

# Spanish Lessons: The Translation of Sally McKean

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### Abstract

This poster will examine Sally McKean as she moved from life as a prominent young woman in the “republican court” of early national Philadelphia into her marriage to an aristocratic Spanish diplomat. Born in 1777, Sally was the daughter of Thomas McKean – Representative of Delaware in the Continental Congress, Signer of the Declaration of Independence, Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, and Governor of Pennsylvania – and his second wife, Sarah Armitage. In 1798 she married Carlos Maria Martínez de Irujo y Tacón, the Minister of Spain to the United States. The marriage obliged Sally to negotiate a series of transitions, which are in turn detailed in the poster: from Presbyterianism to Catholicism; from Philadelphia to Washington to Spain, from an evolving American elite to an established Spanish aristocracy, and from the Governor’s daughter to the Marquise de Casa Irujo. Family correspondence and the writings of contemporary observers help to trace these transitions, these translations, which will shed light more broadly on female education, the role of women in the politics of the New Nation, and the influence of the Revolution on personal identity. Ultimately, the influence from her family, their ambition and lifestyle, influenced Sally and eased her transition into her new life.



Sally (McKean) Irujo, 1804

### Introduction

Sally McKean married Carlos Irujo in April of 1798 after converting to Catholicism just 2 days prior. It may seem strange that this “daughter of America” would permanently join herself to a Catholic, foreign aristocrat like Irujo, as in many ways the man represented much of what the new nation was trying to stray away from like foreign influence and elitism. While this may have been true for the nation as a whole, by analyzing deeper the lives and beliefs of the McKean family and how they may have influenced their daughter, the reasons for and acceptance of this union become more apparent.

### Origins

The Scots-Irish Presbyterian ancestors of Thomas McKean fled Scotland and settled in the state of Delaware, and in New London Thomas McKean was born. During his time in politics, McKean was a powerful force in both Delaware and Pennsylvania, serving a number of positions throughout his career. He represented Delaware in the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1776 and also 1778 to 1783, serving as president of the congress at the height of the American Revolution in 1781. He was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and played an active role in the ratification of the United States Constitution, and the man also served as Governor of Pennsylvania for three terms. McKean was a trusted advisor throughout the Revolution and during the early days of the Republic. He made a life for himself and his family and though not outwardly sentimental, he was passionate about many things, his career and his family taking presence.

McKean married his second wife, a “tall, shapely, outgoing and independent” woman named Sarah Armitage, in 1774, soon after the death of his first wife Mary Borden. McKean’s first child with Sarah was named after her mother, but she was known to everyone as Sally. Daughter to two well-to-do individuals in their own rights, Sally was born in Philadelphia on July 8, 1777, during the heat of the revolution. Sally grew into a beautiful young woman, with dark hair and blue eyes, she was a sight for all young men in the city and beyond. It is important to recognize that Philadelphia served as the capital of Pennsylvania and also the nation’s capital from 1790-1800. This made the city both a hub for the early Republic’s social life, but also the nation’s political center, where important men from both American lands and abroad gathered. Sally and her friends were part of Philadelphia’s inner circle of Republican beauties, and like many young ladies, the girls enjoyed gossiping about the other social elite of the city. Sally was outgoing and charming, and was said to have “acerbic wit and sharp tongue.” Not only was she beautiful and charismatic, but she was fashionable, dressing in the latest styles that any Republican woman would envy. However, during a time in the nation where European ways and elaborate anything were often seen as unfavorable by many, the question arose of whether this daughter of a strong pro-independence supporter was in favor of the same simplicity that others advocated for.

