

THE WORLD OF MARY BALL: CHAPTER THREE

'THE WIDOW JOHNSON'

Part three of a seven-part series that links the early years of Mary Ball, the mother of George Washington, to her Northern Neck heritage and her Washington connections.

BY PAULA S. FELDER
FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

THE long-standing mystery of the identity of the woman known to posterity as "the Widow Johnson" whom Joseph Ball married about 1707 or early 1708 is still unresolved.

ONLINE >> See Paula Felder's series at fredericksburg.com/MaryBall.

The very absence of information about a new wife in such a prominent family might be considered unusual. Even more unusual is that in the ensuing three centuries, the genealogy of Mary Ball's mother has never been determined. Still, the widow Johnson may be the missing grandparent of George Washington.

HER UNKNOWN ORIGINS

It is strange that nothing apparently was known of her origins, not just by the Balls but even by her own children, though Mary Ball was 12 or 13 when her mother died and her older half sister and half brother were young adults.

This curious absence of information prevailed during Mary Ball's youth in Lancaster and Northumberland County and apparently for the rest of her life.

In fact, at the time of Mary Washington's own death in 1789, a Ball descendant tried

Certificate of Indenture of Mary Bennett (Transcription)
Name: Mary Bennett
Gender: female
Occupation:
Place of Origin:
Age: 18
Date of Indenture: August 19 1684
Agent's Name: Abraham Wild
Indenture Length: 4
Signature: (marked)
Witness: William Beale
Place of Origin: London
Destination: Maryland

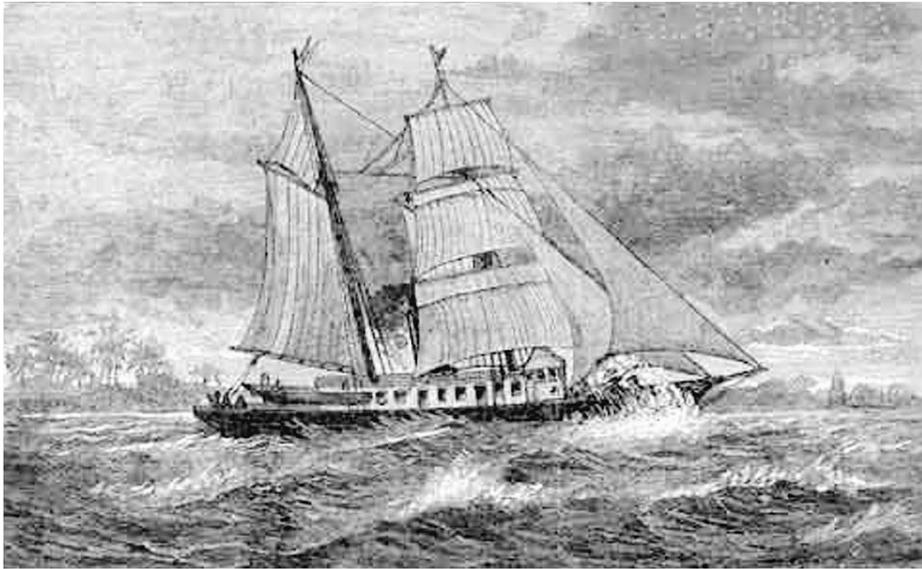
Transcription. Source: Indentured Servants Search, Virtual Jamestown, Virginia Center for Digital History, University of Virginia

to discover her mother's origins. He sought out Ann Chinn Shearman, who was now the elderly granddaughter of Joseph Ball. Mrs. Shearman had been a childhood contemporary of Mary Ball at the Chinn farm (Oakley) during the years her mother had the dower rights to Joseph Ball's adjoining estate.

All that Mrs. Shearman could recall was that Mary's mother was "an English woman."

The Ball family's curiosity persisted through the years, as their famous relation became a great military leader and the country's revered first president.

In 1849, the current Joseph Ball, confirming Mary's birthplace, noted, "Her mother and father both lie at Epping Forest, I believe. He



Abraham Wild was a trader in indentures between England and the colonies of Maryland and Virginia.

was Colo. Joseph Ball . . . *Who Colo. Ball married I never knew.*"

A 20TH-CENTURY HYPOTHESIS

As the unanswered question continued into the 20th century, a new identity was proposed. Elizabeth Combs Peirce, a founder of the Northern Neck Historical Society, embarked on her own quest and in 1935 published a brief article in the William and Mary Quarterly.

Her conclusion was that the answer was to be found in the records of Christ Church parish of Middlesex County (across the Rappahannock River from Lancaster County) where a marriage was recorded in February 1689 between William John-

son of Norwich and Mary Bennett of West Chester, England.

In 1959, George H.S. King of Fredericksburg, an eminent Virginia genealogist, after his own rigorous search that could not even produce the name of Mary Johnson's first husband, confirmed his agreement with Mrs. Peirce's claim, endorsing Mary Bennett as "the only plausible candidate."

Although this claim has continued to appear in print over the last 75 years (with faulty documentation), and although clues in documents and wills narrow the prospective candidates, the origins of Mary Washington's mother must still be left to conjecture or fortuitous discovery.

What is important to re-

member is that we can know of her life as the wife of Joseph Ball and a later husband, Richard Hues, which affords us the opportunity to characterize her as a remarkable woman for her time and place.

Indeed, as the missing grandparent of George Washington, we might recognize in her ambition, determination and resourcefulness the very qualities that historians have attempted to account for in the young George Washington.

There is no proof that Mary Bennett who married William Johnson in Christ Church Parish in Middlesex County in 1689 is "the widow Johnson" who became Joseph Ball's wife. And there is a substantial gap of more

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