

SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY

Historical Facts

Versus

Legend: A View

"OCEAN BORN MARY"

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## Ocean Born Mary;

### Legend or Fact

A small piece of green brocade silk and the legend it holds has always intrigued me. As a small child, I was told a romantic and exciting tale about this silk and how it had been passed down from generation to generation since 1720. This family story, as told to me, was a local legend and the fact and fiction seemed tightly interwoven. Just a small piece of history which has been embellished over the years into a legend.

The legend of "Ocean Born Mary" and her house in Henniker, New Hampshire (the only one on earth) began in 1720 aboard the ship Wolf, enroute from Ireland to the New World. Aboard the ship were a group of Scotch-Irish immigrants. Just a few days off the coast of Massachusetts they were boarded by a pirate ship with a Captain Don Pedro in command. The pirates appeared to have intentions of killing all the passengers and looting the ship when the Captain heard from below decks the cry of a new born infant. It was the daughter of James and Elizabeth Wilson and she had been born at sea. The pirate Captain, for some reason, was moved by this infant and offered to let the ship go free from harm, if he could name the infant "Mary", after his mother. The parents quickly agreed and the pirates left the ship. Shortly after, Don Pedro returned with many gifts for the newborn infant and a bundle of pale green silk brocade, which he instructed was to be for Mary's wedding gown. The ship then proceeded to Boston and Mr. & Mrs. Wilson continued on to a new home in Londonderry, New Hampshire.

The legend continues that Mary married at the age of 18, wearing

a gown of green brocade silk. After bearing four sons, Mary was left a widow. Ocean Born Mary was said to be a tall, red haired beauty. Somehow, the pirate Don Pedro kept track of Mary and after retiring from the sea, he built a house in Henniker, New Hampshire. After learning of Mary's widowhood, Don Pedro offered Mary a home for herself and her four sons in the role of his housekeeper.

The story continues that Mary moved to the pirate's house in Henniker and lived there until her death. The legend also alludes to pirate treasure buried on the property and a violent death of the pirate Don Pedro, with his last request of Mary being that she bury him under the hearth stone in the kitchen of the house.

The "Ocean Born Mary House" changed hands many times since Mary's death in 1814. In the 1940's the owner at that time started to report the presence of Mary's ghost in the house. Over the years, the story of Ocean Born Mary and her house received national attention. Louis Roy, the owner of the house obviously enjoyed this attention because he had a thriving business, conducting tours and telling the legend. Mr. Roy himself added to the setting by conducting tours, complete with a black cat perched on his shoulder.

That's the legend, but what are the facts? In trying to research this legend it became clear that legends are sometimes much more prevalent than historical facts. Mary Wilson Wallace was a colorful figure of her times, but not much documentation is available about her true story.

Mary Wallace, Ocean Born Mary, was truly "Ocean Born." There is on record, the birth of a child on July 28, 1720, born at sea and the meeting with a pirate ship. There is also evidence that some green silk was presented to the infant, for there are pieces of this silk still on display in both the Londonderry and Henniker Libraries. This silk was

handed down to Mary's descendants and my first exposure to this story was by my grandmother, showing me her own piece of Ocean Born Mary's wedding gown. Further proof of this event is in Londonderry's historical records. For many years, July 28th was celebrated as a day of remembrance for the ship's escape from the pirates, because of Mary Wilson.

Mary's father died soon after their arrival in Boston and Mary's mother proceeded to Londonderry with her child. A few years after their arrival, Mrs. Wilson married James Clark and through this marriage, Mary became half-sister to four boys and a girl. Mary's half-brother John Clark was to become great-grandfather to Horace Greely.

In 1732 Mary's mother died, leaving her in the difficult role of woman of the house at the age of 12. She lived with her stepfather until the age of 22, when she married James Wallace - in a gown of green silk brocade. Four sons and a daughter were born to the couple and Mary lived in Londonderry until the age of 78.

Two of her sons, William and Robert moved to Henniker and built homes there. Robert's home is the one which is today known as the "Ocean-born Mary House", but Mary never lived there. At the age of 78 she moved to Henniker to live with her son William, whose home was about a mile away from his brother's. The arrival of his mother in his home is to be seen in a copy of William's daybook, which records the date as July 6, 1798. This evidence dispels the legend of Mary moving into the pirate's house. The house in which she did live burned to the ground in 1920. Record of Mary's residence with her son William can be found in United States Census records of 1800 and 1810. Ocean Born Mary died at the age of 94, on February 13, 1814. She was buried in her son's lot in the cemetery behind the Town Hall in Henniker. At the grave is a usual headstone, but also a second stone simply stating "Ocean Born Mary."

When comparing the legend to the facts, it is easy to see discrepancies. The dates available prove that the "beautiful young widow" would have been 78 years old when she moved in to keep house for the pirate, Don Pedro, then approximately 100 years old. Mary Wilson Wallace's entrance into this world was dramatic and the fact she lived to age 94 in itself was remarkable. But when investigating the facts, it seems her life was very long for that period, but also uneventful, aside from the episode of her birth.

Webster's dictionary gives a definition of a legend as "Any story coming out of the past, based on history but not verifiable." What makes a legend such as "Ocean Born Mary" develop? I feel there are many reasons.

In 1720 the world of Mary Wilson Wallace was based on family, tradition and relaying factual information by verbal means. Important events and facts were passed on from generation to generation for many years without the benefit of literacy or documentation. The relaying of information verbally, understandably lead to distortion and omission of facts from being recorded. Lack of proper historians or even anyone who took the trouble to record data contributes to the making of a legend.

The "Ocean Born Mary" story appeared to develop into a full-fledged legend because in 1917 a man named Louis Roy and his mother wanted to buy an interesting old house in New England. Mr. Roy, considered a bit of an eccentric by local residents, was looking for a legend and possibly believed the ghost of "Ocean Born Mary" truly haunted the house he bought. Legends can fit our fantasies and our needs for romance and excitement. Historical facts can not.

In researching this topic, one of the most interesting aspects was the ~~the~~ relative abundance of information about the legend and the lack of historical data. The legend of Ocean Born Mary and the presence of

her ghost is described in great detail in Hans Holzer's Yankee Ghosts and Susy Smith's Prominent American Ghosts, as well as a number of newspaper and magazine articles written in the 1940's and 50's. This data was readily available in the State Library. The only documented facts about Mary Wallace were two photo-stated copies of brief biographies written by James Newton and Alice Flanders. Locked in the vault at the State Library was a letter written by Robert Wallace, great, great-grandchild of Ocean Born Mary. Mr. Wallace had Mary's son, William's, daybook which records her arrival in Henniker and her death. There is a copy of the pertinent pages of the daybook, sent by Mr. Wallace to try to erase an untrue story about his ancestor. The facts are there, but for many years people chose not to seek them out or wished to ignore them. I too enjoy the fantasy of a legend and hate to give it up.

In our present state of technology, a single statement made on television can reach millions of people, even world wide. Events are recorded and communicated before and during their occurrence. What chance do legends have to develop today? Will someone be investigating a legend two hundred years from now, or will we have such an abundance of documentation that "legends" will no more exist?