ELIZA
DILLON
TALIAFERRO
PORTRAIT OF A FRONTIER WIFE

RENA N. COEN
On a day in November, 1828, a pretty, dark-haired young woman arrived at Fort Snelling to begin a sojourn of about ten years at that remote frontier outpost. She was Elizabeth Dillon Taliaferro (known as Eliza), the recent bride of Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian agent at the St. Peter's Agency at Fort Snelling from 1819, when it was established, to 1839. Little is known about Eliza Taliaferro's life, though a faint picture of her emerges from scattered references in her husband's journals and in the letters and journals of some of his friends. As is often the case for 19th-century women, we do not even know the exact date of her birth, though Lawrence Taliaferro's birth date is well recorded—February 28, 1794—in Whitehall, King's County, Virginia. We do know, however, that she was two or three years older than her husband and therefore was born in 1791 or 1792. We also know that on July 22, 1828, Eliza Dillon married Lawrence Taliaferro in her home in Bedford, Pennsylvania, where her parents, Humphrey and Martha Dillon, kept an inn that was prosperous enough to serve strawberries at Christmas dinner.

Eliza did not leave all her family behind when she traveled west with her new husband. Her brother, Horatio N. Dillon, at some time in the 1820s or 1830s took up residence in St. Louis, from which point he became a frequent visitor to Fort Snelling. Indeed, there seems to have been a good deal of visiting back and forth between brother and sister, which is a detail of some significance in the attribution of an anonymous portrait of Eliza Taliaferro, probably painted in St. Louis in the mid-1830s. It is a portrait that strengthens the indistinct image we have of her and, since it and a companion piece portraying Lawrence Taliaferro were given by family descendants to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1947, there is no doubt as to its subject. However, more about the portrait below.¹


² Dillon compiled a Dakota-English dictionary of some 1,300 words; see H. N. Dillon, “Dictionary of the Sioux Language,” May 30-Aug. 9, 1835, which is vol. 18 of the Lawrence Taliaferro Papers, MHS. The paintings were a bequest from the Taliaferros' grandniece and grandnephew, Virginia Pesch of Clayton, Mo., and John F. Bonner of St. Louis. For an attribution of the portrait of Lawrence Taliaferro see Rena N. Coen, “Taliaferro Portrait: Was it Painted by Catlin?” Minnesota History 42 (Winter, 1971): 295-300.

Dr. Coen, professor of art history at St. Cloud State University, has written books on painter Alexis Jean Fournier and on painting and sculpture in Minnesota as well as exhibition catalogs and numerous articles for art and history journals. Her most recent book is The Paynes: Edgar & Elsie, American Artists (1988).
beds.” Eliza, who presumably shared his bed, must have been just as uncomfortable as the hired men and the major, though he did not think it necessary to mention his wife in his complaint to Clark. The house and the agency buildings were commodious enough, Taliaferro conceded, but “they were constructed at an early period, and of materials entirely unseasoned, and hastily put together.” Things apparently did not improve much, for four years later he was again trying to get money for repairs, pointing out that previous improvements had “been formed from my own private funds.” He insisted that “Means are really necessary to enable me to secure the public property from damage and to shelter me from the violent storms of rain, and snow,” implying, furthermore, that he would no longer be, as earlier, “contented to live more like a Beast than an officer of the Government.”

Taliaferro’s pleas for money to keep his house and the agency buildings in good repair may, possibly, have exaggerated their condition, but even in the best of circumstances life could not have been easy for Eliza under the harsh conditions of frontier life. It is true that the household burdens were lightened for her by the labor of a number of black slaves that Taliaferro had inherited and brought to Fort Snelling in 1825. He hired some of them out as servants to other officers at the garrison but kept some in his own house with Eliza as their mistress. One of them, their servant Harriet Robinson, was married in 1836 at the fort to Dred Scott, the plaintiff in the celebrated Supreme Court decision before the Civil War.

But the poorly built house in the severe northern climate could not have been conducive to the good health of its tenants, especially “during the inclement seasons of the year.” Indeed, on at least two occasions in his journals, which were devoted to the activities and accounts of the Indian agency and rarely noted anything of a personal nature, Taliaferro referred quite matter-of-factly to the indispositions of his wife: “Mrs. T. taken very sick at 3 o’clock this morning[.] Violent pain,” he wrote on November 18, 1835, adding his own diagnosis of “a Plurelic affaction.” And on March 23, 1836, after noting that another Fort Snelling cow had died and that the express from Prairie du Chien was overdue, he wrote again, “Mrs. T. with violent inflammatory sore throat medical aid but of little service.” She eventually recovered from these illnesses, but like many other women who lived at frontier outposts, Eliza aged rapidly. A visitor of 1835, the sharp-penned, observant English-born geologist and adventurer, George William Featherstonhaugh, described her as “a Venus un peu passé,” though he added that Mrs. Iron Cutter (using the English translation of the Italian name, Taliaferro), “must have been very handsome.” He added that she showed him some “very handsome Indian dresses made of doe skin by a half breed Sioux woman,” surmising that “these dresses are embroidered so neatly that I imagine they have been taught the art by the French.”

