

Love and Duty

Amelia and Josiah Gorgas and Their Family



SARAH WOOLFOLK WIGGINS

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For Henrietta

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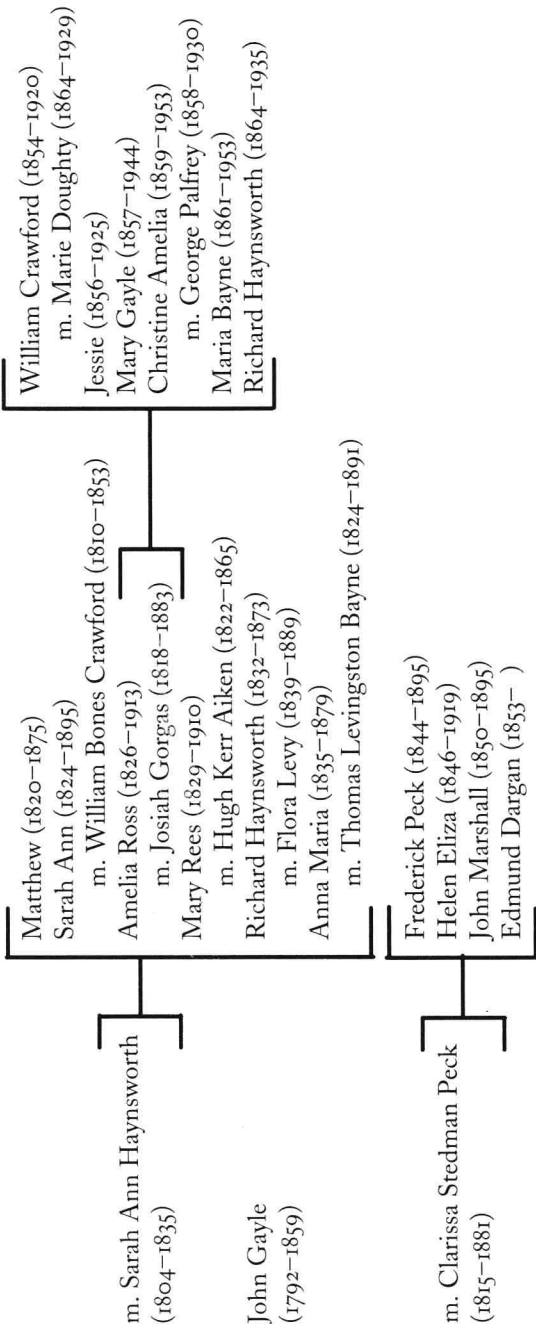
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Family of Josiah and Amelia Gorgas



Introduction

One might wonder *why* a collection of essays about Amelia and Josiah Gorgas. Both have been the subject of full-length monographs, and, in addition, Josiah's journals have been published. However, a reading of these publications leaves us with the frustrated feeling that somehow we do not really know this couple.¹ The intent of these essays is to focus on the personalities of Amelia and Josiah that generally have escaped our grasp and to enable a reader to gain a sense of the relationships of Gorgas family members to each other.

Knowing a person's family and its internal relationships—those between husband and wife, parents and children, siblings, and in-laws—increases our understanding of that person. Important, too, is an appreciation of the distribution of responsibilities and of power within that household. Because the large but close-knit Gorgas family was highly literate and often separated, they produced an extraordinary quality and quantity of manuscripts that span three generations. Members of this family corresponded with each other almost daily, expressing their opinions and pouring their most personal feelings into their letters and journals to those whom they loved and trusted. They commented on contemporary events, lavished advice on each other, and philosophized about life and death and love and marriage and parenting and war and defeat. These thousands of manuscripts provide a remarkable window into the private world of a nineteenth-century southern family.

Family was everything to the Gorgas couple whom we generally know as the chief of the Confederate Ordnance Bureau and the University of Alabama librarian. To the world Josiah was the cool, efficient

administrator—proud, impatient, petulant before his marriage. A man who had not enjoyed much family life as a child, Josiah reveled in his companionate marriage to Amelia. She was known for her charm and outgoing personality, not her appearance. Her childhood, in contrast to that of Josiah, had been one enveloped in a large, affectionate group of relatives, despite the death of her mother at a young age. Marriage usually changes nobody, but Josiah's marriage made him a different man. Amelia created the ultimate sanctuary from the world for him, and this peace and comfort brought out gentleness and tolerance in her husband. He mellowed and became a family man enchanted with his wife and fascinated with his children.

