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Notable Maryland Women



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MARGARET BRENT, c 1601- c 1671 Lawyer, Landholder-Entrepreneur

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Little is known of Margaret Brent's life before she came to Maryland. Her father, Richard, and her mother, Elizabeth Reed Brent, were both descended from the British nobility. Margaret was one of thirteen children born to the couple. Judging by her later actions, she must have received some education. Her importance in Maryland as a landowner, entrepreneur, legal representative, and executor of the governor's estate at a critical political time is quite evident.

The colony of Maryland had existed for only fifteen years when, in January 1648, Margaret Brent acted to divert the settlement from a course headed towards insurrection. These first fifteen years had been politically tumultuous. Tensions between the Catholic minority and the Protestants had been present from the beginning. And after 1640 the elite that had been favored by the Calvert family was being challenged by people who had arrived early in the colony as servants and were now seeking social and economic opportunities along with political influence.

Typical in one way of those who had been patronized by Lord Baltimore was Margaret Brent. Though not closely related to the Proprietor's family, she was a member of the English nobility and a Catholic. She, therefore, obtained from His Lordship a promise of land in Maryland that would endow her and her sister Mary with the same privileges as those given to the pioneer settlers. This was in August of 1638. Later that year the Brent sisters arrived in Maryland where their brother Giles had already established residence. However, their venture was clearly regarded as distinct from that of Giles and another brother, Fulke, because Lord Baltimore had made a separate land grant to the Brent men.

Margaret Brent was aged about thirty-seven when she came to Maryland. She was unmarried and remained so for the rest of her life. In this respect, her experience was unusual for in Maryland, where men heavily outnumbered women, it was expected that most women would marry. And most of them did. Had Margaret taken a husband, according to English common law precedent her legal status would have been subsumed under that of her spouse and her freedom of action as a landholder, virtually annihilated. As it was she and Mary received an initial grant of land about a mile outside St. Mary's City, which they called Sisters Freehold. From this beginning Margaret Brent used her remarkable business sense to extend her property, so that she came to wield considerable authority in her own right, despite the restrictions of a patriarchal society.

Margaret Brent was obviously a skillful entrepreneur. In 1642 she pur-

chased all the Maryland property of her brother Giles so that he could pay his creditors—she being one of them. By 1648 when she sued for damages to her holdings on Kent Island, she operated a mill, possessed several houses, valuable farming equipment and numerous cattle, in addition to her properties elsewhere. The colonial legal records attest to her real estate activities in that she was continually involved in court proceedings to protect and advance her interests. She demanded additional land grants, acted as a feudal magnate, made allocations from her property to her indentured servants as the law required, and frequently sued for debts. She usually appeared in court on her own behalf and sometimes acted as an attorney for her brothers or persons outside her family.

These court appearances, while they are noteworthy in showing the reputation acquired by Miss Brent for her legal skill, were not untypical in the seventeenth-century colonies. Members of the English property-holding classes expected to defend their own interests in court, studying the law for that purpose. In Maryland and in other North American settlements most litigants depended upon their own legal ability or on that of experienced but unprofessional attorneys until well into the eighteenth century. Nor was it unusual for women to appear in the colonial courts. Consequently, Margaret Brent's legal activity should not be regarded as unique.

More unusual and perhaps significant for the relations between Maryland and the neighboring Indians was the naming of Margaret Brent as a guardian to Mary Kittamaquund. Jesuit missionaries reported in 1640 that the Chief of the Piscataway Indians and his family had converted to Christianity. The Chief's daughter, then only seven years old, was sent to St. Mary's City to be educated by the English, with Margaret Brent and Governor Leonard Calvert as her legal guardians. Some time later Mary Kittamaquund married Giles Brent and thus became Margaret's sister-in-law. And in 1654 Giles gave Margaret the responsibility of supporting his wife and educating his children when he departed to England.

By 1647 Margaret Brent was an important landowner of recognized ability. Thus, it is not surprising that Governor Leonard Calvert named her to be the sole executor of his will as he lay dying in May 1647. At the same time, he named as governor Thomas Greene who later testified that the instructions to Margaret were "take all, and pay all." But Miss Brent found Calvert's affairs in great confusion, and it took some time before the estate could be inventoried and related claims settled. Meanwhile, the political situation in the colony was deteriorating. In 1646 Leonard Calvert, using mercenary troops, had put down a rebellion led by Richard Ingle. To secure their support, he had pledged his own estate and that of the Proprietor. When Calvert died a few months later, the soldiers were still unpaid. As his executor, Margaret Brent tried to meet this obligation, but found the estate insufficient. By winter a food shortage had arisen. The troops at St. Ingoes Fort were on the verge of mutiny and enemies of the Proprietor in

Maryland, Virginia and England anticipated the overthrow of the Calvert family.

