

THE STORY OF OCEAN BORN MARY

By

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It was quite a legend while it lasted - the story of the Ocean Born Mary House - in fact, some people do not like the idea that it has not remained so - but it was not true. Ocean Born Mary did not live in the house which has borne her name for so many years, built by and the home of her son, Robert. Mary lived with another son, William, about a mile away. How did the so-called Ocean Born Mary House get its name? Thereby hangs a tale.

Truly, Mary was Ocean Born. A ship carrying Scotch-Irish immigrants to New England was captured off Boston, Massachusetts, by a pirate vessel. Among the passengers in the immigrant ship were James Wilson and his wife, Elizabeth (Fulton); and on the day the ship was hijacked, July 28, 1720, their daughter was born. The pirate captain, hearing the cry of a newborn child, went to the Wilsons' cabin and asked Mrs. Wilson if the baby was a boy or a girl. On hearing that it was a girl, he promised to spare the lives of the captives if the baby would be named Mary for his mother (or wife). Mrs. Wilson consented, and he went back to his own ship and brought her many gifts, including a bolt of light green brocaded silk to be made into a wedding gown for the newly-named Mary when she married.

Soon after landing in Boston, Mr. Wilson died, and his widow and child proceeded to Londonderry, New Hampshire, where land had been laid out for them by reason of Mr. Wilson being a grantee of the town. Later, Mrs. Wilson married James Clark, a great-great-grandparent of Horace Greeley of Amherst, New Hampshire. (Mr. Greeley was the man who said, "Go West, young man.")

For a generation the town of Londonderry annually held a civic celebration of thanksgiving to commemorate the deliverance of the occupants of the captive ship on which Mary was born. She was known as "Ocean Born Mary."

On December 18, 1742, wearing a wedding gown made of the silk which was the pirate's gift, Ocean Born Mary married James Wallace, whose people came from Scotland by way of Ireland, thence Londonderry. To the Wallaces were born four sons and a daughter: Thomas, Robert, William, James and Elizabeth. Three of the sons married sisters, daughters of Robert and Mary Moore of Londonderry. Robert married Jeannette, William married Hannah, and James married Anna. The three couples made their homes in Henniker, New Hampshire. Here Robert built the magnificent mansion of Georgian Colonial architecture which many years afterward became known as the "Ocean Born Mary House."

Mary's sons held many positions of civic and political significance. Thomas served in the Revolutionary War and was said to have taken part in the Battle of Bennington in 1777.

Robert was a legislator, selectman and member of the Governor's Council, a position he held for fourteen years. (This record was never equaled until the present Councilor from this district, Hon. James H. Hayes of Concord, was elected in 1958 and served ever since, beginning in 1959.) Robert was a delegate to the convention to frame the state's constitution and was Judge of the Court of Common Pleas for Hillsborough County. (Henniker is now in Merrimack County, but this county did not come into being until 1823.)

William was a stock raiser, particularly horses and cattle. He manufactured wheels for spinning wool and flax, was a teacher, justice, legislator and selectman. He was a surveyor and assisted in surveying the town of Henniker and made the first good map of the town for the Secretary of State's office in pursuance of a law requiring the same. After William's death, his home was known as the Town Poor Farm. The house burned in 1920. William's

house was a large one, as was that of his brother, Robert, but Robert's house had two chimneys; William's had one. Also, Robert's house had two dormer windows, and William's house had none.

James "like his brothers was a valuable citizen during his short life and was possessed of those noble traits of character which actuated them." He died at age 32.

The daughter, Elizabeth, married Lt. Thomas Patterson of the New Hampshire Militia. She knitted a pair of white stockings for him to wear at their wedding. Tradition has it that every male Patterson descended from Elizabeth and Thomas has worn these stockings at his wedding. In 1966 Robert R. Patterson, one of the descendants, was married in Whittier, New Hampshire, and wore the stockings at his wedding. The account of the wedding stated that he was a descendant of Ocean Born Mary and that the stockings are now on permanent loan to the New Hampshire Historical Society.

Ocean Born Mary was described as being "quite tall, red haired with bright eyes, elegant in her manners, resolute and determined, of strong mind, quick of comprehension, sharp in her conversation with a strong brogue and full of humor." A piece of her wedding gown is in the Henniker Library and another one in the Leach Library of Londonderry.

On October 30, 1791, when she was 71 years of age and he was 81, her husband died and was buried in Hill Graveyard, Londonderry. In 1798 when she was 78, Mary came to Henniker and lived with her son, William. Her husband had never lived in Henniker. Her residence with William, instead of with Robert, is borne out by the United States Census records of 1800 and 1810 and by William's daybook and account sheets, which prove that his mother lived in his home from 1798 until her death. She died February 13, 1814, and is buried in William's lot in the cemetery in back of the Town Hall, now called the Community Building. Her grave is marked by a slate headstone on which is inscribed "In Memory of

Widow Mary Wallace who died Feb. 13, 1814 in the 94th year of her age." In front of the large stone is a small marker "Ocean Born Mary."

So much for the actual history.

Now for the 'other side of the coin' - the ghost stories, etc.