THERE WERE, of course, good times as well as hardships. Besides the presence of interesting guests like Featherstonhaugh, whom the Taliaferros entertained more than once at dinner at their home, Eliza occa-

---

Taliaferro’s map of the Fort Snelling area

---

3 Map reproduced in James B. Rhoads, “The Fort Snelling Area in 1835,” Minnesota History 35 (March, 1956): 25–27; the original is number 540 in the cartographic records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C.


5 Featherstonhaugh, Journal, vol. 6, p. 115, Sept. 16, [1835], George William Featherstonhaugh and Family Papers, microfilm copy, MHS, original in Albany (N.Y.) Institute of History and Art; Eliza’s handsomeness was also mentioned by Col. John H. Bliss, “Reminiscences of Fort Snelling,” MHS Collections (1894), 6:340. All of the major’s journals cited here are in the Taliaferro Papers.
 occasionally accompanied her husband on pleasant visits in
the surrounding countryside to check on the Indians in
his charge. On Sunday, June 21, 1835, for example, the
couple “rode out to Lake Calhoun . . . on horse back 7
miles” to see the Indians at the agricultural establish­
ment there. “They have much corn & potatoes
planted,” the Taliaferro journals tell us. And again, a
few months later, on September 4 Taliaferro noted that
“I visited Lakes Harriet and Calhoun with Mrs. T—o,
Mr. Dillon and Lt Wood” to see the unfinished mission
school for Dakota at Lake Harriet, a place he describes
as “a beautiful Lake . . . 6½ miles NW of Fort Snelling
and the Sioux Agency. . . . a thick and beautiful wood
skirts this location” to make it “indeed a rural spot.”
Taliaferro’s obvious enjoyment of the natural scene
around Fort Snelling, an enjoyment Eliza apparently
shared, is recorded again in a journal entry for October
10, 1835. “Fine Scenery,” he observed, “beautiful coun­
try, excelling water, incomparible climate for general
health and an open field for sports men—who have
good Dogs.” Moreover, the “beautiful lakes” were
“abounding in fish of almost every description for a
Northern climate.” He was even enthusiastic about the
“salubrity of this climate for 6 or 7 months of the year
[which] may be said not to be surpassed on the face of
the habitable Globe . . . either for health or as an ob­
ject of enterprise.” (A few weeks later, however, on
October 29, when the Minnesota winter had blown its
first icy blasts, he changed his mind about the salubri­
ous climate and complained that it made him ill.)

But even in the winter there were pleasant evenings
at home. Eliza had a piano, perhaps the first one in the
Minnesota country, and she was known as an accom­
plished player. Another visitor, the Frenchman Joseph
N. Nicollet, mathematician, explorer, map maker, as­
tronomer, and talented musician, wrote of Eliza’s pro­
ficiency on the piano as well as of the Taliaferros’ warm
hospitality. During the long winter nights of 1836 that
Nicollet spent as a lodger in their house, he would play
the violin while Eliza accompanied him on the piano.

7 Taliaferro journal, Oct. 10, 1835.
Frenchman’s faithful nurse: “Mr. N when low spirited
did not forget his sister as he called her—Mrs. Ta­
iaferro—as he found her at Bedford [Pennsylvania]
and passed the winter with us; and it was well he did,
for he had to be carefully nursed and had the best
medical attendance, Mrs. T dressing his blisters and
acting faithfully the good Samaritan.”

The Taliaferros felt close enough to this man of
many talents to tease him about his dedication to ex­
ploring and mapping the upper Mississippi valley,
much as they encouraged him to do so. Taliaferro later
recalled one conversation with Nicollet particularly
well: “Could he,” Nicollet asked, “go to the source of
the Mississippi[?] Yes sir . . . Well, said he with a pleas­
ant smile, You Americans beat da dev. Suppose I say
can I go to h—ell. You say yes[?] Here his friend Mrs.
T— remarked, None of us will send you that route if we
can prevent it. Well, then, Madam, change my route to
the upper Mississippi.” Shortly thereafter Nicollet ex­
plored Lake Itasca, identified only four years earlier by
Henry Rowe Schoolcraft as the source of the Mississippi
River. Later, as an expression of friendship and esteem,
Nicollet gave Eliza a small map he had drawn of the
area, which he requested back temporarily to serve as a
guide in completing his large, accurately detailed chart
of the region. He neglected, however, to return the
small keepsake to Eliza and, after his death, this trea­
sured memento of her Minnesota years was lost.