### The Politics of Fashion: Republican simplicity or foreign extravagance?

The time of the revolution and after proved to be an era where fashion and politics were easily intertwined and the way in which one dressed could have been representative of their politics. The want to stray away from European tendencies was ever-present during this time, and it was thought that one should show what can be referred to as “republican simplicity”. Many Americans in the 1780s particularly were looking to be more frugal and regulate commerce, and they saw anything foreign being brought in as a threat to the economy and social order. Fashion that united “convenience, simplicity, and neatness” was considered the most elegant in the new nation. Extravagant garb also further intensified class divisions and ideas similar to aristocracy, which is not what a nation in support of equality would have easily supported. The more luxurious fashions and those individuals sporting them could easily have been seen as unreplicable for the fact that they used foreign products, based off of foreign fashions, or because they gave the upper-class means of expressing their wealth in a time where elitism was often frowned upon.

In 1796, to a small dinner at the house of President Washington with her father, Sally wore a blue satin dress trimmed with white crepe and flowers and a white richly embroidered petticoat. Would this be representative of republican simplicity? Fashions varied, and while some individuals wore simple attire, others favored “high metropolitan style”. The truth is that many Republican women probably envied the fashions of women like Sally. While some may have thought she was too extravagant, others may have seen these women as “perfection of America”, displaying their fashions in order to solidify their high status in society. For many, behavior and manners outweighed fashion.

People needed to have a balance between fashion and taste in society, but also had to dress their part depending on who was watching. In a portrait done in 1804, Sally is sporting a gown in the popular empire style. As Haulman mentions, “Women who donned Grecian gowns embraced their union of European luxury and Roman simplicity as an expression of status and social power that indicated their identities as women ‘of sense’ rather than ‘of fashion’ — the taste and education that was code for wealth.” It is evident that Sally loved fashion and often took advantage of her family’s wealth to display her status to the other elite of Philadelphia society. However, she knew there had to be a balance in order to be fully respected in the new nation.

### McKean Family Prestige and Pomposity

With power came wealth and prestige for the McKean family. They enjoyed rising social status, and their lifestyle reflected this. McKean enforced the seizing of the property of Tory sympathizers, and he directly benefited from this decision. Sometime soon after 1783 and through public auction, acquired the fine and ornate home of Tory sympathizer Jacob Duche. The home stretched a full city block, and the property also included a coach house and stables. It was three stories, ornately furnished with hand-crafted pieces, and overall a great display of the wealth the McKean family had obtained. Thomas and Sarah also bought a country house for them to escape to when they were not in the city.

The correspondence between Thomas and Sarah during his time travelling also demonstrate some of the luxuries of living this family possessed including servants and slaves. Several times there is mention of a Sarah being dissatisfied with a servant, and Thomas being very concerned about this “inconvenience” for his wife. Thomas also mentions in several letters “Negro Sam”, whom is most likely the keeper of the horses and who often assists in moving the correspondence from one location to the next. Even before McKean was at the height of his political power and wealth, his family seemed to be living a comfortable life, with domestic servants and slaves to assist in their daily activities. Their possessions and house life seem to display a life refrained from what was considered “republican simplicity”.

McKean did not resist mentioning his accomplishments and admirable qualities. He was thought by some to be arrogant and pompous. He even bought a gold-tipped walking stick and got the most notable painters of the time like Gilbert Stuart and Charles Wilson Peale to paint his and his family’s portraits. The overall idea is that McKean may have advocated for more equality and an anti-elitist republic, in theory, but it seems that when it came to his personal life and his family, he did not mind using his money and power to visibly present himself in a way that would distinguish himself as higher status than the majority of the other citizens in the new republic.

Similar is true for his daughter Sally. In 1800 Washington DC became the new capital, and though the city was underdeveloped and desolate, it served as the new center for the social elite and their gatherings. The lack of resources in the capital made it more difficult for the people in Washington to display their wealth through objects and clothing alone, and balls became an important place for the social elite to reinforce their rank. While this was true, the members of society wished also to “differentiate themselves from European elites and to establish a new identity of gentility in which overt aristocratic markers were rejected”. The dance of choice was the minuet, which involves the highest-ranking man and the highest-ranking woman to open the ball by dancing the first minuet followed by the next highest ranking individuals, and so forth, until everyone filtered through. At a party in 1804, Sally refused to dance after not being placed first during the night’s minuet, showing her rejection of newer, more egalitarian practices in the United States.