In 1917 the Henniker Postmaster, who also dealt in real estate, received a letter from Louis Maurice Auguste Roy of Wisconsin inquiring if there were any old interesting places for sale here where he might settle with his widowed mother. How near it came to be that the so-called Ocean Born Mary House was not to be known by that name lies in the fact that the Postmaster was about to discard the inquiry when his clerk, Marion Sargent (now Mrs. Harold Connor), asked if she might answer the letter, suggesting the old Wallace place. A short time later Mr. Roy and his mother came to Henniker and bought the house. It was then in quite a dilapidated condition and empty, having been vacant for a long time. Mr. Roy did a lot of work restoring the house, filling it with fascinating and valuable antiques, and making it a veritable museum. He had heard the story of Ocean Born Mary, and, adding to what he had learned, told people that she had lived in the house and that the furniture had been hers. "And the story grew."

Mr. Roy did a thriving business of showing the house and its contents to people, including tourists, from many places, telling them his stories about Ocean Born Mary. When someone told him he knew he lied, he told the person to mind his own business and let him, Mr. Roy, earn his living the way he wished. He charged admission to the house.

Some of the things he told people included:

"That the pirate built the house for Mary and that she came there and kept house for him." (Mary's son, Robert, built the house; she never lived there.)

"That the pirate was murdered by a cutlass in the orchard, and, at his request, Mary buried him and his 'loot' beneath the kitchen hearthstone." Also, "that either Mary or one of her sons was buried neath the hearthstone." (But the hearthstone is too heavy for anyone to lift; and from the cellar beneath it, it can be seen that there are only solid stone and mortar, so no tomb or body. Also, Mary is buried in a cemetery in the village in a marked grave.)

"That the pirate's treasure was buried in the orchard." (Many people have dug for the treasure; and it has been said that Mr. Roy rented shovels for 50¢ apiece for people to use in the digging.)

"That he had never seen Mary as he was not psychic enough." Another time he said, "that he had seen her many times; once when he was returning home one night, she appeared. That after she had disappeared, he saw that a covered bridge ahead of him had caved in." (There was no covered bridge on the road to his home.)

"Mary's rocking in her favorite chair." (This was after he had placed a rocking chair at the end of a loose floor board; and when he stepped on the other end of the board, it caused the chair to move.)

Among other stories published were:

"That she married at 18, and four years and four sons later she was a widow. She toiled hard and long to support her young children." (She was married at 20, and was 71 when she became a widow, at which time her children were no longer young.)

"That Mr. and Mrs. Wilson (her parents) and baby - Ocean Born Mary - went to Londonderry." (This is not so, as he died in Boston and did not live to go to Londonderry. Only Mrs. Wilson and the baby went.)

"That the pirate acquired several thousand (6,000) acres in Henniker and built the house." (There is no record of anyone receiving any such grant in town - Robert Wallace's deed is for 300 acres; and Cogswell's History of Henniker states that the town had about 27,000 acres, one-fifth under water.)

"That when Mary was widowed young, the pirate went to her home in Londonderry and asked her to keep house for him as he had bought land in Henniker and built a house. That here, in this house, Mary, her sons and the pirate lived and died." (The sensation-loving public overlooked the true facts. Many books, magazines and newspapers carried the story of the house; but, if people had checked the truth, such as vital statistics records and town histories, they would have realized how impossible some things were: pirates were hardly in the habit of keeping track of their victims; that, since Ocean Born Mary was 78 when she came to Henniker, instead of the 'beautiful, young widow' as the story claimed, the pirate would have been at least, if not more than, 100 years old, and not likely to build the house and have her for his housekeeper.)

"The couple moved to Henniker where they built the house." (Mr. Wallace never lived in Henniker; and their son, Robert, as mentioned above, built the house.)

"That the ship landed in Portsmouth, New Hampshire." (As mentioned above, the ship landed in Boston, Massachusetts.)

"That Mary is buried in Quaker Cemetery, dying at the age of 84." (She died in the 94th year of her age and is buried in back of the Town Hall, now called the Community Building.)

In his later years and in ill health, Mr. Roy sold his property in 1961 to Mr. and Mrs. David C. Russell from Chelmsford, Massachusetts, who came there to live and took care of Mr. Roy. When Mr. Roy died in 1965 he was buried, at his request, beside his mother whose grave is on the place.

So many people came to the place in search of the treasure and ghost, the Russells were bothered night and day - people did not believe that there were no ghosts or treasure there. At times it has been so troublesome and dangerous (Mr. and Mrs. Russell were threatened; windows were broken and articles stolen) that police protection was necessary. From an article in the Hillsboro "Messenger" sometime ago, we learn that the Russells desired to "expose the myth that the Ocean Born Mary House is haunted; that there were no ghosts there or ever were; and it was just a gimmick to get paying tourists to visit the house." The "Keene Sentinel" on October 12, 1968, had a long article entitled: "Russells Trying Hard to Kill Ocean Born Mary Ghost Stories." But people still persist in their actions, and Mrs. Russell, now a widow, regrets that her privacy is still invaded.

Some of the occupants of the house prior to Mr. Roy included the James Dowlin family. Two of Mr. Dowlin's grandchildren are now living in Henniker: Forrest Dowlin and his sister, Alice (Mrs. Henry Moody). They remember their grandfather living in the house, that they visited there, and they say definitely that the place was not haunted, nor was there any of Ocean Born Mary's furniture in the house, as Mr. Roy had claimed.

As stated in the beginning of this article, it was quite a legend while it lasted, and perhaps many people do not know that it was the result of an old man's imagination and fabrication. But we who do know the real story hope that this may "lay the ghost" and that people will not annoy the occupants of the house as heretofore.

REFERENCES:

Cogswell's History of Henniker
Dr. Francis L. Childs of Hanover, former resident of Henniker, Professor of English, Emeritus, of Dartmouth College. Various publications.