

## Letter from America ... 1777

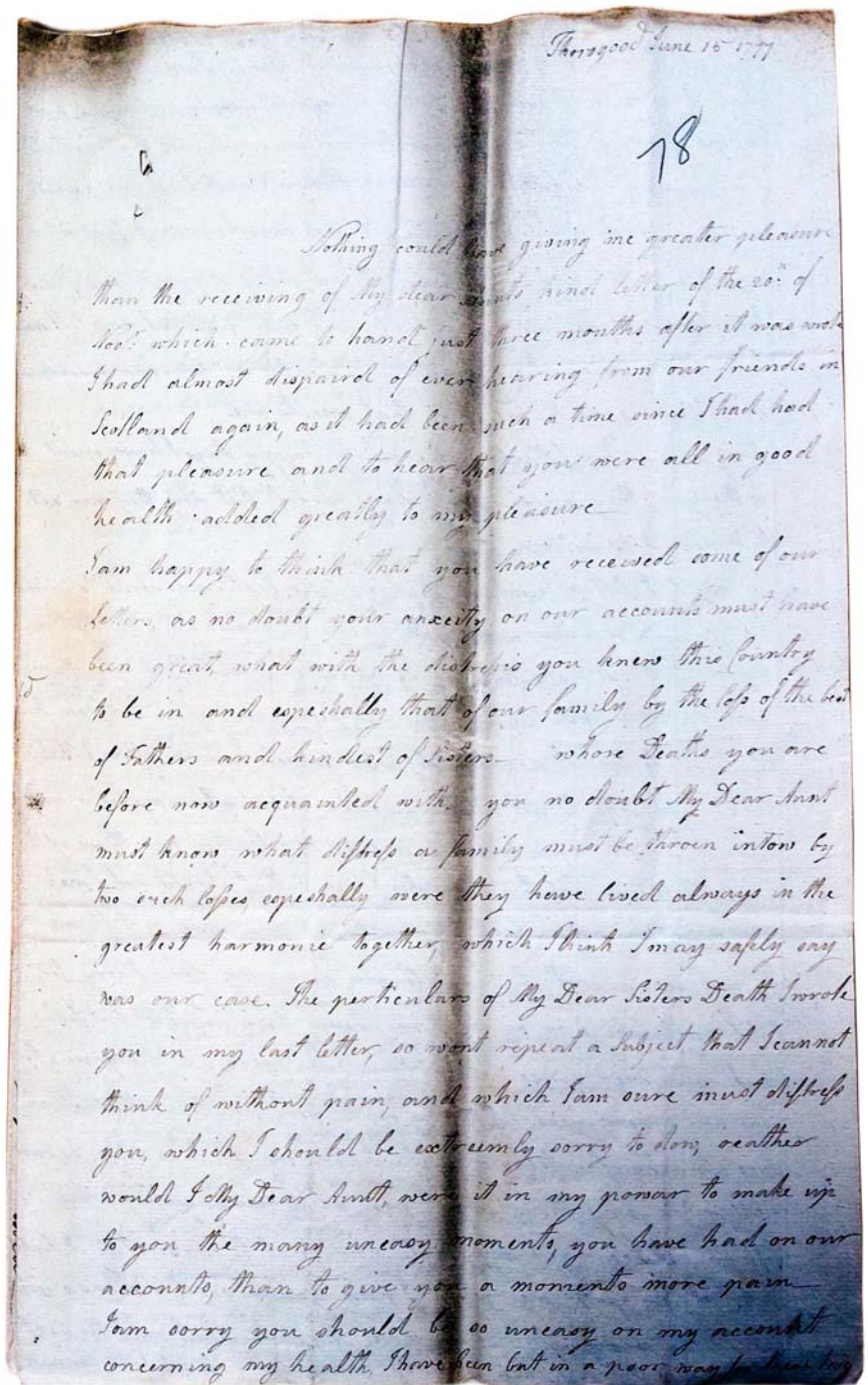
### by Anne Ramon (volunteer and Friend of TNA)

One of the joys of volunteering at the National Archives is that you encounter novel material that illuminates the lives of our ancestors. You also have experts on hand for context and historical fact and who can read the writing when it's challenging!