### Women’s education and New World Connections

For Sally, upbringing and family gave her a one-up in the world of the elite, but her marriage to the Spanish ambassador made her status even higher than before. The connections between husbands and wives at this time shines some light on the changing dynamics of women’s education and how this can impact their relationships with men, especially during and after the Revolution. During the 1770’s and into the 19th century, there was an idea that women’s education should be more widespread because they would be raising and teaching the next generation of Americans and should educate themselves for the benefit of early republican society. Education in general was the “core component to nation building.” Women and men alike were expected to participate in the cultural work of nationalism, which might include reading about current events in newspapers, looking at periodicals, almanacs, or reading histories. It seemed to be an advancement for women in one hand, but the core ideas of the enlightenment still had patriarchal implications.

While women were to be educated and well versed in nation-building, these studies were encouraged not to benefit themselves but to help the new nation as a whole and successfully demonstrate civic virtue. The thought was that women were to dedicate themselves to the welfare of their families and stay in their places in society. A woman being heavily involved in politics would be neglecting their domesticity, and thus rejecting their duties as women in republican society. These women, especially the female elite, were also supposed to refine men’s manners and morals and become “faithful friends and agreeable companions” to their husbands.

It was easier for elite women to gain access to both education in general and also the insights that their husbands provided them about the nation’s current events and possibly political happenings. For Sarah and Thomas McKean this was true as the man often sent his wife letters notifying her of important events and verdicts to his trials as well as sending newspapers and important papers, trusting his wife with duties beyond domesticity in some ways.

During the early years of the Republic especially, elite women also often served as connections between powerful foreign countries and the United States as a budding nation. One of the easiest ways for foreigners gain access to America’s opportunities would have been to marry into a family of high status in the nation’s society. Philadelphia in the 1790’s would have been the ideal place for foreigners to find that link. By marrying Sally, Carlos Irujo could gain behind the scene access to the inner workings of the American government, policies, and political strategies of the men that worked closely with Thomas McKean, his father-in-law. He soon found himself intertwined with the nation’s government and especially the conflicts that accompanied foreign policies in America. Thomas McKean also would have reaped benefits from his son-in-law as the United States had increasing relations and negotiations with the Spanish. He was very accepting and protective of Irujo in the years following his daughter’s marriage.



Philadelphia

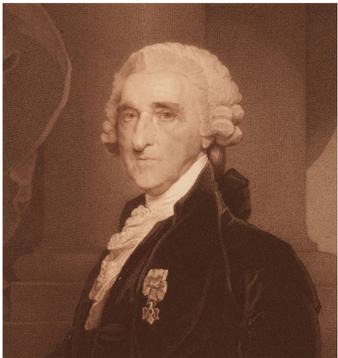
### Threats to Democracy: Anti-Catholicism and wariness towards foreign influence

Anti-Catholicism had a long presence in the United States. The country was founded and settled by Protestants and built on ideals that followed Protestantism. During the years following independence from Britain, the nation wanted to resist anything that could harm democracy. To many, Catholics and their devotion to the pope and the influence he had over the people was a threat to the new republic. The thought was that Catholics could not think for themselves and would vote according to what they thought the pope would want.

During the 1790s and especially by Federalists, there was a similar distaste towards foreigners. The French in particular seemed to pose a threat as the Federalists feared the political radicals coming over during the French Revolution. In reaction to potential threats like this, in 1795 Federalists under the Adams administration extended the residency requirement for naturalization from one to five years. This requirement would then be further extended by the Naturalization Act of 1798 that pushed the necessary period of residence to be a citizen from 5 years to 14 years, lessening the rights of these immigrants who were not to be considered citizens. Non-citizens, of course could not participate in elections, so they could not vote against the Federalist party. The Alien and Sedition Acts permitted the prosecution of anyone of an enemy nation considered a threat and banned the publishing of writings opposing the government or the president. While Don Carlos came to the country as an ambassador to his home country of Spain, his connection to America reigned deeper than just a visitor. He married the daughter of a very powerful and influential man, one that was in the innermost circle of American politics. This could have been a threat to many in the government.

