

Mary McDowell Greenlee's Account of (Future) Rockbridge County in the 18th-Century

In 1806, when she was 95 years of age, Mary McDowell Greenlee – feisty, eccentric and known to be a witch – was called to give testimony in a lawsuit about King George II's 1739 grant of 100,000 acres to Benjamin Borden (also called Burden). The land, then part of Augusta County, evolved into Rockbridge County. Her deposition gives useful insight into the rugged life and politics of the era.

These excerpts and the biographical sketch on the next page are from the chapter "Mary Greenlee, The So-Called Witch – Her Deposition in the Burden Case," in J. Lewis Peyton, *History of Augusta County, Virginia, 1882*.



RS. GREENLEE, being sworn, deposed and saith:

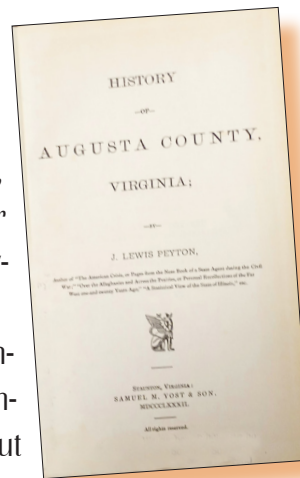
That she, with her husband, James Greenlee, settled on Burden's large grant, as near as she could recollect, in the fall of the year 1737. * * * That shortly before her settlement on said grant, she, together with her husband, her father, Ephraim McDowell, then a very aged man, and her brother, John McDowell, were on their way to Beverly Manor, and were advanced as far as Lewis's creek, intending to stop on South river, having, at that time, never heard of Burden's tract. That she remembers of her brother, James, having, the Spring before, gone into said Manor and raised a crop of corn on South river, about Turks, near what was called Wood's

Gap. That about the time they were striking up their camp in the evening, Benj. Burden, the elder, came to their camp and proposed staying all night.

In the course of conversation, said Burden informed them he had about 10,000 acres of land on the

waters of James river, or the forks, if he could ever find it, and proposed giving 1,000 acres to any one who would conduct him to it. When a light was made, he produced two papers, and satisfied the company of his rights. The deponent's brother, John McDowell, then informed him, said Burden, he would conduct him to the forks of James river for 1,000 acres; showed said Burden his surveying instruments, &c., and finally it was agreed that said McDowell should conduct him to the grant, and she thinks a memorandum of the agreement was then made in writing.

They went on from thence to the house of John Lewis, in Beverly Manor, near where Staunton now stands, who was a relation of



deponent's father. They remained with him a few days, and there, she understood, further writings were entered into, and it was finally agreed they should all settle in Burden's tract.

That said John McDowell was to have 1,000 acres for con-

ducting them there, agreeable to the writing entered into, and that the settlers were, moreover, to have 100 acres for every cabin they should build, even if they built forty cabins, and that they might purchase any quantity adjoining at fifty shillings per hundred acres. The deponent understood that said Burden was interested in these cabin rights, as they were called, for that any cabin saved him 1,000 acres of land. These cabin rights were afterward counted, as deponent understood, and an account returned to the government, then held at Williamsburg, and she has heard, about that time, many tests of the manner in which one person, by going from cabin to cabin, was counted, and stood for several settlements.



HE RECOLLECTS, particularly, of hearing of a serving girl of one James Bell, named Millhollen, who dressed herself in men's clothes and saved several cabin rights, perhaps five or six, calling herself Millhollen, but varying the Christian name. These conversations were current in that day. She knows nothing of the fact but from information. She understood that it was im-

material where the cabins were built; that they were to entitle the builder to 100 acres as aforesaid, whenever he chose to lay it off, and that he had a right to purchase, at 50 shillings as aforesaid, any larger quantity. One John Patterson was employed to count cabins rights, as she understood. He was accustomed to mark the letters on his hat with chalk, as she has been informed, and after-

wards deliver the account to her brother, John McDowell, and remembers to have heard that her brother had expressed his surprise at so many people by the name of Millhollen being settled on the land, but which was afterwards explained by the circumstance of the servant girl above mentioned, and was a subject of general mirth in the settlement. She does not know whether this plan of saving

