

Sarah Virginia Carroll, Countess Esterhazy

Terence Walz



Countess Esterhazy, née Sally Carroll
Undated, probably late-1870s.¹

Part 1 **Youth and Married Life as Mrs. General Griffin**

Sarah Virginia Carroll, called Sally (variously Sallie), the second eldest daughter born to Sally Sprigg and William T. Carroll, was born on the last day of August 1837 at their home on the corner of F and 18th Streets. She had been preceded by Violetta Lansdale Carroll, born in 1829, and then by two sons, the eldest being Samuel Sprigg Carroll, known as Sprigg in the family and by friends, later a famous general in the Civil War, and by William Thomas Carroll, Jr., her father's namesake and an endearing boy destined for a tragic end. The family had moved two years earlier from Capitol Hill to a larger house on the corner of F Street, just two blocks from the White House. It was a gift from her father, Samuel Sprigg, former governor of Maryland and a wealthy planter in nearby Prince George's County, Maryland.

Sally grew up attended by enslaved servants and later by freeborn Irish ones. She may have been educated at home but very likely at the private school for young ladies run by Miss

Sarah Hogan, a woman, as noted in a article in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, as a woman of sound experience and high social position.² Her school was located on F Street between 13th and 14th Streets and students were taught English, mathematics, and French – a language that would have been useful for Sally in her later years – as well as drawing and needlework. Sally may also have learned to play the Chickering piano that the Carrolls had installed in the south parlor room at their home which many young women of well-to-do prominent families did, and she may have been enrolled in the dance classes of Monsieur Labbé that her elder sister Violetta had excelled at.³ Both she and her younger sister Alida were excellent horsewomen, and both must have been given riding lessons if they were not trained by the family’s enslaved coachmen. It is likely that the Carrolls kept a horse or horses for them in the house stable.⁴

MISS S. HOGAN'S
English and French Boarding and Day School for
Young Ladies.
F street, between 13th and 14th, Washington, D. C.

THE second quarter of this school commences the 24th instant, and expires early in March. Miss Hogan is now prepared to receive five more boarders, and an additional number of day scholars. Pupils entered during the present quarter will only be charged from the date of entrance.

Terms for board, including tuition in English and Mathematics, French, Drawing and Needlework, \$62.50 (in advance) per quarter.

To young ladies desirous of acquiring a thorough knowledge of French this institution offers great advantages.

For further information application may be made to Miss Hogan, the Rev. Dr. Butler, Wm. T. Carroll, Esq., Mr. Justice Wayne, Francis Markoe, Esq., Hon. Hamilton Fish, Hon. J. W. Maury, and Wm. Hogan, jr.

Circulars are furnished at the school. dec 11—dtf

William T. Carroll is among those recommending Miss Hogan’s Young Ladies School, suggesting that his daughters, including Sally, had attended it.
Daily National Intelligencer, December 28, 1852

No letters written by Sally in her youth have surfaced, but when she was twenty-three, she, her mother, and two younger sisters Caroline (Carrie) and Alida visited their brother Sprigg and his new wife at West Point in 1860, where he was then serving as one of the quartermasters of the institute. They seem to have been royally welcomed by the numerous young cadets and were invited to all the balls and races. About them, Carrie dutifully wrote her father, adding at the end, “Sister Sallie says she’ll write soon.”⁵

One has the feeling that Sally’s dance card, even at an early age, was much too full to find time to write home and that she tended to enjoy life to the fullest, as it came. Soon after the Civil War started, she was introduced or reintroduced to Capt. Charles Griffin, a graduate of West Point in 1847, who as captain of the “West Point Artillery,” distinguished himself at the disastrous Battle of Manassas in July. Had they met earlier during her visit to West Point in 1860? They seem to have settled on each other quickly and decided to marry sooner rather than later. In December 1861, their marriage in the Carroll home was attended by President and Mrs.

Lincoln, by Gens. McClellan and Meade (who wrote about it in a letter to his wife), fourteen bridesmaids and fourteen uniformed officers.⁶ It was considered one of the social highlights of the year. Whether Sally was prepared or not, she was launched in the life of a military wife.

