

Lydia Sheridan (née Fergusson)

Born	28 th April 1753; baptised 3 rd May, Corstorphine, Scotland.
Died	8 th August 1796 in Baltimore
Age	43
Father	Captain John Fergusson
Mother	Lydia Cumber
Brothers ¹	John - a captain in the navy William - a captain in the army
Sisters	Marion - married Dr. Smith
Married	(1) Henry Fortick Sheridan, m. 29 Jul 1770 (2) Francis Newman (probably a de-facto partnership)
Children	(1) Henry Augustus John Sheridan, born 27 Nov 1771 (1) Another son (name unknown) (2) Jean Elisabeth Francois Georges Newman 1786 – 1851 (2) John Elisabeth(?) Francis George



from Town and Country Magazine Sep 1790

Lydia Sheridan (née Fergusson) was the daughter of Captain John Fergusson of Chigwell, Essex², and Lydia Cumber. She was baptised on 3rd May 1753 in Corstorphine, just outside Edinburgh. She had two older brothers, John, a naval captain, William, an army captain, and a younger sister, Marion, about whom nothing is known. Likewise, nothing is known about Lydia's childhood beyond the fact that her father was naval commander of Scottish ancestry who seems to have spent most of her childhood overseas.

Through most of the 1770s and early '80s, Lydia lived with her mother and siblings in Tiverton, Devon, perhaps having moved there after her marriage. This took place on 29 Jul 1770 when Lydia married Henry Fortick Sheridan in St Helen's Parish, Worcester³. Based on evidence given at her divorce hearing, it appears that she and her husband lived in Tiverton with her mother and family after their marriage. The following year on 27th Nov 1771 Lydia gave birth to a son, Henry Augustus John Sheridan, in Tiverton. She had a second son by Henry Sheridan about whom nothing is known.

On 23 May 1772, Henry Sheridan was commissioned into the British army as a lieutenant in the 31st Regiment⁴. In 1776 he was ordered to America and five years later, after being promoted to the rank of Major, was in command of the New York Volunteers, a provincial loyalist regiment that had mustered in New York City in 1776. He and the New York Volunteers were highly distinguished at the Battle of Eutaw Springs in 1781⁵.

¹ Lydia's baptism record states that the witnesses were Mr Walter Ferguson and Mr William Ferguson, the said Captain's sons. Perhaps John was misnamed Walter, or perhaps Lydia had a third brother.

² According to the Gentleman's Magazine, 1789 page 1107 when reporting on Lydia's divorce case – see http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Gentleman_s_magazine.html?id=D17PAAAAMAAJ

³ Ref: Journals of the House of Lords, Volume 38 by Great Britain House of Lords.

⁴ Ref: British officers serving in America 1754-1774; compiled from the "army lists", 1894.

⁵ Ref: The Historical magazine, and notes and queries concerning the antiquities, history, and biography of America, C. Benjamin Richardson, 1864.

In early 1784, during Henry Sheridan's continued absence, Lydia became associated with the Newman family when she began an affair with Francis Newman who was 6 years her junior.

Most of what is known about their affair comes from the testimony of witnesses at Lydia's trial published by Gale Ecco under the title "The trial of Mrs. Lydia Sheridan, wife of Major Henry Sheridan, for adultery with Francis Newman, Esq., tried in the Bishop of London's court, Doctor's Commons". Their evidence is summarized separately, but much of the following outline is based on that evidence.⁶

Following her husband's posting to America in 1776, Lydia lived with her mother and siblings in Tiverton, Devon. A Mrs Brewer who came from Tiverton and whose husband ran a pub in Plymouth between 1780 and 1785, testified to having known Lydia since the early 1770s when she and her husband had come to live there. They had lived with Mrs Fergusone (Mrs Sheridan's mother) for two or three years until Major Sheridan had been sent on service abroad [*to America*] after which Mrs Sheridan continued to live with her mother. She was still living with her mother when Mrs Brewer left Tiverton around 1780.

Sometime prior to April 1784, Francis Newman and his wife Frances were living in rented rooms at Fursdon House⁷ in the Parish of Cadbury, Devonshire, about 6 miles south of Tiverton (not be confused with North and South Cadbury in Somerset).



Fursdon House, Cadbury, Devon

On 7th April 1784⁸, Frances gave birth to a daughter Frances Charlotte Newman in Tiverton. Just one month later, in May 1784, Francis left Frances to begin a new life with Lydia⁹.

⁶ In those days, the adultery laws were in a state of flux, new laws having been introduced in 1771, 1779, 1800 and later. Adulterers were no longer treated as public criminals as they had been in earlier generations, but private actions claiming "criminal conversation" could be brought by a husband against his wife's lover through which he could obtain monetary compensation via the courts. Ref: Dabhoiwala, D., "History of Sex" p.213.