At this critical juncture, Margaret Brent took the initiative. On January 3, 1648, she requested and received authority to act as attorney for the Lord Proprietor. Shortly thereafter she appeared at a session of the Assembly and, as the record puts it, "requested to have a vote in the howse for herself and voyce allso. . ." When "the Govr. denyed that the sd. Mrs. Brent should have any vote in the howse," she protested the validity of any proceedings conducted without her.

This confrontation, though probably the best-known event in Margaret Brent's life, has often been misunderstood. It seems likely that she advanced her claim because of her responsibility to the Calverts, not because she intended to challenge the male monopoly over political power. In any case, the Maryland Assembly was unmoved by her address. The governor's terse reply upheld the conventional exclusion of females from political affairs. Ironically, the Assembly's next order of business was to adopt rules of debate that included the traditional term of parliamentary address to "the Gent. that spoke last or the like."

The Assembly's intransigence did not prevent Margaret Brent from using her authority as attorney for the Proprietary family. Early in January, Captain John Price, representing the mercenaries, had put a legal restraint on Leonard Calvert's estate until the soldiers were paid. Miss Brent therefore acted swiftly, selling some of Lord Baltimore's cattle to purchase supplies with which to pay the troops. The threat of mutiny was removed, together with the spectre of insurrection in Maryland.

Lord Baltimore, however, was incensed to learn of Margaret Brent's actions. The Assembly responded to his complaints with a long, outspoken letter, explaining the dangerous situation and defending Margaret Brent:

We do Verily Believe and in Conscience report that it was better for the Collonys safety at that time [to be] in her hands then in any mans else in the whole Province after your Brothers death, for the Soldiers . . . were even ready at times to run into mutiny yet she pacified them . . . [and] she rather deserved favour and thanks from your Honour for her so much Concurring to the Publick safety then to be justly liable to all those bitter invectives you have been pleased to Express against her.

Even this letter did not alter Lord Baltimore's opinion. There were other considerations, too, that made him withdraw his favor from the Brent family. As Catholics and members of Maryland's elite, the Brents were representatives of a privileged group whose position was being undermined by political and social forces in the colony and England. Lord Baltimore found it politically advantageous to be antagonistic towards the Brents, so that the family moved to Virginia between 1649 and 1651. Margaret and Mary took up new lands, but they then remained aloof from public life in Maryland and Virginia. Margaret gradually disposed of her Maryland holdings, finally yielding Sisters Freehold in 1663. In the same year she made a will

bequeathing her property to her relatives. Her lands were to be given to her male kin, and some of her livestock and "all my silver spoons which are six," to the females in the family. She died some time in 1671.

The opportunities for a female to act as Margaret Brent did were extremely limited in a pre-industrial and patriarchal society. Religious, political, legal and cultural norms restricted both sexes, but for women they presented often insurmountable obstacles to participation in public affairs. Women who were born into the aristocracy possessed certain advantages, though they seldom had the chance to use them. Margaret Brent, however, endowed with high status by birth, found an environment in which to exploit her considerable abilities. There were barriers, of course, as the Assembly's rejection of her claim to vote revealed. But few settlers in Maryland seemed to find it surprising that she was a successful entrepreneur, that she was named to several responsible positions, and that she served as the attorney for the Calvert family. In all her activities, she exercised her authority with skill and authority.

Brief Bibliography

The materials for Margaret Brent are scattered through volumes I, IV, and X of the *Archives of Maryland*, ed. by William H. Browne (Baltimore, 1883-91). W. B. Chilton has compiled a genealogy of the Brents that reprints Margaret's will and other pertinent materials in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XII, XV, XVI (1905-08). The best historical interpretations are "Margaret Brent," by Lois Green Carr in *Notable American Women, A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. by Edward T. James (Cambridge, Mass., 1971); Julia C. Spruill, "Mistress Margaret Brent, Spinster," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, XXIX (1934), and Mary E. W. Ramey, *Chronicles of Mistress Margaret Brent* (1915).

HELEN ELIZABETH BROWN, 1899- Lawyer, Politician, Militant Feminist

WINIFRED G. HELMES

A women's liberationist since the 1920's, Helen Elizabeth Brown worked for women's rights all of her adult life and helped to pave the way for women who ran for elective public office and held appointive positions in Maryland. She was well-known as a speaker before women's clubs and at meetings of Republican women, business and professional women and women lawyers. As a lawyer she brought professional competence to the public offices to which she was appointed and to the Maryland Federation of Republican Women's Clubs.

Helen Elizabeth Brown wanted to be a lawyer for as long as she could remember. Her grandfather, a circuit riding judge in Indiana, was her inspira-