



# Wondrous Beauty: The Life and Adventures of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte

*Carol Berkin*

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From the award-winning historian and author of *Revolutionary Mothers* (“Incisive, thoughtful, spiced with vivid anecdotes. Don’t miss it.”—Thomas Fleming) and *Civil War Wives* (“Utterly fresh . . . Sensitive, poignant, thoroughly fascinating.”—Jay Winik), here is the remarkable life of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte, renowned as the most beautiful woman of nineteenth-century Baltimore, whose marriage in 1803 to Jérôme Bonaparte, the youngest brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, became inextricably bound to the diplomatic and political histories of the United States, France, and England.

In *Wondrous Beauty*, Carol Berkin tells the story of this audacious, outsized life. We see how the news of the union infuriated Napoleon and resulted in his banning the then pregnant Betsy Bonaparte from disembarking in any European port, offering his brother the threat of remaining married to that “American girl” and forfeiting all wealth and power—or renouncing her, marrying a woman of Napoleon’s choice, and reaping the benefits.

Jérôme ended the marriage posthaste and was made king of Westphalia; Betsy fled to England, gave birth to her son and only child, Jérôme’s namesake, and was embraced by the English press, who boasted that their nation had opened its arms to the cruelly abandoned young wife.

Berkin writes that this naïve, headstrong American girl returned to Baltimore a wiser, independent woman, refusing to seek social redemption or a return to obscurity through a quiet marriage to a member of Baltimore’s merchant class. Instead she was courted by many, indifferent to all, and initiated a dangerous game of politics—a battle for a pension from Napoleon—which she won: her pension from the French government arrived each month until Napoleon’s exile.

Using Betsy Bonaparte’s extensive letters, the author makes clear that the “belle of Baltimore” disdained America’s obsession with moneymaking, its growing ethos of democracy, and its rigid gender roles that confined women to the parlor and the nursery; that she sought instead a European society where women created salons devoted to intellectual life—where she was embraced by many who took into their confidence, such as Madame de Staël, Madame Récamier, the aging Marquise de Villette (goddaughter of Voltaire), among others—and where aristocracy, based on birth and breeding rather than commerce, dominated society.

*Wondrous Beauty* is a riveting portrait of a woman torn between two worlds, unable to find peace in either—one a provincial, convention-bound new America; the other a sophisticated, extravagant Old World Europe that embraced freedoms, a Europe ultimately swallowed up by decadence and idleness. A stunning revelation of an extraordinary age.

## Wondrous Beauty: The Life and Adventures of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte Details

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# **From Reader Review Wondrous Beauty: The Life and Adventures of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte for online ebook**

## **Camille Wilson says**

Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte was one of the first celebrities, female or otherwise, of the United States of America. She had the audacity, in the eyes of a wealthy but controlling father and the mores of the era, to live life on her own terms. This biography is a quick read about a fascinating woman, not only of the 19th century, but for all times! Highly recommended!

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## **Christine says**

A highly readable and accessible biography of a Bonaparte bride whose story exemplifies the difficulty of bridging the complex cultures of late-18th- into 19th-century Europe and United States. Dr. Berkin does a good job of not overly romanticizing her subject, nor does she apologize for or condemn her actions even as she tries to explain them. That, combined with her decision not to bog this book down with more context than necessary (as many biographies tend to do) and excellent use of the commentaries Elizabeth herself left in the margins of many of the letters she received, makes this a worthy book to choose in order to acquaint oneself with the origins of one of the earliest branches of American Bonapartes.

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## **Heather says**

I didn't know much at all about Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte before reading this biography. Definitely an intriguing woman with a ton of ambition and idealistic views. So glad I picked this up, as I love discovering new badass historical women I don't know of!

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## **Christy Sibila says**

An intriguing history of the sister-in-law to Napoleon.

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## **Amanda says**

Very interesting story about a woman I never heard of! It was a great read for anyone interested in American or French history.

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## **Libby says**

**Fabulous piece of history**

What an amazing story about a little known piece of history. I LOVED this! Elizabeth Patterson lived an amazing, albeit sad, life. I enjoyed learning about her and her legacy. Thank you, Carol Berkin!