ABOUT MARY MCDOWELL GREENLEE

Mary McDowell, who married James Greenlee, was the daughter of Ephraim McDowell, one of the early settlers on Burden's grant, and a great aunt of the late Gov. James McDowell, of Rockbridge. She was a woman of more than ordinary brightness and vivacity of intellect, but many aberrations of mind and eccentricities of character and conduct. Early disappointment in a love affair heightened her natural peculiarities, and these, with her superior abilities and her independence, caused her neighbors to regard her as a witch. Nothing in those days was too wild and remote from the reality of things, not to meet with an eager welcome, at least, from many. She was, no doubt, as were all witches, thought to have signed in her own blood a contract with the devil, to abjure the Christian religion and all reverence for the true God; that she would steadily refuse to listen to any one who should desire to convert her or convince her of the error of her ways and lead her to repentance. Many of our ancestors, no doubt, believed this contract was duplicated, to prevent mistakes, and that while the Prince of Darkness retained one copy, the other was in possession of Mrs. Greenlee, and often consulted by her. Such, notoriously, were the supposed conditions and custody of these compacts with Satan. On one occasion, at a "quilting party"

at her own house, and when hospitably pressing one of the ladies to eat more, she said gaily, "The mare that does double the work should be best fed." The rash ignorance of the party construed this to mean that she herself was a witch, and this woman the mare she rode in her nightly incursions to the consecrated haunts of diabolical intercourse. Her crimes, and many were attributed to her, were said to have proceeded from malignity and resentment, and she was supposed to go forth at night into the open air, and there, amidst darkness and the storm, to curse her victims and pursue her unholy incantations. No wonder the more superstitious of her neighbors shrank from her with holy horror, poured out curses upon her from the bottom of their hearts.

In a somewhat mysterious way, some of the stock of Mr. Craig, an inhabitant of the Triple Forks, disappeared, and the loss was attributed to Mrs. Greenlee, for witches were understood to have the power of destroying life, without the necessity of approaching the person or beast whose life was to be taken. One method was by exposing an image of wax to the action of the fire, while in proportion as the image wasted away, the life of the individual, who was the object



Conjecture in stained glass: Mary Greenlee being deposed in 1806

contrived against, was undermined and destroyed. Another, was by incantations and spells. Either of these was styled "compassing, or imagining the death." Possessed of such subtle and dangerous power, and indulging in such practices, in the opinion of her neighbors, one can readily understand the indignation and abhorrence with which she must have been regarded.

From so much of the story of Mrs. Greenlee as is preserved, it is probable her vanity was flattered at the terror she inspired in her simple neighbors, and that she was greatly amused at the fright she caused these rustics. Possibly, in the end, she deluded herself, and began to think her imprecations had a real effect; that her curses killed — provided, always, that she indulged in any, which is open to doubt.

Mary Greenlee inherited not only the hard intelligence, but the pluck, of her Covenanter stock; was the kinswoman of the Founder, surrounded by a powerful family, and indulged few fears of coming to the ordeal of fire and water. In that superstitious age, however, to pursue, at the expense of her ignorant neighbors, a mysterious conduct might be likened to whetting the knife that was to take

her life — digging her own grave. That she escaped trial under the ancient laws of Virginia is, in view of all the facts, surprising. Rather would we have expected to hear that she had been seized by the hair of the head, or nape of the neck, and drawn before a judge. The belief in witchcraft of our ancestors was sincere, and this is the less to be wondered at when we consider that these superstitions are cropping up in the civilized life of the present day in "spirit manifestations." The belief, however, in these matters is now confined to a class who may be, not inappropriately, styled "cranks."

Let us rejoice that light has broken in upon us, and that amidst the inevitable ills of this life we are no longer harassed, like our forefathers, with imaginary terrors and haunted by frightful images.

