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MISTRESS MARGARET BRENT, SPINSTER.

By JULIA CHERRY SPRUILL.

In the founding of Maryland, as in the establishment of the other southern colonies, women played a significant part. In the new settlements, where the crying needs were for increased population and a stable food supply, mothers and housewives naturally were of great importance. Promoters of colonization wrote in glowing terms of the fecundity of women in the New World and praised their efficiency in domestic matters. Prominent officials commended capable housewives to the Lord Proprietor and interspersed their accounts of political matters with descriptions of their wives' and neighbors' success in preserving, in cheese making, poultry raising and gardening.¹ Among the first letters sent back to England from Maryland was one in 1638 eulogizing a "noble matron" for her domestic virtues.² Another epistle from Captain Cornwallis, one of the commissioners of the province, took particular pains to commend to Lord Baltimore the wife of his assistant, Jerome Hawley, "whose industrious housewifery," he declared, "hath so adorned this desert, that should his [her husband's] discouragements force him to withdraw himself and hir, it would not a little eclipse the Glory of Maryland."³

¹ "Calvert Papers," Maryland Historical Society *Fund Publication*, no. 28, pp. 247, 265-266; John Hammond, "Leah and Rachel," *Narratives of Early Maryland*, edited by Clayton Colman Hall, pp. 293, 296.

² "Annual Letters of the Jesuits," *Narratives*, pp. 123-124.

³ "Calvert Papers," *op. cit.*, pp. 180-181.

Not only as "fruitful vines" and skillful housekeepers, however, did women distinguish themselves, but also as landed proprietors and active participants in public affairs. Women heads of families, who were granted lands on the same terms as men, brought in servants, took up large tracts, established plantations, and brought numerous suits against their debtors in the provincial court.⁴ Several were active in political struggles. When in the battle between the Puritans and the forces of Governor Stone in 1655 the Governor was wounded and kept "incommunicado," his wife, Virlinda Stone, lest he and his party be misrepresented by Puritan messengers dispatched to present favorable accounts of their actions in England, wrote at once to Lord Baltimore, explaining the political issues and describing the armed conflict from her husband's side.⁵ Another Maryland matron to plead her husband's cause before his enemies could "make their owne tale in England" was Barbara Smith, wife of Captain Richard Smith of Calvert County. During the Revolution of 1689, when her husband was imprisoned for refusing to take part with the insurgents, Mistress Smith hurried to England to lay his case before the authorities there.⁶

But the outstanding woman among the early Maryland settlers was not a devoted wife or an eminent housewife, but, as she appears in the records, "Mistresse Margarett Brent, Spinster." This remarkable woman was not only the most conspicuous of her sex, but was one of the most prominent personages in the colony, whose business and public activities filled many pages of court records and suggest a career which the most ambitious of modern feminists might envy. Mistress Brent was of distinguished family⁷ and apparently was not

⁴ See references to Mary Tranton [also spelled Throughton], Frances White, Winifred Seaborne, Jane Cockshott, and others in "Land Notes, 1634-1655," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, V, 166-174, 261-271, 365-374; and "Judicial and Testamentary Business of the Provincial Court, 1637-1650," *Archives of Maryland*, IV, Index.

⁵ This letter is given in full in *Narratives of Maryland*, pp. 265-267.

⁶ *Archives of Maryland*, VIII, 153; *Maryland Historical Magazine*, II, 374.

⁷ Margaret was one of a large number of children born to Richard and

without means, but as a Catholic she suffered disabilities under the English laws, which at the time were unfriendly to those of her religion. Dissatisfied, perhaps, with the religious persecutions of her family in England, and encouraged by Lord Baltimore's extraordinary offers of land and privileges in Maryland, she decided to emigrate, and, with her brothers Giles and Fulke and her sister Mary, arrived in the province in November, 1638.