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### **Jaylia3 says**

Before reading this biography of Betsy Patterson Bonaparte I didn't realize Napoleon Bonaparte had a Baltimore connection, but it's a fascinating story, well told in this book, that encompasses both European and early American history and culture. Betsy met Napoleon's younger brother Jérôme in 1803 while he was in Maryland avoiding military service and the two teenagers fell in love and married within that year, against the wishes of their families and governments. Betsy's strict controlling father did not trust the aristocratically unemployed foreigner, but Betsy was eager to escape the limiting and prosaic social strictures she felt awaited her if she was forced into a more conventional match. Because Betsy and Jérôme were courting during the unsettled period while Americans debated whether to choose sides or remain neutral in the conflict between France and Britain their romance became a political event monitored closely on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the early days of their marriage Betsy and Jérôme enjoyed mingling with the major political players of Washington, where Betsy scandalized party goers with her risqué French fashions, but their happy days did not last long. Napoleon wanted to further his empire building ambitions by arranging a royal marriage for Jérôme, so when the young couple arrived in Europe Napoleon declared their marriage annulled. Unable to stand up to his older brother Jérôme abandoned Betsy, then pregnant with their child, and married the highly titled but much less scintillating Princess Catherine Fredericka Sophia Dorothea of Württemberg to become the king of Westphalia.

Betsy still managed to live a fascinating and intellectually rich life, spending as much time as possible in the great cities and salons of Europe where she was welcomed by luminaries that included Madame de Staël, Madame Récamier, and the goddaughter of Voltaire Marquise de Villette. She taught herself to be a shrewd manager of what fortune she had to support her chosen lifestyle and had high expectations for her son's future, goals he unfortunately for her did not share. Author and history professor Carol Berkin treats Betsy with sympathetic but clear eyed respect by not downplaying her shortcomings. For me one of the most interesting aspects of this very readable book is the way it highlights the evolving differences between European and American cultures.

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### **Kathie says**

The story of a Baltimore girl with high hopes. It's hard to care for any of these characters. Elizabeth had a difficult relationship with her father after her mother died, at least that's the way she saw it. He tried to protect her from making awful choices, at least that's the way he saw it. She was an intelligent, attractive woman who just wanted to LIVE. But not in Baltimore and she was willing to do almost anything to get out of Baltimore and live the good life as long as it was in Europe. By the end of her life there had been betrayals and disappointments aplenty. And it seemed to me that Shakespeare said it well: "The sins of the father (parent) are to be laid upon the children." And then the parent has to deal with them. Still the book gives a pretty clear picture of the life of women in the mid-19th century.

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## Elizabeth S says

This book is one of the absolutely most frustrating books I have ever read, and everyone with whom I've discussed it has said the exact same.

The story of the gorgeous woman from Baltimore who married Napoleon's younger brother sounds fascinating. It really does.

Yet I will make something clear for you from the beginning: Betsy is insanely irritating.

While plenty of historical figures have proven naive yet full of determination, Betsy is simply exhausting, and not in a good way. She dreams of going to France. I don't blame her in the least, because I happen to love France!

But the entire book is just Betsy wanting to go to France and deciding no one else is good enough and they should also go to France because it's her dream that clearly everyone else must share. At one point, she even makes her father look after her son just so she can head to France!

Some may argue Betsy was just doing what was best for her son; I cannot agree. She was fighting for him to receive his rightful inheritance, but it just felt like another thing Betsy was forcing upon her progeny so people could live out the life *she* wanted.

Then, when it came time for her grandchildren to take center stage, there was Betsy, yet again trying to force them to go to France. As a French speaker and general Francophile, I am always ready to encourage people to visit the country if they have a chance. But if someone *doesn't want to go*, then I wouldn't just assume that no, of course they definitely want to go and must go and there's really no other possible fate in life.

The description for *Wondrous Beauty* claims Betsy was "torn between two worlds." That is absolutely not true; every step of the way, all she wants is to be in France, and she will whine and ignore her family's needs and desires in order to remind everyone how she just has to go to France.

I had the opportunity to meet the author several years ago along with a group of people who had also read this book. While I fully understand that researching a historical figure is likely to endear you to them somewhat, she said she was always *completely surprised* when someone asked how she could write about such a bothersome character. The fact that Berkin apparently found no fault in Betsy whatsoever explained a lot to me in terms of the writing, but also baffled me at the same time. Surely getting close to someone means you also recognize their faults.

To finish this review, I will just say that, as someone who does not care for Napoleon in the least and has written academically on his many pitfalls, I was rooting for him when he banned Betsy from every part of Europe within his grasp. I wouldn't want her in my empire, either.

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## Louise says

This is one of those unique side stories that make history so interesting. The teenage Betsy Patterson and the

youngest brother of Napoleon Bonaparte fell in love in her native Baltimore where he was, by chance, avoiding his military responsibilities.

Everything about their marriage was a problem (international politics, their ages, finances, religion, and Betsy's overbearing father's plans for her) but all problems were overcome. When Jerome Bonaparte sailed away to France at his brother's command, Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte, Jr. was born in Baltimore.

Not too many years later, it was Napoleon Bonaparte, himself, who put the kibosh on this marriage – Jerome was needed for a dynastic marriage and Betsy agreed to receive a stipend from him (and hence independence from her father) to make divorce possible.

