

Mistress Margaret Brent
By Rachel Choate

Margaret Brent was a woman lawyer, businesswoman, and suffragette all rolled into one, before any of these could be imagined. She helped to form and protect the colony of Maryland. She was an equal and perhaps even greater to all the men she knew; yet she never achieved the equal rights that she deserved.

Margaret Brent was born in 1601 in Gloucester, England. Her father was Richard Brent, Lord of Admington and Lark Stoke, and her mother was heir to William the Conqueror. She was one of their thirteen children. Margaret found pleasure early on from studying law books and became extremely well versed.

In 1638, she, her sister Mary, and two brothers Giles and Fulke set off for the royal colony of Maryland. With them they carried letters from Lord Baltimore to his brother Governor Calvert, asking him to give Margaret and her brothers "first-settler lands and privileges". This ensured that any land Margaret received would stay in her name even if she married. Still, in her documents she signed her name as "Margaret Brent, Gentleman" to ensure the land stayed in her possession.

Upon reaching Maryland, Margaret and Mary received seventy and a half acres. After paying for the voyage of five men and four women to Maryland, one thousand acres were added to Margaret's land holdings. She and her sister named their home "Sister's Freehold". Margaret was already quickly becoming the most powerful landowner around. To add to her power, many of Maryland's settlers took out loans from her and

still more began going to her for legal advice. She shocked many people when she insisted upon arguing her own cases in court, making her the first female lawyer in America.

Off the coast of St. Mary's was Kent Island where Giles Brent was governor. Some of the settlers of that island felt they had a previous claim to it and to St. Mary's. As part of their revolt, the men kidnapped Giles and sent him back to England. When this group led by Richard Ingle invaded and took over St. Mary's, Margaret Brent began organizing and training men to force the invaders out. They succeeded and were promised compensation by Governor Calvert from his own estates. Unfortunately he died before he could fulfill that promise.

On his deathbed, Calvert named Margaret the executor of his estate and Thomas Greene the new governor. In Maryland: A History of a Palatinate, William Hand Browne makes the comment, "In view of subsequent occurrences, one is tempted to think that if he [Governor Calvert] had reversed his testamentary dispositions and made Greene his executor and Mistress Brent governor, it would have been, on the whole, a better arrangement." Margaret proved her competence at her new job almost immediately. When the soldiers who had fought for St. Mary's began to talk of rebelling for lack of compensation, Margaret used Calvert's estate to partially pay them. Since Governor Calvert had been his brother, Lord Baltimore's attorney, Margaret took on this title and had it approved by the Maryland Assembly. Using this new power, she

sold some of the Lord's cattle and used the proceeds to pay off the remaining debt to the soldiers. Soon after, Giles returned to St. Mary's.

Margaret Brent was beginning to understand the power available to her. So on January 21, 1648, she rode to the Maryland Assembly to demand the right to vote. She not only demanded one vote, but two as a landowner and as Lord Baltimore's attorney. She also demanded a voice in the Assembly meetings. Governor Greene subsequently denied her request and she replied by protesting "all proceedings in this present Assembly, unless she may be present and have a vote".

This incident must have scandalized the people of St. Mary's, but apparently did not damage their estimation of Margaret. Lord Baltimore was not pleased that this woman had sold his possessions and he sent a letter to the Assembly stating his displeasure. The Assembly backed Margaret by saying:

As for Mistress Brent's undertaking and meddling with your Lordship's estate here...it was better for the Colony's safety that time in her hand's than in any man's else in the whole Province after your Brother's death for the Soldiers would never have treated any others with that Civility and respect...she rather deserved favor and thanks from your Honor for her so much concurring to the public safety than to be justly liable to all those bitter invectives you have been pleased to express against her.

Lord Baltimore subsequently approved Margaret's sale, although with some reservations as to her amount of power.

Margaret managed to keep good relations with her Native American neighbors as well. When Chief Chitomachen of the Piscataway Indians became a Christian, he sent his seven-year-old daughter, Mary, to Margaret as a ward. She taught the girl English among other things. Eventually, Giles Brent married the girl.

Pressure began to come from Lord Baltimore, who felt the Brents were a threat to his authority, for the family to move. So Margaret packed her bags and moved across the border into Virginia. In 1650, she established a home in Westmoreland, which she named "Peace". It did not take long for Margaret to become involved in Virginia's courts. Margaret was nearing the end of her life, though. In 1663 she made out her will and in 1671 she died.

Margaret was an amazingly powerful woman for her day. The records of the Maryland Provincial Court from 1642 to 1650 alone contain her name no less than 124 times. This incredible woman paved the way for many to come in the future demanding women's rights. Out of a need for freedom or lack of interest, Margaret never married. She succeeded in finding new freedoms in the New World and helped establish herself and her family in a prominent position.

Margaret was a pioneer in many ways. She was the first female lawyer. She was probably the most powerful landholder in Maryland. She created a sense of awe wherever she went in both men and women. Although she never received the right to vote, her wisdom, determination

and authority inspired those to come. No woman of the age could have had more power.

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