successfully to get Lynnside Historic District named to the National Register of Historic Places.⁵

*This is one of three articles about Letitia Preston Floyd that appear in this issue of the *Smithfield Review*. The companion articles are a biographical sketch of her including some letters written by her and an article about the relationship she and her husband had with the Catholic church.

Immediately below is the edited version of the manuscript that Harry Winter wrote in 1990 while living in Monroe County, West Virginia. It comes from an unconventional historical perspective and sheds an interesting new light on the remarkable former first lady of Virginia.

**LETITIA PRESTON FLOYD—
PIONEER CATHOLIC FEMINIST⁶**

By Harry E. Winter (1990)

When Alexis de Tocqueville was finishing *Democracy in America*,⁷ about 1835, he asked what was “the chief cause of the extraordinary prosperity and growing power of this nation,” and he wrote succinctly, “the superiority of their women.”

Recently, the Diocese of Wheeling–Charleston, which covers the entire state of West Virginia, decided to honor one of these women, the author and educator Letitia Preston Floyd (1779–1852). She was to the manor born, with her brother, James Patton Preston, serving as the governor of Virginia from 1816 to 1819; her husband, John Floyd Jr., from 1830–1834; and her son, John Buchanan Floyd, from 1848 to 1852. However, the manor was not in slaveholding and aristocratic Tidewater Virginia, but in the antislavery⁸ and populist Appalachian Mountains, near what is now Blacksburg, Virginia. Her childhood home, Smithfield Plantation, is today surrounded by the large land-grant university Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (VPI&SU), commonly called Virginia Tech. Smithfield was in the Preston family for five generations, and was deeded in 1959 to the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. Beautifully restored, and open to the public, it gives a good insight into what it was like to grow up on the frontier, in a powerful, landed family.

Mrs. Floyd herself, with terse and polished prose, described her childhood at Smithfield in a long letter (or perhaps a short history) written on February 22, 1843 to her son Benjamin Rush Floyd.⁹ She wrote lovingly about the books her father had arranged to be purchased in London. “A good selection of the classics, ancient history, the distinguished poets of England, the *Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, a sort of encyclopedia, with much polemics and many religious productions, constituted the libraries.” And then she summed up her view of the importance of education on the frontiers: “the use of these books gave to each family possessing them a station which outranked many wealthier families.”

Letitia's father was the surveyor for much of central and western Virginia. He employed several deputies, and Letitia wrote that every young man whom he employed had to teach school for him "six months at least, thereby finding out his temper, diligence, habits and trustworthiness." One such man was Colonel John Floyd, Sr. In 1804, Letitia married his son, John Floyd Jr. (1783–1837).

Trained in both law and medicine, John Floyd Jr. was soon serving in the U.S. House of Representatives (1817–1829). A cousin, Charles, had been a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition. John tirelessly pushed for the occupation of the Oregon area, both during and after his service in Congress. In 1830, he became the last governor of Virginia to serve under its 1776 pre-Revolutionary War constitution, then the first to serve under the 1830 post-Revolutionary War constitution. In the national election of 1832 he received the eleven electoral votes of South Carolina for president of the United States.

It was during his governorship that their children started becoming Catholic, and therein lies a mystery. What led the family to become Catholic in a time when Catholicism was a very suspect religion?¹⁰

Two people were certainly involved. The first was the very personable pastor of St. Peter's Church, Richmond, Father Timothy O'Brien. Governor Floyd maintained a pew at St. Peter's during his term of office. The three daughters began to convert at this time, during their teens. Three of the four sons eventually became Catholic. Undoubtedly, the sermons they heard from their pew helped. In fact, on May 27, 1832, their father recorded in his journal, "went to the chapel to hear Mr. O'Brien, who is a man of talents and a respectable orator."

The second person involved was Bishop Richard Whelan, second bishop of Richmond and first bishop of Wheeling. His views on slavery, and those of Governor Floyd, were remarkably similar: they wanted to stamp it out. Governor Floyd wrote in his journal on December 26, 1831: "I shall not rest until slavery is abolished in Virginia." (The Nat Turner slave rebellion, which Floyd had to subdue, must have been a tragic time for the whole family). Slavery affected Bishop Whelan no less seriously. One of the main reasons he left Richmond altogether for Wheeling was his hatred of and opposition to slavery.¹¹

Thus two clergymen undoubtedly influenced the Floyd family. But it is quite certain that the teenage girls could never have joined the Catholic Church without the permission of their mother.

