

**The Death of Sally Carroll, February 11, 1895**  
**“The House is like a Body without a Soul”**

**Terence Walz**

Sally Carroll, who arrived at 1801 F Street as a 23-year-old married woman with three children, lived in the house for sixty years, from 1835 to 1895. Her life in the house spanned a tumultuous period in American history, with economic ups and downs, Civil War, numerous births, marriages and deaths, many of them played out in the house. She departed life as a woman who had suffered both great happiness and unending pain with piety and grace. Her innate hospitality and goodwill were felt by many who met her. Her death on February 11, 1895, came as a shock, despite her long years of decline, and ended an era in the house’s history. Luckily, we have a firsthand account of her last day, written by her daughter Alida Carroll Brown in a letter she posted to her husband in Portland Maine the day after Sally’s death.<sup>1</sup>



The only known portrait of Sally Sprigg Carroll, probably done in the 1830s.  
Courtesy Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers.

Alida came down from Maine by train, arriving just in time as Sally lay near death in her large bedroom on the third floor. She was being tended by Dr. Sprigg, a distant relation,<sup>2</sup> who kept Mrs. Carroll breathing until Alida reached her, and thus she died just past midnight the day Alida arrived with Alida’s hand holding hers. The house was filled with her surviving children and several grandchildren – Carroll Mercer and his wife, Minnie, and Katie Beale and her

husband John Beale,<sup>3</sup> as well as her son Charles and two other daughters of Mrs. Carroll – Sally Countess Esterhazy and Carrie Dix Bolles. Both of the older daughters were keeping to their rooms due to illnesses. Mrs. Carroll was being tended by the nurse named Annie and by Delia Noonan, her faithful servant who looked after her for almost thirty years.<sup>4</sup> Jimmy Jackson, the Black servant who had also been part of her household for thirty years, is not mentioned in Alida's letter but he was probably standing by as well.<sup>5</sup>

Alida slept not a wink that night, and at eleven in the morning, Rev. Alexander MacKay-Smith<sup>6</sup> of St. John's Church, where Sally and William Carroll had been parishioners since 1836, arrived to be consulted about funeral arrangements. Alida found that she was being asked to make the arrangements without the help of her older brother and sisters who were too ill or sat listless and distraught by their mother's death to take an active part in the discussions. She was told that Sally had left a message in the box by her bedside "not to be opened until my death," and she asked Delia to bring it to her. In it, her mother wrote she wanted "as quiet and inexpensive funeral as possible" – an idea that Alida immediately rejected, believing that a church funeral was the only possible one for her. She then turned her mind to friends of Sally's to be notified and made a list of "honorary pall bearers." "Active" pall bearers would be asked to accompany the family to the mausoleum at Oak Hill.

The names of "honorary pall bearers" were compiled on a separate piece of paper and they were in keeping with her husband's long career as the Clerk of the Supreme Court and their prominent social history in the city. They included: Justices [John Marshall] Harlan, [Horace] Gray and [Henry B.] Brown of the Supreme Court, Senator [John] Sherman,<sup>7</sup> Secretary [John G.] Carlisle,<sup>8</sup> Hon. [J. C.] Bancroft Davies,<sup>9</sup> General Watanough,<sup>10</sup> Judge Webb,<sup>11</sup> Mr. [James H.] McKenney, Clerk of the Supreme Court,<sup>12</sup> and Dr. Grinnell.<sup>13</sup> In a note at the end of the list, Alida added, "Nearly all of whom were life-long friends" (of Sally's).<sup>14</sup> The funeral was set for February 13<sup>th</sup> at St. John's, at 2 p.m., and honorary pall bearers were asked to meet the casket at the front of the church fifteen minutes in advance of the service.

Alida confessed to her husband that Carroll Mercer, although around the house, was no help at all, and she wished that Sally's cousin Dr. Phillip Lansdale was there.<sup>15</sup> "How reduced is our family," she wrote to her husband, "but the doorbell is ringing all the time with enquiries and proffers." Mittie Anderson, a niece, came during the day, and her brother "Charlie,"<sup>16</sup> when asked who else should be told about Sally's death, could only say, "I don't know of anyone who is fit to attend Mother's funeral." Katie "was in the family way"<sup>17</sup> and therefore unable to help, and the countess was "scarcely fit to be up. Alida lamented, "This house, as Katie says is like a body without a soul."

In her last year, Sally Carroll faced ever-present financial difficulties and with the help of her grandson John Wheeler Beale, a prominent Washington businessman, she applied for a loan, which in the last days of her life was turned down. Alida wrote in her letter to her husband that she was grateful that "Johnnie" didn't reveal the news to Sally before she died.

Alida's husband, John Marshall Brown, may have come down from Maine to join his wife for the funeral. He was named a co-executor of her will along with Beale. When it was read out, annuities were planned for Sally's three surviving children – Countess Esterhazy, Carrie Dix Bolles, and Charles Carroll. Alida was not left any money, since her husband was already wealthy. The will necessitated the selling of the house and what real estate and stocks Sally had

in order to provide for the annuities in the will. Sally was buried in the family mausoleum on February 13<sup>th</sup> in the vault next to her husband, William T. Carroll, who had died thirty-three years earlier. Her death did end an era for the house on F Street.



1801 F Street “for sale,” “a house without a soul” in 1895 following Sally’s death earlier in the year.

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<sup>1</sup> Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 15, folder 64 (Correspondence to JMB) undated (February 12, 1895)

<sup>2</sup> Dr. William Mercer Sprigg, a graduate of Columbia College who started practicing in 1892, and is buried at Oak Hill Cemetery. He was descended from the Spriggs who settled in Allegheny County, Maryland.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll Mercer was Violetta Carroll Mercer’s son, who had married Mina Tunis in London in 1888; Katie Beale was the daughter of Gen. S. Sprigg Carroll, who married John Wheeler Beale in 1877 and was one of Sally’s favorite grandchildren.

<sup>4</sup> Delia’s family lived in Foggy Bottom and were members of St Stephen’s Church. She was remembered in Sally’s will and given \$300.

<sup>5</sup> He, too, was rewarded with a bequest of \$300 in Mrs. Carroll’s will.

<sup>6</sup> On his period at St. Johns, Richard F. Grimmett, *St. John’s Church Lafayette Square* (Minneapolis: Mill City Press, 2009), 159-60.

<sup>7</sup> The brother of Gen. William T. Sherman.

<sup>8</sup> Secretary of the Treasury during Cleveland’s second term.

<sup>9</sup> Recorder of the Supreme Court, 1883-1902.

<sup>10</sup> Unidentified.

<sup>11</sup> Possibly Judge Nathan Webb of Maine

<sup>12</sup> 1880-1913.

<sup>13</sup> Possibly George Bird Grinnell, founder of the Audubon Society.

<sup>14</sup> The newspapers did not cover Sally’s funeral, and so it is not known whether the honorary pall bearers attended.

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<sup>15</sup> At the time Philip was medical director of the U.S. Navy. His daughter had been married in the house in a big society wedding: *Evening Star*, October 31, 1884. By the time Sally died, Carroll Mercer was known for loose-living and drinking, but he would join the “Rough Riders” in 1899 and go to Cuba with Teddy Rosevelt.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Holker Carroll, Alida’s brother (1839-1905).

<sup>17</sup> Katie gave birth to her last child, Kitty, in March 1895.