In the Burden case, Mrs. Greenlee underwent, in 1806, a long examination, testing her temper and memory. In the midst of the examination the question was put to her, "How old are you?" She tartly replied, "Ninety-five the 17th of this Instant; and why do you ask me my age? Do you think I am in my dotage?" Her deposition, which follows, cannot fail to be read with interest. It casts much light upon our early days, supplies valuable information as to the early settlers, their manners and customs, and has not inaptly been styled the corner-stone of our county history. — J.L.P.

several cabin rights by one person appearing at different cabins, was suggested by Burden, the elder, or not. She understood that every person saving a cabin right got 160 acres for each right so saved, as he, Burden, was to have a cabin for every 1,000 acres. When the party with which she traveled, as aforesaid, came, as they supposed, into the grant, they stopped at a spring, near where David Steele now lives, and struck their camp, her brother and said Burden having gone down said branch until they were satisfied it was one of the waters of the James river. The balance of the party remained at that spring until her brother John and said Burden, as she understood, went down to the forks formed by the waters of the South and North river, and, having taken a course through the country, returned to said camp. They then went on to the place called the Red House, where her brother, John, built a cabin and settled where James McDowell now lives. The first cabin her husband built was by a spring, near where Andrew Scott now lives, but when deponent went to see it, she did not like the situation, and they then built and settled at the place called Browns. They sold this after some short time, and purchased the land on which her brother, James, had made an improvement, now called Templetons, and where she resided until about the year 1780, being within sight of where her father, then near a hundred years of age,

resided. This was the first party of white people that ever settled on the said grant. The said Burden, the elder, remained on the grant from that time, as well as she can recollect for perhaps two years and more, obtaining settlers, and she believes there were more than a hundred settlers before he left them. She believes he was in the grant the whole time from his first coming up until he left it before his death, but how long before his death he left it, she does not know. He resided some time with a Mrs. Hunter, whose daughter afterwards married one Greene, and to whom, she understood, he gave the tract whereon they lived. When the said Burden left the grant, she understood he left his papers with her brother, John McDowell, to whose house a great many people resorted, as she understood, to see about lands, but what authority her brother had to sell, or whether he made sales or not, she does not know. Her brother, John, was killed about Xmas before her son, Samuel, her first son of that name was born. He was born, as appears by the register of his birth in the Bible, about April, 1743. The date of this register is partly obliterated, in the last figure, but from the date of the birth of the preceding and subsequent child it must have been, as she believes, in 1743, that said Samuel was born.



OUNG BENJ. BURDEN came into the grant before her brother's death. She recol-

lects this from the circumstance of his being then in ordinary plight, and such that he did not seem much respected by her brother's wife, and when she afterwards married him she could not but reflect on the change of circumstances. She understood that he was altogether illiterate. She said, Benjamin, junior, lived with her brother John, whilst in the grant, but returned to his father's before the death of said John, and after his father's death returned, fully empowered by his father's will to complete titles and sell lands, and then married the widow of her said brother, and continued to live at the place where her said brother settled as aforesaid, until his death. This place, now called the Red House place, is about three quarters of a mile from Templeton's, where the deponent resided as above.