A successful marriage is based on friendship. Amelia and Josiah were each other's best friend before and throughout their marriage until his death. They found their greatest satisfaction and joy in each other's company, often in the simplest pleasures. Their favorite moments, as described in their letters and in their wishes, were those where Josiah spent an evening reading aloud to Amelia or where the couple passed an afternoon alone talking. Like two close friends, each deeply respected the judgment of the other and sought the other's opinion. No couple was more unhappy with separation.

The impression persists that Victorians were uninterested in sex. Nothing could be further from the truth in the case of Amelia and Josiah. Their letters—especially his—make clear the strength of the passion that existed in their marriage.

From the outset of their marriage Amelia made deliberate efforts to please Josiah in endless small ways and in the process taught him how to reciprocate. He commented more than once on how pleased he found himself to be in making Amelia and their children happy—as if this pleasure were newly discovered. Their marriage succeeded in no small measure because the two partners worked to meet the needs of each other.

The story of Amelia and Josiah is also the story of their successful and famous son, William Crawford, whose efforts to improve sanitation made possible the building of the Panama Canal. With a current understanding of elementary psychology in mind, the reader cringes at times over Josiah's sharp criticism of his son and Amelia's substitution of her son for the absent father.

Despite the method of William Crawford's upbringing, the result was an adult of strong character, determined to follow his own voca-

tional preferences and able to fight successfully for his principles in Panama against a horrific bureaucracy.

Amelia found her identity in her family. She was a caregiver her entire life, first for her own family and then for the boys at the University of Alabama. Mothering came instinctively to Amelia. Years after Amelia's death one of her daughters recalled that she always seemed to know what to do and how to do it and did it "with so much ease."²

A loyal Confederate wife during the Civil War, Amelia did whatever she could for the cause. When Richmond fell, she attended to the survival of her family. Enormously proud of her husband's contributions to the Confederacy, she grieved over its defeat. Unwilling to admit what had occurred, she indulged in wistful dreams about the Confederacy's future. Later she joined those who actively celebrated the memory of the Lost Cause. Her die-hard loyalty to the Confederacy long after the war was rooted in her devotion to her family.

The manuscripts on which these essays are based are voluminous and widely scattered in repositories across the country. The primary collections, the Gorgas Family Papers and the William Crawford Gorgas Papers, are located in the Hoole Special Collections Library at the University of Alabama. Many letters in the Gorgas Family Papers are missing the day, month, or year, which are supplied in brackets in the notes. Each date in a note represents a separate letter. Other manuscript collections, many of which contain thousands of items, are cited in the bibliography.

Despite the volume of Gorgas family manuscripts that have survived, many items apparently have been lost. The treasure trove of correspondence between Josiah and prominent political and military Confederates that the late Frank Vandiver described finding in the 1940s has disappeared.³ Likewise, many letters cited in Mary Tabb Johnston's study of Amelia are no longer in the Gorgas manuscript collections. This author has cited Johnston as the source for information contained in those letters.

Through these manuscripts the personalities of Amelia and Josiah come alive. We are fortunate that they were so articulate. Amelia and Josiah understood that life is not fair, that what happened to them was less important than how they coped. This couple was unafraid to play the hand they were dealt, to make the best of what fate gave them, and they did so without whining or complaint. In so doing they epitomized their generation in the South—as survivors.

Love and Duty

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Prologue

To the casual observer, Amelia Gayle and Josiah Gorgas were an unlikely couple to build a successful marriage because they came from such different worlds. She was born June 1, 1826, into Old Guard Mobile. Her paternal and maternal ancestors in South Carolina included distinguished Revolutionary War veterans. Her father, John Gayle, was an Alabama governor, congressman, and judge, and her mother, Sarah Haynsworth Gayle, was known as a great beauty. Sarah Gayle died of lockjaw in 1835 when Amelia was nine years old.¹ The Gayles were comfortable, but never rich, southerners who were content with their place in the aristocratic social circles of antebellum Alabama.