Such a document came to hand recently in an HCA (High Court of Admiralty) Prize Papers file. The American owned Sally was captured on 20 July in 1777 by a British privateer Brigantine, the *Sarah Golbourne*. On board were several important South Carolina politicians, a Judge and some merchants who were fleeing Charles Town (now Charleston) in advance of British attacks. The passengers on the Sally were taken captive and all the paperwork on board, including from amongst the passengers' and crews' personal possessions, were seized along with the ship and its cargo, and was taken into Liverpool.

The document is a personal letter dated 15 June 1777, written by Elizabeth DEAS to her aunt Katherine THOMSON, who lived on St. Andrews Street, Edinburgh, in Scotland. It came into HCA in 1777 and came into the Public Record Office (now TNA) in the 1850s. The Prize Papers Project is enabling these files to be fully catalogued now, and the intention is to document all the papers in detail.

Who was Elizabeth DEAS? She writes from her home address 'Thorogood' in Charles Town, South Carolina. It's a comfortable house, equipped with fine furniture, and serviced by a sizeable house staff (regrettably likely all slaves) and possibly located on a family plantation beside the St James Goose Creek in Charles Town<sup>1</sup>. She was born Elizabeth ALLEN in December 1742 in Leith, Midlothian, in Scotland, the daughter of William ALLEN and Mary KEATING. Her family were merchants and ship owners and she had the opportunity to travel around the world. She married John DEAS (1735-1790) on 2nd May 1759 in Charles Town (1), he was 24 and she was 17. John DEAS was born in South Leith, Midlothian, Scotland, and he emigrated to America in early 1749. He owned and ran a Slave Auction



Rob Eliza Deas letter

in Charles Town with his brother David DEAS. John DEAS was an important person locally and Grand Master of The Most Ancient and Hon. Masons of South Carolina. They must have lived a comfortable life[1].

Elizabeth ('Eliza' as it's a family letter) is now 35 years old, and she is writing to her Aunt Katherine, following a common format. (The spelling, capitalisation and punctuation are her own). First there's a reference to the Aunt's last letter to Eliza which was dated 20 November

1776. Safe delivery of the post was not assured because so many ships were being captured by the enemy. Then there's some family news. Eliza has lost a father (father-in-law?) and a sister (sister-in-law?). Eliza's health has been poor for the last two years. Eliza would love to visit her Aunt but her only travel options are via France and Holland and *'then one runs a great risk of being takin'*. Then there's the baby news: her sister (Polly) Inglis *'lay in last Febry of a fine boy, he is called David Deas after my poor Papa'* (her husband John's father), and she provides updates on her own children.

It's the month of June and Eliza and family are due to travel to a less 'sickly' area (mosquitos? malaria?) but she fears attacks from the King's ships in the harbour, though she reports that *'our Forts are better fortified and have plenty of powder, which we had not last year ...'*. She adds *'Our Town swarms again with French people just now a great many vessels come here with goods from the French Islands'*, but she is alarmed because *'there prises are enough to friting one, what dow you think to half a Guinia a yard for printed Callacos that are no finer than wrapping Calicos and near a Guinia a yard for dymitys<sup>2</sup> and corse threed stockings that I would hardly wear ...'* and, *'Beef a crown a pound, that's eightpence your monnie<sup>3</sup>, and Mutton, upwards of half a Guinnia a leg'*. The ever-present danger also limits her freedom; *'there is no pleasant rides or walks about town'*.

Then she provides updates on other residents such as Mrs Thomson, Mr Davison, Mr Cards the tutor, Mr Gough, Doctor Chambers and *'our Uncle Lynch'* and asks for the latest news of her Aunt's acquaintance, presumably in Scotland, Mrs Bremner and Mr Navie, and Miss Peggy Navie. Then she gives the latest wedding news including the marriage of the widow Mrs Smith to Doctor Cletheral: *'it was not thought a very suitable match for her, she is just lay in of a son ... but has five daughters by Mr Smith'*.