President Lincoln took an early interest in Capt. Griffin, perhaps for his energy and decisiveness, and he was soon given promotions.⁷ Sally, now Mrs. Griffin, and at least one of her sisters were invited to the great ball that Mrs. Lincoln gave in February 1862 to show off the newly decorated ballrooms of the White House. Sally's appearance at the ball was among those especially singled out by the *Frank Leslie Illustrated News* in its reporting of the event: "Mrs. Griffin was simply but tastefully attired in a corn-colored silk; headdress of bright crimson flowers. She was the observed of all, as she leaned on the arm of the President." This was, of course, a distinct honor.



Sally "Mrs. Griffin" is pictured on the far right. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* February 22, 1862.

Sally was soon pregnant with her first child, Charles Carroll Griffin, who was born September 10, 1862. Sally's good looks and youth and her marriage to an esteemed Union officer meant that she was often included in the Lincoln entourage when they left Washington to visit the troops at the front. These were conceived as morale boosting events, and the organizers liked to include attractive women in the entourages they sent to the front. Sally's good looks served her well – by then she was known as "one of the best known and most elegant women in Washington"⁸ In March 1863, Sally visited her husband at the front at Stoneman's Station, Virginia, near the Rappahannock River, and again the following year, during a review of the troops at Falmouth, Virginia. Mrs. Carroll and Sally's two younger sisters, Carrie and Alida, were also included.⁹

Sally's son had fallen ill in June 1863, and on July 1 she wrote President Lincoln asking if her husband could be allowed to leave the field to be with them.¹⁰ The family had already

departed for Sharon Springs in upstate New York, a popular spa, and it may have been there that Gen. Griffin went. In any event, he was not present at the Battle of Gettysburg, which took place July 1-3, 1863. On July 14, William Carroll, who had been ailing and remained in Washington, suddenly died, and the distraught family immediately returned to Washington for the funeral, which was held in their home. Both Sprigg and their own enlisted son, Charles, were called home from the field to attend. The interment was at Oak Hill in the Carroll mausoleum, then also sheltering the embalmed body of President Lincoln's son, Willie who had been interred five months earlier. The mausoleum had been purchased in 1857 after two of the Carrolls' sons died, a young boy Howard, only five, and the tuberculosis-plagued young man, William Thomas Carroll, after a lingering illness.

Sally was again pregnant with her second child, William Thomas Griffin (named after his deceased grandfather), who was born on February 3, 1864. However, he only survived five months and was interred in the family mausoleum in August.

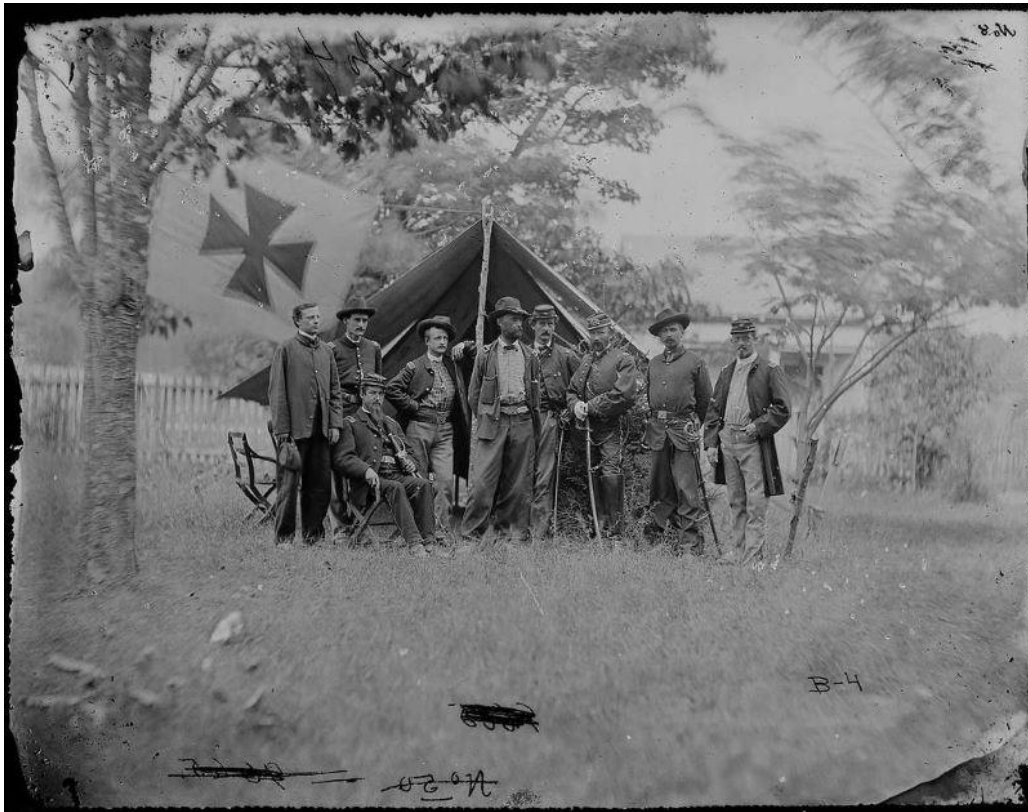
That fall Sally went to visit her husband then stationed in Petersburg, where their photograph was taken in front of the Cummings House on November 2, flanked by members of his staff.¹¹ During this visit on another, soldiers were mustered for a review, and Sally was seen riding on horseback, "looking most charming and making the general the most envied man there," wrote Gen. Gouverneur Warren.¹² Clearly, she had recovered from the death of her infant son.