Though accompanied by their brothers, the Mistress Brents came on their own ventures, bringing in servants and patenting lands in their own names. That Lord Baltimore considered them particularly desirable as colonists appears in the unusually large grants and special privileges given them. In his "Conditions of Plantation," he had allowed each adventurer transporting as many as *five* men in the year 1633 two thousand acres with manorial rights, and to those bringing in as many as *ten* in the years 1634 and 1635 he offered the same inducements.⁸ Though Mary and Margaret Brent did not arrive until four years after the first settlement and then brought less than the required number of servants, they were allowed the same large grants and all the rights and immunities awarded the adventurers who had braved the first voyage.⁹

According to a deposition of April 8, 1661, in which she testified she was aged "Sixty yeares, or thereabouts," Margaret Brent was about thirty-seven years old when she arrived in Maryland. She had probably put aside all thoughts of matrimony and turned her whole attention to establishing an estate and enjoying a career of her own. Besides her lands, houses, and cattle in and about St. Mary's, she acquired considerable possessions on Kent Island. Some idea of the value of this

Elizabeth Reed Brent. Through her maternal grandmother, Katharine Greville Reed, she traced her lineage back to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, sons of King Edward III of England. (John Bailey Calvert Nicklin, "The Calvert Family," *Maryland Magazine*, XVI, 189-190; and "The Brent Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XII, 439-440.)

⁸ *Archives of Maryland*, III, 47-49.

⁹ "Land Notes, 1634-1655," *op. cit.*, p. 263.

property and the numerous activities she conducted on her plantations may be obtained from an itemized list of damages for which she brought suit in 1648 against Peter Knight, one of the leaders in an insurrection in which she had lost property. She demanded compensation to the value of 30,600 pounds of tobacco, maintaining: first, that the rebels had entered her Kent mill and taken all the profits amounting, according to what the mill had hitherto brought, to three thousand pounds of tobacco, and had taken away all the iron works of the mill, thereby causing it to decay to the loss of ten thousand pounds; second, that they had killed "divers of her cattle" with gun shot and made the rest wild to the damage of eight thousand pounds, had burned her houses valued at six thousand pounds, and had taken away a "wayne and wheele" worth six hundred pounds and a plowgear worth one thousand; and, third, that they had ruined her house, which they had used as a garrison, to the value of two thousand pounds.¹⁰

As holders of manorial estates, Margaret Brent and her sister had the right to hold courts-baron where controversies relating to manor lands were tried and tenants did fealty for their lands, and courts-leet where residents on their manors were tried for criminal offences. One of the few surviving records of a court-baron is of that held at St. Gabriel's Manor by the steward of Mistress Mary Brent, where the tenant appeared, did "fealty to the Lady," and took possession of thirty-seven acres according to the custom of the manor.¹¹ Whether Mistress Margaret exercised such feudal rights over her tenants does not appear, but the many references to her in the minutes of the provincial court bear witness to her diligence and perseverance in prosecuting her debtors. Between the years 1642 and 1650 her name occurs no less than one hundred and thirty-four times in the court records, and during these eight years there was hardly a court at which she did not have at least one case. Occasionally she appeared as defendant, but oftener as

¹⁰ *Archives of Maryland*, IV, 417.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, XLI, 94.

plaintiff, and, it is interesting to know, a majority of these cases were decided in her favor.

Her successful handling of her own affairs probably accounts for her being often called upon to act in behalf of her friends and members of her family. When her brother Fulke returned to England, he gave her a power of attorney to conduct his affairs,¹² and on several occasions she acted for her other brother Giles.¹³ As guardian of the little Indian princess, Mary Kittamaquund, daughter of the Piscataway Emperor, she brought suits and collected debts due her,¹⁴ and she also acted as agent for other gentlewomen.¹⁵ Because she so frequently transacted business for others by power of attorney, it has been mistakenly assumed that she was an attorney at law, but no evidence appears to show that she made any claim to membership in the legal profession.

