Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson (sometimes spelled “Ferguson”) was born in Philadelphia on February 3, 1737. She was the daughter of Thomas Graeme, a prominent physician, and Ann Diggs, step-daughter of Sir William Keith. Raised on the large estate of Graeme Park, Elizabeth was well-educated by her parents and tutors, and she composed poems, letters, songs, travel accounts, and impromptus. She wrote under a variety of pen names, frequently using the pseudonym Laura.

After a broken engagement with William Franklin, the son of Benjamin Franklin, Elizabeth’s parents sent her to England and Scotland in 1764 to revive her poor health. There she composed a travel journal that was later circulated among her friends. Achieving some notoriety abroad, Elizabeth met members of the Penn family, novelist Laurence Sterne, King George III, and Dr. John Fothergill.

When her mother and her sister Jane Young died in 1765, Elizabeth returned to Philadelphia. Inspired by the French, she organized her acquaintances into a weekly literary salon, known as her “Attic Evenings.” During these gatherings, Elizabeth entertained the intellectual and cultural leaders of Philadelphia society, including John Dickinson, Jacob Duché, Francis Hopkinson, Dr. Benjamin Rush, and Annis Boudinot Stockton. To divert her mind from her broken engagement, Elizabeth translated Abbé Francois Fénelon’s *The Adventures of Telemachus* and paraphrased the Bible’s book of Psalms in verse. Elizabeth also helped to raise Anna and John Young, the two children of her deceased sister Jane. Like her Aunt Elizabeth, Anna Young also wrote poetry about politics, women, and courtship. She married Dr. William Smith in 1775. Elizabeth maintained a strong correspondence with her niece and mentee until Anna died in 1780 from complications of childbirth.

On April 21, 1772, Elizabeth married a Scotsman, Henry Hugh Fergusson, whom she had met at one of her “Attic Evenings.” Henry was ten years her junior with Tory political leanings. The couple took possession of Graeme Park after Dr. Graeme’s death in September 1772. In September 1775, Henry traveled to England, returning two years later with General Howe’s army in the midst of the Revolution. With her loyalty under suspicion due to her husband’s support of the British, Elizabeth gave generously to the American cause. She wrote about her
separation from her husband during this time in a poem titled “The Country Mouse and the City Mouse,” which is included under the title “County Mouse” on page 33 of this commonplace book. Persuaded by her husband to do so, Elizabeth also mediated two messages across war lines, one of which was a bribe attempt that triggered a scandal that stripped Elizabeth of her reputation as a patriot.

In the spring of 1778, Henry’s property, including Graeme Park, was confiscated as punishment for his treason. He returned to England and separated from his wife permanently. Elizabeth attempted to regain her family’s estate and her reputation. In 1791, the Pennsylvania court returned Graeme Park to Elizabeth. She then lived a quiet life with her friend Eliza Stedman, publishing some of her writings in periodicals such as The Pennsylvania Magazine or American Monthly Museum, Columbian Magazine, and Pennsylvania Packet. She sold Graeme Park to her late niece Anna’s husband, Dr. William Smith, who sold off pieces of the property through the 1790s. Elizabeth died on February 23, 1801 in Horsham, Pennsylvania, near Graeme Park, while tended by Dr. Benjamin Rush.

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