It was in March 1865 that Sally had a celebrated encounter of sorts with Mary Todd Lincoln. This was during a tour of City Point, Virginia, on the James River just north of Petersburg where the army headquarters were located. Sally, once again visiting the front as part of a presidential entourage, received permission to sit with President Lincoln in his own carriage, while Mrs. Lincoln rode with Mrs. Grant in a separate carriage. When Mrs. Lincoln learned that her husband was alone with Mrs. Griffin, she flew into a rage, shouting at her husband's aide, Gen. Adam Badeau, "Do you know that I never allow the President to see any woman alone?!"



Close up of Sally sitting to the left of Gen. Griffin and his staff

in front of the Cummings House in Petersburg in 1864.¹³



Gen. Griffin (center, next to pole), with his staff of eight. The banner on the left is the badge of the 5th Corps, mentioned in the *Evening Star* report as being suspended with floral baskets from beneath a window of the Carroll house in 1865. Image: Mathew Brady, Library of Congress.

and demanding to be let out of her carriage at once. She was only mollified by the intervention of Gen. Meade who told her he had given permission for Sally to sit with the president.¹⁴

Gen. Griffin, who was admired by his men but not by his colleagues (who bristled at his cantankerous nature), was present at Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April. When news of it reached Washington, a city-wide celebration broke out. *The Evening Star* reported:¹⁵

“The private residence of Mrs. Carroll (mother of General Carroll, mother-in-law of General Griffin, of the 5th Corps), was brilliantly illuminated, and generally admired for the tasteful was it was decorated. The 5th Corps badge and floral baskets were suspended from the windows, while the outside of the building was festooned with large flags and evergreens. A transparency, which was encircled with evergreens, occupied a prominent position on the portico. And bore the inscription “Griffin.”

On May 24, Gen. Griffin led the 5th Corps in the Grand Army March down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington.

