



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

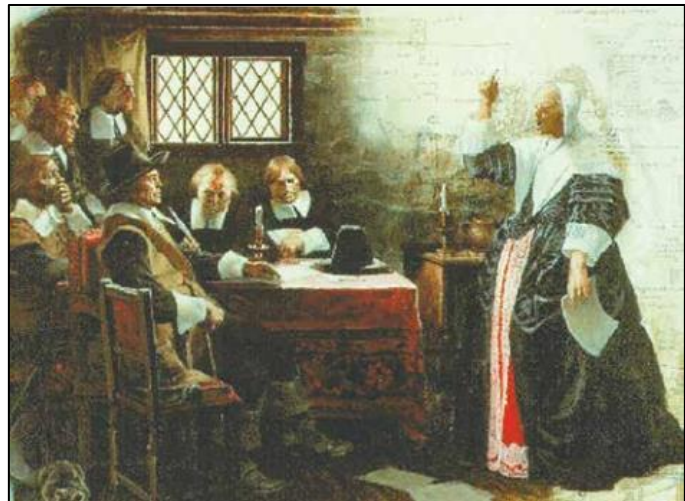
“Nation’s first woman lawyer” lived in Alexandria

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Image: Margaret Brent, conjectural painting by Louis Glanzman. Courtesy, National Geographic Society.

Women’s History Month was first celebrated the week of March 7, 1982 as “Women’s History Week.” Its advocates noted that in 1980, a maximum of 3 percent of history content taught to schoolchildren involved women, and sought to change that. In 1987, “Women’s History Week” was expanded to “Women’s History Month,” first by congressional authorization, and then by presidential proclamation.

Early Alexandria history includes the stories of remarkable women, including Margaret Brent, the first patent (land grant) owner of the area that Old Town stands on. Born in England in 1601, Brent moved to Maryland with her sister and brothers in search of religious freedom in 1638.



In 1648, Brent petitioned the Maryland Assembly for the right to vote. This might have been due to a specific desire to settle the estate of Lt. Governor Leonard Calvert, rather than a blanket demand for suffrage. Due to her significant property and business interests, Brent often appeared in Maryland court, both on her own behalf and representing others. This role has led the American Bar Association to dub her “the nation’s first woman lawyer” in memoriam.

Brent never married, and this fact allowed her to petition the courts on her own behalf, which would have been denied her had she been married. Whatever her motivations, Brent was denied the right to vote, and this decision prompted her to move to Virginia, where she lived from 1651 until her death in 1671.

Brent’s brother Giles had married the Piscataway princess Mary Kittamaquund and began to acquire property in Virginia. He settled a plantation on the north bank of the Aquia Creek, in present day Fauquier County. Margaret and their sister Mary joined him at the new plantation, which Giles named “Peace.”

Margaret continued to buy property, and two of those property purchases seem particularly shrewd. The first was one thousand acres on the south side of the Rappahannock, a quarter mile above the falls of the river, in what is present day Fredericksburg. The other was a 700-acre tract north of Great Hunting Creek, now the site of Alexandria. Margaret also either owned land that became significant or adjacent to the port of St. Mary’s and Aquia Creek, from which the stone to build the U.S. Capitol was cut.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Margaret, Mary and Giles at times suffered religious persecution and discrimination as Catholics in the Protestant colony of Virginia. This included a plot by George Mason II and the Anglican parson John Waugh to implicate the Brents' nephew George in a scheme to arm the local native people against Protestants in Stafford County.

Eventually, the Brent name was cleared in court, and Mason and Waugh were punished for their role in this smear campaign. Giles, Margaret and Mary Brent are recognized as the first English Catholic Settlers in Virginia on a large crucifix on Route 1, near Aquia Creek. Plaques honoring Margaret Brent were also placed at Jones Point here in Alexandria and at St. Mary's City, Maryland.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.