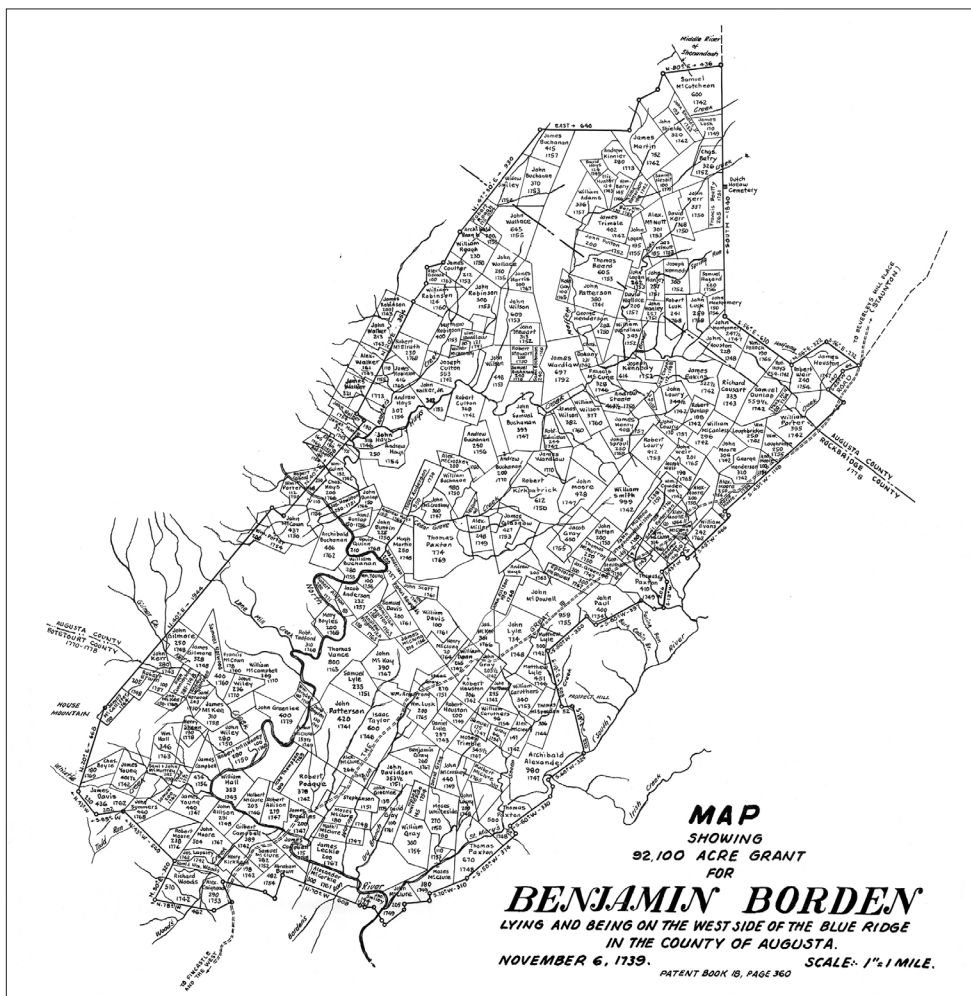
Joseph Burden (a son of old Ben. Burden, the grantee,) had resided at his brother, Benjamin's, some years before his, (Benjamin's) death; had gone to school and was here at his death; had the small-pox about the time of her brother's death, and some time after which (deponent does not recollect precisely, but believes it was not long,) he went away, not being very well liked, as she understood, and not made very welcome; was then but a lad of about 18 or 19, as well as she can recollect from his appearance. This deponent recollects that John Hart, who had removed to Beverly Manor some short time before the removal of this

deponent and her friend, as above stated, but she cannot say whether he surveyed for the said Benjamin or not; she understood he was a surveyor. The people who first settled and purchased did not always have their lands surveyed at the time of purchase; as she understood, some had their lands surveyed and some had not, but when it was not surveyed, they described it by general boundaries. Beatty was the first surveyor whom she knows that surveyed in the grant. The said Burden had been at Williamsburg, and some one, perhaps the Governor's son-in-law, by name Needler, and his other partners, had in a frolic given him their interest in said grant. She

understood there were four of them—the Governor, Gooch, his said son-in-law, and two others whose names she does not recollect, who were interested in the order of Council for said land, and that Burden got it from them as above; this was his information. She well recollects that her brother, John, assisted one Wood to make the survey of said large grant after they removed to it, as aforesaid, it being at the time of their removal, as aforesaid, held by the order of Council, as she understood. The said Woods and her brother made the survey, she believes, after the cabin rights were taken in, as above stated. Many people came up, and many settlements and cabins were

made immediately after their settling on the tract, as aforesaid.