Gen. Griffin remained in the army until he was mustered out, but he was not content to stay at home with Sally. He was briefly assigned as commander of the Department of Maine, and then in 1866 accepted a position as assistant commissioner for the Freedman's Bureau in Texas under Gen. Sheridan. Sally and their young son Charles joined him at his post in Galveston. For a year Gen. Griffin led a tumultuous struggle to enforce Reconstruction laws in Texas. In 1867 he was appointed military governor of the Fifth District, covering Texas and Louisiana, but shortly before he could take up his position in New Orleans, he and his son succumbed in September to yellow fever in Galveston. Sally escaped catching the fever and left after the funeral service in Galveston to join her mother in Newport, Rhode Island, where she was staying at the DeBlois Cottage for the summer season.¹⁶ Three months later, on December 28, the bodies of her husband and four-year-old son were brought by train down from New York (to which they had been shipped). Gen. Griffin was given a full military funeral, both bodies first placed on a specially erected catafalque outside the railroad station in Washington. There they were met by his brother-in-law Gen. Carroll and Gen. Porter of General Grant's staff. Flanked by guards on either side, two carriages, drawn by white horses, one carrying the body of Gen. Griffin and the other his son, proceeded up Pennsylvania Avenue, followed by a horse, bearing the sword of the deceased, the stirrups bearing a reversed pair of boots, to St John's Church where they were met by Gen. Grant, Sherman, and other generals. They then proceeded in carriages to Oak Hill Cemetery where a service was given in the cemetery chapel. The interment in the Carroll Mausoleum was private, attended by Sally, her mother and other members of the family.¹⁷ Thus ended the first chapter in Sally's giddy, melodramatic life. She was thirty years old.

¹ Source: Maine Historical Society, John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 12, Photo Album, Family Relatives. The back of the photograph is written in pencil: "Carroll relative?"

² *Daily National Intelligencer*, September 13, 1852

³ Violetta Carroll had been crowned queen of the ball in 1845 at M. Labbé's classes: Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Court Circles of the Republic: Or, the Beauties and Celebrities of the Nation, Illustrating Life and Society Under Eighteen Presidents, Describing the Social Features of the Successive Administrations from Washington to Grant* (Philadelphia Publishing Company, 1872), 376-77.

⁴ Sally's horsemanship is attested in several Civil War memoirs (see further on); Alida Carroll is said in one Brown family tale to have met Gen. Brown out horseback; in 1846, Carroll was taxed for owning a carriage: National Archives, Corporation of Washington Tax Book, Wards 1 & 2, 1845; William Carroll offers a four-seated barouche "newly new" for sale in 1862: *Evening Star*, August 26, 1862, p. 3.

⁵ Carrie Carroll to William T. Carroll, August 21, 1860, Maine Historical Society Library, John Marshall Brown Papers, Box 18A, Folder 2 "Carroll Family, Anna Ella Carroll."

⁶ *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade: Major-general United States Army*, vol. 1 (C. Scribner's sons, 1913), 235.

⁷ On April 29, 1862 Lincoln wrote Gen. McClellan asking him "if it would derange or embarrass your operations" if he appointed Capt. Griffin a brigadier general of volunteers; McClellan responded in May that it would not, and the appointment was confirmed by the Senate in June: "Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Volume 5 [Oct. 24, 1861-Dec. 12, 1862]." In the digital collection Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/lincoln5>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed November 12, 2024.

⁸ Adam Badeau, *Grant in Peace* (Hartford, CT: Scranton & Co., 1897), 357.

⁹ Meade's Letters, *op. cit.*, 364; also reported in *Evening Star*, April 10, 1963, p. 3.

¹⁰ Library of Congress, Abraham Lincoln Letters, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal2498200/>. Her letter seems not to have been acknowledged or responded to.

¹¹ <http://www.petersburgproject.org/blog-and-updates/newly-identified-photograph-of-gen-charles-griffin-and-staff-at-petersburg>.

¹² Taylor, E. Gifford. (1932). *Gouverneur Kemble Warren: the life and letters of an American soldier, 1830-1882*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 200.

¹³ <http://www.petersburgproject.org/cummings-house.html>.

¹⁴ The incident is described in detail in Adam Badeau, *Grant in Peace: From Appomattox to Mount McGregor. A Personal Memoir* (Hartford: Scranton, 1887), 356-58.

¹⁵ *Evening Star*, April 12, 1865, p. 2. Sally was reimbursed \$96.98 for funeral expenses in Galveston by the War Department in December 1869, and \$60.55 for shipping two trunks of personal items from Galveston to Washington: Executive Documents, House of Representative, 2nd Session 1868-70 (Washington GPO 1870), Executive Document #78, Contingent Fees of the War Department, p. 58.

¹⁶ *Flakes Bulletin* (Galveston, Texas), October 16, 1867, 8.

¹⁷ *Evening Star*, December 28, 1867, p. 4.