

The Mystery Shoes of Weston

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September 2026

Hidden away at Weston is a pair of women's shoes covered in cream brocade with pointed toes, a leather sole and a thin arched heel. Inside is a trade label with the name John A. Wolfe, New York City. Scripted into the linen lining is the name "Nourse" with the remains of a barely visible first initial, maybe a "J" or an "M."

When we uncovered the pair from a upstairs trunk, we could only wonder who these shoes belonged to and how they arrived at Weston. We were intrigued and inspired. Without much of a pause, we began investigating the shoes: the artisan who crafted them, when and where they were made, and who the Nourse family woman was who would have bought them or received them as a gift. A review of the Nourse family papers housed within the collections of the University of Virginia and Yale would have to wait.

What style are these shoes; what does their style reveal?

Aside from their advanced, multi-century age, what stands out about the Weston mystery shoes is their elegant, understated style. Instead of having a tall, chunky "Louis" heel named after King Louis IV and popular before the Revolution (when the attire of showy monarchs was in vogue), these shoes have a shorter Italian heel popular around 1780 as the large hoops and heavy brocades of the colonial period became replaced by the more diaphanous and classical style associated with Roman statues. Appropriate to the 1780s and for decades before, the latchets or straps that appear across the front of these shoes would have been held in place with buckles clad in shimmery "paste." Made of lead glass and backed with foil, these paste gems would have caught light from nearby candles and added sparkle and intrigue to the lady's foot — or so promised the purveyors of 18th century fashion. By the 1790s, latchets and buckles were no longer in fashion and a newly popular and slightly shorter gown would have increased the likelihood of the lady's foot being appreciated in a plainer, simpler slipper that provided a greater sense of freedom. This simpler style was preferred by the many women who had actively managed domestic and social responsibilities while their husbands were away at war. Revolutionary women were attracted to roles requiring more mobility and greater civic engagement and they needed their shoes to be accommodating. By 1800, not only were shoes more wearable because of the height of their heel and simpler style, they were no longer, like the Weston shoes, "cut on the straight" and lacking a left and right foot. By the end of the 1700s, shoes, especially customer-made shoes, were crafted to better fit and serve the wearer.

Considering the style and characteristics of the Weston shoes, it seems likely they were made sometime during the 1780s.

Who was John Wolfe, the name on the label inside the Weston shoes?

First, some background information:

For much of the 1700s, the American elite preferred to buy luxury footwear imported from England. Starting around 1760, as tensions with the British mounted, cordwainers, those journeymen who crafted shoes as opposed to cobblers who only fixed them, found a powerful means for ginning up business. They, like other market-sensitive tradesmen, subscribed to non-importation agreements, promised not to sell imported goods, and marketed their craft as a means for customers to boycott British products and protest taxation. An American-labeled pair of shoes not only showed an appreciation for superior craftsmanship (shoes not custom-made were usually sold without a label) but was considered an act of patriotism. It showed support for “the cause” for which their fathers, husbands and sons were fighting. The outbreak of the Revolution and the signing of the Declaration of Independence encouraged women of all ranks, but especially those from privileged backgrounds, to become more politically conscious and assertive. Even as they maintained their domestic roles as wives and mothers, many took over the responsibilities of their soldier husbands and still remained proponents of the latest fashion, as best they could.

Being fashionable after the War was considered an indicator of status, power and, in the case of women, virtue and femininity. Sarah Livingston Jay, wife of John Jay, Founding Father and first Chief of the Supreme Court, was considered American’s “first lady of fashion.” After returning with her husband from Europe and the Parisian salons, Sarah ably set the tone for refined hospitality and attire during the convening of the new government in New York City. As a Founding Mother, she recognized the need to embrace a more egalitarian approach to social interaction between colonial-rooted classes and genders. And so, while the parties she convened and attended between 1784 and 1800 would have been more inclusive socially, the prevailing social norms required everyone to be properly and fashionably attired. Fashion, along with politics, ruled the day

In choosing shoes 250 year ago, it was understood that shoemakers, referred to as cordwainers, were of two types: those that specialized in luxury footwear, using molds (called “lasts”) to record their clients’ sizes and then writing their clients’ names on the linen linings to prevent mix-ups; and those who produced non-custom, ready-to-wear shoes to keep up with the demands of the growing retail and wholesale market.

About John Wolfe:

Records of early business directories have preserved the legacy of several successful Manhattan cordwainers. One of these was John Albert Wolfe (1765-1815), a master artisan who, in 1789, became listed as a “shoemaker” at No 24, corner of Crown and Smith Street, New York. In 1789, Wolfe would have been 24, having likely completed his 4-7 year apprenticeship several years prior. (During the mid-1700s in America, boys between the ages of 14 and 17 customarily entered into a contract with a master

artisan to learn skills such as carpentry, printing or cordwaining until their legal age of 21.) By 1792, Wolfe had moved his successful shoemaking business to Crown Street and expanded it into boot making. By 1794, he moved again, this time to 17 Liberty Street at the corner of William Street, and then later to Maiden Lane, advertising himself as a jewelry and hardware merchant, a business with whom he partnered with his brother until his death in 1815. While there is some controversy as to the exact location of John Wolfe's businesses, the label in the Weston shoes has "No. 24, corner of Crown and Smith Street" as his address, which would have been his first address according to the directories mentioned above. We can therefore assume that the purchaser of these shoes would have visited Wolfe's shop sometime around 1789-92.