Governor Floyd had never enjoyed robust health. Mrs. Floyd's sister Mary had married John Lewis, a part owner of the famous resort Sweet

Springs. The powerful families of the day summered for several weeks at each of six resorts: a modern historian (Fishwick) notes “one HAD to be at the Sweet for the last week in August and the first week in September. It [the gathering of the powerful] was like the salmon, who knew when it was time to go back up the Columbia River.”¹² John Floyd died suddenly at his daughter’s home, Lynnside, just outside the village of Sweet Springs, Virginia (now West Virginia) on August 21, 1837. He was only 54 years old. Local historians assert that John Floyd was received into the Catholic Church on his deathbed, but no records have ever been found. Consequently, the reports have never been accepted by Diocese of Richmond authorities.

The oldest daughter, also named Letitia, had become the third wife of widower William Lynn Lewis, John Lewis’ son, in a Catholic marriage on March 19, 1837. They were first cousins, and some 15 years different in age. Letitia Lewis now became mistress of the estate of Lynnside, some five months before her father’s death.

They buried her father in the Lewis Family Cemetery, at the Lynnside estate where they had spent so many happy summers. Letitia Lewis set about building a chapel for local Catholics, and securing the services of a priest. The chapel, St. John’s, Sweet Springs, stands to this day and is the oldest Catholic Church in West Virginia to be preserved in its original form. Bishops, archbishops, and probably even Cardinal Gibbons¹³ beat a path to Sweet Springs to stay with the powerful Lewis/Floyd family and celebrate Mass at St. John’s.

After her husband’s death, Letitia Floyd directed the affairs of her family from an estate high in the Appalachians, at Burke’s Garden, Virginia. She certainly spent many summers in Sweet Springs, at her sister’s and daughter’s estate. And she wrote thousands of letters.

Her lengthy correspondence with Bishop Whelan is probably preserved among papers of the Floyd and Preston families in the several archives and state libraries. No one has yet edited the letters and written the definitive biography of this Christian feminist, but four of the letters from Bishop Whelan to her are available in the archives of the Diocese of Richmond. The one of May 8, 1845 is especially revealing. Bishop Whelan had lost patience with her, and used every argument to help her make up her mind. “I feel sure that your intelligent and well informed mind will scarce allow you to admit any resting place between Catholicity and infidelity. I feel equally sure that Christianity carries with it too many evidences of truth to allow you to stake your everlasting hopes upon its rejection.” He wanted her to consider the influence of her example: he felt that many had

attempted before God to excuse or lessen their own neglect by her example. He concluded these and other arguments by warning her “it is now, my dear friend, the 11th hour for you, and you still have it in your power to repair much of the past, ... by acknowledging before men that Saviour whom you wish to acknowledge you before his Father in heaven.” He wrote that it would be a great consolation to him on his approaching visit to receive her and two others he named into the Catholic faith.

Mrs. Floyd put off the final decision for seven more years, not being received into the Church by Bishop Whelan until June, 1852. She died on December 12 of the same year. The pastor of Wytheville, Virginia, her sons and sons-in-law accompanied her body the 80 miles from Burke’s Garden to Sweet Springs. A beautiful journey over mountains and streams in good weather, it would have been a torturous one in bad. They buried her next to her husband in the Lewis Family Cemetery on the knoll with the exquisite view behind her daughter’s house.

If one reads the historians of frontier religion, particularly Methodist historians, one can perhaps understand why it took Mrs. Floyd so long to join an organized religion. One of the signs of fervor during revivals was the amount of barking one could do. Religion in the Appalachians, even up to Civil War times, was very messy and chaotic. The slavery issue affected all churches with great bitterness. It is perhaps to her credit that she allowed her children to join as they approached their late teens, but took much more time for her intellect to accept the reasonableness of the Latin language and other externals of Catholicism at that time.

On January 24, 1821, Mrs. Floyd witnessed the death of her brother William. She had to write William’s wife the sad news.

“He died as he lived, satisfied with the justice and goodness of his Creator.” Devout but not saccharine, she then added “A friend to all honest men and the foe of scoundrels.” Signing the letter to her sister-in-law “Your afflicted Sister,” Mrs. Floyd expressed the belief, “Oh my Sister what a shield and stay his precious family have lost. I hope God will enable them to bear this sad bereavement.” She may not have been quick to join any organized religion, but she was deeply religious.

Governor Floyd’s grave had been marked with a handsome dressed concrete slab some three feet long, six feet wide and ten inches thick. After discussion with Mrs. Floyd’s direct descendent, Mrs. Jack (Lynn) Spellman, who maintains the Lewis Family Cemetery, this text was agreed for Mrs. Floyd:

<p>JOHN FLOYD TWICE GOVERNOR OF VIRGINIA AN APOSTLE OF SECESSION AND THE FATHER OF THE OREGON COUNTRY DIED AUG. 21, 1837</p>	<p>LETITIA PRESTON FLOYD WIFE OF GOVERNOR JOHN FLOYD MOTHER OF GOV. JOHN BUCHANAN FLOYD AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR DIED DEC. 12, 1852</p>
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But a major problem would be to find Mrs. Floyd's grave, for it had been unmarked, with only the understanding that she was buried "next to her husband."

