Lead: After a sensational Virginia trial in the spring of 1793, aristocrats Richard Randolph and his young sister in law, Nancy Randolph, were acquitted of the murder of her newborn baby.

Intro.: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: The two were accused of adultery and a brutal act of infanticide to conceal an incestuous affair. Pleading the defense were former Governor Patrick Henry of “Give me liberty or give me death,”
fame, and Randolph family cousin John Marshall, who later became Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Randolph family members testified both for and against the defendants. Much of the testimony involved intimations that Nancy and Richard had an intimate relationship, but the most critical evidence was never brought to light. Virginia law prohibited slaves from testifying against whites, and it was plantation slaves who allegedly tended to Nancy while she was in labor and discovered the corpse of a white baby on the woodpile. Since no white person or member of the Randolph family testified they had ever seen a baby’s corpse, the charges were dropped.
Though Nancy Randolph was legally vindicated, the nineteen year old was ruined in Virginia society. After Richard Randolph’s death three years later, Nancy’s relationship with her sister and other family members began to deteriorate, and her cousin John Randolph of Roanoke, also Richard’s brother, blamed Nancy for Richard’s death and became her chief tormenter, insuring that she continued as the subject of gossip among Virginia aristocrats and eventually banishing her from a family plantation where she was living.

Nancy Randolph, still young and resilient, eventually made her way to
New York where at age thirty-five she charmed and married statesman Gouverneur Morris, member of the Constitutional Convention and former minister to France. They had a happy marriage and one son.

Years later she gave her version of the events of that fateful night. She had given birth, but to a stillborn child. The father was Theodorick, Richard Randolph’s brother, to whom she had been engaged before his death of tuberculosis seven months before. Essayist Alan Crawford says, “The story illuminates the passing of the old colonial gentry and the rise of a more democratic America. The crimes of which Nancy was accused would probably have
been covered up a generation before, when the Virginia grandees had more power. While the lives of many of Nancy’s brothers and male cousins ended in bankruptcy, disgrace and outright madness, [Nancy] did surprisingly well for herself.” Research assistance by Ann H. Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.
Resources


