

My Grandma Mary ... Was She a Witch or Was She Just Crazy?

By Gaye Buzbee Jacobs

"The Mother of Rockbridge County, Virginia, the first white woman settler in that part of Colonial America" was said to be extraordinarily beautiful and unusually articulate for a woman in that time. She was also shunned by her Christian neighbors because they felt she was "a bit touched in the head" and may have even practiced witchcraft!

Born in Ulster, Ireland in 1707, Mary McDowell grew up in a large protestant family who emigrated to Galloway, Scotland, along with several other local families. When she was twenty-two years old she joined her father Ephraim, her two brothers and her future husband, James Greenlee, on the perilous journey to America. They settled near Philadelphia but soon journeyed with a large group of friends to a new "Scots-Irish" settlement in Virginia, leading packhorses full of household goods. Such a long trip in 1729 was arduous and full of very real danger from the Native American tribes along the way, but the group arrived safely at "Borden's Grant" and decided to purchase land for a farm from a local owner.

James Greenlee and Mary McDowell married in 1736, built their home, and over the next 20 years had eleven children. Mary was said to be very outspoken, and evidently decided early on that she would stop the local Indian tribes from harassing and intimidating her family. And, she had a plan for preventing that: known to be eccentric, personable, and smart, she seemed to understand their culture and their superstitions. If she could figure out how to communicate with these Natives, letting everyone think she was a bit crazed, could it be used to her advantage?

Since they believed that bad things would happen to them if they harmed a crazy woman, Mary was allowed to roam freely around the countryside and was treated as a respected visitor by the tribes in that area of Virginia. In later years, her sons told the story of Mary rescuing a young girl who had been kidnapped. Jumping on her horse, Mary rode straight into the Indian camp and found young Alice Lewis, who may have claimed she had not been taken, after all? The Chief told Mary that the young girl was just visiting with her Indian boyfriend, and he called her "White Dove!" Mary wasn't so sure about that, but after successfully negotiating with them on their own terms, the Indians agreed to trade Alice for a horse and promptly returned the girl to her grateful family.

Meanwhile, Mary Greenlee's reputation grew in the settlement, and her neighbors began to believe she was not insane, but truly was a witch. In those times, many believed that witches went about the countryside, signed contracts with the devil in their own blood, and used their great powers for "evil doings." One evening Mary hosted a quilting party and urged one of her guests (who was pregnant) to eat more, commenting that "the mare that does double work should be best fed." Immediately the other ladies thought this "proved" her witchcraft, and gossiped that the woman whom Mary encouraged to eat was soon turned into a horse! They claimed that Mary began to ride it on nightly haunts around the village.

Despite all the rumors of witchcraft, Mary and James erected their first cabin near present-day Fairfield, increased their land holdings and opened a tavern near Timber Ridge, Virginia, which Mary ran for another seventeen years after James died. Mary continued to befriend the Indians throughout her life. She was also involved in some of the issues of the community, including supporting her friend, Miss Millhollen, a servant girl of Joseph Bell. It's not clear how Miss Millhollen got the money, but she dressed herself in men's clothing and reserved the Cabin Rights for five or six Grants in her own name. These Rights entitled the builder to 100 acres of land per cabin, and the right to purchase even more land at fifty shillings each. Although she was successful, it was then illegal for women to own land, so this was unheard of! At the age of 97, Mary McDowell Greenlee agreed to give sworn depositions in the Augusta and Rockbridge Courts regarding historic land ownerships in western Virginia. She evidently amazed the Justices, who were astonished by her clear memories. They confirmed that she recited many valuable details of the early settlers in that region, recalling their names and the locations of their land grants. Shortly after that, she moved to Natural Bridge, Virginia. She died at the age of 102 years on her son's farm (now owned by Mrs. Sallie Letcher) and her grave was marked in 1944 by the Association for Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.

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Just before Mary McDowell Greenlee's death, a local poet visited her and proposed to write her Epitaph, on the condition she would pay him with a bottle of whiskey. She consented, and he wrote:

"Good Old Mary died of late, Straight she went to Heaven's Gate"

She was delighted and gave him the whiskey, which he drank and continued to write ...

"But Abraham met her with a club, and knocked her back to Beelzebub."

Grandma Mary's grandchildren said she was so infuriated at this, she jumped out of her rocking chair and chased the man out of her house with her fat, trusty broomstick ... just like a real witch!

Sources:

- **The Mother of Rockbridge County."**

The Rockbridge County, Virginia Heritage Book 1778-1997, by Angela M. Ruley.

- **The Mary Greenlee Monument, APVA**

Inscription: *Mary Greenlee First White Woman in Rockbridge County 1707—1809*

- **Cheryl Smith-Owens Family Papers**

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- Personal research and documents, Gaye Buzbee Jacobs, 2018