

DID LOUIS XVI. OF FRANCE PRESENT A RUG  
TO GEORGE WASHINGTON?

By William Frederic Worner.

At a meeting of the Lancaster County Historical Society held in April, 1908, a booklet was received entitled: "An Illustrated Handbook of Mount Vernon; the Home of Washington," issued by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union. It was presented to the Society by Mr. Evans Wallis Shippen. Accompanying the booklet is a letter, which is as follows:

"Meadville, Pa., Feb. 22nd, 1908.

Mr. F. R. Diffenderffer,  
Secretary of Lancaster Historical Society,  
Lancaster, Pa.

Dear Sir:

"Enclosed find an illustrated hand book of Mount Vernon, the home of Washington, in which is an illustration of a rug which Louis XVI. of France had had woven for a present to President Washington, but Washington not being allowed to receive it, it graced the floor of Judge Jasper Yeates' house in Lancaster for many years.

"I have added in the book a short history of the rug, which may be of interest to the members of your Society.

Yours respectfully,

Evans Wallis Shippen."

On page 17 of this booklet appears an illustration of the west parlor at Mount Vernon, the fine old home of General George Washington. The rug covers a part of the floor. On page 16 appears this interesting statement:

"The rug in the room (west parlor) is particularly interesting. It was woven by order of Louis XVI., and sent by him as a present to General Washington."

This brief statement, while interesting, does not furnish a description of the royal carpet nor does it tell how it came to America. Mr. Evans Wallis Shippen has written the following illuminating account of this ancient carpet, which appears, in his own handwriting, on page 16 of the copy of the handbook he so kindly presented to the Lancaster County Historical Society:

"Washington being President of the United States, could not receive a present from any foreign power. Consequently, the rug was sold. Judge Jasper Yeates, of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, then living in Lancaster, Pa., bought it and laid it on the parlor floor of his house (now occupied by The Inquirer) [southwest corner of Queen and Mifflin streets], where it remained until the death of the last one of his two maiden daughters, in 1866, when it descended to his great grand-daughter, Mrs. Townsend Whelen (nee Sarah Yeates McElwee), of Philadelphia, who on May 3rd, 1897, presented it to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

"Lafayette was a guest of Judge Yeates in 1824, and was entertained on the rug.

"The rug is of Gobelin tapestry velvet. The main portion green in color. The outside and central oval borders yellow. The shield in the coat of arms has red and white stripes. The eagle, arrows, and olive branch, are in their natural colors, whilst the streamer in the eagle's beak is blue, with dark letters E Pluribus Unum on it.

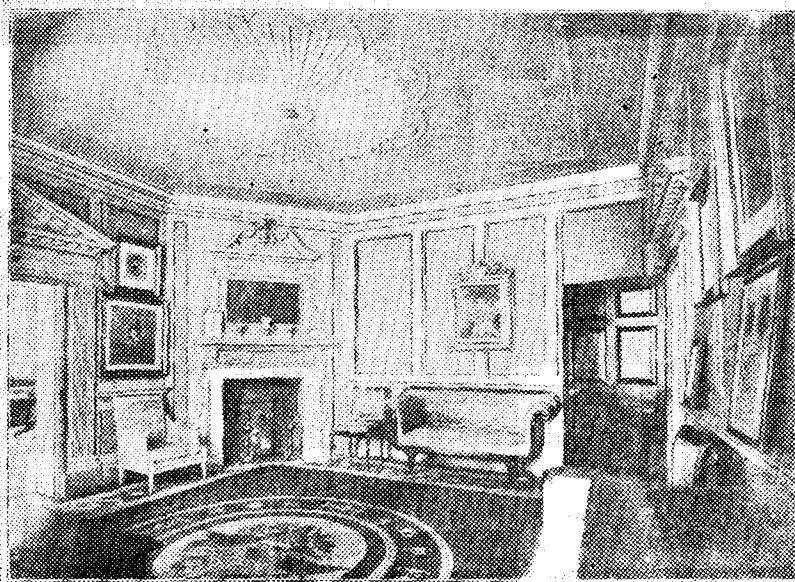
"It was on this rug that the writer, in 1847, first met Miss Catharine Yeates McElwee (sister of Mrs. Whelen) who became his wife in 1852.  
Meadville, Pa.