While major museums around the world display women's shoes from the 1700s (i.e. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto), we are not surprised that none of these collections appear to include the custom-made but unremarkable shoes produced by John A. Wolfe. What does seem remarkable is that Wolfe's name, address and two of his clients' names are included on shoes owned and displayed by two East Coast historical societies: The Connecticut Historical Society and The Monmouth County Historical Society in New Jersey. Regarding the one shoe housed at the Monmouth location, the scripted name "Miss Ustick" is clearly visible inside the shoe, giving reference to the prominent merchant family, the Usticks, living in colonial and post-revolutionary New York City. Recently, we have also learned of a pair of late 18th century shoes included in the collection of Nourse family belongings owned by Dumbarton House, now the home of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America. This pair of white silk shoes, made without latches, more typical of shoes crafted after 1790, are attributed to Maria Bull Nourse (1765-1850), the wife of Joseph Nourse (1754-1841), first Registrar of the United States Treasury serving under six Presidents. Joseph and Maria lived at Dumbarton House, called Cedar Hill by the Nourse family, from 1804 to 1813. (Currently, these shoes are in storage during building renovations.) All three collections of John Wolfe's shoes demonstrate the role that shoes play in illuminating periods of history and the family and family member who owned them.

As an aside, it's interesting to note that John Wolfe's son, John David Wolfe (1792-1872) is described as being a well educated man who, after a successful career in the hardware business left to him by his father, devoted his life to philanthropy and served as President of the American Museum of Natural History, Vice President of the New York Hospital, President of the New York Prison Society, Vice President of the New York Association for improving the Condition of the Poor, and was Senior Warden of Grace Episcopal Church among other positions. "He was fondly remembered as a cheerful giver."

So did the Weston shoes possibly belong to Maria Bull Nourse?

With the address on the label pointing to an approximate range during which the shoes would have been made — between 1789-92, our next research task involved

considering who would have visited John Wolfe's shop during this approximate time frame. While the purchaser could have ordered them from a distance or for someone who didn't live in New York City, we know that custom-made shoes — of the kind Wolfe specialized in at the time — would have required the wearer to have her foot measured on site and probably a mold made prior to the shoes' crafting. Because the name "Nourse" is clearly inked into their lining, we have no reason to believe they belonged to anyone beside a wife, mother or an unmarried daughter of the Nourse family. And because they were found at Weston, it is thought that they must have either been gifted or inherited by Weston's Charles Nourse, grandson of Joseph and Mary Bull Nourse, or possibly sent to Weston by a relative. (Weston was the recipient of many possessions of Charles' parents and grandparents.) Although there might be other Nourse women beside Maria Bull Nourse who could have ordered and owned these shoes (we don't know of any that lived in New York City during the late 1700s besides Maria), it seemed reasonable to start with considering whether Maria Bull Nourse might have been the owner by reminding ourselves who Maria was and how and when she entered into the Nourse family.

Maria Louisa Bull (1765-1850) of Philadelphia married Joseph Nourse (1754-1841) on April 22, 1784. The ceremony took place at Bullskin, the home of her father, John Bull (1731-1824), a colonel in the Revolutionary Army and a delegate in the Pennsylvania Provincial Conference, the body which declared the State of Pennsylvania independent from Britain. Bullskin was located not far from Berkley Springs, Virginia and close to the Nourse's farm, Piedmont, owned by James Nourse, Joseph's father, a successful farmer, surveyor, Virginia Delegate, and an ardent patriot during the Revolution, raising a militia to serve General Washington. (Bullskin farm, now called Beverley, is included on the National Register of Historic Places with an address of U.S. Route 340, Charles Town, West Virginia.) Maria's mother, Mary Phillips Bull (1731-1811), was a Revolutionary hero recognized by the Daughters of the American Revolution. When British troops under General Howe were ready to set fire to the Bull's estate outside of Philadelphia, Mary famously refused Howe's offer of protection in exchange for telling her husband, Colonel Bull, to abandon his cause. Instead of complying, she bravely directed her daughter to escape with the deed while she remained to protect her home from the British.

Mary, like her mother, was viewed as a capable and competent women who would have befriended many prominent men and women of the day. She, after all, was from a respectable, well-connected Philadelphia family and, as wife of Joseph Nourse, would have been known and likely respected by George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay and other prominent politicians and social leaders along with their wives and families.