During the first eight years of her residence in Maryland Mistress Brent's energies were exerted largely in the conduct of private business, but rapidly moving events following the civil wars thrust her into a position of great public responsibility and for a time placed in her hands the destiny of the whole colony. Leonard Calvert, the governor, went to England in April, 1643 to consult with his brother, Lord Baltimore, about affairs in the province, and on his return in September, 1644 found the colony on the verge of an insurrection. Led by William Claiborne and Richard Ingle, a band of rebels soon took possession of Kent Island, invaded the western shore, and established themselves at St. Mary's. Governor Calvert with a large number of the Councillors fled to Virginia leaving Maryland in a state of anarchy. Toward the end of 1646 he returned with a small force of Virginians and Maryland refugees, entered St. Mary's and established his authority over the province. But he had hardly restored order when on June 9, 1647, he died, leaving Maryland once more without a strong hand to direct her affairs.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, IV, 192, 228.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 259, 264, 265.

¹³ *Ibid.*, IV, 357, 477, 481; X, 28, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 487-488.

¹⁶ William Hand Browne, *Maryland: A History of a Palatinate*, pp. 58-64.

On his deathbed, by a nuncupative will, after naming Thomas Greene to succeed him as governor, he appointed Margaret Brent his executrix with the enigmatical instruction, "Take all and pay all."¹⁷ This appointment was apparently not regarded with surprise or question by his contemporaries, but it has provided a subject for much speculation by historians. Imaginative writers, reading in the records that the dying governor, after making his legal appointments, requested the witnesses to leave the room and was for a while in private conference with Mistress Brent, at once visualized an affair of the heart between the two, but the disillusioning discovery that at the time of making his will Leonard Calvert was married, put an end to this pleasing romance.¹⁸ Later it was believed that the governor's wife was Anne, sister of Margaret Brent, and that because of her close relation to his children he had placed the direction of his affairs in her hands. But this explanation has also been questioned and the real relation between Margaret Brent and Leonard Calvert is still unknown.¹⁹

Might it not have been that the governor, realizing his estate was greatly involved and his affairs confused, chose Mistress Brent as his executrix, not because of any personal relationship, but because he respected her business ability and felt that she was the person most able to handle the difficult situation he was leaving? Evidently she had acted as his agent on former occasions, for, while he was away in England, she was accused of bringing a suit against his estate to thwart the legal proceedings of one of his creditors and of sending the tobacco she thus recovered to him in London. The person making the accusation was sentenced to imprisonment for defamation, but the court, possibly also suspecting her of secretly saving the property for Calvert, suspended the talebearer's sentence.²⁰

With her appointment as executrix of Governor Calvert,

¹⁷ *Archives of Maryland*, IV, 314.

¹⁸ *Maryland Magazine*, XVI, 189-190; XXII, 307.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, XXI, 320; XXII, 307.

²⁰ *Archives of Maryland*, IV, 259, 265.

Margaret Brent's public career began. She was summoned into court to answer numerous suits for his debts and found it necessary to start legal proceedings for sums due his estate. The most urgent matter before her was the satisfaction of debts due the soldiers of Fort Inigoes. Governor Calvert had brought these volunteers from Virginia to help regain the government from the rebels, and, in order to secure their much needed services, had pledged his entire estate and that of the Lord Proprietor to pay them. Before his executrix could complete her inventory, the captain of the fort, on behalf of the soldiers, demanded their back wages and secured an attachment upon the whole Calvert estate.²¹

Mistress Brent now found herself confronting a grave and critical situation. Leonard Calvert's estate was entirely inadequate to meet the demands upon it. The price of corn was soaring higher and higher and famine threatened. Enemies of the existing government were just outside the borders of the province awaiting an opportunity for a new invasion, and the hungry soldiers in the fort, frightened by the rise in prices and the scarcity of food, became unruly and threatened mutiny. Realizing the necessity for prompt and decisive measures, she demanded and obtained a power to act as attorney for the Lord Proprietor and quieted the clamorous soldiers by promising to send to Virginia immediately for corn and by selling enough of the proprietary's cattle to pay them. Thus she rescued the struggling little colony from certain disaster and very probably saved it from all the evils of another civil war.

