

Good Neighbor Clocker

by Susan Wilkinson, HSMC Director of Marketing & Communications

Had you been one of St. Mary's City's few hundred residents 340 years ago, you surely would have known Mary Lawne Courtney Clocker. The mother of six, Mary was also an entrepreneur—a midwife and dairymaid— and the wife of Daniel, farmer and carpenter. Her story well illustrates the opportunities afforded an industrious, and perhaps lucky, few among Maryland's first settlers. The court records, inventories, and proceedings that measure her successes also outline a dark episode. The circumstances surrounding Mary's conviction as a thief remain a fascinating tangent that official documents can't illuminate.

Mary Clocker was just 14 in 1638 when she traveled to the colony as Margaret Brent's indentured servant. She was one of many immigrants whose passage to colonial Maryland was sponsored by wealthy patrons in exchange for much needed labor. An indenture agreement would have bound Mary for four or more years and during this period her sponsor would have provided shelter, food and clothing. At the close of the indenture period, servants were typically awarded food and equipment to make a start—clothes, corn, an axe and a hoe, and, for the cost of a survey, the rights to 50 acres of land.



We have no written record of what Mary hoped to gain by leaving her home in England or what she thought of her new surroundings. Although the colony's leaders traveled to Maryland seeking freedom to worship as Catholics, it's likely she accepted the risk and discomforts of sea travel in hopes of finding a better future. She may have had second thoughts once she got here. Maryland's climate was harsher, than the weather in England. All newcomers fell ill with malaria, dysentery or other diseases during their first year here. About one in four of her neighbors would not have made it through their first year.

Mary would have had to adjust to a new diet. Because plowing was impractical, wheat, the staple of the English diet wasn't grown here. The settlers followed the Indians' example and ate corn. Many settlers complained of an inability to digest this new food. Mary likely tried deer, oysters, sturgeon and wild duck for the first time. All in all, she may have eaten better than her English relatives.

Just a year after Mary arrived, one James Courtney bought out her indenture and married her. By 1643, Courtney was dead and she was left with a one-year-old son. Women were in short supply and in great demand in the early days of the colony. Soon Mary was wed to Daniel Clocker. He became the owner of whatever property Mary brought to the marriage as well as the assets of her child. As a woman, Mary could not make a contract. Her husband was the head of the family, responsible for welfare and behavior of wife, children and other household members. Despite all, Mary's role was probably not as subordinate as may be imagined. Running a household was a team effort and woman's work made a major contribution to the family economy.

Daniel Clocker had also started his life in Maryland as an indentured servant. He served his term and became a tenant farmer, improving and working another's land in exchange for a portion of his crops. By the middle of the century, Clocker had secured the land promised in his indenture agreement for the price of a survey as well as an additional 100 acres that included a large tract of land near today's Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation, which they lived on for the rest of their lives.

Mary undoubtedly found her first home with Daniel far less comfortable than her situation in England. Housing here was typically small and dark, with earthen floors and leaky clapboard siding and roofing. She probably slept on the floor, on a ticking filled with cornhusks, and sat on a stump. Large traveling chests doubled as tables. Home in England, in all but the meanest situations, would have held a bedstead, a bench for seating, and a table to eat or work on.



The Clockers would probably never have worked so hard, or so long, had they remained in England. Raising tobacco—hilling, planting, weeding, worming, pruning, cutting, stripping, and packing—consumed much of the year. Fences had to be built, fields prepared and firewood cut. Hunting, fishing, and cultivation of a corn crop were necessary to round out the diet. Mary would keep house, pound corn, gather wild greens and berries, grow and prepare medicinal herbs, raise cabbages, onions, and sweet potatoes, pick and dry apples or peaches, tend her

six children, and help in fields. Eventually these former servants probably kept a servant of their own. Along with the help of their relatively large family, Daniel and Mary were able to maintain the home economy, a dairy, and to work in the community.

Mary devoted time and energy to making and marketing butter and cheese to her neighbors and she probably sold livestock to households just starting out. This enterprise would have had a significant impact on the family fortunes. A cow and calf were worth about 600 pounds of tobacco, about the value of half a tobacco crop in the middle of the century. Mary's skills as a midwife were also of worth. Records describe Daniel's appearance in court to collect for her midwife services in a difficult case. The jury allowed 10 pounds a day for 10 days away from her 'dayry'. Pay for a laboring man at the middle of the century ranged from 10 to 25 pounds of tobacco a day. Because it was more profitable to spend time growing tobacco, the Clockers would have purchased necessary manufactured items from England.

As years passed Daniel appeared in records as a participant in community affairs, a reliable neighbor, and a good citizen whose judgment was respected. As a midwife, Mary was also trusted in the community. It is difficult to reconcile the hardworking wife, mother, and entrepreneur with the woman described in court records from 1659. Mary was indicted, tried, and sentenced to be hanged as an accessory to the theft of personal items from the Dutch merchant Simon Overzee, who lived at St. John's off today's Fisher Road on the college campus. While Overzee was away, Mary was in the home to attend the labor of his wife. When Mrs. Overzee died, Mary cared for the newborn child. While Mrs. Overzee was laid out in a coffin built by Daniel, Mary and an accomplice pilfered clothing, fabric, laces and other goods and fled with the goods stuffed under their skirts. Apparently Mary and her family

made good use of some of the items. But the husband of her accomplice lost his nerve and hid some of the stolen items in a tree, where they were found, revealing the crime.

In colonial Maryland, where deals were made by word rather than writing, arguments over the value of services and who owed what were common. The Clockers and their neighbors were frequently in court making claims. Records from court sessions hearing these cases are primary sources of information for those conducting historical research. It may be that Mary was attempting to secure compensation for her services in anticipation of Overzee's refusal to pay. The case went to court and the accused were sentenced to hang. But the day after the sentence was delivered, the Governor proclaimed the death of Oliver Cromwell and the succession of his son Richard to the protectorate of the Commonwealth of England. He pardoned Mary and all others slated for death.

The Clockers took a chance on finding a better life in the New World and were among a minority who won the gamble. They arrived in Maryland with nothing but a few basic skills and a willingness to work hard. They died, at relatively old ages, as solidly middle class leaders in the community with a relatively comfortable home. Of the identified servants who left England for Maryland over the first nine years of the colony, fewer than 30 percent achieved ownership of land and the independence it brought. Most died. The Clockers' descendants remained on inherited land for another two hundred years. A home built by Clocker's grandson or great grandson still stands just off Rosecroft Road.

As you pass the reminders of 17th-century structures that stand in St. Mary's City today, imagine the great hopes that were sheltered in these tiny frames. Salute the spirit of those who dared try for a better life, admire their industry, and marvel that dreams can come true.

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