



A Self-Guided Tour

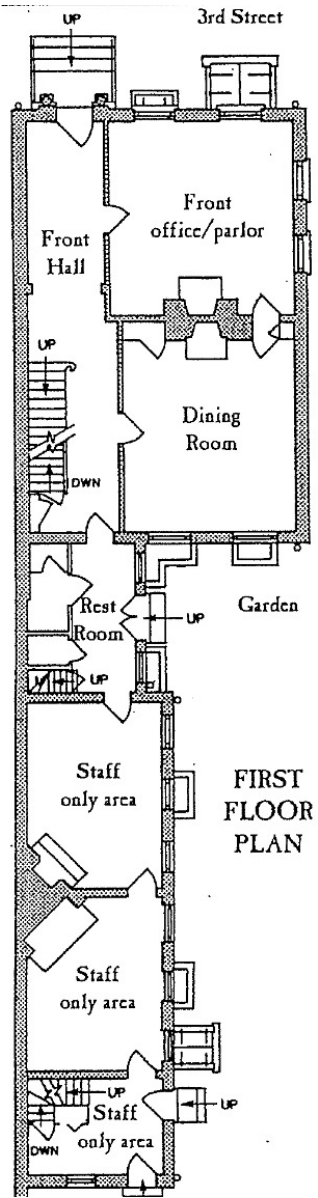
ELIZABETH WILLING POWEL

James Kopaczewski

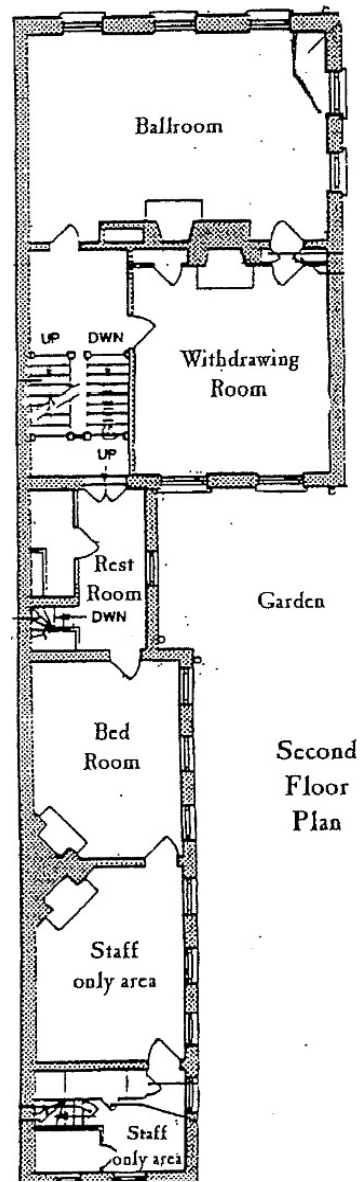
Temple University



Map of the Powel House:



First Floor



Second Floor

Tour Introduction:

“contrary to American custom, [Mrs. Powel] plays the leading role in the family – *la prima figura*, as the Italians say...she has not traveled, but she has wit and a good memory, speaks well and talks a great deal”

-Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America*

Throughout her life, Elizabeth Willing Powel (1743-1830) sustained a voluminous correspondence which included letters to colonial America’s first families. Elizabeth’s correspondence shows that she was not only literate but also highly intelligent and politically astute. By utilizing her words and visiting the rooms in which she wrote those words, this tour seeks to show that Elizabeth was a sophisticated and an exceptional woman.

She was born and raised in privilege, married into one of Philadelphia’s wealthiest families, and had a grandfather, father, brother, and husband who all served as Mayor of Philadelphia at different points in the 1700s. Undoubtedly, Elizabeth had access to opportunities that many in colonial America could never access. While Elizabeth’s story cannot explain what life was like for ordinary men and women, her story nonetheless can illuminate what women in certain circumstances experienced. Indeed, the story of Elizabeth Willing Powel shows that some 18th century women were culturally powerful, economically savvy, politically active, and socially conscious.

1) “The Powel House and the Evolution of Society Hill”

Location: The historic marker outside of the Powel House

Instructions: Please exit the Powel House, stand near the historic marker on the front of the house, and examine your surroundings.

