

# BARRISTERS, BRIGANDS, AND BRENTS: Margaret Brent: Attorney, Adventurer, and America's First Suffragette. By Aleck Loker

A little more than three hundred and fifty years ago, Mistress Margaret Brent appeared before the Maryland legislature, and demanded the right to vote. Who was this Englishwoman, and how could someone thought of at that time as a middle-aged "spinster" have had the nerve to take such a bold step?

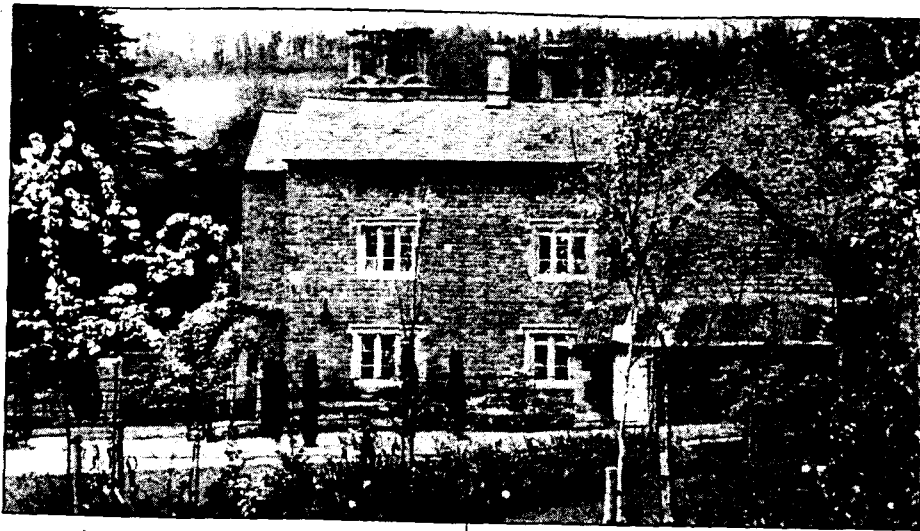
Unfortunately, Margaret Brent is hardly recognized in England or America for the great adventurer, attorney, and champion of human rights that she was. During this anniversary year of her petition for the vote,\* it is time that she receives the honor and recognition she deserves.

My wife and I have attempted to add some substance to the history of this courageous woman by documentary research and travel to the place of her childhood—the beautiful Cotswold Hills of England.

To understand Margaret Brent, we need to revisit 17th-century England to examine how she would have been brought up. Margaret, one of the oldest of thirteen children, was born in 1601 to Sir Richard and Elizabeth Brent, Roman Catholics of Larke Stoke Manor in Gloucestershire (now Warwickshire). The Brents are descended from Martin de Tour (purported but not proven to have been the son of Bishop Odo of Bayeaux Tapestry fame and half-brother of William the Conqueror).

By the 15th century, the Brents had accumulated significant estates, and Robert, younger son of the Lord and Lady of Cossington in Somerset, set out for Gloucestershire to make his fortune. He arrived at Larke Stoke about 1487 and married Margery, daughter of George Colchester, Lord of Stoke and Admington. Catherine Greville, daughter of Fulke and Elizabeth Willoughby Greville, was Margaret Brent's grandmother. Elizabeth Willoughby was perhaps the wealthiest heiress of her day.

During Margaret's youth, the Brents were overtly Church of England members, but when she was nineteen, the family reverted to Roman Catholicism. Three of Margaret's sisters entered the



Larke Stoke Manor, a charming country seat. Photograph by the author.

Convent at Cambrai, and Margaret and her sister Mary apparently took vows of celibacy—perhaps in a secret Roman Catholic order of nuns. Margaret's independence and strength of character and her evident education indicate she probably attended a continental school.

By the 1630s, the Brents' fortunes had begun to dwindle due to the fines and penalties they incurred for their recusancy (refusal to swear an oath of supremacy putting the king before the pope). They were clearly the poor cousins of some of the wealthiest and most important English aristocrats.

That situation, coupled with the prospect of intensifying religious persecution, led Margaret and her sister Mary as well as her brothers Giles and Fulke to take the bold step of emigrating to Lord Baltimore's new colony in Maryland. Baltimore, also a Roman Catholic and Brent cousin, had begun the colony with the first voyage in 1634.

Margaret and her siblings settled there in 1638 after she secured Lord Baltimore's written guarantee of her right to land in Maryland. On her arrival, she and Mary established their home, "Sister's Freehold," on the first grant of land made in the new capital. They lived independently among all the men in the colony, seemingly rejecting all offers of marriage—a most unusual situation.

Problems soon erupted in the colony. In February, 1645, Captain Richard Ingle, sailing on the aptly

named *Reformation*, attacked the colony and seized the capital. Giles Brent and two Jesuit chaplains were taken prisoner and returned to England for trial. They were subsequently freed and Giles returned to America.

The governor of the colony, Lord Baltimore's brother Leonard Calvert, fled to Virginia. The colonists suffered greatly at the hands of the rebels—cattle and tobacco were stolen, homes were burned. Margaret Brent remained and stabilized the situation until Calvert returned two years later with a rag-tag militia. Calvert had promised the militiamen plunder if they met armed resistance; otherwise, he would pay them for their service.

Calvert regained the colony peacefully in 1647, but by summer he was dead. On his death bed, he appointed Margaret as his executor with the statement, "Take all and pay all." He left behind a colony in chaos with serious political tensions, a militia made up of brigands bent on taking their pay by plunder, and two orphaned children in England.