Amelia's mother described her daughter at the age of two as an amusing "urchin" who was so small that "everything appeared extraordinary in her." The child possessed an outgoing personality that was apparent at an early age. On one occasion when her mother returned home after a brief absence, five-year-old Amelia greeted her with "unrestrained joy" as she "flew over the path" and flung herself up into her mother's arms, while her older sister, Sarah, coyly buried her face in her mother's skirts and hugged her around the knees.² At the age of seven mischievous Amelia rode an Indian pony into the Alabama state capitol in Tuscaloosa while her father was serving as governor. In the words of her mother Amelia was becoming "wretchedly wild" and must be brought "to track immediately." A year later Sarah Gayle observed in her journal that this daughter required constant care to manage. "She is very affectionate and warm hearted," but "easily led into temptation."³

A zest for life always characterized Amelia's personality, and as an adult her magnetism drew people to her.

As the third of six children, Amelia attended classes with local teachers in Greensboro and Tuscaloosa. After Sarah Gayle's death in 1835 her children were scattered to relatives or friends. Amelia lived for two years in Tuscaloosa with her mother's close friend, Mrs. Alva Woods, wife of the president of the University of Alabama. Judge Gayle remarried in 1837, reunited his family in Toulminville near Mobile, and began a second family. In 1841 when Amelia's older sister, Sarah, returned to Mobile from school in New York, Amelia left to attend Columbia Female Institute in Columbia, Tennessee, the only formal education that she received. A year later she returned to Mobile. Existing records provide no additional details about her education, and none of her correspondence mentions what she read as a young girl. When Sarah married William Bones Crawford of Winnsboro, South Carolina, in 1842, Amelia became the oldest daughter at home; she now assumed responsibilities of assisting with the family's young children—her half brothers, a half sister, nieces, and a nephew. Her lifetime role as a caregiver had begun.⁴

John Gayle was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1846, and the next year Amelia accompanied him to Washington while her stepmother remained at home. That season in Washington was exhilarating to twenty-one-year-old Amelia. John Gayle took rooms on Capitol Hill at Hill's boardinghouse where John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and his niece also lodged. Amelia's room, she excitedly wrote her sister, opened "immediately into Mr. Calhoun's," and, she continued, "he says when the weather grows warm we will throw the doors open & give me the benefit of his South windows." To Amelia's delight, Calhoun made her his frequent companion on his daily strolls about the Capitol grounds before breakfast: "I enjoy of all things a walk with him." They talked of the esoteric (politics) and the mundane (housekeeping).⁵

As good friends, the tiny, black-haired Amelia and the grim, white-haired Calhoun, then in his late sixties, made an odd May-December couple on their early morning walks. During this period Calhoun gave Amelia a black wooden inkstand that had been used in the U.S. Senate by Sen. George McDuffie of South Carolina and later by Calhoun himself. At Calhoun's invitation she sat on the platform for the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument, the only woman so honored.⁶