Questions: What do you see? How does the Powel House fit into the surrounding neighborhood?

The tree-lined, cobble-stoned Society Hill that surrounds you today is a façade – it is a creation of 20th century city planners and politicians. In the 18th century, Society Hill was a small neighborhood in what was, perhaps, the world’s most densely populated city. Historian François Furstenberg notes that Philadelphia’s population density was “far greater than Manhattan’s is today...to find a similar density in our day one needs to look all the way to Mumbai.”¹ This population density meant that Philadelphia literally stank. Overcrowded dwellings, open sewers, insufficient trash disposal methods, and standing bodies of water caused the city to be a breeding ground for foul smells and diseases. The Philadelphia you see today is substantially cleaner, healthier, and more aromatic than the Philadelphia experienced by Elizabeth Willing Powel.



Map of Philadelphia, 1776²

¹ François Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French: Five Refugees Who Shaped a Nation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 30.

² The Powel House is circled in red. Fisher, Joshua and William Haydon, Andrew Dury, *A chart of Delaware Bay and River : containing a full and exact description of the shores, creeks, harbours, soundings, shoals, sands, and*

If Samuel and Elizabeth had looked north towards Market Street, they would have seen a dense and diverse urban center. If they had looked south towards South Street, they would have seen the city limits. And, if they had looked east, they would have seen the bustling port on the Delaware River. Today, our view from the Powel House is considerably different. The homes that surround the Powel House were mostly built in the 1950s and 1960s as a part of Edmund Bacon's redevelopment of Center City.³ Moreover, the cobble stones that line much of Old City are historically misleading as most colonial streets were unpaved. Even though Society Hill may feel genuinely historic, we must be mindful that much of what we see is replica.

The Powel House, however, is a notable exception because it has been preserved. Completed in 1766, the Powel House was built in the Georgian style for Charles Stedman, a Scottish born merchant.⁴ Before Stedman moved into the home, his wife died and his business failed. Stedman's bad luck forced him to sell the home to Samuel Powel. Shortly after his purchase, Samuel upgraded the home to his opulent standards with the help of renowned architect, Robert Smith.⁵ Following Samuel's death from yellow fever in 1793, Elizabeth maintained the Powel House for a few years until she sold the property in 1798 to her niece Anne Willing Bingham and her husband William Bingham.⁶

bearings of the most considerable land marks, from the capes to Philadelphia (London: A. Dury, 1776), accessible at <https://www.loc.gov/item/74692202/#about-this-item>.

³ Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 217-218.

⁴ Tatum, George B. and Cortlandt Van Dyke Hubbard, *Philadelphia Georgian: The City House of Samuel Powel and Some of its Eighteenth Century Neighbors* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), 4.

⁵ Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, "Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769-70," *Winterthur Portfolio* 46, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2012), E15.

⁶ Fleece, Franklin and Mary Elizabeth Fleece, George W. Boudreau, David A. Dasher III, Laurie C. Switzer, *Powel House Guide's Manual*, third edition (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, 2000), 5.

Following the Bingham's ownership, the home was inhabited throughout the 19th century by a series of merchants and lawyers. In 1904, a Russian immigrant named Wolf Klebansky purchased the home and used it as a warehouse for his horse hair business.⁷ Klebansky's neglect of the Powel House caused significant damage to the interior of the home which concerned Fiske Kimball, who was the Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.⁸ Kimball negotiated an agreement with Klebansky to remove certain architectural elements of the home. In 1925, Kimball carefully collected the interior of the Powel House Ballroom and put it on display at the Museum of Art.⁹ By 1931, Klebansky's health and business began to fail which put the future of the Powel House in jeopardy. Threatened with the possibility of destruction, Francis Wister, the founder of The Philadelphia Society for the Preservation of Landmarks, raised enough money to purchase the house from Klebansky.¹⁰ After the purchase of the house, Wister and Landmarks diligently restored the interior to its 18th century condition. While nearly all of the Powel's original furnishings have disappeared, Wister saved the wonderful space that you are about to enter.

2) "A Revolutionary Woman"

Location: Front Passage (or Foyer)

Instructions: Please enter the Powel House and remain in the Foyer.

Question: What do you know about Elizabeth Willing Powel?