IT IS POSSIBLE that Eliza’s household at the St. Pe­
ter’s Agency also included, at some time, Lawrence
Taliaferro’s mixed-blood daughter, Mary. During the
1820s Taliaferro had formed a liaison with a Dakota
woman, whose name has not come down to us, the
daughter of the Mdewakanton chief, Cloud Man. Ta­
iaferro’s only child was born at the St. Peter’s Agency
on August 17, 1828, a few weeks after Taliaferro mar­
rried Eliza in Pennsylvania. The records are vague on
the subject but seem to suggest that the girl grew up at
the agency and that, in time, Taliaferro sent her to the
Indian mission school at Lake Harriet, which he helped
establish with the missionary brothers Samuel W. and
Gideon H. Pond. The agent represented Mary’s claim
as a “half-breed” for land and annuities under the In­
dian treaty of 1837. When he left the agency, he ar­
ranged for 11-year-old Mary to live in the home of Sam­
uel Pond at the Lake Harriet mission, writing “if you
can prevail upon Mary (& she seems some willing) to
remain with you and Mrs. Pond, it would afford me
consolation, and pleasure. I should be willing to pay
you . . . her board[,] clothing, and tuition. In time she
may from habit and instruction in household matters
be able to assist Mrs. P—.” Eventually, Mary Taliaferro
married Warren Woodbury, a soldier at Fort Snelling,
who fought at Vicksburg and died of yellow fever dur­
ing the Civil War, leaving her with small children to
care for. It appears that Taliaferro kept in touch with
his daughter and was concerned for her welfare, but
whether she ever lived in the house with him and Eliza
is unclear. Equally unclear is Eliza’s relationship with
her husband’s acknowledged daughter, whose existence
was certainly no secret at the agency.

At some time in the spring or summer of 1838 Eliza
returned to her home in Pennsylvania. It seems she did
not come back during the next year to Fort Snelling.
Perhaps life at the frontier finally proved too much for
her and she decided to wait for her husband in the
East. A little over a year later, Lawrence Taliaferro

Joseph N. Nicollet, from a painting on ivory

150 MINNESOTA HISTORY
resigned his commission as Indian agent at Fort Snelling and, after stopping in St. Louis on the way, he rejoined his wife on August 12, 1839, in Bedford, where the couple spent the rest of their days.

Eliza's home in Bedford was very different from the small stone dwelling at the St. Peter's Agency. One of the handsomest buildings in town, it was designed like the elegant houses of Major Taliaferro's Virginia boyhood. It featured the tall, double chimneys characteristic of the Virginia mansions he remembered and boasted an elaborate railed cornice on the exterior and a magnificent curved staircase inside. There is a story that the timber for the house was cut from trees at his boyhood home, sawed into various lengths, brought to Bedford, and stacked on the lot to air dry for several years before the carpenters' work began. The builders' labors were probably supervised by Eliza's parents, who gave the land to the couple. In addition to the main house, the Taliaferros' Bedford place also boasted several "dependencies" considered essential to a gentleman's residence. These included a stable, two outdoor privies, a smokehouse, and servants' quarters. A fire at the main house in March, 1865, was confined to the second floor; though the house itself and most of the furniture was saved, the library, containing many of Taliaferro's private papers and journals, was lost. After a brief illness, Major Taliaferro died in the Bedford house on January 20, 1871. In ill health, Eliza continued to live there until her own death on March 29, 1875. Both she and her husband lie in the graveyard of the Bedford Presbyterian church in a small brick crypt topped by a marble slab. It is inscribed with one name—Taliaferro.

THE IMAGE of Eliza Taliaferro that emerges from these scanty records is a pale and shadowy one. It would remain so were it not for the three-quarter-length portrait of her in the art collection of the Minnesota Historical Society, a portrait that adds a strong visual presence to the faint written one (see cover). The painting represents Eliza standing in a landscape and pulling on a glove in an elegant gesture. Dressed formally and with her hair carefully arranged in the current fashion, she confronts the viewer almost directly with a candid and straightforward glance. This portrait is quite different from an earlier one of Eliza, now in the New Britain Museum of American Art in Con-
necticut, which was possibly painted on the occasion of her marriage. It depicts a younger woman and is painted with a much looser brush. Smiling happily at the viewer, she is seated in a chair whose curved arm gracefully opposes the curve of the shawl thrown over her left shoulder. Here too the artist is unknown. Both paintings are unsigned, and no attempt at attributing the earlier one will be made here. The later picture, however, bears such close stylistic similarities to the early work of the Missouri artist George Caleb Bingham (1811-79) that an attribution to him ought to be considered. Though no documentary evidence has been found linking Eliza Taliaferro with Bingham, she visited St. Louis, where he worked off and on, frequently enough to make such a connection tenable.