One of Maryland's historians, commenting upon her courageous handling of this critical situation, suggested that Leonard Calvert might have done better had he reversed his testamentary dispositions and made Margaret Brent governor and Thomas Greene executor.²² But it was not a day of political rights for women, as Mistress Margaret soon discovered. On January 21, 1647, probably in order to be in a better position to look after the Calvert interests, she went before the assembly

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

²² Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

and demanded a seat, thereby unconsciously distinguishing herself as the first woman in America to claim the right to vote. The minutes of the proceedings for the day state: "Came Mrs Margaret Brent and requested to have vote in the howse for herselfe and voyce allso for that att the last Court 3d: Jan: it was ordered that the said Mrs Brent was to be looked upon and received as his Lordships Attorney. The Governor denied that the sd Mrs Brent should have any vote in the howse."²³ She did not submit quietly to this decision, however, for, according to the record, she protested against all the proceedings in the assembly unless she might be present and vote.

The members of the assembly, while unwilling to allow a woman within the sacred precincts of their divinely ordained sphere, nevertheless appreciated her public services and commended her to the Lord Proprietor. Lord Baltimore, ignorant of the succession of disturbances in his colony, and hearing of the bold manner in which Margaret Brent had taken matters into her own hands and disposed of his cattle, wrote an indignant letter to the assembly complaining of her highhandedness. In answer, the assembly wrote him a long letter describing the calamities and disorders they had suffered and concluding with this justification of their countrywoman: ". . . as for Mrs Brents undertaking and meddling with your Lordships Estate here (whether she procured it with her own and others importunity or no) we do Verily Believe and in Conscience report that it was better for the Collonys safety at that time in her hands than in any mans else in the whole Province after your Brothers death for the Soldiers would never have treated any other with that Civility and respect and though they were even ready at times to run into mutiny yet she still pacified them till at the last things were brought to that strait that she must be admitted and declared your Lordships Attorney by an order of Court (the Copy whereof is herewith inclosed) or else all must go to ruin Again and then the second mischief

²³ *Archives of Maryland*, I, 215.

had been doubtless far greater than the former so that if there hath not been any sinister use made of your Lordships Estate by her from what it was intended and engaged for by Mr Calvert before his death, as we verily Believe she hath not, then we conceive from that time she rather deserved favour and thanks from your Honour for her so much Concurring to the Public safety then to be liable to all those bitter invectives you have been pleased to express against her.”²⁴ Lord Baltimore was not moved by this enthusiastic defense to withdraw his accusations or to express any appreciation of Mistress Brent’s services, but from that time on continued distrustful and hostile.

Margaret Brent’s fall from grace, however, was not due altogether to her selling the proprietary cattle. She and her family were the victims of a new policy the proprietor was observing to meet the changes in English politics. A shrewd politician, Lord Baltimore warily watched the undercurrents of popular feeling in England, determined to gain the good will of those in power and thereby save his proprietary estates by whatever means he found expedient. Perceiving the rise of the Puritans to power in Parliament, he sought to conciliate them by showing disfavor to prominent Catholics and granting concessions to Protestants in Maryland. He replaced Thomas Greene, the Catholic governor, with William Stone, a partisan of the Puritans, and reorganized the Council so that Protestants had a majority in the upper house.²⁵ As an expression of his unfriendliness to Margaret Brent, he wrote a letter to the new governor confirming the sale of all his estate made after the death of his brother up until April, 1649 but making a conspicuous exception in the case of any part which at that date remained in Margaret Brent’s hands or had been disposed of at any time to her brother or sister.²⁶

Deprived of the Maryland proprietor’s favor, the Brents moved down to Westmoreland County in Virginia where they

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.

²⁵ Matthew Page Andrews, *History of Maryland*, p. 93.