In 1742, Elizabeth Willing Powel was born into two of the wealthiest and most connected families in colonial Philadelphia. Elizabeth's father, Charles Willing, was an English merchant

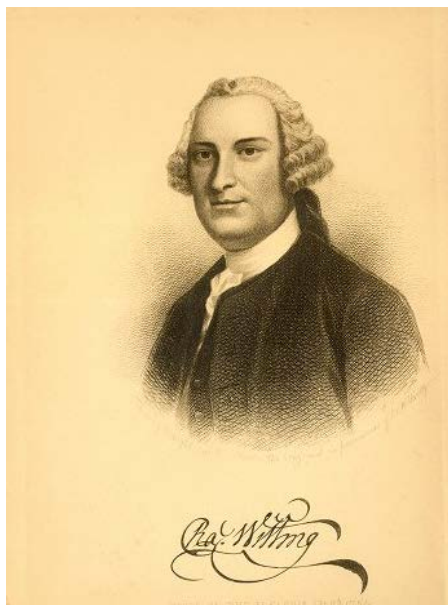
⁷ Lyell Funk, *Beyond the Powels: Alternative Narratives as Primary Solutions for the Powel House* (Master's Thesis, Temple University, 2015), 7-8.

⁸ Kirtley, "Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769-70," E19-E20.

⁹ Tatum, *The Philadelphian Georgian*, 96.

¹⁰ Funk, *Beyond the Powels*, 12.

who twice served as Mayor of Philadelphia and headed the prominent trading house of Willing & Co.¹¹ Charles Willing conducted international trade and had powerful contacts on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1731, Charles Willing married Anne Shippen who was the granddaughter of Philadelphia's second Mayor, Edward Shippen.¹² Anne's brother, William Shippen, served in the Continental Congress and her cousin, Edward, was Mayor of Philadelphia.¹³ Thomas Willing, Elizabeth's older brother, was noteworthy in his own right. He voted against the Declaration of Independence as a member of the Continental Congress and acted as the President of the Bank of North America, the central bank of the United States.¹⁴ As a result of these relations, Elizabeth was closely related to Philadelphia's economic, political, and social elite.



Charles Willing, 1760¹⁵

¹¹ David W. Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel (1743-1830)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Association, 2006), 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁵ "Charles Willing (1710-1754), portrait," University of Pennsylvania, University Archives Digital Collection, http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/archives/detail.html?id=ARCHIVES_20040402001



Mary Willing Byrd, 1773¹⁶

After a brief flirtation with another man, possibly John Dickinson, Elizabeth married Samuel Powel in 1769.¹⁷ Her marriage further solidified her position because Samuel came from one of the largest land owning families in the city. The couple moved into their newly renovated home on South Third Street, which became their seat of power.¹⁸ By all accounts, the Powels had a happy, prosperous marriage of nearly twenty-five years.¹⁹

Elizabeth's familial and marital ties ensured that she was connected to a network that included bankers, builders, politicians, and presidents. She personally knew Anne Bingham, Benjamin Rush, the Marquis de Lafayette, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Martha Washington, and George Washington. All of these men – and women – were all greeted in the very same foyer where you currently stand. As we progress through the tour imagine the Powel House as it

¹⁶ Portrait by Matthew Pratt. "Mary Willing Byrd," *Encyclopedia of Virginia*, http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00002436mets.xml.

¹⁷ Jessie Lee Yost, *Elizabeth Willing Powel of Powel House in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1984), 4.

¹⁸ Fleece et al., *Powel House Guide's Manual*, 5.

¹⁹ Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel*, 23.

was in the 18th century with candles glowing, men and women in fine imported clothing, and the sound of crackling fireplaces. As you wander these halls consider one simple question: why has Elizabeth Powel been largely lost to history?

3) "A Woman of Business"

Location: Front Parlor

Instructions: Please walk into the Front Parlor, explore the room, and take careful note of how the room is separated from the rest of the house.

Question: What role did women play in business before, during, and after the American Revolution?

“Although my present communication may appear to be ungracious. Yet candour and a sense of propriety impels me to make it. I have contrary to your advice but in conformity with my own judgment and wishes after having reflected seriously on the subject sold all my U.S. Bank stock...I wish the business completed tomorrow before the decision of Congress can be known here respecting the renewal of the Charter.”

