

Margaret Brent

Assuming Leadership

(1601-1671)

Born to a gentry family, she immigrated to Maryland in 1639, as a 38-year-old spinster, along with her sister Mary (?-1658) and brothers Fulke (?-1656) and Giles (ca 1600-1672), who were soon to be very influential in Maryland affairs. Margaret and Mary patented "Sister's Freehold" near St. Mary's City upon arrival and soon became wealthy planters.

Governor Leonard Calvert died suddenly in 1647 leaving only an oral will. He named Thomas Greene as Governor, and Margaret Brent as executor of his estate. She was now responsible for paying off all of Calvert's debts, which included paying the soldiers who had helped rid the colony of rebels just six months earlier. Calvert's famous words to Brent were, "take all and pay all." The soldiers began to threaten mutiny because they were getting hungry as well as being unpaid. Unfortunately, Leonard Calvert's estate was not sufficient to cover the soldier's pay.

The Provincial Court, as an emergency act, made her Lord Baltimore's attorney in place of Leonard Calvert to whom Lord Baltimore had given that power. The Provincial Court, the highest court in colonial Maryland, really did not have the power to make Margaret Brent the Lord Baltimore's attorney without consulting Cecilius Calvert himself. But he was in England and it would take too long to send word and get response back. This was a true emergency, and the court needed to act immediately. The colony's leaders thought they could explain everything to the Lord Baltimore after the matter was settled. This decision on the part of the Provincial Court led to the crisis that made Margaret Brent famous.

Brent faced seemingly insurmountable odds. She was appointed to a representative position by a group of men who did not have the power to do so and yet who now expected her to act. This same group refused to tax themselves in order to pay the soldiers who had helped save the colony. It is possible that she knew the Lord Baltimore would be unhappy with her appointment and was seeking ways to cover for herself, but there was little she could do.

On January 21, 1648, Margaret Brent appeared before the Assembly and demanded to be admitted with two votes, one for herself and one as Lord Baltimore's representative. This request, unimaginable in the 17th century, is something that makes her very different from most other women at that time. The governor refused and she departed, protesting the proceedings unless she could be present and vote.

The day after the Assembly refused her request to vote, Brent turned to the only realistic option left to her which would allow her to pay the soldiers and avoid a mutiny. This was the sale of Lord Baltimore's only portable possessions in Maryland. Without the Lord Baltimore's permission or knowledge, Brent began to sell his cattle in order to save Maryland.

The Maryland Assembly defended Margaret Brent's actions to the Lord Baltimore in a letter to him in 1649: "We do verily believe, that your estate was better for the colony's safety at that time in her hands than in any man's else. For the soldiers would never have treated any other with civility and respect. She

rather deserves favor and thanks from your Honor for so much concurring to the public's safety than to be justly liable to bitter invectives." In the Assembly's view it was not only Margaret Brent's courage and diplomacy that enabled her to save the day but her womanliness, which demanded and received civility.

Shortly after this affair, Margaret Brent left Maryland for Virginia, where she established a new plantation, Peace. Little is known of how she lived out the remainder of her life. But what is certain is that Maryland would not have survived without her. Her legacy, as Dr. Carr remarks, is not so much what she did, but what she could *envision*. Some have interpreted her as an early feminist or suffragist. *(Note: Margaret Brent should **not** be identified as the first women suffragist, nor should she be identified as the first woman attorney or lawyer.)* Dr. Carr states that she was well born, exceptionally able, and carried a heavy responsibility both to the Lord Baltimore and for the welfare of the colony. Nothing indicates that she believed that all women should have the vote.