An archaeologist trained in restoring cemeteries had been hired to recover the graves of many early Irish settlers buried in the adjacent Old Catholic Cemetery. Professor Ken Robinson, of Lillington, North Carolina, spent the weeks of September 26, 1988, and June 11, 1990, restoring both cemeteries and locating the grave of Mrs. Floyd. No attempt was made to excavate or exhume any human remains. Rarely did the excavations extend any deeper than 10 inches. Excavations were conducted mostly with hand tools such as shovels, mattocks and trowels. Excavation areas were marked prior to the excavation and the precise locations of the excavated areas were mapped and recorded in order to maintain permanent record of where the excavations were conducted.¹⁴

Since the massive concrete marker to Governor Floyd had not been placed on his grave until the 1930s, some one hundred years after his death, it was deemed prudent to see if the marker actually covered his grave. Intensive investigation determined that it was off center by at least two feet. The concrete slab, and a large concrete box supporting it were both moved 4 feet west and 2 feet north of the original location, since both historical evidence and soil analysis and probing indicated that was where the governor's grave was, with an identically matching grave on its south side. This unmarked grave gave every indication of being Letitia Preston Floyd's grave. So the new marker was placed on it, and the Most Rev. Bernard W. Schmitt, seventh bishop of Wheeling, was invited to bless it and celebrate the occasion.

On August 15, 1990, direct descendants of Mrs. Floyd from Virginia and West Virginia joined Bishop Schmitt first in the chapel of St. John and then at the newly marked grave itself, to celebrate the memory of this great Christian feminist. A Roanoke, Virginia, television station gave the church

service extensive coverage. A van brought officials of the Montgomery County Branch of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, and other interested people from Smithfield Plantation, Letitia's childhood home about 75 miles from her grave site across the border in Blacksburg, Virginia.

During the ceremony at the grave, Professor Robinson explained his excavation procedure and Bishop Schmitt blessed the new marker, standing where his predecessor, the first bishop of Wheeling, Richard Whelan, had stood when he visited the grave site on October 19, 1859.

Today, the drive from Wheeling takes more than five hours. Then, the coach ride must have taken at least a week. Bishop Whelan had come to preside at the marriage of one of Mrs. Floyd's granddaughters; and probably would not have missed the opportunity to pray at his famous convert's grave.

Did de Tocqueville, who embodied his praise of American women ever meet this feminist? The Floyds are not listed among the people he interviewed during his 1832 trip up the coast from New Orleans to Washington, D.C. But he almost certainly heard of her. His very poor impression of Andrew Jackson after interviewing him coincides remarkably with the shared opposition that Governor and Mrs. Floyd showed to President Jackson. This shared opposition leads me to conclude that she undoubtedly formed a strong partnership of mind, heart, and action with John Floyd.

In addition to the ceremony at the grave, a memorial service was held in St. John's Chapel. One speaker¹⁵ at that service mused that when he first started reading about Mrs. Floyd, he was tempted to call her "the Abigail Adams of Virginia." Then, as he read more, he began to wonder if someday, when Mrs. Floyd's letters are edited and a definitive biography written, we might not be calling Abigail Adams "the Letitia Preston Floyd of New England!"

Editor's Conclusion

This essay and its two companion articles in this issue of the *Smithfield Review* make it abundantly clear that Letitia Preston Floyd was a remarkable woman who has been largely ignored by writers of Virginia history. In the male-dominated society of her lifetime, she stands out as a tough-minded lady with an agenda of her own. Obviously, she ought to be far better known. We are fortunate that the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate posted Father Harry Winter to Monroe County and that he worked there with Lynn Spellman to establish Lynnside as an Historic District. We are also fortunate that Winter came to understand the role of Letitia Preston Floyd as a Catholic feminist and wrote about her from that perspective.

Editor's Acknowledgments

Thanks to Father Harry Winter for his warm collaboration and for encouraging the editing and annotation of his work. Thanks to the anonymous *Smithfield Review* referees who, as always, sharpened the editor's attention and forced him to think carefully about what Winter had written. Thanks to Lynn Spellman for her many-year custodianship of the recently sold Lynnside property and for her encouragement of the editor. Thanks to Hugh Campbell, the editor of the *Smithfield Review*, for his ongoing support. Finally, thanks to the editor's wife, Deena Flinchum, for her ongoing encouragement and support.