–Elizabeth Willing Powel to Edward Shippen Burd

Unless you were an elected official, diplomat, or a member of the Powel family, this would have been the only room in the Powel House that you would have been allowed to enter. The Front Parlor was designated as the only space open to the public because it is largely detached from the rest of the home and offers easy access to the front door. Individuals of all races, creeds, and religions would come to the Front Parlor to pay rent, ask for favors, or propose business ideas. It was from this room that Samuel controlled his sizable land holdings, wrote bills of exchange, and balanced his ledgers. In addition, this room served as the de facto mayor's office when Samuel served as Mayor of Philadelphia. Upon Samuel's death, Elizabeth took over his business ventures and utilized the Front Parlor as her office.

As the sole heir to Samuel's fortune, Elizabeth was responsible for overseeing a vast commercial empire. Elizabeth managed accounts, collected rent, serviced debt, donated to

charities, and paid annuities to family members and business partners. With no formal education in business, Elizabeth sought advice from her nephew and lawyer, Edward Shippen Burd.²⁰ While Burd may have aided with legal matters, Elizabeth was gifted with considerable business acumen. Whether it was self-taught or acquired from living with Samuel, Elizabeth understood business, particularly finance, and was able to make capital improvements to the Powel estate. In 1800, Elizabeth developed 96 acres west of the Schuylkill River into a profitable farm and manor.²¹ The area, now known as Powelton, served as Elizabeth's summer retreat – a place where she went to escape the heat of the city.



Edward Shippen Burd, 1806-1808²²

²⁰ Yost, *Elizabeth Willing Powel of Powel House in Philadelphia*, 15.

²¹ Tatum, *The Philadelphian Georgian*, 24.

²² For more on Edward Shippen Burd, see <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/findaids/burd1.htm> and <http://archives.dickinson.edu/collection-descriptions/edward-shippen-burd-family-papers>
Portrait by Rembrandt Peale. "Portrait of Edward Shippen Burd of Philadelphia," *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=19318>.



John Powel Hare, 1810²³

Perhaps, the most important business decision that Elizabeth made was to adopt her nephew, John Powel Hare – who later changed his name to John Hare Powel. Elizabeth adopted John when he turned 21 years old and provided funds for him to conduct a Grand Tour of Europe.²⁴ The correspondence between Elizabeth and John reveals a deep affection for one another. Elizabeth, whose two children with Samuel died shortly after birth, found in John the child that she had always desired. While the adoption of John was conducted out of love, it had additional economic benefits. Without a clear heir, Elizabeth’s fortune could have been in jeopardy at the time of her death. John was a capable businessman who served as an agent for William Bingham’s estate as well as an agent for the large Dutch financial house, Hope & Co.²⁵ When Elizabeth died in 1830, she had secured and expanded the Powel family fortune.

²³ Portrait by Sir Thomas Lawrence. “John Powel Hare,” *Pennsylvania State Senate*, <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/BiosHistory/MemBio.cfm?ID=4368&body=S>.

²⁴ Yost, *Elizabeth Willing Powel of Powel House in Philadelphia*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

4) “Unfree Labor at the Powel House”

Location: Dining Room

Instructions: Please proceed through the door into the Dining Room, explore the room, and stop at the fireplace.

Question: Who cooked, cleaned, and worked in the Powel House?

“A most sinful feast again! Everything which could delight the eye, or allure the taste—curds and creams, jellies, sweetmeats of various sorts, twenty sorts of tarts, fools, trifles, floating islands, whipped syllabubs, etc., etc., Parmesan cheese, punch, wine, porter, beer, etc.”

