

Royal and colonial women made their mark on 'The Dutchess's County'

by Melodye Moore and Bill Jeffway

Since March is Women's History Month, it seems like a good time to take a look at the fate of three of the women in the earliest days of the creation of Dutchess County in the 17th and early-18th century.

Until 1713, owing to the very few inhabitants of the area, Dutchess County was committed to the care of Ulster County. One of the 12 original counties of the Province of New York, Dutchess was the fifth named in an act passed by the colonial legislature on November 1, 1683 that yielded some familiar county names like Orange, Ulster, Queens and Westchester.

Originally called, "The Dutchess's County," it was named for Maria Beatrice D'Este, known as Mary of Modena, or the Dutchess of York. Mary was born a princess in the Italian Duchy of Modena, the daughter of the Duke of Modena. A strict and observant Catholic, she was married to the Duke of York, and therefore became the Dutchess of York in 1673, keeping the title until 1685 when her husband became King and she became Queen.

She was Queen from 1685 to 1689, at which point the couple was deposed in order to restore Protestantism to the monarchy. She ended up exiled in France, and despite all the bright prospects of her earlier life, she died a pauper and in isolation in 1718.

"Duchess of York" (the modern spelling drops the "t") is the courtesy title of the wife of the Duke of York. The Duke of York is the title reserved for the second son of the reigning monarch. Since the time of the "Dutchess" for whom our county was named, there have only been three later Duchesses. The three are the mother, and paternal grandmother, of the current Queen Elizabeth II, and Sarah Ferguson, who lost

the title after her divorce from the Duke of York in 1996.

At the time of its creation, the county was much larger than it is today, extending northward into present-day Columbia County to the Roeliff Jansen Kill, and southward to include all of present-day Putnam County.

One year after Dutchess was deemed to have sufficient residents to warrant administration independent of Ulster, the first colonial census was taken and enumerated 447 residents living in 67 households. Thirty of the residents were identified as slaves. The households were located in the first three areas of the county to be settled – Fishkill, Poughkeepsie and Rhinebeck. Nearly equidistant from one another, the number of households in each area was also almost equally divided with 18 families in Fishkill, 22 in Poughkeepsie and 27 in Rhinebeck.

Forty-six percent of the population in the first census (207) were women and 11 of those women were enslaved, four being under the age of 16. Coming from places like Albany and New York City, the rugged remoteness of Dutchess County must have felt challenging, but the colonial women who were the first to arrive in the county worked side-by-side with their husbands to tame the wilderness and lay down the foundations of the Dutchess County we know today.

The good news is that by contrast to the fate of the Dutchess of York, this introduces you to two women who, through their own efforts, thrived in a most rugged and challenging early wilderness before the 1776 creation of the United States.

Helena Schemerhorn Van Den Bogaardt

was the wife of Myndert Harmense Van Den Bogaardt. He was baptized in New Amsterdam in 1643 and sometime later his surgeon father moved to Beverwyck (Albany), where he acted as commissary.

Myndert grew up in Beverwyck and prospered as a gunstock maker and trader. He married Helena Schemerhorn around 1679. Born circa 1660, she was the daughter of Jacob Janse and Jannetje Schemerhorn.

Myndert prospered in Beverwyck and in 1686, in partnership with Robert Sanders, he purchased a substantial amount of land in what would become Poughkeepsie. He is believed to have relocated to his new land in 1692 with Helena and their children and settled in the vicinity of what is now North Bridge Street.

It might be said that Helena was the "first lady" of Poughkeepsie. Ultimately Myndert and Helena were said to be the parents of at least six sons and four daughters. He died sometime between September 1710 and August 1712, leaving Helena, then around 50 years old, to manage their holdings with the help of her sons.

Helena is listed as "Elena" in the 1714 census as head of a household that included 10 people. She did not own slaves. In the first tax list for Poughkeepsie in 1717/18, she is listed as "De Weden Van Myndert Harmense" and assessed at over 52 pounds, surpassed only by "De Weden Van Baltus Van Kleeck," the widow of another prominent early Poughkeepsie settler.

She had obviously managed their land holdings and their assets well. She lived until 1733 and was buried in Old Reformed Dutch Cemetery. Her numerous children continued to live in or near Poughkeepsie.

Another woman of early and extraordinary success was Catharyna Rombout Brett. She was a business woman and patent settler. In 1709, Roger and Catharyna Brett, with their children and slaves, emigrated from New York City to Dutchess County to claim Catharyna's inheritance, a third of the 85,000 acres in her father's 1685 land patent. They hired a Long Island architect to build a Dutch-style house.



This portrait of Mary Modena, the Dutchess of York, was painted in 1680, three years before she gained the honor of having "The Dutchess's County" (today's Dutchess County) named for her. Despite an opulent start, rising to Queen of England, her Catholicism led to her exile in France. There she died in poverty and obscurity in 1718. *Image courtesy, the Yale Center for British Art*

The house is today called the Madam Brett Homestead, the oldest house in Dutchess County, and is meticulously maintained by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Early widowhood and challenges raising sons in a wilderness urged diplomacy with local Indians. She subdivided land holdings to multiply neighbors while retaining the Brett mill and landings as a cash supply. This strategy became the successful county development paradigm.

You are invited to read the full story of "Madam Brett" which was the entire focus of our 1992 Yearbook, and the 1999/2000 Yearbook dedicated entirely to women's history in the county at: www.dchsn.org/yearbook.

Bill Jeffway is the Executive Director of the Dutchess County Historical Society and can be reached at bill.jeffway@dchsn.org or (845) 293-7711.

Melodye Moore is a Trustee of DCHS, head of its Collections Committee, and involved in the development of its programs and exhibitions.



The Madam Brett Homestead in Beacon is the oldest house in Dutchess County and is meticulously maintained by the Daughters of the American Revolution. It was home to a woman who, despite early widowhood and children, created a settlement and business paradigm as a first settler that was emulated by those that followed. *Image courtesy of DCHS Collections*

TWO OF US PRESENTS 'RABBIT HOLE' ON MARCH 27

The Two Of Us Productions, the award-winning theater company based in Columbia County, will present "Rabbit Hole" by David Lindsay-Abaire on Saturday, March 27, as a Virtual Live-Staged Reading starting at 7 p.m.

"Rabbit Hole" received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. This play deals with the ways family members survive a major loss, and includes comedy as well as tragedy. "Rabbit Hole" premiered on Broadway in 2006, and has also been produced by regional theaters in cities such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

Becca and Howie Corbett have a comfortable family life in the suburbs of New York City until a random, tragic accident takes the life of their 4-year old son. Soon after, Becca's younger, irresponsible sister, Izzy, announces that she is pregnant: there will now be a new child in the family. As Becca and Howie grow apart, Becca's mother Nat badgers Becca about her grieving process while Shauna, the young driver who killed their son, continually shows up to ask forgiveness.

"Rabbit Hole" delves into the complexity of a family navigating deep grief, and learning what it means to live a fruitful life when things fall apart. We have a front-row seat as they travel a bumpy road to healing with no road map to guide them.

To learn the rest of the story, RSVP at www.TheTwoOfUsProductions.org or call (518) 329-6293 and see it all for yourself.



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