Aside from opportunity, the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro is very characteristic of Bingham's early paintings, especially during the mid-1830s when she would have been most likely to have visited St. Louis. In striving to capture the reality of the sitter's personality, a skill that contemporaries admired even in the young Bingham, there is a precise definition of planes and the firm, clear draughtsmanship that bears his stamp. Indeed, in 1835, a local admirer noted that Bingham was sometimes too faithful a draughtsman to please the conceit of the sitter. The hard modeling and exact delineation of form also speak of a young artist not yet completely sure of himself. Nevertheless, the painting exhibits a certain self-confidence, an assurance that is also apparent in the artist's self-portrait of 1835, painted when Bingham was only 24 years old. Here, too, is a crystalline quality of drawing and the same solid definition of form that appears in the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro. Beyond that, however, particularly in the self-portrait, there is a depth of psychological probing that points to an artist of major talent.

The sharpness of execution and the rather harsh color contrast also reveal the hand of a self-taught artist, as indeed Bingham was at this time. Another perceptive but not unsympathetic contemporary critic, commenting on Bingham's work in the Jeffersonian Republican of January 2, 1836, wrote that the artist's success in portrait painting "is all the result of perseverance and his own genius, no master's hand directed his pencil, no wise head pointed out his faults—he alone designed and executed. His portraits are invariably good," he went on, "yet there is a want of skill in coloring evinced, which does not disclose a want of genius but of instruction."

The young painter was well aware of his own deficiencies, writing in a letter to his fiancée, Elizabeth Hutchison, in 1835 that "though I generally succeed in pleasing others, it is but seldom I can please myself—in fact no work has yet gone from my hands with which I have been perfectly satisfied . . . I have yet," he added, "scarcely learned to paint the human face, after having accomplished which, I shall have ascended but one step toward that eminence to which the art of painting may be carried."

That he was trying hard indeed to paint the human face is evident in the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro as well as in a number of his other portraits depicting women from the second half of the 1830s. Unavailable for reproduction here since they are in private collections are the significantly similar portraits of Mrs. William Franklin Dunnica (Martha Jane Shackleford), about 1838-39, one of the very few of this period that, like the portrait of Eliza Taliaferro, is placed in a landscape setting; of Mrs. Lewis Baumgardner (Hetty Ann Halstead), 1839; and, closest of all to the picture of Eliza, the 1837 portrait of Mrs. David Steele Lamme (Sophia

[Image of George Caleb Bingham, self-portrait]
Woodson Hickman) and her son, William Wirt. This too includes a landscape, though seen through a window (in the manner of the early American limners), rather than surrounding the sitters. The firmness of drawing here, the solid structure of face and form, the solemn concentration of gaze, and even such details of costume as the treatment of Sophia's fringed shawl are unmistakably the work of the same hand that portrayed Eliza Taliaferro.

Stylistic similarities to Bingham's work also appear in the landscape setting of the Taliaferro portrait, especially when compared with the artist's later scenes of raftsmen on the Missouri River. There is not only the "layering" of the landscape planes but the very characteristic detail of the silhouetted stump of a tree branch that appears to the left, above Eliza's head. Contrasting with the lush foliage, this stump points downward toward the subject of the composition, echoing the design of Eliza's tidy ringlets. And even though the landscape background may have been just a studio drop, this detail constitutes the type of grace note that is typical of Bingham's special touch.

By the time Bingham painted the portrait of Mrs. John Fletcher Darby (Mary Wilkinson) in 1839, he had had the benefit of studying art briefly in Philadelphia and, possibly, of having visited in New York where he could observe—and learn from—the work of other artists. Such opportunities were hardly available to him on the Missouri frontier where his own untutored work was probably the best he had ever seen. The 1839 portrait of Mrs. Darby reveals a noticeable advance in Bingham's ability to achieve a smoother, less abrupt, transition in tone and value in the portrayal of the human form and, therefore, a more naturalistic effect. The picture retains, however, the firmness and simplicity of his earlier portraits.

When compared with the increased sophistication of the portrait of Mrs. Darby, Eliza Taliaferro's picture, its strength and monumentality notwithstanding, displays a certain primitive provincialism. The combination of these qualities of pictorial power and naive imagery indicates that the portrait was probably painted at some time before Bingham's art lessons in 1838.

Since the artist was painting in St. Louis in 1836 for the longest continuous period in the decade of the 1830s, one can legitimately surmise that that year is the date of the Eliza Taliaferro portrait. She could easily have visited her brother in St. Louis during 1836, and it may, indeed, have been Horatio Dillon who introduced Eliza to George Caleb Bingham. Dillon occasionally liked to draw himself and may have been likely to know other St. Louis artists. Whoever furnished the introduction, the result was a portrait of both artistic merit and historical significance. We are much indebted to the artist's brush for bringing to life this image of a long-vanished lady of the Minnesota frontier.