-John Adams, September 8, 1774²⁶

Elizabeth was renowned for her hospitality and the grand dinners that she held for friends, family, and dignitaries. Dinners at the Powel House consisted of three courses. No wonder John Adams declared his meal at the home as a sinful feast! For a dinner party of twenty to be suitably served over 40 dinner plates, 20 utensils, 40 dessert plates, and 20 glasses had to be cleaned and set.²⁷ As you can imagine, preparing, cooking, and serving three courses for a party of twenty was an incredibly labor intensive and time consuming task. African slaves or free African American servants conducted this arduous labor. African American laborers at the Powel House cooked meals, cleaned, greeted visitors, landscaped, and emptied chamber pots. Many of these laborers also likely held marketable skills, such as blacksmithing, carpentry, or competency in the art of French cooking.²⁸

While very little personal information is known about the Powels’ laborers, Samuel's ledgers indicate that a handful of slaves and perhaps as many as a dozen servants worked at the

²⁶ Amy H. Henderson, “Federal Feast,” *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts*, December 4, 2010, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French*, 101-110.

Powel House over a span of approximately fifty years.²⁹ In fact, the Powels did not totally divest themselves of their slaves until Pennsylvania abolished slavery in 1780.³⁰ As much as the Powels were gracious hosts and members of high society, their lavish lifestyle was made possible by their ownership of human property.

The Powels' slaves slept in dark, cramped, and poorly ventilated rooms on the top floor of the home. Life at the Powel House would have been markedly better than life in the plantation South, but the Powels' slaves still toiled on a daily basis for no economic or political benefits. Moreover, the Powels' African American servants endured slightly better living conditions since they were able to choose where to live and work. Servants were paid wages – albeit subsistence wages – which meant they could purchase simple pleasures, such as healthy food and private rooms. Paradoxically, it was the Powels' laborers that served America's revolutionary leaders who demanded freedom from tyranny and advocated for personal liberty. Of course, African Americans – and women - were not a part of the founder's vision of an independent United States.

Instructions: Please exit the Dining Room, enter the Foyer, and proceed up the stairs to the second floor.

5) “A Woman of Learning”

Location: Withdrawing Room

²⁹ “Samuel Powel (1738-1793),” *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Powel Family Papers (1681-1938), Series 2, Box 3, Folders 4 and 6.

³⁰ “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, March 1, 1780,” *Black History in Pennsylvania: Communities in Common*, http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/empowerment/18325/gradual_abolition_of_slavery_act/623285.

Instructions: Upon reaching the second floor, turn left, walk down the hall, and enter the Withdrawing Room, which is on your right.

Question: How were women politically active in the Early Republic?

“To educate a child in such a manner as to fit her for receiving & communicating happiness is certainly the most arduous task that can devolve on the female character. Yet certain it is that the groundwork of Education with both Sexes rests on the Mother. She gives the first & most lasting impressions.”

–Elizabeth Willing Powel to Ann Fitzhugh³¹

Elizabeth did not receive a formal education like her brother, Thomas, who was sent to London to study law.³² While we do not know what type of education Elizabeth received, we do know that she was highly literate, well-versed in the classics, and conversant in a range of intellectual topics. In other words, Elizabeth was a highly intelligent woman. Elizabeth’s bookshelf would have undoubtedly contained works by Shakespeare, Plutarch, and Locke.³³ If you examine the bookshelf, you will see a few of Elizabeth’s actual books.

Although Elizabeth did not advocate for women to be publicly active in politics, such as protesting or voting, she challenged many of the conventions of her time. Women in Colonial and Revolutionary America were restricted to the household and isolated from political power. They were not supposed to have opinions on issues or allowed to publicly speak about politics.³⁴ Elizabeth openly flaunted these social constraints by freely discussing political issues and arguing strongly for her beliefs. Most importantly, Elizabeth had access to individuals that wielded significant political power who could also champion her causes. Through

³¹ Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel*, 18; Yost, *Elizabeth Willing Powel of Powel House in Philadelphia*, 8.

³² Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel*, 17.

³³ Kevin J. Hayes, *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 22.

³⁴ See Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

correspondence and informal conversations with political figures, Elizabeth subverted what was expected of a sophisticated woman.