Evans Wallis Shippen.

February 22nd, 1908.

Some of the statements by Mr. Shippen in this handbook are so far removed from the truth that we cannot accept them. For example, he states that "Lafayette was a guest of Judge Yeates in 1824, and was entertained on the rug." The good man erred when he wrote this statement. In the first place Lafayette was not in Lancaster in 1824; and, secondly, Judge Jasper Yeates died in 1817, therefore he could not by any means have entertained so distinguished a guest seven years after he had passed to his eternal reward.

Did Louis XVI. of France really present this rug to Washington? What proof do we have for this assertion as made by Mr. Shippen? and for the statement published in the handbook by the authority of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union? In delving into this matter, I have come upon the following information, which I am submitting for the benefit of



all who may be interested in this subject. When the rug was tendered to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union a letter from the donor, Mrs. Sarah Yeates Whelen, was received by Mrs. Ellen Waln Harrison, vice regent for the state of Pennsylvania. It appears on page 21 of the book issued in 1897, and is as follows:

"My Dear Mrs. Harrison:—

It will give me pleasure to present to the Mt. Vernon Association, through you as the Vice-Regent for Pennsylvania, a carpet of national and historic value. This carpet was made by order of Louis XVI. of France, for George Washington, President of the United States, and was sent over during the first years of his administration, when Philadelphia was the National Capital. As he was not allowed to receive presents from foreign powers, the carpet was sold to my great-grandfather, Judge Jasper Yeates, and remained in the old family mansion at Lancaster until about thirty years ago, when it came into my possession. As I consider Mt. Vernon the proper place

for such a relic, if the ladies of the Association will do me the honor of accepting it I will send it down at once to your care to the address you may designate. In giving this carpet to the Association I request that it be placed where it will not be used continuously and that a card of explanation be placed upon it.

Yours very truly,

Sarah Yeates Whelen,  
1814 Rittenhouse Square,  
Philadelphia."

May 3, 1897.

If the statements contained in Mrs. Whelen's letter are correct then this rug is of unusual interest to the citizens of Lancaster.

In the Library of Congress is an alcove devoted to George Washington. It contains practically all that has ever been printed about this illustrious man. I have gone through this great collection of books and pamphlets with more than ordinary care, but, thus far, have failed to find a single reference to Louis XVI. of France presenting a rug to Washington. I do not discredit the statement made by Mrs. Whelen in her letter. It may be that one of these days some paper or document will come to light that will substantiate the story as given by Mrs. Whelen and printed in the year book of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.

At the present time, it seems that the indisputable evidence that would confirm the story associated with the rug has not yet been rescued from its hiding place and presented to the public. No less a distinguished person than Mr. Harrison H. Dodge, the superintendent of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, is hoping that some paper or memorandum be disclosed that will establish the authenticity of this interesting story. Not long since I wrote him a letter in which I asked him to put at my disposal such information as he might have which would establish the truth of this story. I received from him the following communication:

"MOUNT VERNON ON THE POTOMAC,  
FAIRFAX COUNTY,  
VIRGINIA.

February 25, 1925.

Mr. William Frederic Worner, Librarian,  
Lancaster County Historical Society,  
Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

My dear Mr. Worner:

Your question as to the particulars concerning the rug given to General Washington by his Majesty, Louis XVI. of France, I fear I cannot give such answer to you as you hoped I might.

Actually, we have no data here throwing light on the subject, otherwise than the letter from Mrs. Whelen, of Philadelphia, who presented the rug to the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, as reported in the Year Book of the Association for 1897.

I, too, have been searching through all the works on George Washington, hoping to discover some corroborative allusion to the incident of the Louis XVI. rug. While not yet successful in this search, I am still hoping that some clue may eventuate, which of course, I will be very glad to make known to you very promptly.

Believe me, sir,

Very cordially yours,

Harrison H. Dodge,  
Superintendent."