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Defying Boundaries: Mary Musgrove in Early Colonial Georgia

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Often referred to as the ‘Pocahontas of Georgia,’ Mary Musgrove played a very prominent role in facilitating peaceful relationships between Native Americans and English settlers. And, much like Pocahontas, recent scholarship on Mary Musgrove has slowly been chipping away at the mask designated to her by popular memory. Historian Michael D. Green argues that Mary Musgrove’s life “represented a distinct vision for the future of the English in America.”¹ This vision was one in which Native American and English identities could be combined, which Mary intended not only for herself, but also for English colonists and the Creeks. Mary’s vision of a world where one could live in peace as both a Native American and English person was, however, severely shattered; Mary Musgrove’s rise to power as a businesswoman and landowner of ‘mixed blood’ threatened English colonists’ predominantly white, patriarchal society and ultimately led to the absolution of their relationship.

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the number of mixed race children in Southern Native American societies dramatically increased. As historian Michele Gillespie points out, “interracial unions aided the exchange of cultures that hastened both English colonization and Native American acculturation,” and Mary was indeed an offspring of such a union.² Born Coosaponakeesa, around 1700 in the Creek Nation of Coweta, she was the daughter of an English trader named Edward Griffin and a Creek mother (whose brother was Brims, the most prominent town king and chief of the Lower Creeks). Around the age of seven, Mary and her brother were taken to South Carolina where she lived until 1716; among her father’s relatives, she learned to write and speak English, she became a Christian, and she ultimately changed her name to Mary. Though most children of interracial unions between

¹ Michael D. Green, "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," in *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, ed. Theda Perdue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46.

² Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," in *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 188.

Native Creek women and English men remained firmly under the influence of the mother due to Creek society's matrilineal customs, Mary's situation was quite different. Little is known about what happened to her mother, but most historians conclude that after she passed away, Mary's father relocated the children closer to his area of work. However, Mary did not abandon her knowledge of Creek society, which had no special category for those of mixed blood; Mary was simply considered a Creek, and in a rank-conscious society such as the Creeks, she was a woman worthy of prestige. As she would later find out, whites in English society increasingly came to view people like Mary as 'half-breeds.' Though interracial unions were, as stated previously, tools of cultural exchange, they also furthered the process of colonization and represented sources of controversy. In fact, in 1816 when Andrew Jackson tried to negotiate land cession with the Chickasaws, he blamed the resistance he encountered partly on the "designing half-breeds," who supposedly held political authority over 'real' Natives.³ As a young woman of 'mixed blood,' Mary was aware of her situation and how English society operated; she also desired to be successful in the changing world she saw around her. As historian Michael D. Green emphasizes, "Mary never stopped being Coosaponakeesa, neither in her own mind nor in the minds of her Creek relatives, but increasingly she also became Mary, an English-woman in colonial Georgia."⁴

Adopting a 'merged' identity of two cultures was not, however, an easy task. 'Mixed blood' Natives in white society and culture were indeed considered important intermediates in the early development of colonization, trade, and land acquisition. In Creek society, women controlled land and crops; essentially, they were responsible for the inheritance of property and were likely to be seen outside the home, cultivating and vigorously working with their crops.

³ Theda Perdue, *Mixed Blood' Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 70.

⁴ Michael D. Green, "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," 29.

However, in English society, women were typically condemned for operating in the ‘public sphere,’ and land ownership certainly did not pass through matrilineal lines. Mary understood the position she was in, and instead emerged as a model of a new gender role for Native women: “a cultural bridge or mediator between her own society and the British colonists.”⁵ As a cultural bridge and mediator, Mary would actively uphold certain elements of Native and English society, all the while serving as a literal mediator, as an interpreter and operator of trading posts.

In 1716, the Englishman John Musgrove negotiated a peace treaty with Brims after the Yamasee War, and to further seal the peace, Brims agreed to the marriage between his niece Mary and Musgrove’s son (also named John Musgrove).⁶ In 1732, the couple relocated to South Carolina, which marked the beginning of Mary and her husband’s business in trading with Natives. Though their lifestyle differed from Natives, they were viewed as Creek tribal members, and in 1732 at the request of the Yamacraws, they relocated near Yamacraw Bluff in what is now southern Georgia (near Savannah). Their business of trading and selling livestock and manufactured goods from Charles Town soon boomed as “the volume of their business equaled one-sixth of the total Indian trade of Charles Town.”⁷ But, it was Mary’s involvement in the settlement of Savannah that garnered her the most recognition and praise among the English and Natives. Around 1733, Oglethorpe sought an interpreter to help in the process of settling Savannah, and he found his match in Mary and John Musgrove. Though it is not clear why Mary assumed the position over her husband, it is clear that she faithfully evolved into James Oglethorpe’s “interpreter, advisor on Indian affairs, diplomatic go-between in the later relations between the colony and the Creeks, troubleshooter, hostess for visiting Creek envoys, recruiter of

⁵ Michael Morris, “Emerging Gender Roles for Southeastern Indian Women: The Mary Musgrove Story Reconsidered,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (Spring 2005), 24.