When Margaret assumed the responsibilities for Calvert's estate, the court also made her Baltimore's representative—a power-of-attorney that the deceased governor held. Immediately, Margaret had to deal with the militia crisis. She had two courses of action: pay the soldiers from Calvert's assets, or arrange for

a general levy to be imposed on colonists. On January 21, 1648, Margaret Brent attended the General Assembly and demanded "voice and vote," probably to have a tax imposed to pay the militia. Her demand was based on being a free-woman land owner and Baltimore's attorney. Acting Governor Thomas Greene refused her demand and she protested vociferously, but to no avail. Undaunted, she used her legal skills to maintain the Calvert assets and paid the militia with some of Baltimore's livestock and property. Her actions ensured that the struggling Maryland colony avoided further deprivations.

By about 1650, the Brents had moved to Virginia and became wealthy planters, eventually owning over 10,000 acres along the Potomac River. Margaret Brent died there in 1670. This great pioneer left behind no children to carry on her spirit. However, her spirit of independence and her strength of character germinated in America.

Others came after her, clamoring for equality. Nearly 300 years later, women finally received the vote in the United States. Margaret Brent, a courageous and highly successful English settler in America, was first and foremost a champion of human rights and a very active litigant on behalf of others.

Last April, my wife and I set out to find Larke Stoke Manor and to visit the village where some of Margaret's relatives are buried. Ilmington, a charming village at the northern edge of the Cotswolds (referred to with good reason as the "Heart of England"), is perhaps ten miles south of Stratford-upon-Avon, best known for its most famous resident, William Shakespeare (Margaret was sixteen when Shakespeare died).

We engaged local tour guide Tony Wootton to help us find Larke Stoke Manor. Neither Mr. Wootton nor any other person we interviewed in the area knew of Larke Stoke Manor or Margaret Brent—except for the owners of The Myrtles Bed and Breakfast, where we were staying.

Mr. Wootton was familiar with St. Mary's the Virgin Church in Ilmington and showed Mrs. Loker the distinctive carvings in that

charming Norman church while I photographed the Brent memorial plaque in the north transept. The church guide book contains the following references:

*Of other mural tablets of historical interest in the church, the oldest is on the east wall of the north transept to the members of the Brent family, the founder having migrated (from Somerset) during the Wars of the Roses, under the assumed name of Buston. Another member of the family, Giles Brent, migrated to the American colonies in 1648. Many families now living in the USA claim their descent from him.*

Alas, Margaret is unknown in her home parish.

Leaving the church, we drove along a narrow lane until we reached the entrance to Larke Stoke Manor. The Jacobean manor house and grounds appear well maintained by the current owner. The property is not open to the public. The area would seem little changed from when Margaret lived there. Ilmington is even more evocative of the past, with its small village charm unspoiled by commercial development.

The next stop was Chipping Campden, the enchanting market town where the Greville and Hicks families of wool merchants left their mark in the magnificent St. James Church. One of the most important and impressive brasses in the church is that of William Greville (Grevel), supposedly the largest in Gloucestershire. William Greville was an ancestor of Baron Brooke and an ancestor of Margaret.

The pilgrimage concluded with a trip to Warwick to see The Collegiate Church of St. Mary where Margaret's cousin Baron Brooke is buried. The Greville mausoleum is dominated by a two-storey black marble monument commissioned by Baron Brooke. The building incorporates elements of an earlier, 12th-century church. A plaque in the nave lists Margaret Brent's ancestor, Robert Brent, LL.D., as a prebendary in 1500.

No trip to Warwick is complete without a visit to Warwick Castle, one of the most magnificently restored and appointed castles in England. Warwick Castle, bought from King James I and restored at great expense by Sir Fulke Greville, is the site of the incarceration of the Brents.

Margaret's father paid heavily for his public profession of the Roman Catholic faith. Two-thirds of Larke Stoke Manor was sequestered by 1644 because of Richard Brent's part in the English Civil War. In August of 1644, Sir Richard allowed Royalists to fortify his home at Larke Stoke. The house was ultimately overrun by Parliamentary forces and Brent was imprisoned at Warwick Castle.

There is still much to be discovered about Margaret Brent's life and her connections to the Calverts. Her education, her possible secret religious vows, the details of the sequestration of Brent property, the Brents' role in the English Civil War, and finally the true relationship between Leonard Calvert and the Brents (he may have married Margaret's youngest sister) need to be documented.

Hopefully, English historians and researchers will become enthusiastic about this great woman who was a credit to England as well as one of the truly great pioneers in America. With the death of Princess Diana, Britain lost an enormously powerful and sensitive advocate for human rights. Perhaps regaining the memory of a powerful 17th-century Englishwoman who advanced human rights can serve as a memorial to both women, separated by 350 years of struggle for high moral principles.

*\*The editor regrets to say that the publication schedule of this Newsletter did not allow for the inclusion of this article until 1999, not in 1998, the anniversary of Mistress Brent's request for the vote.*

You can visit the Historic St. Mary's City website for a factsheet on Margaret Brent written by Dr. Lois Green Carr.

[http://www.smcm.edu/hsmc/center/margaret\\_brent/margaret\\_brent.htm](http://www.smcm.edu/hsmc/center/margaret_brent/margaret_brent.htm)