In particular, Elizabeth's correspondence with George Washington challenged the ways that women were allowed to engage with politics. Elizabeth and Samuel were close friends with George and Martha Washington for many years, and even visited Mount Vernon on a number of occasions.³⁵ When the United States Capital moved from New York City to Philadelphia in 1790, George became a frequent guest at the Powel House. Elizabeth and George would sit in this room discussing a host of topics ranging from politics to society to personal issues. They had a deep and affectionate friendship, which allowed Elizabeth to feel free to speak frankly with the President. Elizabeth wrote to George in November 1792 as he struggled with whether to run for a second term as president. The advice Elizabeth gave him was eloquent, intelligent, and indicates a political astuteness. Elizabeth states in her letter,

“Your Resignation would elate the enemies of good Government and cause a lasting regret to the Friend of humanity. The mistaken and prejudiced Part of Mankind that see thro the Medium of Bad Minds would ascribe your Conduct to unworthy Motives. They would say that you were actuated by Principles of self-Love alone- that you saw the Post was not tenable with any Prospect of adding to your Time. The Antifederalist would use it as an Argument for dissolving the Union, and would urge that you, from Experience, had found the present system a bad one, and had artfully, withdrawn from it that you might not be crushed under its Ruins- that in this you had acted a politic Part.”³⁶

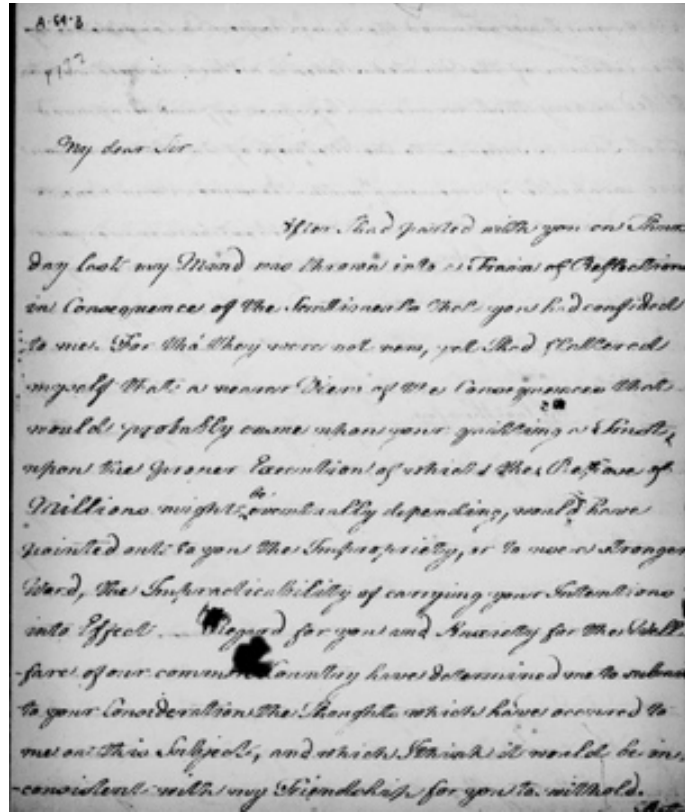
We will never know if this letter had an impact on George's decision to run for a second term, but it does highlight the political awareness that Elizabeth possessed. She wrote to the President of the United States with authority and crafted a smart, realistic appeal for the necessity of

³⁵ Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel*, 30-31.

³⁶ “Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, November 4, 1792,” *George Washington's Mount Vernon*, Digital Collection from the Washington Libraries,

<http://catalog.mountvernon.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p16829coll6/id/24>.

running for a second term. Elizabeth's words show that she understood the partisan politics of her times and had the courage to give advice to the most powerful individual in the country.



Elizabeth Powel to George Washington, November 4, 1792³⁷

6) "High Society at the Powel House"

Location: Ballroom

Instructions: Please proceed through the door next to the bookshelf and enter the Ballroom. Take some time to explore the architectural details of the room and check out the view from the windows facing Third Street.

Question: What can the Ballroom tell us about life at the Powel House?

"Mrs. Powel has not traveled, but she has read a good deal, and profitably: it would be unjust perhaps to say, that she differs in this respect from most other ladies; but what chiefly distinguishes her is her taste for conversation and the truly European manners in which she uses her wit and knowledge."

³⁷ Ibid.

–Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America*³⁸

The Ballroom was designed, constructed, and furnished with the careful oversight of the Powells. They selected choice pieces of European art and furniture for the Ballroom, and employed some of the most skilled craftsmen in the country to create intricate rococo mantling.³⁹ Featuring a large fireplace, an elaborate chandelier, and views of the Delaware River, the Ballroom acted as a deliberate presentation of the Powells as cultured, sophisticated, and worldly. Art historian Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley argues that the Powells' home served as a, “conspicuous and tangible seat through which Philadelphians – peers and those aspiring to the level of the Powells' prominence – could view them.”⁴⁰ With Elizabeth at the top of Philadelphia society, she utilized the Ballroom to throw some of the cities marquee events.