During Joseph and Maria's residency at Cedar Hill in Georgetown, Maria would have not only entertained many of Washington's elite, she managed the family's large house, the eight acre farm and the servants and enslaved people that worked there. As the wife of an exacting, disciplined and intellectually inclined patriot who supported the

War with his financial and managerial expertise, Maria would have surely been able to grace any social or political environment in which she found herself.

Joseph Nourse, Maria's husband, was the oldest of James and Sarah Nourse's children. Formally educated as a young boy in London, Joseph spent his teen years at Piedmont becoming proficient in farm management and finance while establishing friendships with neighbors such as General Charles Lee. As a result of these neighborly connections, Joseph came to work for General Lee, first as a manager of his estate and then his military secretary. He then moved on to several positions with the Board of War, including secretary of ordnance and paymaster. In September of 1781, the Confederation Congress elected Joseph Register of the Treasury. Eight years later, in 1789, he was appointed by George Washington to be Register of the newly established Treasury Department, a position he held under six Presidents until May 1829 when he was removed by President Jackson.

In 1785, soon after their marriage, Joseph and Maria moved to the New York City area. As a civil servant, Joseph worked within the Department of Treasury near Federal Hall at Wall and Broad Street in lower Manhattan, three or four blocks from John Wolfe's Cordwainer business, a close proximity for purchasing a pair of shoes. In 1790, Joseph and Maria moved with the government to Philadelphia and in 1800 to Washington.

While living in the New York area, the couple would have attended various formal events with high level officials and prominent friends. Although not inclined to gaily socialize, Joseph and Maria would have attended George Washington's inauguration and related events. One might think this attendance would have been especially likely due to Joseph's and Maria's republican leanings, his important association with the War effort, and affiliation with both the government and Washington himself. A description of this event is enthusiastically provided in a letter from Betsey Hamilton, wife of the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton:

"I was at the inauguration ball ... given early in May at the assembly rooms on Broadway above Wall Street. It was attended by the President and Vice President, the Cabinet officers, a majority of the members of Congress, the French and Spanish ministers, and military and civil officers with their wives and daughters. Mrs. Washington had not yet arrived in New York from Mount Vernon and did not until three weeks later. On that occasion every woman who attended the ball was presented with a fan prepared in Paris with ivory frame and when opened, display the likeness of Washington in profile."

Unfortunately, no fan with the likes of Washington's profile is included in Weston's collection. Finding one would provide a valuable artifact from Joseph's and Maria's life.

What we do know with some certainty is that the Nourses would have attended numerous formal occasions between the years 1785 and 1800 in New York City and that these occasions would have required Maria to wear a fashionable and respectable

pair of shoes. Whether the Weston shoes were the shoes she wore remains in question.

What we can conjecture from our early research:

Based on the time of the Nourse's residency in New York City, Joseph and Maria could have easily purchased the Weston shoes from John Wolfe's New York shop located near to where Joseph worked. And while we may never pinpoint the exact date, the Weston shoes could have been made for Maria just prior to April 30, 1789, the date of Washington's inauguration.

Joseph could have been inspired to purchase shoes for a major event celebrating the new Republic amidst a patriotic fever running throughout the city. He and Maria were solidly rooted in the Revolutionary cause after all. And even though housing and the cost of living in the New York area were expensive, spending for new shoes, perhaps as a fifth-year anniversary gift, could well have been a justifiable expense.

Instead of the scripted name in the shoes having been inked there by John Wolfe, Joseph may have signed the shoes himself since there is some similarity between the scripted name and Joseph's signature. Adding his signature might have been a way of personalizing the gift to his wife or, with tongue in cheek, showing that he was authenticating the purchase. For many years, Joseph authenticated the currency of the Continental Congress.

As a piece of memorabilia from one of the most significant events of the 18th century — and perhaps also a gift from her husband — Maria could have wanted to save these shoes and pass them down through the generations.

These conjectures clearly require additional research. Even so, they reveal possible scenarios that make our mystery shoes seem a little less mysterious. They also point to a promising hypothesis we hope to confirm in the months or years ahead: *Weston's mystery shoes belonged to Maria Bull Nourse, the wife of the first Register of the Treasury, who wore them to President George Washington's first inauguration and likely other events celebrating the new nation.*

Based on the character of Joseph and Maria — and the character of the family members who preceded and followed them — it shouldn't be hard to imagine why these special shoes were bought, saved and never thrown away. Joseph and Maria were proud to be part of the new Republic and the American experiment. Their patriot parents and the members of the Nourse family to follow would be proud as well.

Postscript:

Despite Joseph Nourse's inclination to document and account for everything (he was the Registrar of the Treasury!) why has no written record of the couple having

purchased a pair of brocade shoes emerged from the letters and journals located within the Weston archives. A single document could solve the mystery!

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks for the help and support of Meaghan Riddick and Anne Van Ryzin in researching this article, and for the Warrenton Antiquarian Society and its mission to pursue and support local and family histories and the legacy of Weston in Casanova, Virginia, www.historicwestonva.org.

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