²⁶ *Archives of Maryland*, I, 316-317.

patented land and established a plantation, giving it the significant name "Peace." There they continued to import servants and take up large tracts of lands. They evidently had no intention of ever returning to Maryland, but meant to identify themselves wholly with the Virginia Colony. Mistress Brent, in a business letter to Governor Stone July 22, 1650, expressed a desire not to be further involved in Maryland affairs, declaring: "[I] would not intangle my Self in Maryland because of the Ld Baltemore's disaffections to me and the Instrucons he Sends agt us."²⁷ This hope was apparently realized, for after 1651 her name did not appear in the Maryland records.

While she was not prominent in public affairs in Virginia, she continued active in the management of other people's business affairs as well as her own. By a deed recorded April 17, 1654, her brother Captain Giles Brent, about to set out for England, conveyed to her his whole estate in Virginia and Maryland in consideration of her promise to support his wife and educate and maintain his children.²⁸ For a while it was believed that she was the heroine of a romantic episode mentioned in the archives, but a careful reading of the records proved the Margaret Brent mentioned to be a servant maid,²⁹ and the finding of her will, dated December 26, 1663,³⁰ proves beyond a doubt that Maryland's most notable woman lived all her days as "Mistress Margarett Brent, Spinster."

MARYLAND AND THE EARL OF LOUDON.

By PAUL H. GIDDENS.

While Indians were perpetrating all kinds of atrocities upon the panic-stricken frontiersmen of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania during the summer and fall of 1755, William

²⁷ *Archives of Maryland*, X, 104.

²⁸ *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XVI, 211; *William and Mary College Quarterly*, IV, 40.

³⁰ *Virginia Magazine*, XVI, 98-99.

²⁹ *Maryland Magazine*, II, 379.

Shirley, Braddock's successor as commander-in-chief, asked the various colonies to send commissioners to New York to discuss plans for a spring campaign against the French and Indians.¹ Feeling that his Assembly would not comply with the request, Governor Horatio Sharpe of Maryland set out for New York alone. There on December 12th and 13th, 1755, Governors Shirley, Hardy, Sharpe, Morris, and Fitch, Colonel Dunbar, Majors Charles Craven, James Kinnear, John Rutherford, and Sir John St. Clair held a council of war and agreed on a plan of operations.² A drive against Crown Point with 10,000 men was to be the main objective with concurrent attacks against Quebec, Fort Duquesne, and the French posts on Lake Ontario. If these plans were successfully executed, lower Canada would be isolated and the British would become masters of the Great Lakes region. For the Crown Point expedition, Maryland was asked to raise 1,000 men, Virginia 1,750, and Pennsylvania 1,500. They were also expected to organize and send an expedition against Fort Duquesne. Finally, Shirley proposed that the southern colonies make a treaty with the Catawba and Cherokee Indians not only to secure their aid but to keep them from joining the enemy.

Governor Sharpe hurried home from New York and on February 23, 1756, presented the plan of operations to the Maryland Assembly with a request for it to act in a most zealous manner.³ He also asked the Assembly to make the militia law more effective. After sitting ten days the lower house voted £40,000 for military purposes. "But from experience," declared Sharpe, "I find that with us there is a wide Difference

¹ Horatio Sharpe, *Correspondence of Governor Horatio Sharpe* (Archives of Maryland), William Hand Browne, editor, Baltimore, 1888, Vol. I, pp. 271, 291, 293, 306, 308, 309. (Hereinafter referred to as *Sharp Cor.*)

² *Ibid.*, pp. 306, 315-318, 321, 331, 332; *Proceedings of the Council of Maryland*, Archives of Maryland, William Hand Browne, editor, Baltimore, 1911, Vol. XXXI, pp. 90-100. (Hereinafter referred to as *Council Pro.*)

³ *Votes and Proceedings of the Lower House of Assembly of the Province of Maryland, February, 1756*, pp. 2, 4. (Hereinafter referred to as *Votes and Pro. L. H.*)