⁷ Fursdon House, owned by the Fursdon family since c.1250. See <http://www.fursdon.co.uk>. Hence it can be assumed that Francis was renting rooms there.

How it was that Francis and Lydia met and fell in love remains unknown, but there can be little doubt that Francis was unhappy in his marriage and that Lydia was lonely in hers. From the evidence of her later divorce proceedings, it seems likely that Francis was the dominant partner and that she had a more neurotic and submissive personality, appearing to be in a constant stress as to whether the scandal of their relationship would be discovered or that Francis might leave her. Not surprisingly, she also worried about her two children who presumably remained with her mother in Tiverton.

By October 1784 the couple were living together (with a servant) in Lowerbank's Hotel in St. James's Street, London. Early the following month, they rented rooms at the house of Mrs Barker in Green's Row Chelsea. From December to the middle of the following February, they moved into Osborne's Hotel at the Adelphi (not far from the Strand) before moving back to Mrs Barker's rooms.

At the time the couple first moved into Mrs Barker's rooms, she thought they were man and wife, but subsequently discovered the truth when Francis Newman was away for a few days during which time Lydia "became so much agitated that [Mrs Barker] was fearful of leaving her alone" and that gradually she "drew from her a confession that she was not married to Mr Newman." Thereafter Lydia would often converse with Mrs Barker about her children and they became such good friends that after the couple had left for France, Mrs Barker received "pressing invitations" from Lydia to travel over and visit them.

After the couple left Mrs Barker around 29th April 1785, they took an apartment somewhere near Moulins in the heart of France. It appears that that they took rooms at the Château le Riau (photo below) near Dornes, some 15km north of Moulins, which was owned by Jean-Antoine Charry, Marquis des Gouttes¹⁰. Charry later became the godfather to Lydia's son, Jean Elisabeth François Georges Newman, when he was baptized in Moulins Cathedral in February 1787.



Château le Riau near Dornes, Central France.

⁸ Frances Charlotte's birth date is inscribed in the [Newman-Rogers Bible](#).

⁹ According to Chancery Proceedings C12/629/31 (pages 43/44), in or about the month of May 1784, Francis Newman left his wife and remained separated from her until October 1784 when he and she met in London; and that sometime around the beginning of 1785 he "with the privity consent and approbation of" Frances Newman, left her and went to France.

¹⁰ Ref: <http://www.chateau-du-riau.com>

Note: David Chudleigh (a descendant of Lydia) speculates that Charry, who was commandant of the French squadron at Louisburg in 1758, might have been taken as a prisoner of war by Lydia's father, Captain John Fergusson, following France's defeat there that year, and that (as was customary at the time) he might have been lodged with the Fergusson family until the end of the war some five years later. If this was the case then Lydia would have known him from childhood and might explain why she and Francis chosen to head for Moulins in order escaping from the scandal of their affair in England. This possibility is not supported by Charnock's *Biographia Navalis* which claims that Captain Fergusson "remained in the same station during a considerable space of time" after the siege of Louisburg in 1758. A similar theory has also been put forward that it was Francis who came to know Charry during his childhood when was lodged with a Major John Mompesson, a friend of Admiral Boscawen and relative of Francis's grandmother Eleanor Mompesson.

Some six months after leaving England, Lydia fell pregnant and in July or August the following year, her appeals to her erstwhile landlady Mrs Barker bore fruit when Mrs Barker arrived at her doorstep. According to her testimony, Mrs Barker arrived at Lydia's apartment in or around July 1786 and the following day Lydia gave birth to a baby boy whereafter Mrs Barker remained with the couple for a further four months. Throughout this time, Lydia lived in a state of nervous tension, frequently telling Mrs Barker that "if Major Sheridan or any strange gentleman should enquire for her, to say that she (Mrs Barker) knew nothing about her."

If Mrs Barker actually arrived the day before the birth of Lydia's baby, then it must presumably have been mid-August and not July. At any rate, it seems that the baby was hurriedly baptized in the chateau immediately following its birth for fear that it might not survive.

