

Ocean-born Mary

In the town of Henniker, New Hampshire, stands a grand old house with a fascinating legend attached to it—a legend that some people would like to kill and others insist on preserving. For generations, stories have circulated of eerie happenings in and around the house. It has been said that lights would sometimes flicker on and off in an upstairs window, when no one was living in the house. The awful groans of a dying man have supposedly been heard in the woodyard behind the house. And now and then at dusk a coach drawn by four horses has reportedly taken shape at the front door. Inside the coach, a tall woman with flaming red hair sits, staring off into the distance. The woman, it is said, is the ghost of Ocean-born Mary, and this was once her house.

The story of Ocean-born Mary begins in Londonderry, Ireland, in 1720. A shipload of people were setting sail for a new life in the New World. They were bound for Londonderry, New Hampshire. Among those on board were James Wilson and his wife, Elizabeth, who was soon to bear their first child.

On July 28, as the voyage was drawing to a close, Elizabeth gave birth to her child. At about the same time, a lookout sighted land—America! Right after,

another lookout, perched high atop the mainmast, shouted, "Sail ho!"

At that cry, the captain's face remained calm, though he was anything but. He knew that his ship was easy prey for pirates, who were known to sail those waters. As he debated what to do, the strange ship drew nearer and fired a cannon. Then it broke out the skull and crossbones. Two boats were lowered over the side, and a group of fierce-looking men brandishing swords and pistols rowed swiftly to the immigrant ship and clambered onto its deck. At their head was a tall, dark-skinned man called Pedro. "Lash the men together!" he ordered. "Once we get the valuables, we'll kill them all!"

Pedro himself went below decks. He soon found what he was looking for: chests of silver, gold, and jewels. As he knelt to run his hands through the treasure, he heard a whimper. He drew his pistol and followed the sound—down the passageway to a locked cabin door. Pedro crashed through the door, pistol at the ready. What he faced was a terrified Elizabeth Wilson, lying in bed, her new-born baby cradled in her arms. Pedro's fierce look disappeared. He lowered his pistol and approached. "Is it a girl?" he asked gently. "Yes," Elizabeth whispered. "Has she been named yet?" Pedro inquired. "No . . . not yet," came the hesitant reply.

Pedro leaned over to get a better look at the child. "My dear," he said to Elizabeth, "if you give this child my mother's name, I swear I will not harm this ship nor any of its passengers." A bewildered Elizabeth nodded yes. "Her name shall be Mary," Pedro said. Then he left the cabin.

Back on deck, he shouted a series of commands to his men. "Return the treasure! Release the men! We are leaving this vessel!" The pirates lowered themselves into their boats and pulled away to their own ship.

Shortly after, Pedro returned carrying a bundle. He went straight to Elizabeth's cabin. Thrusting the bundle at her, he said, "This is for little Mary's wedding dress." Pedro then left the ship and sailed away. Inside the package, Elizabeth found a bolt of pale green silk embroidered with flowers.

The immigrant ship landed safely in Boston. Shortly afterward, James Wilson died, and Elizabeth and her baby daughter went on to Londonderry, where a piece of land awaited them. The story of the tiny child who had saved a ship spread quickly. Everyone began calling her "Ocean-born Mary."

The years passed, and Mary grew to be a beautiful bright-eyed, red-haired woman, nearly six feet tall. A contemporary described her as being "elegant in her

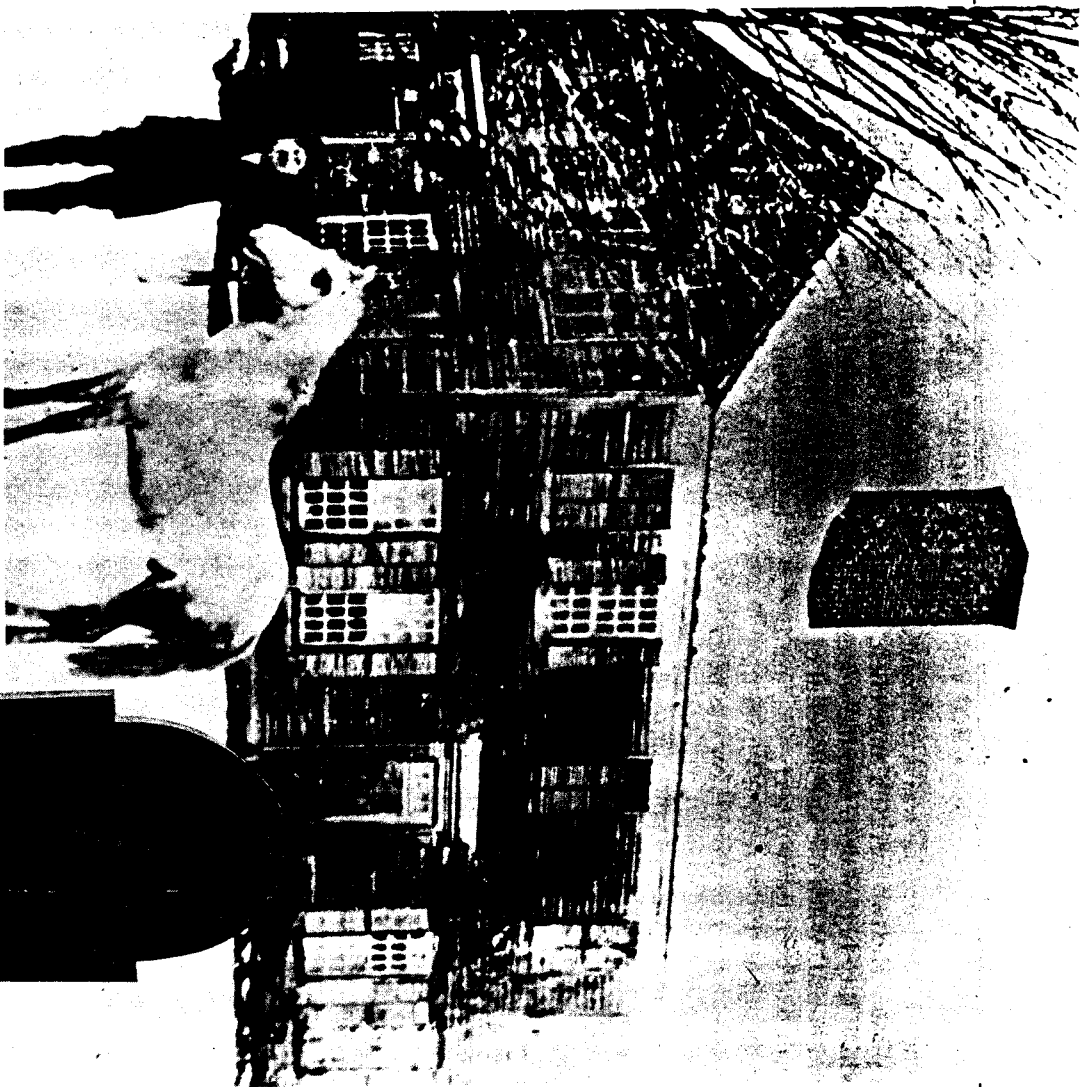
manners, resolute and determined, of strong mind, quick of comprehension, sharp in her conversation with a strong brogue and full of humor." When she married, she wore a wedding dress of green silk embroidered with flowers.