Elizabeth primarily used the Ballroom for salons where she invited the political and social elite of the city to discuss politics. Salons were widely popular in Europe and, particularly, France where individuals debated Enlightenment ideas in the years before the French Revolution. Women, called salonnières, typically organized salons around specific political topics which, according to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, helped to create a public sphere.⁴¹ Among the many attendees of Elizabeth's salons was the Marquis de Chastellux, who was a French General that served under Rochambeau in the American Revolution.⁴² Chastellux noted the liveliness and intellectual nature of these salons, which were known for Elizabeth's vocal injections in the conversation. For instance, historian David Maxey notes that Elizabeth was

³⁸ Amy H. Henderson, “Federal Feast,” 1.

³⁹ Kirtley, “Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769-70,” E18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, E14-E15.

⁴¹ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, English translation (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).

⁴² “François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux,” *National Parks Service Museum Collections*, American Revolutionary War, http://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/revwar/image_gal/indeimg/chastelx.html.

incapable of withholding her opinion on the direction in which she saw the country moving, or on the competence of the leading figures in public life.”⁴³ While Elizabeth may have broken decorum by failing to avoid politics, her salons were well received and attended by the city’s elite.



Marquis de Chastellux, 1782⁴⁴

In 1778, the British Army occupied Philadelphia but Elizabeth refused to abandon the city. Frederick Howard, the Earl of Carlisle, who came to America as a peace commissioner, decided to utilize the Powel House as his headquarters.⁴⁵ Carlisle allowed the Powels to remain in the home and was pleased by the good company that Elizabeth kept. Despite disagreements over the war, Elizabeth and Carlisle shared conversations and dinners. Carlisle used the Ballroom as a military headquarters in the winter and early spring of 1778 but, just a few months later in January 1779, the Ballroom was put to a different use. Elizabeth transformed the room to

⁴³ Maxey, *A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel*, 29.

⁴⁴ Portrait by Charles Wilson Peale. “François Jean de Beauvoir, Marquis de Chastellux,” *National Parks Service Museum Collections*, American Revolutionary War, http://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/revwar/image_gal/indeimg/chastelx.html

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

be used as the site of George and Martha Washington's 20th wedding anniversary.⁴⁶ Organized by Elizabeth, the ball was a grand affair with drinking, singing, and, Washington's personal favorite, dancing. The popularity of Elizabeth's salons, dinners, and parties placed her at the center of Philadelphia's high society.



Frederick Howard, 5th Earl of Carlisle, 1780⁴⁷

Instructions: Please exit the Ballroom, walk down the stairs, and return to the spot in the Foyer where this tour began.

7) "Conclusion"

Location: Foyer

Question: Why has Elizabeth Powel been largely lost to history?

⁴⁶ Tatum, *Philadelphia Georgian*, 87.

⁴⁷ Portrait by George Romney. "Frederick Howard, 5th Earl of Carlisle," Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, <http://www.themsv.org/artwork/frederick-howard-fifth-earl-carlisle>.

“I am by living in the world better satisfied of her consummate knowledge of its habits. I give you my honor that the Duchess of Powelton as far surpasses in dignity of appearance any Duchess which I have seen as she exceeds all her country women.”

–John Hare Powel to Martha Hare⁴⁸

We began this tour with one simple question: why has Elizabeth Powel been largely lost to history? While there is no single or simple answer to this question, thinking about the ways that historians, museums, and historic sites have interpreted history is a good start. Women have been generally marginalized within the grand narrative of American history. Depending on the specific circumstances, this marginalization has been both inadvertent and deliberate, partial and complete. Elizabeth’s life, which was marked by social sophistication, political activism, and financial savvy, fights against this marginalization by casting women as strong historical actors.

