

Biographical/Historical note

Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson (1737-1801) is described by author Elizabeth Fries Ellet as having had "... a mind richly endowed with intellectual gifts..." (Ellet, p. 220). She was a leading woman in colonial Philadelphia and an avid writer, who composed poems, songs, travel accounts and other writings, referencing literature, natural history, religion, politics and current events. Beginning around 1765, she also hosted Saturday soirees, or salons, in her home, during which she and her friends, who included Benjamin Rush, Jacob Duché, Francis Hopkinson, Nathaniel Evans, John Dickinson, Benjamin West and others, discussed music, literature and politics.

Elizabeth was born on February 3, 1737, the youngest daughter of a prosperous Philadelphia physician and his wife, Dr. Thomas Graeme and Ann Diggs Graeme. She was raised both in Philadelphia and on a country estate that was situated twenty miles outside of the city near Horsham, Pennsylvania, called Graeme Park. Elizabeth was educated by her mother and later by private tutors. She developed a keen intellect and was affiliated with some of the brightest minds of the day, including Reverend Richard Peters and William Smith, who were both involved in the creation of the Pennsylvania Academy, which would become the University of Pennsylvania.

Elizabeth was engaged to William Franklin, Benjamin Franklin's son, in 1754. In 1759, while he was away in England, he broke off their engagement and married another woman. Author Martha Slotten argued that this event served as the primary catalyst for Elizabeth's literary career. It was at this point she began writing poetry in earnest and, in 1760; she translated Abbe Francois Fénelon's *The Adventures of Télémachus*.

From 1764 to 1765, Elizabeth travelled abroad with Reverend Richard Peters of Christ Church. She was well received by London society, and while she was there she met author Laurence Sterne, Thomas and Juliana Penn, Dr. John Fothergill and King George III, among others. She kept an astute journal of her trip. Elizabeth returned to Philadelphia in 1765, when she received word of her mother's death. Shortly thereafter, her sister Jane died, leaving Elizabeth as guardian of her two children, Anna and John.

In 1771, Elizabeth secretly married Henry Hugh Fergusson, a Scotsman, who was an acquaintance of Benjamin Rush. Then, in 1772, her father died, leaving her and Henry his estate. Elizabeth's relationship with Henry grew problematic when the Revolutionary War broke out, as Henry was a staunch loyalist. In fact, in 1778, he returned to England; leaving Elizabeth who refused to join him behind. Prior to his leaving however, Henry persuaded Elizabeth on two occasions to deliver letters on behalf of the loyalist cause, which brought her own patriotism into question. As a result of Henry's allegiance, Graeme Park and nearly all of Elizabeth's other inheritance was confiscated. To get her property back, Elizabeth "... peppered the state legislature with petitions of her own formulation until its members... passed a special act revesting Graeme Park in herself," (Ousterhout, p. xviii).

Despite the personal turmoil she suffered toward the end of the 1770s, around this time Elizabeth entered the most productive period of her literary career. She published her first poem, "Ode to Spring," in *Pennsylvania Magazine* in 1776. Over the next sixteen years, she published an additional twenty-seven poems in various Philadelphia journals and newspapers. She often used the pseudonym Laura.