All to this point is true. The facts are of historical record. Here the legend begins.

Mary and her husband, James Wallace, lived in Londonderry and had four sons. When the boys were still very young, Mary's husband died. The pirate Pedro had long since retired from the sea, but he had never forgotten the child he had named for his mother. Hearing that Mary was widowed, Pedro decided to help. He went to Henniker, New Hampshire, accompanied by one of his ship's carpenters. Together they built a great house deep in the woods. Then Pedro sought out Mary.

Mary was happy to meet the pirate who had given her her name. She had long been curious about him. She found him to be both kindly and generous. "Care for me in my old age," Pedro said to Mary, "and I will see that you and your sons lack nothing." Mary agreed and went to live in Pedro's house. He gave her a coach-and-four to drive, and he made sure her children were well provided for.

Then one day Pedro left for the seacoast.



The name Ocean-born Mary and the house pictured above have long been intertwined in a romantic legend featuring pirates, buried treasure, murder, and ghosts. Historians claim that the story is bunk. But Ocean-born Mary, whose grave-stone is pictured on the right, was a real person. Just what is the truth in this story?

An error- This is the William Wallace house where Ocean Born Mary spent her last days. Pictures of the Robert Wallace house - the so-called "Ocean Born Mary" house may be found in the library's archives or in the frontispiece of the reprint of Cogswell's history.

When he returned, he was accompanied by a pirate. The two carried a huge chest, which they lugged deep into the woods and buried. When the last shovelful of earth had been thrown, a cry was heard in the night. Pedro returned from the woods alone. His companion was never seen again.

Months later, Mary returned from a drive in her coach-and-four to find the house empty. Where was Pedro? She found him behind the house, dead, his heart pierced by a cutlass. Pedro's body was buried under the huge hearthstone in the kitchen of the great house, where he had often said he wished to be placed.

The years went by, and one by one, Mary's sons married and left home. Mary stayed on alone in the house Pedro had built for her. She died there in 1814, at the age of eighty-four. Mary's ghost regularly visited the house, usually around sunset. In recent years, the legend has distressed the people who live in the house. There is no ghost, they claim. And they wish people would stop bothering them.

First of all, the house, which has come to be called the Ocean-born Mary House, was not Mary's at all. It was built by her son Robert. Mary never lived there. Historical records show that Mary did

have four sons, but she also had a daughter. And Mary's husband did not die until he was eighty-one years old. Mary was seventy-one at the time—hardly the beautiful young widow of the legend. If Pedro had still been alive at that time, he would have been about a hundred. He never bought any land in Henniker or went looking for Mary Wallace.

In 1798, when she was seventy-eight years old, Mary left Londonderry to live with her son William in Henniker—about a mile from Robert's house. She lived there until her death. Mary was buried in the cemetery behind the Henniker Town Hall. A slate headstone marks her grave. On it are inscribed the words "In Memory of Widow Mary Wallace who died Feb. 13, 1814 in the 94th year of her age."

How did such a wild legend grow up around her name? It was all part of a money-making scheme. In 1917 a man named Louis Roy bought the Robert Wallace house, which had long been vacant and was in bad condition. He moved in with his mother and renovated the house, filling it with valuable antiques. Then he started the story about Mary and Pedro, the ghost, the buried treasure, and the cries in the woodyard. His story grew and grew, and many people

began to believe it. Newspapers and magazines spread the story. People began to come from all over. Mr. Roy gave tours of the house for an admission fee. He even rented shovels for fifty cents apiece, so that folks could dig for the buried treasure.

Mr. Roy died in 1965, but by that time the legend had taken on a life of its own. The family that bought the house is still plagued by people wanting to see the ghost. Although the story has been proved to be a fake, some folks just refuse to believe the facts. It seems they'd rather cling to the more colorful fiction. A good ghost story dies hard. What would Mary and Pedro say if they knew? ■

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