

MARY'S MYSTERIOUS MOTHER: Mary Ball was born about 1708 to Joseph Ball of Lancaster County on the Northern Neck. She was the only child by his second marriage to a widow, Mary Johnson, who had two older children. Beyond being identified as “an English woman” by a collateral descendant of the Ball family, nothing is known of her origins. In 1849, he wrote that Mary was buried with her husband, Joseph, at Epping Forest, but “who she was, I never knew.”

MARY WASHINGTON: SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH

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appropriate time for us to make the effort. We have mostly been able to ignore the 17th century since it did not touch us directly, but we need to understand the connection. There are ample opportunities to acquire knowledge that once required years of travel to collect.

But crossing the Rappahannock River, figuratively speaking, is not so easy to accomplish. Northern Neckers—who live on the peninsula between the Rappahannock and the Potomac—are very protective of their unique past, which is difficult for an outsider to grasp, as it is in large part a web of tangled genealogies. The Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula were Virginia's second frontier.

MARY'S MOTHER

I have been looking for several years for Mary Washington's mother, who I think may be the missing link in George Washington's genetic heritage.

I have been delighted just recently to meet by phone Butch Jenkins, who is a member of the Lancaster County Board of Supervisors. He is an encyclopedia of Northern Neck knowledge. And although he declines to write it all down, he is as convinced as I am that Mary Ball Washington's mother was a remarkable woman.

She was very likely an indentured servant (all we know is that she was “an English woman”), probably born soon after the middle of the 17th century.

Her first husband remains unidentified, and we have more than one theory about him. And there is a mystery about her origins, as well. She apparently did not share her story even with her children. I am hoping we can resolve that puzzle.

We first encounter her in Lancaster County about 1703 as “the widow Johnson” with two young children, and by 1708 she was married to Col. Joseph Ball, a prominent county leader.

Mary, her third child, was her daughter by Ball, a widower in his mid-50s with a grown family. Even Douglas Southall Freeman noted in an essay in an appendix to his first volume that Ball “fell in love” with the widow Johnson. Indeed, his will, written shortly before he died, reads



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Visitors can tour the 18th-century home at 1200 Charles St. in Fredericksburg where Mary Washington spent her final years.

almost like a love letter.

Besides her persistence and determination, Mary Johnson Ball must have had an added quality that drew admiration from her husbands and perhaps from others, as well.

Joseph Ball devoted much of his will to bequeathing to his “beloved wife” many of his personal and household furnishings and lifetime dower rights, as well as produce from his estate (now known as Epping Forest).

He also willed her his white horse called Dragon—which she must have ridden, for his bequest included the “bridle side-saddle and furniture”—and also a bay horse called Bush.

To his small daughter, Ball bequeathed 400 acres farther up the Rappahannock River, three of his slaves and all the feathers in the loft above the kitchen for a bed. (Perhaps it had been a play area for her.) He also awarded her and her mother shares of cattle and sheep.

Very soon after her husband's death, Mary Johnson Ball married again, this time to another older man in Northumberland, the neighboring county. He was Richard Hues, a member of the vestry of St. Stephen's Parish, who owned a 160-acre farm on Cherry Point.

The two men seem almost to have collaborated on an estate plan for her and her children, no doubt with

her gratitude.

SECURING HER FUTURE

Dying in 1713 without heirs, Hues left his estate to his widow. On her death it would go to her older daughter, Elizabeth, who would then maintain the home. Hues also purchased a tract of land—600 acres in Stafford County—for the express purpose of bequeathing it to his stepson, John Johnson.

But it was Mary, the daughter of Joseph Ball, who was the star in her mother's crown.

When she died in 1720, Mary Hues devoted her own will to her namesake, bequeathing to her the possessions from her marriage to Mary's father, even her clothing.

And she included instructions to her executors to purchase for her daughter, who was then only 12, a “fine pacing horse” and an elegant plush sidesaddle.

Mary Johnson Ball Hues did not live to see her daughter's future unfold, but she would have been triumphant that Mary married into the gentry, fulfilling her mother's vision for her.

As we learn more about Mary Ball's years leading up to her marriage, I think we may have cause to reframe our mental image of the person we thought we already knew.

“Reminiscing late in life about his youthful visits to his cousins at the Washington farm, Lawrence Washington wrote: ‘Of the mother, I was ten times more afraid than I ever was of my own parents. She awed me in the midst of her kindness, for she was indeed truly kind. I have often been present with her sons, proper tall fellows too, and we were all as mute as mice. I could not behold that remarkable woman without feelings it is impossible to describe. . . . Whoever has seen that awe-inspiring air and manner so characteristic in the Father of his Country, will remember the matron.’ ”

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