

Mildred Washington
(ca 1697 - 1747)

Mildred Washington was one of the three orphans of Maj. Lawrence Washington and Mildred Warner, his wife, who are chiefly remembered as George Washington's grandparents. Little Mildred was certainly less than eighteen months old, probably much younger than that when she is first mentioned - in her father's will, written 11 Mar. 1697/8. Within three weeks he died, His widow was soon married again, to George Gale, who traded between his native Whitehaven, England and Maryland, and the Gales went to Whitehaven. There, Mildred Warner died in 1700/1. Mildred Washington, age three, was an orphan. She and her two brothers, John, eight years old, and Augustine, six, were brought back to Virginia and raised by their father's cousin, John Washington (1671 - ca 1721).

The next thing we know of Mildred is that she married around 1716 John Lewis of Gloucester County. Her mother, Mildred Warner Washington Gale, had been from a prominent Gloucester County family, the Warners. Her older brother, John, married a Gloucester County bride, Catharine Whiting, and settled permanently there on land apparently inherited from the Warners.

Mildred's husband, John Lewis, was the son of Edward Lewis and his wife Susannah. John was the nephew of the John Lewis who had married Mildred's aunt, Elizabeth Warner, and so was a connection, but not, so far as we know, a relative of Mildred. John Lewis, Mildred's husband, was the eldest son of the eldest surviving son of the only son to have issue of the first immigrant of this Lewis family to Virginia. As primogeniture head of the family, he would have been a very wealthy man for his time. Unfortunately, however, he died on April 7, 1718, leaving Mildred a childless widow of twenty.

As was not uncommon at the time, only a few months later she remarried. Her second husband was Roger Gregory of Stratton Major Parish, King and Queen County. King and Queen is one of the counties whose early court records have been destroyed, and apparently nothing whatsoever is known of Roger Gregory's background or family connections, beyond the fact that he married Mildred and was the father of her three daughters.

While it must be assumed that the Gregorys lived in King and Queen, next to Gloucester, Mildred had inherited from her father a twenty-five-hundred acre property in the present Fairfax County. Her grandfather, the immigrant John Washington, had patented it soon before his death in 1677. In 1726 Mildred and Roger Gregory sold this tract to her brother, Augustine Washington. It is, of course, the place that Augustine's son, Lawrence Washington, later named Mt. Vernon.

After Roger Gregory's death in 1730 or 1731, Mildred and her three young daughters may have stayed in King & Queen Co. In 1732, however, she must have been (although perhaps

only on a visit), in Fredericksburg or down the Northern Neck when she acted as godmother for her brother Augustine's son, George. Thus, she is invariably remembered today as "George Washington's aunt and godmother."

In November, 1733, her thrice-married cousin, Mildred Lewis Brown Howell Willis died, and the widower, Henry Willis, immediately asked our Mildred Gregory to become his third wife. The story is that she was discovered weeping bitterly after her cousin Mildred's death, but explained that she was not weeping so much at the loss of her cousin, as at the prospect that Col. Henry Willis would inevitably come courting, and she did not know what to answer him.

Indeed it might well have given her pause, for he had a family of eight or ten children then still living, from his two previous marriages. They ranged in age from Mary, age seventeen, and just marrying Hancock Lee, down to Isabella, a six months babe in arms. Nevertheless, within two months of cousin Mildred's death, our Mildred did marry Henry Willis. He was aged 42, and so five or six years her senior. Thus he fulfilled the oft repeated statement about him, that he had courted all three of his wives as maids and married them all as widows. Soon, at the end of 1734, Mildred had her fourth and last child, Lewis Willis, who some think was named in memory of her first childless, husband.

In the late 1720's Henry Willis had moved up from Gloucester County and helped found the town of Fredericksburg, where he immediately became, as William Byrd wrote in his diary, the "top man of the place". Here then Mildred settled with him, and that in turn settled the future of her three Gregory daughters. In 1736, Frances, who could not have been more than just barely 17, married Francis Thornton, whose family had long been settled in the region, at the falls of the Rappahannock. Then, in 1740, daughter Mildred, now about 18, married John Thornton, brother of Francis. In 1742 it would seem Elizabeth tried to break the Thornton habit, and marry her stepbrother, Henry Willis, Jr. When, however, he died in 1757, she reverted to type and married Reuben Thornton, brother of Francis and John. So we always remember that the three Gregory sisters married the three Thornton brothers.

Elizabeth had no children by these two marriages, nor indeed by two later marriages after Reuben Thornton died, but Francis and Mildred, together with their younger half-brother Lewis Willis, eventually produced 19 grandchildren for our Mildred Washington Lewis Gregory Willis. Ultimately there were some 74 great grandchildren, and her descendants now number many thousands.

Henry Willis died in 1740, and Mildred did not marry again, but survived until 1747, when she died at the age of 50. She thus lived to be much older than either of her parents or her Washington grandparents. An article, 'A Virginia Lady of Quality and Her Possessions,' in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, January 1948, gives the details of her estate inventory. It is an interesting and intimate glimpse of the possessions and way of life of the people of that time.

Our President General (1997–1999), Wilma Brown Thomas, is a direct descendant of

Mildred Washington and Col. Henry Willis.

John A. Washington

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