⁶ Michael D. Green, “Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World,” 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

warriors to support anti-Spanish adventures, and dispenser of the gifts necessary to validate Georgia's friendship with the Indians."⁸ Throughout it all, however, she desired and struggled for wealth and recognition as a mediator of English and Native societies. But, in the colonial South, she began to realize that real wealth "lay in land," and based on Creek customs and society, she believed she had access to a large portion of it.⁹

It is important to note that many English colonists highly respected Mary, including Oglethorpe who noted that she was instrumental in gathering "about fifty Creek... and formed a treaty with them."¹⁰ Historian Michele Gillespie argues that "Mary carefully cultivated her identity in response to the racial and gendered boundaries she encountered in the colonial culture of Georgia," which could indeed be why she was respected by so many for her achievements in working with the colonists.¹¹ She was a very self-aware individual and as a young girl, she learned that acceptance into white society necessitated a Christian education, and she thus composed herself as a 'good Christian wife.' Even Methodist Minister John Wesley spent some time at the Musgrove household in 1735, when he helped tutor children of the area in the Christian doctrine.¹² She found that she could be useful to the English if she adopted their customs and in essence set aside her Native heritage to pursue and work in the best interest of the colonists. She did not, however, foresee the level of degradation she would face in later years from the very people she helped. Mary also demonstrated that she understood that her power in English society came through the three white men she married. After John passed away in 1735, she was in danger of losing the property she and her husband had owned, and thus married one

⁸ Michael D. Green, "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," 32.

⁹ Ibid, 33.

¹⁰ *[Notes relative to James] Oglethorpe[']s landing at Yamacraw Bluff in 1733 [and his dealings with] the [British] Trustees and Creeks [for two years thereafter]*

¹¹ Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," 189.

¹² Ibid, 195.

of her indentured servants named Jacob Matthews. And, once again in 1744, Mary got remarried to Reverend Thomas Bosomworth after the death of Jacob; with the help of Thomas (who was of a higher and more respectable branch of the colonial hierarchy than Mary's previous husbands), Mary was able to manage her own trading enterprises, and together they set out to rise to the top of the 'social ladder.'

Despite her steady rise in power as an important businesswoman in colonial Georgia, Mary was continuously hindered by inherent racism and misogyny. While married to Thomas, Mary began to enter into a period where she became more aware of these things at play in colonial Georgia. As Michele Gillespie notes, "Musgrove was slandered and called a witch precisely because her status challenged the colonists' ideas about gendered behavior and race difference."¹³ This is significant because in the patriarchal English society in which she had chosen to operate, many questioned why a woman, who was also of mixed blood, should be able to acquire more land and profit than an English white male; thus, it is not surprising that some interpreted her unusual achievements and actions as evidence of being a 'witch.' After Oglethorpe left Georgia in 1743, he verbally expressed to his successors and colonial officials his highest regards for Mary, and called upon them to respect her in his absence. However, her increasing power challenged Anglo notions about who deserved privilege and status.¹⁴ After 1743, she petitioned multiple times for the British government to compensate her for her losses (livestock and food), as well as her efforts in working with the British government, and also challenged to gain English title to land that the Creeks had granted to her. But, the British authorities, while making sure not to alienate her completely, made it clear that there were no exceptions to British sovereignty. While Natives could grant and exchange land among

¹³ Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," 198.

¹⁴ Ibid.

themselves, they could not grant or sell the land to an individual Englishman; and, according to English law, all land titles were derived from the Crown. Thus, the land that Tomochichi (a Yamacraw Native whom Mary worked with in the settlement of Savannah) granted to Mary, along with the land that her brother Malatchi would later grant her, could not be sold for profit because the exchanges were ‘illegal’ in the eyes of the British.

In setting up Georgia, the Board of Trustees pronounced that land would be available in relatively small amounts to colonists. Unlike South Carolina, where colonists could own large plantations, Georgia officials desired to create “a middle-class paradise for the hard-working and worthy poor of Europe.”¹⁵ This ‘utopia’ was not, however, appealing to Mary who was aware of the wealth entitled to her through her prestigious Creek heritage. In his formal deposition on December 22, 1755, the Creek trader Lachlan McGillivray revealed important details concerning Mary’s right to own land:

“[He] heard Malatchi declare That the Islands of St. Catherine, Sapala, and Ossabaw and the Lands by the Town of Savannah belonging to his Sister meaning Mary Bosomworth and desired that the said Governor and Council would be Aiding and Assisting in confirming the said Mary Bosomworth in her Right to the said Lands.”¹⁶

Malatchi, who was documented as Mary’s only sibling, had risen to power as a Creek leader of mixed blood, and thus granted her land, which he believed to be protected by previous treaties between the Creeks and the British. However, once again, her race and gender severely hindered her. Planning to use Malatchi’s support for her demands, on August 12, 1749, Mary and over one hundred Creek headmen marched to Savannah to pressure the government to act on her land

¹⁵ Michael D. Green, "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," 33.