### McKean political straddling

McKean’s Republican party was thought to be against elitism, and he often advocated immensely for freedom of speech for the people. However, ultimately he believed that only educated individuals should truly have a voice in politics. The Alien and Sedition Acts created by the Federalists in power were a jab at the right for freedom of speech, and up until this point, McKean was opposed to them. The summer of 1798 editor of the *Philadelphia Gazette*, William Cobbett, picked a fight with Carlos Irujo, accusing him of being too influenced by the politics of the French. In response, McKean took action and wanted Cobbett, who renounced his English citizenship, to be kicked out of the country under the Alien Act. When this failed, he convicted the man of libel because he was “tending to defame the.. King, envoy and minister [of Spain]...” In end there was never enough evidence to convict Cobbett.



Thomas McKean

That same year, Irish men gathered in the courtyard of St. Mary’s Church in an attempt to get signatures to petition against the Alien Bill. Conflict broke out, and ultimately a few of the men were handcuffed and taken to the mayor’s house, being charged for disrupting the peace. McKean then was said to have burst into the home and ordered the men be freed immediately because they were simply exercising their right to free speech. They were released on bail, paid for by McKean. While previously he wanted to use the Alien Bill against an opponent, now he was defending those opposing it. This seemed to go along with his politics and opinions of freedom of speech, more so than his actions in the Cobbett ordeal.

Overall, McKean’s reactions to both the St. Mary’s Church case and the Cobbett ordeal display varying opinions about the nation and its conflicts. He said he supported freedom of speech and defends protesters like Duane and Reynolds but within the same year tried to acquit a man of libel for something published in the media, using the Alien and Seditious Acts to back his reasoning when he claims to be against everything that these acts represent. Thomas McKean’s politics seemed to fluctuate depending on how he could benefit. In the case with Cobbett, he was defending his son-in-law with whom he can possibly gain more insight and details about foreign affairs with Spain. For the Duane and Reynolds case, by defending them he was gaining political support for upcoming elections from the radicals whom he saw as a potent force but also from other members of the Republican party as a whole.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, Carlos Irujo favored his home of Spain, and plotted against the government of the United States when tensions grew regarding westward expansion into Spanish territory. In 1808, Irujo and Sally left the United States after Carlos was appointed a position on Rio De Janeiro Brazil.

While Sally was disheartened by all the events that led to her and her husband’s departure, she knew this change was inevitable, as she married a man devoted to his work and devoted to his country. She was aware of what a relationship to an important man entailed as she would have seen similar happenings watching her father travel for work her childhood. There is no evidence that shows that this is not the life she wished to live. In a letter written in 1810 from Rio de Janeiro, she tells her sister, “The Ladies, and myself among them, are preparing our dresses for the Princess Carlotta’s birth day which will be celebrating with great pomp in a few days.” Given what is known about the woman, love for splendid social events, gossiping, fashion, and being recognized as part of the social elite, this new life as part of an inner circle of elite “Ladies” seems to suit her quite nicely. In America, the idea of republican simplicity was not seen favorably in the eyes of Sally McKean. She admired fine, elaborate clothing and wanted to display her wealth and status any way possible. She was an elitist and an opportunist at heart, as her father’s life also shows. Thomas McKean’s homelife often contrasted the politics he advocated for, and he often changed viewpoints depending on how he could benefit. Sally’s family and her upbringing prepared her for an ambitious life in a Spanish aristocratic society. She used status and the appeal of her prestigious family to obtain her wealthy and aristocratic husband. While the rest of the nation may have been wary of a foreign man like Irujo, Sally and her father saw him and his connection as an opportunity. Sally sought the very things that the rest of the country resisted. She left her home in search of a life perhaps better for her, in a place where she would no longer simply be Sally McKean, but where she would be termed Sally Maria Theresa, Marchioness of the House of Irujo.

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