Eliza reports that *'there has been a great many people sent off from here latly ... all such are suspected to be against us and those have been medling to much ... all the Kings offercers are sent off ... amongst them, Mr William Wragg Mr Rind, Mr Bull the leftennard Govrner and Doctor Barron and Doctor Milligen and how dow you think is also gone to France but old Mrs Watson how has been bed riddin for some years past ...'*. Others leaving included *'Mrs Cummings the midwife ... a great loss to this place ... she intends going down to Edinburgh ...'*

Eliza in now in full flow and she spills the beans on Mr Jemason *'that married Miss Simons', '... (Jemason) has been confined in gaol for some months past and is still there he was suspected of supplying the troops at St Augustain with provisions from this place, which if he really did, was very base in him, as he was feading our Enimies... no body pittys him'*. She goes on, however, *'I sincerely pity his wife and Children he has got three daughters'*. Eliza also pities Lady Nesbitt whose son, Sir John, has died *'...it will near kill her*

*for she was such wrought up in him and his being her only child, no wonder'*, and there's plenty more to find out about Sir John as Eliza mentions a possible wife who was never introduced to anyone as *'...Lady Nisbet, which made people think he was not Married to her...'* and she was *'big of another Child'* and they had sailed to North Carolina.

Eliza concludes her letter with best wishes to Aunt's family and asks to be remembered to a list of people. She entrusted her letter to Mr Levie [Robert Levy was a passenger on the *Sally*], whom she knew from school in Edinburgh, but, of course, Eliza's aunt never received the letter. I've read it now. Thank you, Eliza.

Eliza died 2 February 1802 aged 59<sup>1</sup>. In her Will, proved 10 February 1802 in Charleston, she 'gives' her house servants to various of her family members. To her credit she asks her children to *'free old Dido, one of my settlement negroes'*.

I plan to share the images (7 pages of handwriting) and my transcription with the Museum of South Carolina ([scmuseum.org](http://scmuseum.org)) who hold a linear foot of papers for the DEAS family, The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg ([colonialwilliamsburg.org](http://colonialwilliamsburg.org)) who have a beautiful portrait of Eliza and a fine double set of wooden drawers from her house, and with appropriate South Carolina Family History Societies.

Maybe Eliza sat at that set of drawers as she wrote this letter.

#### Notes:

1. The biographical details were found in Ancestry.com, accessed 6 August 2023. The underlying sources there include:

First Census of the United States 1790. South Carolina>Charleston>St James>Goose Creek, South Carolina Marriages 1686-1799 compiled by Brent H. Holcomb, Genealogical Publishing Co. 1980 South Carolina US Wills and Probate Records 1670-1980. Will of Elizabeth DEAS, probate 10 February 1802.

2. Dymitys. A sheer, crisp cotton fabric with raised woven stripes or checks, used chiefly for curtains and dresses [Wikipedia, accessed 6 August 2023]

3. Monnie. There were approximately 13 Carolina dollars to the British Pound. A 'crown' (perhaps 5 shillings or sixty British pennies) was maybe a 'dollar' in Charleston and so equivalent to about 8 British pence in Scotland. [Wikipedia accessed 6 August 2023]

Eliza's letter is held at The National Archives, Kew, UK under reference HCA 32/447/10 and items currently numbered 78 and 79. Records of John Deas are held by South Carolina State Museum [scmuseum.org](http://scmuseum.org)

The Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, [colonialwilliamsburg.org](http://colonialwilliamsburg.org) hold a beautiful portrait of Elizabeth DEAS and the double size wooden chest of drawers. [emuseums.history.org/objects/](http://emuseums.history.org/objects/)

Anne Ramon. I have been a volunteer at TNA for over ten years. I have enjoyed working on conservation projects (IR25 maps, photographs and transparent paper) and transcription projects (WO 416 British Prisoners of War in German camps in WW2 and now the Prize Papers).