¹⁶ *Deposition [of] Lachlan McGillivray, 1755 Dec. 22, Augusta, Georgia / [sworn to] before Jonathan Copp*

grants and compensations.¹⁷ Little did she know that this event would prove to be the beginning of the end of her authority as a mediator between the Creeks and the English.

Startled by the event unfolding before their eyes, colonial officials decided to invite the Creek leaders to discuss the issues in a conference; however, Mary was not invited. Angered by the colonists' refusal to appoint her as interpreter for the meeting and making her wait outside while they convened, Mary "entered the meeting room unbidden and proceeded to berate the leaders and their "white town" for the successive abuses she and the Creek people had endured at their hands."¹⁸ In this one act, all of her frustration towards the gendered and racial boundaries she tried so hard to work around was immediately exposed. One witness went so far to say that "in the most insulting manner, [she declared] she was Empress of the Upper and Lower Creeks, Yea, went so far in her imaginary sovereignty as to call herself king."¹⁹ But, what is particularly interesting about the situation is her husband Thomas' reaction; not only did he publicly apologize for his wife's behavior and declare himself his wife's "spokesman," but he also asserted his authority as a white male in English society.²⁰ This signified that he knew the repercussions of his wife's actions in stepping outside the boundaries of what her race and gender allotted her, and he sought to alleviate further issues. Many documents, such as the Colonial Records of Georgia, point out that Mary was even asked by the members of the meeting whether she considered herself to be an Indian or an Englishwoman, and she firmly replied "an Indian."²¹ In this case, Mary was faced with the ultimate decision of choosing sides, something she had never done before. She constructed her identity as a mediator of two separate cultures,

¹⁷ Michael D. Green, "Mary Musgrove: Creating a New World," 36.

¹⁸ Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 190.

²⁰ Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," 194.

²¹ *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, ed. Kenneth Coleman and Milton Ready, vol. 27 (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 173-74.

hoping to reap the benefits as both Coosaponakeesa and Mary. But, by replying that she was indeed an Indian, she renounced her status as a ‘good Christian woman’ and put aside the social hierarchy of white colonial society.

In the end, Mary Musgrove gave into a compromise elicited by the Georgia Trustees. In examining her life, it is difficult to imagine why or how a woman such as Mary would give into compromise, but it is apparent that she understood that her vision of a world in which one could live peacefully as a Native and an English person could not be achieved. Despite her accommodations to white society, they were the ones who held the upper hand and changed the ‘rules’ when it benefitted them. With the arrival of the new governor Henry Ellis in 1757, Mary and Thomas settled the land disputes by accepting the title to St. Catherine’s Island and the payment of £2100.00 for her losses and contributions to the colony of Georgia; she also gave up Ossabaw and Sapelo to the Crown in order to be sold, as well as renounced her title and claims to land that could possibly be inherited after the death of her husband:

“I Mary... do declare, that I have freely and without any compulsion, signed, Sealed, & delivered, the within Instrument of writing passed... and I do declare and renounce all title or claim of Dower that I might claim or be intitled [entitled] to, after the Death of my said Husband to or out of the Lands or Hereditaments [Hereditaments] hereby conveyed
In Witness whereof I have here unto set my hand & Seal the day & year first within written.”²²

Though she lost almost everything she had fought for, Mary accepted her own title to St. Catherine’s Island, and around the year 1767, she passed away on land that she believed was rightfully hers and that the English essentially confirmed.

²² [Legal] indenture executed by Henry Ellis and Thomas [and] Mary Bosomworth [with sworn statements and opinion], 1760 Apr. 19.

Although she was in essence a ‘product’ of European colonization, Mary Musgrove’s familial ties to Creek society and her efforts as a woman to own land and pursue a career in business and trading labeled her as a target in a predominantly white, English society. She proved useful to the colonists when she acted in their best interests and seemed to embrace her identity as an Englishwoman; however, when she used her own knowledge and influence to pursue her own gains, the colonists saw her as a threat, and as Michele Gillespie emphasizes, “Colonial leaders applied the racial and gendered hierarchies implicit in [patriarchal] institutions to judge, demean, and belittle Mary Musgrove in the wake of her infamous speech.”²³ Similar to how Pocahontas is often painted in popular memory, Mary Musgrove is not portrayed as an active challenger to the standards of white colonial society. Her reference as the ‘Pocahontas of Georgia’ dismisses an important part of her own character, and instead emphasizes her acculturation of white society, which many English overly praised Pocahontas for. Mary Musgrove’s individual story reveals the depth of the situation at hand, and foreshadowed the degree to which Natives ultimately became victims of “martialized manifest destiny,” that began with racial and gendered boundaries.²⁴ However, Mary was not just a Native American at odds with the world of white English colonists; rather, her life represented the complexity of two societies, cultures, and worlds that existed at the same time and place, and more importantly, one woman’s journey to defy the racial and gendered boundaries within the colonial culture of Georgia.

²³ Michele Gillespie, "The Sexual Politics of Race and Gender: Mary Musgrove and the Georgia Trustees," 199.

²⁴ Charles Geisler, "Disowned by the Ownership Society: How Native Americans Lost Their Land," *Rural Sociology* 79, no. 1 (March 2014), 56.

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