Presumably the baby's sickliness delayed a formal baptism for some months since it was not until February 1787 that he was taken to Moulins for the formalized ceremony to be performed. This seems to have been quite a grand affair judging by the baptismal record which has been translated into English as follows:

In the year of 1787, and on this 7th day of the month of February was baptized under authority of myself, Rector of the college of Moulins by permission of the Pastor:- JEAN ELISABETH FRANCOIS GEORGES, born August 16th 1786 of the Parish of Dorne at the Palace of the said place, Diocese of Nevers, son of the marriage of the High Lord FRANCIS NEWMAN, Knight, Baron and Lord of Cadbury, Sparkford and Lord and Sovereign of Fullen, besides his other lands, and My Lady Nioman Furgusson¹¹ his wife, of that Parish, and having doubt of the validity of the private baptism which was administered at the said Palace, because of the nearness of death. The Godfather was the High Lord John Anthony de Charry, Marquis des Gouttes, Chief of Cadres of the Marines, and the Godmother was the High Lady Elizabeth Claudinede Neuchaize, Abeyesse and Countess of Alix. Both Godfather and Godmother have, with me, signed as well as the father here present. (S)Marquee des Gouttes; (S) de Neuchaize, Abeyess and Countess of Alix; (S) F. Newman, Sir and Baronet; (S) Villefort, Vicar of St. Peter; (S) Berrut Collegii, Rector.

One wonders why Francis felt it necessary to pass himself off as a knight and Lord of Cadbury, Sparkford etc., and whether he was simply in the habit of self-aggrandisement (being twice been described as "the articulate Francis Newman" in depositions at Lydia's trial). But perhaps he simply

¹¹ Presumably Lydia had adopted the double-barrel name of Newman-Fergusson and "Nioman" was a mistranscription or mistranslation of "Newman".

felt it expedient to give himself a title in order to fit more comfortably within the social set that that he was engaging with in Moulins.

Francis's pretensions were summarily deflated when early in February – perhaps no more than a few days after the baptism - his and Lydia's idyll was broken by a knock at his door announcing the arrival of a Mr William Loveridge, a solicitor acting on behalf of Henry Sheridan. In his testimony at Lydia's trial, Loveridge said that when he asked for Mrs Sheridan "Francis Newman appeared much embarrassed and said that he knew of no such person" but quickly changed his mind when Loveridge threatened to leave the documents that he had come to serve upon her with the Moulins authorities. Francis then introduced Loveridge to Lydia and allowed him to serve his papers on her, after which the couple invited Loveridge to stay for dinner during which they showed their baby boy to him. Lydia once again showed signs of stress "repeatedly in conversation (she) said that she was determined to live and die with the said Mr Newman, and never again live with her husband". Loveridge remained in Moulins for two more days "during which he was several times with the said Mr Newman and Mrs Sheridan and they both repeatedly entreated [him] not to divulge their situation, for that they were looked upon as husband and wife at Moulins and visited, and were visited, by the principal people of the place". Loveridge duly reported back to his client who must have begun legal action without delay.

Presumably, the facts about the couple leaked out into the Moulins community making their continued residence there untenable. At any rate, sometime in the next 12 months, Lydia and Francis and baby returned to London taking lodgings at a house in Brompton Row, Hyde Park where they were discovered in February 1788 by the aforementioned Devonian, Mr Brewer. Mr Brewer was by then running a coffee house in Pall Mall that was sometimes frequented by Major Sheridan who, having heard that Lydia was back in London living in Brompton Row, and having discovered that Mr Brewer had known her during the time that he lived in Devon, had asked Mr Brewer to go and verify that it was indeed Lydia who was living there.

The last written testimony taken for the trial was from Mrs Brewer whose deposition was drafted in March 1788 which repeated much of her husband's testimony. Shortly after, in May 1788, the trial (held at the Bishop of London's Court in the Doctor's Commons) was summarily concluded, with Major Sheridan being granted his divorce "by reason of adultery"¹² Three months later in August 1788 two year-old John, Lydia's son by Francis, was baptised into the church of England.¹³

It seems that Lydia's divorce had subsequently to be ratified in the House of Lords since a record of the proceedings of that House relating to the case can be found on British History OnLine's website¹⁴ under a date heading of March 1789. Of passing interest, the House of Lords' records include the testimony of a Sarah Sell who was obviously the same Mrs Sarah Barker who had testified at the Doctor's Court hearing the previous year, and whose testimony was preceded by one from a Thomas Sell who was at that time a gardener working for Mrs Barker. The pair must have married in the interim. Of more specific interest, it appears that by the time of the House of Lord's hearing, Mrs Sell had forgotten some of the details of her previous evidence, since she now claimed that on the 15th August 1785, she had "seen Mrs. Sheridan and Mr. Newman at a place called Caen, about

¹² Testimonies from the trial of Lydia Sheridan have been published by Ecco under the title "[The Trial of Mrs. Lydia Sheridan, Wife of Major Henry Sheridan, for Adultery with Francis Newman, Esq. Tried in the Bishop of London's Court, Doctor's Commons](#)".

¹³ Copy of [baptismal entry](#) supplied by Harold Biggs, Aug 2019.