BEING INTERROGATED as to the value of the lands remaining unsold by Ben. Burden, she stated that one Harden, who, she understood, was an executor, and who was in this country after the death of young Ben. Burden (which occurred from small-pox in 1753,) and after John Bowyer had married the widow, and who, she understood, was settling Burden's business—but she does not know by what authority—she recollects that said Harden offered to her brother, James, the unsold lands for a bottle of wine, if he would clear him of the quit rents. She also recollects that her said brother consulted with her father about the proposition, who advised him to have nothing to do with it, for it would probably run him into jail. This, she thinks, was shortly after Bowyer's marriage. She does not know whether Benj. Burden, Jr., was distressed on account of the quit rents or not, but recollects that shortly before his death, Col. Patton was at her house; a horse of said Burden broke out and came there, which said Patten wished to have caught, that he might take him for some claims against said Burden, but she did not hear what. She had, however, said horse sent home, fearing that as there had been some misunderstanding between deponent's husband and said Burden about this land, he might think they had aided



in said seizure. The deponent further states that her husband purchased 1,000 acres of land of old Burden, at an early day for fifty shillings per hundred, which she understood he had located on the Turkey Hill, as it was called. After the death of old Burden, his son, Benjamin, disputed giving a deed for the whole quantity there, alleging it was all valuable land, and afterwards, for the sake of peace, it was agreed that a part should be taken there — a part joining Robert Cutton, which was sold to one Buchanan, and a part near John Davidson. This arrangement was made at the time Harden was present, as aforesaid, who seemed willing to give the land, and advised his deponent, whose husband was then abroad, to agree to take it at those places, which she did. All the land purchased by her husband was purchased from old Burden; indeed, he had purchased this 1,000 acres before they came to the tract, at Lewis', as before stated, provided he liked the land when he saw it, which he did.

The deponent being asked what she knew of the persons named in a mutilated paper purporting to be an account of entries and sales, beginning at "No. 1—McDowell, Jno., to No. 22 — Moore, Andrew," on the first side, where the papers appeared to be torn off; beginning on the other side at "No. 42 — Martin, Robt., and ending at No. 62, at Brown, Robt.," and whether those persons were settled in the grant at an early day or owned lands in it?

Answered — That she knew a number of persons therein named. Many of them lived in Beverly Manor, and others in the Calf Pasture and elsewhere, but she did not know many of them to have lands in Burden's tract. The McDowells and her husband she had before spoken of. She also knew John Moore, who settled at an early day where Charles Campbell now lives; Andrew Moore, who settled where his grandson, Wm. Moore, now lives. Wm. McCausland also lived in the grant, as did Wm. Sawyers and Robt. Campbell, Sam'l Woods, John Mathews, Richard Woods, John Hays, Chas. Hays, his son, Sam'l Walker, &c., all of whom settled in the grant at an early day.

The deponent being interrogated if she knew Alex. Miller, and if he was an early settler?

Answered — That she did not know said Miller. He was the first blacksmith that settled on the tract. She recollects of his shoeing old Burden's horse, and understood he purchased land of said Burden. He lived on land adjoining one John McCroskey's land, who also purchased his land from old Burden. He also joined the plantation, now Stewart's mill-place, as she believes, whereon one Taylor, who, she believes, married Elizabeth Paxton, formerly lived. She recollects being at the burial of said Taylor, who was killed by the falling of a tree not long after his marriage. Said Miller's land, she understood, has been in possession of people of the name of Teeford since the said Millers removed. The

deponent recollects one McMullen, who resided some distance above the place where Robt. Stewart's mill now stands, but up the same branch, and near a spring. Said McMullen was living on said land and had a daughter married there when this deponent's daughter, Mary, was a sucking babe. She recollects this from having gone to the wedding when a daughter of said McMullen was married, and having left her child at home. Her daughter, Mary, was born, as appears from the register of her birth, in May, 1745. Humphrey's Cabins, as they were called, were over the hill, at another spring, not far from where said McMullen lived. She knows not from whom McMullen purchased, but rather thinks her brother, James McDowell, gave him a piece of land there for teaching school. There was no mill where Stewart's mill now is in the lifetime of Ben. Burden, Jr. John Hay's mill was the first mill in the grant, and built very early after the settlement.

