

MARY CALVERT of the Northern Neck

"Ye said Mrs. Calvert shall personally receive thirty stripes upon her bare shoulders for her offence." Thus the court of Northumberland decided in the case of Mary Calvert in the year of our Lord 1655.

This court was probably held at Coan Hall, the home of Colonel John Mottrom, as it is doubtful that a court-house had yet been built.

Court Day was a great event to the men of Virginia in colonial times. It created an opportunity for the discussion of politics, for trading livestock, bargaining for the sale of tobacco, catching up with the news, and last but not least, a free enjoyment of rough horse-play, accompanied by the passing of the jug.

Let us imagine this Court Day at Coan Hall. If the weather was warm enough the session may have been held out of doors under the trees. In the rear the virgin forest must have furnished an impressive background. In front flowed the river where the small sailing vessels, barges and log canoes belonging to the men who had come to court were tied or anchored. A few horses may have been tied in the barn-lot or tethered out to graze, but there were not many horses in the Neck at that time, probably not more than fifteen or twenty in the county.

In cold weather court was doubtless held inside before the blazing fire in the great hall. Colonel Mottrom, if he was presiding, was no doubt dressed in his best, as befitted the occasion and his position as justice. Ursula was probably in the kitchen supervising preparations for a feast for those among the gathering who would be their guests.

If the crowd overflowed outside there was perhaps an outdoor fire near the stables for warmth. And the passing flagon of ale no doubt helped to warm and cheer the crowd. Contests of strength and skill, such as wrestling, cudgeling, running, riding and shooting[Pg 72] may have been going on there while the court was in progress inside the house.

Mary Calvert must have been embarrassed to have been the only woman in such a crowd of men, for as a rule women stayed out of sight on Court Days. The records reveal only enough information about Mary Calvert to arouse the curiosity. What sort of woman was she?

She was perhaps fairly young, as women of that day usually married early and died early. There is no clue as to her appearance but it is safe to assume that her clothes were bright because colonials wore gay colors, and that she wore a hood of

some sort over her head, and if it was cold a mantle that covered her other garments.

What heinous crime had this woman committed that she deserved to be lashed thirty times across her bare shoulders?

Mary Calvert had been so bold as to speak in public against Oliver Cromwell and the Parliament of England. She had called them "rogues and rebels."

Now, Mrs. Calvert confessed in court that she had made this statement, but in her own defense she stated that she was in danger of being murdered by her husband and "spake those words" to bring about her arrest and thus be "secured from her husband."

Was Mary telling the truth? The true answer will never be known. But the ancient county records do reveal the fact that her husband either loved her and could not stand by and see her lashed, or that he wanted to save his own self-respect.

Whatever his reason may have been he did come forward and beg to pay a fine in order that Mary's sentence be revoked—

"Upon Mr. Calvert's petition in behalfe of his wife," the court ordered him to pay a thousand pounds of tobacco for commuting "of ye corporall punishment to be inflicted upon his said wife, with charges of court."

Source: The Stronghold A Story of Historic Northern Neck of Virginia and Its People by Miriam Haynie