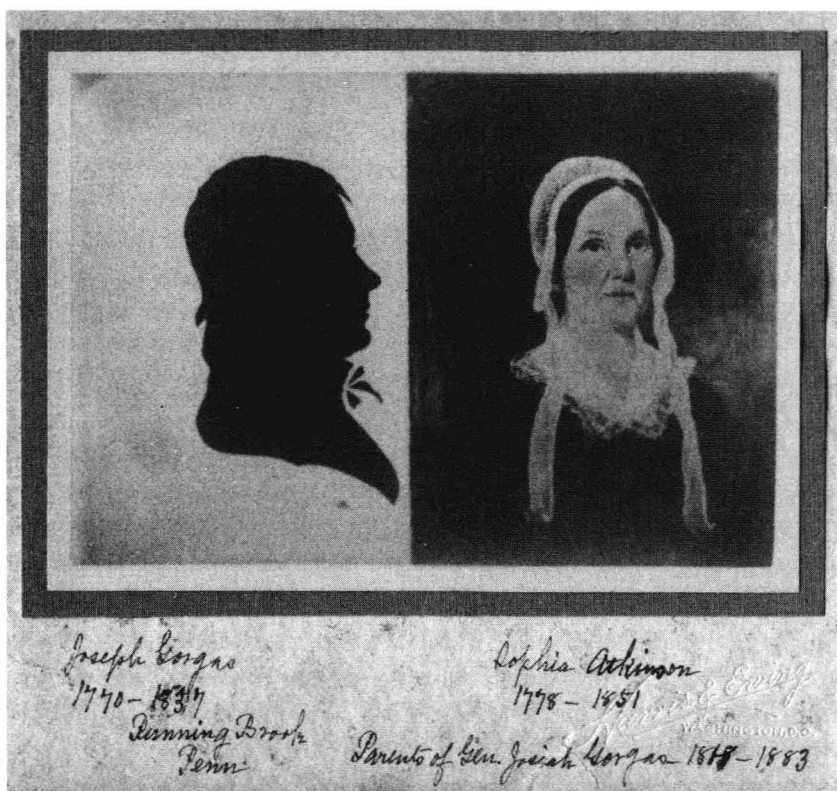
While in Washington, Amelia met other famous men, including Henry Clay and William Tecumseh Sherman. One evening in 1848 Clay called to see Calhoun. When Amelia opened the door, Clay mistook her for Calhoun's niece and greeted her with a kiss. When Amelia reported the episode to Calhoun, he solemnly warned Amelia, "don't put your trust in that old man."⁷

In 1865 in South Carolina, on his March to the Sea, Sherman called on Amelia's sister, Mary, whom he had known when John Gayle was a congressman. He told her that he owed Amelia "a dress for the one he had spoiled when he took her buggy riding on a muddy day" in Washington years earlier. Amelia recalled in April 1865 that Sherman had dined at her father's house in Mobile before the Civil War.⁸

Amelia attended sessions of Congress and listened to congressional debates. She wrote home especially about the debates over slavery. Her father had been a strong states' rights governor in Alabama, taking on President Andrew Jackson and winning a quarrel over Indian removal.⁹ Amelia's intense southern loyalties, if not already established at home, became ingrained while she was her father's hostess in Washington and Calhoun's morning companion. When that year ended, Amelia returned to Mobile, living with her father and stepmother and assisting with the children in the family.

Josiah's world was quite different. Born July 1, 1818, he was the youngest of ten children of Joseph Gorgas and Sophia Atkinson of Running Pumps, Pennsylvania. Joseph was a clock maker, farmer, innkeeper, and mechanic who was not successful financially. As a child and a young man Josiah received little formal education, and when he was seventeen, he was sent to live with an older sister, Eliza Gorgas Chapman, and her husband in Lyons, New York. There, as an apprentice in a printing office, he caught the eye of the local congressman, who allowed the boy to begin reading law in his office. Josiah so impressed the congressman that he secured an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, for the young man. Not only did Josiah receive a splendid scientific and engineering education that his family never could have provided, but also he was introduced to art, literature, and languages at West Point. In the years after West Point he often translated pages of French or German as a matter of self-discipline.¹⁰

Josiah's exposure to art while at West Point deeply impressed him. In the years before his marriage he sketched ink drawings and painted



1. Sophia Atkinson Gorgas, 1778–1850, and Joseph Gorgas, 1770–1837, parents of Josiah Gorgas. (Courtesy of the Gorgas House, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.)

scenes in watercolor. His drawings were caricatures of figures, scenes from his experiences in Europe, Mexico, and the southwestern United States, and trenchant cartoons.¹¹

When he graduated from West Point in 1841, he ranked sixth in his class of fifty-two. Money was scarce. When he could not afford to pay for a new uniform for graduation ceremonies, some of his relatives provided the necessary funds. He then chose the U.S. Ordnance Corps as his branch of service in the army.¹²

His first assignment sent him to Watervliet Arsenal near Troy, New York. One of his older brothers, Solomon, was a successful businessman in Philadelphia, and the two brothers enjoyed each other's company while Josiah was at Watervliet. Soon Josiah was transferred to De-