Unfortunately, history has largely failed to explore the challenges and triumphs of Revolutionary Era women. For a myriad of reasons, including lack of sources, women have not received the same scholarly attention as men. The overly nationalistic tales of the American Revolution have historically focused on the great white men of the period, such as Adams, Franklin, and Washington. Historically, there has been little room for people of color or women in the story of the Revolution. However, fascinating histories about loyalists, slaves, and women have come to light in recent years.⁴⁹

As you have seen, Elizabeth is a woman worth studying. She was *not* an ordinary woman and, importantly, we cannot conflate her story with those of ordinary women. Surely, ordinary women had to overcome hardships, such as long working hours, backbreaking labor, and financial insecurity, that Elizabeth never faced. However, in other ways, Elizabeth’s life offers us

⁴⁸ “Martha Hare, 1809-1810,” *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Powel Family Papers, Series 4, Box 7, Folders 9-15.

⁴⁹ See Maya Jasanoff’s *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011) and Alan Taylor’s *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1771-1832* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

a look at some of the significant challenges women faced on a daily basis. Despite her intellect and political awareness, Elizabeth could not vote or hold elected office. Even though she counted America's leading physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush, as a friend, she prematurely lost two children and her husband. Although she was wealthy, Elizabeth was tasked with running a household, managing the Powel's finances, and raising her nephew, John Hare Powel, by herself. Like countless women throughout history, Elizabeth did her duty without much fanfare.

Elizabeth's story begins to move us closer to understanding what life was truly like for Revolutionary Era women. Indeed, Elizabeth's life provides us with an opportunity to think about how women fought against social norms, struggled under difficult circumstances, and advocated for political rights. As you leave the Powel House today, please consider how Elizabeth's life could shed light on current issues of gender inequality and whether we have truly attained the lofty goals set out by the Declaration of Independence.

Thank you very much for visiting the Powel House!

Further Suggestions:

While mobile apps have become widely popular, I propose that this tour be made available in its entirety on the Landmarks website. I believe that the prohibitive costs of app development and the tendency of people to delete apps quickly makes a web-based strategy more effective. I envision an interactive page on the Landmarks website in which visitors can utilize their smartphones to access additional content. In conjunction with the actual self-guided tour, the webpage can incorporate maps, images, interactive timelines, and, perhaps, selected primary documents. I also believe that this strategy would enable the creation of short videos in which

passages from Elizabeth's correspondence could be read by a narrator. By using the infrastructure of the Landmarks site, we can get all the benefits of a mobile app at a fraction of the cost.

Besides a web-based strategy, I believe that this tour should be supplemented by a variety of hard copy documents. In the case that a visitor would want a printed copy of this self-guided tour, there should be a number of printed tours available. My hope is that most visitors will use their smartphones but, for some visitors, this may not be realistic. I feel that this tour should be printed in a brochure format with a number of images incorporated with the text of the tour. Moreover, I propose that we create a coloring sheet that can be distributed to children. While this may not be a revolutionary idea, children will always love to color and by offering them the ability to color in a portrait of an important woman it may serve as a learning experience. I believe that Matthew Pratt's 1768-1770 portrait entitled, *Portrait of Mrs. Samuel Powel (nee Elizabeth Willing)* would serve as the perfect image for a coloring sheet. See below for the portrait.



Elizabeth Willing Powel⁵⁰

Finally, I propose that this self-guided tour be launched with a signature event that could be marketed to women's groups, families, schools/universities, and neighbors from Society Hill. One option would be to launch the tour in late February to coincide with Elizabeth's birthday, which has been approximated by David Maxey to be February 21. We could market it as a birthday party for Elizabeth with a tagline along the lines of "Elizabeth Powel: Still Going Strong at 273!" At this event, we could serve cupcakes made from her recipe and also distribute cards with the recipe on it. As visitors enjoy the cupcakes, we can offer guided tours of the house. The ultimate goal of this event would be to bring people into the Powel House, introduce them to Elizabeth Powel, and, hopefully, spur interest in the other properties owned and operated by Landmarks. We could use the opening of this specific tour as an opportunity to cross promote Landmarks' other ventures.

⁵⁰ "Portrait of Mrs. Samuel Powel (nee Elizabeth Willing)" by Matthew Pratt. Kirtley, "Front Parlor from the Powel House, Philadelphia, 1769-70," E16.