

Anna Maria Thornton (- 16 Aug 1865)

The National Intelligencer, August 7, 1835

The first fruit--A circumstance of a shocking character, and what was within a second of time of



ANNA MARIA BRODEAU THORNTON

resulting in the perpetration of a most bloody tragedy, occurred in this city two nights ago, which, viewing it as one of the effects of the fanatical spirit of the day, and one of the immediate fruits of the incendiary publications with which this city and the whole slave-holding portion of the country have been lately inundated, we have concluded it to be our duty to make public. On Tuesday night last, an attempt was made on the life of Mrs. Thornton, of this city, (the much respected widow of the late Dr. Thornton, Superintendent of the Patent Office,) by a young Negro man, her slave, which, from the expressions he used, was evidently inducted by reading the inflammatory publications referred to above. About half past one o'clock, in the dead of the night, Mrs. T's chamber, in which slept herself, her aged mother, and a woman servant, was entered by the Negro, who had obtained access to it by forcing the outer door. He approached the bed of Mrs. T. with an uplifted axe. She was, fortunately, wakened by his step, and still more fortunately the negro woman, the mother of the

man, was also awake. As he approached the bed of her mistress, the latter sprung up, seized and held him, while Mrs. T. escaped from the room, rushed to the door of the next house, the residence of Dr. Huntt, whom she roused by her cries. On reaching the entry of Mrs. T's house, Dr. H. found that the mother of the Negro and succeeded in forcing him out at the back door and locking it. Finding, however, that but one person had come to the assistance of the family, he endeavored again to force an entrance with his axe, and furiously continued his efforts, notwithstanding the party had been strengthened by the presence of a gentleman, who resided with Dr Huntt, and who had also been roused by Mrs. T's cries for help; and it was not until after the arrival of two constables, and hearing their voices as they entered the passage in front, that he desisted and fled. Had they approached the house by the rear, the Negro would have been arrested; but, as it was, he escaped and has not yet been apprehended. During the whole time that he was endeavoring to force a second entrance into the house, he was venting the most ferocious threats, and uttering a tissue of jargon, much of which was a literal repetition of the language addressed to the Negroes by the incendiary publications above referred to. Believing that his bloody purpose was in part at least, if not altogether, the effect of those publications, and that such deeds must be the natural consequence of their dissemination, we have concluded, not, however, without some hesitation, to make the occurrence public, as well for the information of our northern fellow citizens at large, as for that of the Fanatics themselves, who may not be aware of the tendency of their labors.

The National Intelligencer, August 10, 1835

To The Editors

The editorial article in your paper yesterday seems to me to be a matter of more importance than many in our ill-fated City may be disposed to attach to it. If our highly and much respected friend therein mentioned, with all her known and acknowledged kindness, has been on the point of falling a victim to the base and brutal conduct of a negro who had all to thank her for, and nothing to object to, what have the other citizens to expect from the free blacks and slaves that have congregated among us for the last twenty years? It is true, I have seen a notice in your paper from the "Police Officers," but the question is, will they perform the duty pointed out by the laws of the Corporation? I doubt it much. We have, it is true, two or three good and efficient Police Officers in the city; but when this is said, all that truth and justice can approve is said. It is proper, however, that the Public should wait the result of their proceedings, and if they should not prove to be such as they should be, to compel those having the power to remove them from office. To do this, it becomes the duty of every citizen to keep an eye on these officers, and report without delay to the proper authority, each and every neglect that may occur. The safety of ourselves and families is of more importance to the city than the case and idleness of a set of police officers.

The Mayor, it seems to me, has a high and important duty to perform at present, as well as at all other times. I will not in this communication point out what this duty is, but I may do so in another communication if it should be necessary to write it.

I hope our present Mayor will place himself at the head of his police officers, and compel them to do their duty.

To the citizens I would say, "Watch."

A Citizen

Perley's Reminiscences, p. 60

After the death of Dr. Thornton and of his accomplished wife, it became known that she was the daughter of the unfortunate Dr. Dodd, of London, who was executed for forgery in 1777. Her mother emigrated to Philadelphia soon afterward, under the name of Brodeau, and brought her infant daughter with her. In Philadelphia she opened a boarding-school, which was liberally patronized, as she had brought excellent letters of recommendation and displayed great ability as a teacher. The daughter grew up to be a lady remarkable for her beauty and accomplishments and married Dr. Thornton, who brought her to Washington in 1800.

McMahan, Virgil E. *The Artists of Washington, DC, 1796-1996*. The Artists of Washington, Washington, DC, 1995.

THORNTON, ANNA MARIA (nee BRODEAU)

Amateur painter born in Philadelphia, PA, in 1775, she married architect-artist Dr. William Thornton there in 1790. They came to DC in 1794 and she remained in the city until her death in 1865. She had no formal instruction in art but benefitted from the advice and criticism of a number of artists including Gilbert Stuart, she was acquainted with through her husband, the Architect of the U.S. Capitol. Her work consisted primarily of miniatures but she also painted scenes of Monticello and Montpelier. The diary she kept from 1798 until 1865 is one of the most important repositories of information related to the early history and daily life in the Capitol city. Her portrait and one of her husband, both by Gilbert Stuart (1804), are in the collection of the National Gallery of Art. REFS: FIELDING; FORD; PROVINCE.