Endnotes

1. O. M. I. stands for "Oblates of Mary Immaculate." The Oblates are a community of Catholic priests and brothers who "serve the poor and needy people in the United States and more that 60 countries world wide." Harry Winter was born in New York in 1937, and joined the priesthood in Rome, Italy, on December 16, 1964. From 1979 to 1994 he was pastor at churches in Virginia, West Virginia, and North Carolina. It was during his service at Union, in Monroe County, West Virginia, that he became interested in Lynnside and the role of Letitia Preston Floyd as an important early Virginia convert to Catholicism. As of 2015 he was Director, Oblate Residence, 104 N. Mississippi River Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55104. His website is www.harrywinter.org.
2. The *Encyclopedia West Virginia* article about St. John's Chapel is at www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/156. Harry Winter's unpublished nine-page article about the history of the chapel is on line at www.lynnside.org/files/StJohnsChapelBriefHistory1999.pdf.
3. The 2012 "Preservation West Virginia" brochure about Lynnside Manor is at www.pawv.org/endangered2012/ELsitesheets3_lynnside.pdf.
4. Lynn Spellman is the daughter of the late Philip Preston Keiley and the late Madeleine Emilie Marie Leclercq and inherited the (now sold) Lynnside property. The Keiley family is a noteworthy Virginia Catholic family, having produced over the years a bishop and an international jurist. Spellman lived for many years adjacent to the Lynnside property. At the time of this writing she is confined to a nursing home in Colorado. During the years 2007–2012, Lynn maintained the now defunct website lynnside.com. Her website recorded the histories and genealogies of the Floyd, Lewis, and related families. lynnside.com has recently been replaced (August 2014) by lynnside.org, which is maintained by Jim Glanville, editor of this article.
5. The National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for Lynnside, a 23-page pdf file with maps and pictures, is at www.wvculture.org/shpo/nr/pdf/monroe/91000452.pdf.
6. Manuscript originally written August 15, 1990. The original manuscript is on line at www.lynnside.org/files/HarryWinter1990.pdf.
7. Alexis de Tocqueville, Henry Reeve, trans., *Democracy in America*, (London: Saunders & Otley, 1835). Multiple subsequent edited and reprinted editions.
8. Author Winter is perhaps overly generous to the western Virginians here, many of whom owned slaves. Specifically, despite Winter's statement, Letitia's father William Preston was a slave owner. In 1759, he purchased for £752 eighteen slaves brought to Maryland on the vessel *True Blue*. At the time of his death he owned 42 slaves. See Jim Glanville, "The Neglected William Preston," *The Roanoke Times*, Friday August 8, 2014, page 7. Letitia and her husband also owned slaves, and it is worth noting that two of them lie buried only a few yards from Letitia and her husband.
9. This important "My Dear Rush" letter is discussed in the companion biographical article about Mrs. Floyd in this issue of the *Smithfield Review*.

10. The answer to this question is perhaps that it was the Georgetown connection, discussed in the companion article about Governor and Mrs. Floyd and the Catholic Church in this issue of the *Smithfield Review*.
11. James H. Bailey, *A History of the Diocese of Richmond: The Formative Years* (Richmond: Chancery Office, Diocese of Richmond, 1956), 100, writes: "Bishop Whelan became convinced that the western parts of Virginia, differing in its natural features from the rest of the Commonwealth, offered greater inducements for Catholics to settle, as slave labor was comparatively rare and the country was rapidly developing." Fogarty, *Commonwealth Catholicism*, 98, writes: "Whelan was convinced of the necessity of splitting his diocese, not because of the size of its Catholic population, but because of the extent of its territory."
12. Marshall W. Fishwick, *Springlore in Virginia* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Popular Press, Bowling Green State University, 1978).
13. James Gibbons (1834-1921) was successively Bishop of Richmond, Archbishop of Baltimore, and a cardinal. He was the second American to attain the rank of cardinal.
14. Kenneth W. Robinson, "Archaeological investigation of the Governor John Floyd and Letitia Preston Floyd Graves, and documentation of the Lewis Family Old Catholic Cemetery, Sweet Springs, Monroe County, West Virginia." Report prepared for the St. Johns Catholic Church, Monroe County Parish, Sweet Springs, West Virginia, February 15, 1991. The report describes the archaeological investigation of a grave site in Monroe County, West Virginia, undertaken in order to determine the approximate location of the grave of Letitia Preston Floyd (1779–1852) relative to that of her husband, former Virginia Governor John Floyd (1783–1837). It includes copies of photographs and diagrams of the grave site. On line at www.lynnside.org/files/KennethRobinson1991.pdf.
15. The editor strongly suspects that the speaker to whom Father Winter here refers to was himself.