The deponent said the people paid no quit rents for two years from the time the grant was first settled. She understood this exemption was granted by the Governor at the instance of one Anderson, a preacher. When they had to pay quit rents, they raised money by sending butter to New Castle, to Williamsburg, and other markets below, and got also in return their salt, iron, &c.

Being asked whether Joseph Burden was frequently in this country after the death of young Ben.

Burden, she answered that he was frequently in this country some time after the death of said Benjamin. He called at her house, inquiring for a horse, and she thought she knew his name, and afterwards heard he lodged in the neighborhood, at one Wm. Campbell's. She saw him again at her house about twelve or fifteen years ago. He made some enquiries of her about her husband's estate or something of that kind. She does not recollect the particulars, but she had very little conversation with him. She also heard of his being through this country some little time before this, but does not recollect how long, nor did she see him.



QUESTION by the defendant's agent — Did not many persons, from time to time, in the lifetime of old Burden, settle in the grant, under an expectation of getting the lands at the usual price, and without first contracting with said Burden?

Answer — I believe they did. I think many settled before they had an opportunity of seeing Burden, and Burden would frequently direct them to deponent's husband, to shew them the land, as they said.

Do you not believe that the first deeds were made for the cabin rights?

Answer — I suppose the cabin right, with such land as the settler had purchased, would be deeded together, and perhaps these were the first made.

Did Ben. Burden, Jr., appear, when he first entered on the affairs

of the estate, to be disposed to do justice to the devisees?

Answer — I thought he did. He appeared to be a good man. She understood he was the heir-at-law, and did not hear of the sisters' claims, except to five thousand acres, which she understood had been assigned to them on Catawba, where the land was good.

Did he ever leave his country and go to Jersey, after he came up and got married?

Answer — No, I believe he did not. I am pretty confident he did not.

Did you know of Archibald Alexander and Magdalen Bowyer selling lands?

Answer — I did not know they were executors, and had a right to sell. I understood John Bowyer sold a great deal and gave away a great deal. Alexander was as respectable a man as any I knew. Bowyer, she understood, claimed what Ben. Burden claimed, though she had no conversation with him about this claim.

Being asked whether Alexander paid Burden any money on account of the estate?

Answered — She never heard that he had, and from her intimacy with the wife of said Bower, she believes she would have heard of it, had it taken place.

Question by same — When Burden produced his right to the land, as you have stated, were you not satisfied, and did not the company appear satisfied, that the right was completely in him?

Answer — Yes, the papers appeared perfectly satisfactory.

Did you not understand that your brother, James McDowell, built a cabin and purchased the land where Thos. Taylor, above mentioned, resides?

Answer — My brother, James, purchased a considerable tract, perhaps four or five hundred acres, either at or where Stewart's mill now stands. It run, as she understood, on a large hill, but whether in one or two tracts, she knows not. This tract, she understood, he sold to some person, but does not know who. She does not know whether he had it surveyed or not, but supposes it was merely designated by general boundaries. She thinks if she was on the land, she could point out the tree whereon his name was cut, if it is yet standing. It stood near a deep hole in the creek. Knows not how he acquired it, but understood he had built a cabin on it and saved a cabin right, but never saw the cabin, nor does she know where it stood, but the land was called his very shortly after they went to the grant, and in the lifetime of old Burden.

Sworn before us, 10th November, 1806.

— JOSEPH WALKER,

— J. GRIGSBY

Burden succeeded in procuring the erection of ninety-two cabins within two years, and received his patent from the Governor, dated Nov. 8, 1759. He died in 1742, and his will is on record in Frederick county.