Author Carol Berkin follows Betsy as she leads an exceptional life for a woman of her time. She travels in aristocratic circles, she invests in bonds and real estate (with the money from the Emperor Napoleon) and seeks to have her son succeed Napoleon III.

Berkin notes how Betsy resembled the father who taunted her. Like him, she was a shrewd investor, she tried to control her adult children and she lived her life on her terms.

The narrative reads exceptionally well. Words, sentences and paragraphs are clear (I just finished another book that was rife with words and phrases that could be taken in different ways). Names and concepts appear with their description or context and not in advance (a pet peeve of mine). The Acknowledgements describes the editing process that worked so well.

This is a short, but satisfying micro-history.

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## **Jean says**

This is an interesting biography of Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte (1785-1879). The book was brought to my attention by the review of my Goodreads' friend, Louise. It has been sitting on my "to read pile" for some time.

Elizabeth married the younger brother of Napoleon. His name was Jerome and they had a son together. Napoleon ordered Jerome back to France and annulled the marriage. After Elizabeth was successful in making money by her own investments, she divorced Jerome in Baltimore. Berkin points out that if she stayed married to Jerome the monies would be his; but as a single woman she could control her own money. She never remarried.

The book was well written and meticulously researched. Berkin quoted frequently from letters received by Elizabeth as she had a habit of writing comments in the margins of the letters. Apparently, Elizabeth kept most of the correspondence she received. This habit must make historians happy. Berkin does a good job of painting a picture of life in Baltimore as well as in England and France in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The author also covers the legal rights of women in those years. I enjoyed learning about an American connection to the Bonaparte family. Carol Berkin is the Presidential Professor of History at Baruch College.

I read this as an audiobook downloaded from Audible. The book is almost nine and a half hours. Tara Hugo does an excellent job narrating the book. Hugo is an actress, singer and audiobook narrator.

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## **Mmars says**

Born in 1785, Elizabeth Patterson Bonaparte lived a life more typical of women one hundred years later. Though her father's self-made American wealth could have supported her, a life-long feud with her father over her short, youthful marriage to Jerome Bonaparte (Napoleon's brother,) an unrelenting desire to live in Europe, and the determination to live a dignified and independent life thereafter forced Elizabeth to develop a financial acumen unusual for her time. However, she was never able to obtain permanent status in Europe and remained in Baltimore until her passing in 1879, outliving her son and many famous personages of her time.

Wondrous Beauty is a straight-ahead biography focused on the subject, though asides into the Bonapartes, and American and world history could have easily overtaken the book. Instead Berkin kept the book short and tight and filled with information unique to casual readers of biography, history and feminism.

Though a bit dry for popular collections, I highly recommend this to readers of women's history and fans of biography

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## **Kipperly says**

3.5 to 4.0. This book was meticulously researched and well-written. I learned about Napoleon Bonaparte's children. The subject of this biography is Elizabeth Patterson who was born and raised in Baltimore, MD, and met, fell in love, married and had a son with the French emperor's youngest son Jérôme.

Because I am familiar with Baltimore, I wish the author had included the locations of places where the Patterson family lived and where various activities took place. It also would have been helpful to have had a family tree of the Bonaparte family included as so many of the sons and grandsons shared the same or similar names. I finally googled such a tree toward the end of the book to keep who was who straight in my head.

I enjoyed learning about Elizabeth and her relationships with her family and particularly that with her father with whom she shared a very similar temperament but with whom there was always great conflict. He tried to dissuade Elizabeth from marrying the very young prince from France. They were not married long before Jérôme's father interfered which began the major conflict and, in my opinion, the major obsession of Elizabeth's life.

I wanted to like Elizabeth but found it difficult. I would have rated this book much higher if I had found her more sympathetic. I would have enjoyed reading this book more if I had. I will say that I did admire her strength and independent spirit, particularly for a woman of her time. She was truly quite remarkable and undaunted in fighting for what she wanted and thought she was due. However, I found her motivations too often to be superficial. They say to be cautious of judging too harshly individuals of a different time. So, I'll cease speaking further of her character except to say that it was difficult to understand her preference for the social constructs of aristocratic Europe (including her admiration for Napoleon Bonaparte, even after his death) over that of the American ideals of freedom and opportunity, especially considering her father was a



man of self-made wealth.

I am truly impressed with the author's work. This book is an important biography documenting the life of a fascinating American woman who led a most unusual life which was intertwined with that of one of the most formidable and powerful families of the 19th Century.

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### **Laurie says**

Interesting history of a beautiful young Baltimore woman who did what she wanted in the late 1700's up until her death at the age of 94(!) She was obsessed with gaining a royal situation for her son, who was also the son of Napoleon's brother. Her self-directed life was very unusual for a woman at that time.

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### **Nefertari says**

Nice to have a more fully realized story for this dynamic force of a woman who only ever gets a sidenote in the biographies of Napoleon and his family.

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