

Frances Mottrom, A FIRST LADY OF JAMESTOWN

While life flowed on at Chicacone, what had become of little Frances Mottrom?

Frances had been growing up. She was now, in 1662, seventeen years old and about to become the bride of one of the most important men in Virginia.

Since her step-mother's marriage Frances had probably been living with her sister, Anne, who had been married for five or six years to Richard Wright, formerly a merchant of London. The Wrights lived part of the time at Coan Hall and part of the time at Cabin Point, in Westmoreland County. The latter estate had been left to Anne by her father, Colonel John Mottrom.

And how did Frances find a suitable bridegroom in the wilderness of the Northern Neck? Probably through her brother-in-law, Richard Wright. Her future husband, the Honorable Nicholas Spencer, Esq., had also been a London merchant who had taken up lands in the Neck. He was now a neighbor of the Wrights, in Westmoreland County.

And where was the wedding to take place? There are no records to tell us, but a deed made a few years after Frances' marriage refers to her as being "late of Chickacone." It is doubtful if a church had been built as yet, although the Parish of Chicacoan had been established in 1653, and the Reverend David Lindsay, of the Established Church of England, had arrived in the Northern Neck as early as 1656.

Let us assume that Frances and Nicholas were married at Coan Hall by the new minister, who would have been dressed for the occasion in a white surplice with bands and a "close" cap of black velvet.

The ceremony would probably have taken place on a Wednesday morning between eight and noonday.

The bride was doubtless radiant in a low-cut gown of the latest London fashion. It may have been pink, yellow or some other pastel shade but we can be sure that it was not white. The gown, no doubt fell in soft folds to the ground, as hoops had not yet come into vogue. Her hair was probably arranged just as she wore it as a child, with a veil in place of the cap.

Coan Hall was no doubt "passing sweet trimmed up with divers flowers" or evergreens. All the kettles were doubtless a-bubble in[Pg 82] the kitchen, and the silver, pewter, brass and copper gleamed in the firelight.

There seem to be no surviving records of the festivities accompanying a seventeenth century wedding in Virginia, but we may be sure that there was "an open cellar, a full house and a sweating cook," three things dearly loved by these transplanted English people.

They also loved noise—the sound of guns and firecrackers, bells and music. They liked to sing the old ballads brought from "home," as they still called England.

The wedding guests may have brought small spiced buns to the wedding and piled them high in the center of the table. If the bride and groom succeeded in kissing each other over the mound, lifelong prosperity was assured.

Dancing and games were very likely to have followed the feasting. The wedding guests may have lingered on a week or more at Coan. It is possible that the wedding party followed the bride and groom to the groom's house in Westmoreland and continued the festivities for awhile there.

And how did Frances reach her new home? Most likely by sailing vessel, up the Potomac. If she traveled by land it was doubtless on horseback as there were few if any carriages then, nor any roads. She may have been seated on a pillion behind her new husband, holding on tight to his waist. If the wedding party traveled by land they must have made quite a clatter—riding at the reckless "planter's pace" between the big trees, shouting and singing and making the forest ring with happy sound.

Two wedding gifts that Frances may have brought to her new home were a "garnish of pewter," that is a full set of pewter platters, plates and dishes, and a bread "peel," which was significant of domestic utility, plenty, and was a symbol of good luck. These were favorite wedding gifts then. Glass and earthenware were scarce at that time because of breakage on the trip across the Atlantic. An inventory later on shows that Frances had only twelve glasses and not more than eighty-eight pieces of earthenware. Silver plate was abundant in the homes of the wealthy.

At the time of their marriage Frances' husband was a member of the House of Burgesses. Later (1679-89) he was Secretary of the Colony which made him, next to the Governor, probably the most powerful man in Virginia at that time. People started calling his home on Nomini River, Secretary's Point, by which name it was ever after known.

Colonel Spencer's neighbors named their parish "Cople" in honor[Pg 83] of his ancestral parish in Bedfordshire, England.

About 1675 Colonel Spencer and John Washington procured a patent

for five thousand acres of land on Little Hunting Creek, which later became famous as the Mount Vernon estate. This land descended to the heirs of Spencer and Washington.

Colonel Spencer became President of the Council, which was a position of great honor and dignity. As President of the Council in the absence of the Governor, his cousin Lord Culpeper, he became acting governor from 1683-84.

"Madam Spencer," as Frances was now respectfully addressed, had seen many changes since she had left her wilderness playground in the Northern Neck, to become for awhile the "First Lady of Jamestown." She had borne six children. One son went to England and remained there to claim the large estates which his father had inherited.

After Governor Spencer's death Frances married Reverend John Bolton.

Source: The Stronghold A Story of Historic Northern Neck of Virginia and Its People by Miriam Haynie