¹⁴ British History OnLine – see <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=116852>

twelve miles from Moulins, in France, and the next day, the 16th of August, Mrs. Sheridan was brought to-bed of a son." In fact, Caen is in northern France and nowhere near Moulins, and Lydia's son was born on 16th August 1786 (not '85). Presumably no-one troubled to dispute the discrepancies in her two stories, or perhaps the transcript was in error.

When the Gentleman's Magazine reported on the case in 1789¹⁵, it noted that in addition to obtaining his divorce in May 1788, Major Sheridan also brought an action against Francis Newman for "criminal conversation with Lydia Sheridan" through the Court of King's Bench which in late 1788 awarded him damages of £2000¹⁶ against Francis Newman¹⁷. Presumably Francis must have found the funds to pay these damages, though it might be wondered how he was able to do so at a time when he was at the same time fighting off creditors in the Chancery Court.

Even after the House of Lords had completed its deliberations, Lydia's ordeal of public humiliation was not yet over. The following year, the Town and Country Magazine published an article titled "[The Female Deserter](#)" and "[The Chemical Lover](#)". Town and Country Magazine was a popular London journal published through the second half of the 18th century which included a gossip section called "Histories of the Tête-à-Tête Annexed" under which the article about Francis and Lydia appeared. Portraits had to be more or less representative of the subjects since the subtitles rarely contained full names but made use of witty monikers that described the couple in question. At any rate, the caricature of Lydia below is the only representation that we have of her.



Caricatures of Lydia and Francis as published in [Town and Country Magazine, Sept 1790](#)

The article reflects the biases of the time in that it describes Lydia as "having more than a moderate portion of personal charms [but] no pecuniary allurements to attract prudent or mercenary lovers", going on to portray her as a temptress who beguiled Francis into beginning their affair.

¹⁵ See Google Books at: <http://books.google.com/books?id=D17PAAAAMAAJ> page 1107.

¹⁶ £2000 was a very considerable sum in those days equivalent to several hundreds of thousands today - see <http://www.measuringworth.com/>.

¹⁷ See [British History OnLine](#) for details

Little more is known about Lydia following her divorce beyond the fact that she and Francis remained together. It would be surprising if they did not at some stage get married, but so far there is no evidence that they did. Nor indeed is there any evidence that Francis was able to obtain a divorce from his wife (and first cousin) Frances.

Lydia and Francis must have stayed together in England for the next few years during which they lived rather peripatetic lives as Francis pursued, and was pursued by, various relations and business associates through the courts. In late 1789 they were reportedly living in Greenford, Middlesex; later they were living in Broad Street, London, before moving to Shudy Camps near Cambridge sometime around November 1791.

Francis was still in England in February 1794, when he signed a will in which he “bequeathed the residue of his estate and effects to his reputed son, Elizabeth Francis George Newman”¹⁸. Presumably he took this step in anticipation of his (and Lydia’s) departure for America and the hazardous journey across the North Atlantic.

The couple probably made their move later in 1794, carrying sufficient funds with them to purchase the “La Grange” tobacco plantation in Maryland shortly after their arrival. It was there that, no more than two years later, “Lydia, wife of Francis Newman was buried, Aug. 8, 1796, age 38”.¹⁹ In fact she must have been 43 - a young age even by the standards of the day.

Post Scripts:

Particular thanks to David Chudleigh, a descendant of Lydia, and Harold Biggs for their help in sourcing information about her.

Many questions remain to be answered about Lydia and her relationship with Francis Newman.

- Did the couple ever marry? If so, did Francis obtain a divorce from his first wife Frances?
- What became of Lydia’s children before and after she left for America?
- After all the financial difficulties, losses, disputes and court cases that Francis Newman went through (not to mention punitive damages paid to Henry Sheridan), where did the money come from to pay for Francis and Lydia’s travel expenses and rented lodging over so many years, and not least the purchase of an estate when they landed in America?

A separate point of interest: Lydia’s name appears a couple of times in the “Records of the Clan and Name of Fergusson, Ferguson and Fergus”²⁰, including an obscure reference to the fact that “*Lydia Fergusone, afterwards Sheridan, appears as an authoress in the printed catalogue of the British Museum.*” It is not known what this printed catalogue related to.

¹⁸ See TROWER AND SMEDLEY v. Cox. Prerogative Court, Trinity Term, 2nd Session, 1822 – ref: <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/great-britain-parliament-house-of-lords/the-english-reports-volume-162-ala/page-15-the-english-reports-volume-162-ala.shtml>. Francis’s first will has been sighted by Jerry Gandolfo who’s summary of it is presented on Francis Newman’s page.

¹⁹ The Maryland Genealogical Bulletin: Baltimore City Dead – Prior to 1806

²⁰ See http://www.archive.org/stream/recordsofclannam00ferg/recordsofclannam00ferg_djvu.txt