Mary Sebrell Stiles
(c1760–1784/1788)

of

Surry County, Virginia

Daughter of Nathaniel Sebrell Sr.

by Timothy Dean Hudson

On 9 December 1782, John Stiles posted the required £50 bond in Surry County, Virginia to secure a license to marry Mary Sebrell, who the clerk described as a *"Spinster"* [1]. Their marriage ceremony was performed shortly afterwards. The couple had one known child, John Stiles Jr., commonly known as *"Jack."* The boy's birth occurred about one year after his parents' marriage, probably in late 1783 or early 1784 [2]. The youth first appeared in 1803–1804 in the household of John Stiles Sr., who paid the free male tithes for himself and *"John Stiles Jr."* [3]. Four decades later, the elder Stiles identified the younger John Stiles as his son in his will written on 6 November 1841 [4].

Documentation confirming that John Stiles Jr. was the son of Mary Sebrell comes from the will and estate papers of her father, Nathaniel Sebrell Sr. On Christmas Day 1813, at the age of ninety, Sebrell wrote his will, identifying the young man as *"my Grand son John Stiles Jr."* [5].

After their marriage, Mary Sebrell and John Stiles settled near her father's farm along the Blackwater Swamp in southern Surry County, a region designated in the 1780s as the Johnchecohunk Precinct. A 1784 precinct census shows the John Stiles household consisting of three white and no black people. The land on which they lived contained one dwelling house but no other buildings. This suggests that Jack Stiles was born early enough to have been counted on this census, and that Mary apparently survived the infant's birth [6].

We know little else of Mary Sebrell. If she were indeed one of those enumerated in her husband's household on the 1784 census, presumably taken after Jack's birth, then she may have lived another two or three years. However, she had died by about 1787 or early 1788, perhaps in a second childbirth. On 22 July 1788, John Stiles Sr. posted bond for a license to marry Jane Cooper, a woman *"of full age"* [7].

In his will, Nathaniel Sebrell Sr. followed the standards of his day by leaving his lands to his only son who outlived him. He next made provisions for the housing and support of his unmarried

daughter during her lifetime, after which the home and surrounding land that he provided for her would revert to his son. Sebrell then divided his remaining property into six equal shares, leaving one each to his two living children, and one share each to be equally divided among the heirs of Sebrell's three children who predeceased him and left multiple children themselves.

For the final share, or *"lot,"* as he called them, Sebrell specified, *"And the other lot I give to my Grand son John Stiles Jr. to him and his heirs forever."* The wording of Nathaniel Sebrell's will and the meticulous accounting of how his executor made an equal division among his grandchildren after his death both indicate that Mary Sebrell left only one surviving heir: her son, John Stiles Jr.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Mary Sebrell's Uncertain Maternal Ancestry

Nathaniel Sebrell Sr died in the fall of 1815 at the age of ninety-two, placing his birth in the year 1723 [8]. At the young age of nineteen, he inherited a plantation and several slaves from his uncle, making him an eligible land-owning bachelor by the early 1740s. Marriage records for Surry County do not exist for that era, but Nathaniel probably married by the mid-1740s. We have documentation for two of his wives.

On 21 April 1752, Nathaniel Sebrell appeared before the Surry County Court:

> *On the Motion of Nathaniel Sebrell who made Oath according to Law certificate is granted him for obtaining Letters of Administration of the Estate of Catherine his deceased Wife.*

We have no information on Catherine or her family background. Sebrell's petition to the Surry Court seems to imply that she had inherited property that needed distribution among her heirs. Surry County has not suffered the destruction of any of its court records, but the probate records contain no inventory or further accounting of Catherine Sebrell's estate [9].

In about the mid-1750s, Nathaniel remarried to Elizabeth Faulcon, daughter Nicholas Faulcon Sr., a wealthy Surry County tobacco planter. Faulcon wrote his will on 6 January 1781, first distributing his lands to his three sons. His next bequest was:

> *I give and devise unto my Daughter Elizabeth Sebrell, my Negro Girl Lucy, to her and her Heirs for ever. I also* [omitted word] *all the Money her Husband Nathaniel Sebrell is owing me.*

Nicholas Faulcon then made individual bequests to each of his remaining daughters and orphaned granddaughter, and he concluded by ordering his executor to distribute the money on hand at his death, including the funds from his current crop of tobacco, among his four younger daughters and granddaughter. He did not include Elizabeth among his daughters who divided his money. The order of Faulcon's bequests to his daughters implies that Elizabeth was one of his elder children. Moreover, he left her less property than his other daughters, suggesting that he had previously given her property as well as loaned money to her husband, Nathaniel Sebrell [10].

Nathaniel Sebrell's multiple wives and the lack of any firm birth date for Mary Sebrell complicate efforts to document Mary's maternal ancestry. Nathaniel's mother, Susanna Sebrell Hancock, wrote her will on 5 November 1750. She made these bequests to Nathaniel and his eldest child:

> *I leave & bequeath to my Son Nathaniel Sebrell one Case Bottles & the best Bed & furniture...I leave & bequeath to Mary Sebrell my Granddaughter a Gold Ring And I do Nominate & Appoint my Son Nathaniel Sebrell to be my whole & Sole Exor of this my Last Will & Testament.*

Susanna Sebrell Hancock died shortly after making her will, with Nathaniel filling it before the Surry County Court on November 20th [11].

This presents us with two possibilities for which of Nathaniel Sebrell's wives was Mary's mother:

Scenario #1: Mary was the daughter of Catherine

Given Nathaniel's documented birth in 1723, the birth of Mary Sebrell, the granddaughter named in his mother's November 1750 will, probably occurred between about 1745 and late 1750. If this young girl were the same daughter of Nathaniel Sebrell who married John Stiles in December 1782, then at the time of her marriage, she would have been a woman of between thirty-three and thirty-seven years old. Stiles' birth occurred between about 1760 and 1764, putting his age at the time of his marriage at between about eighteen and twenty-two [12].

This scenario would make Stiles more than a decade younger than his bride. Such an age gap with the woman that much older than her husband seems unusual, although not unprecedented. Their marriage bond did identify Mary as a *"Spinster,"* but we cannot draw specific conclusions regarding her age from the use of this term. It generally describes a woman older than the typical marriage age of between fifteen and twenty years, so even a woman in her early twenties could have been termed a spinster.

Scenario #2: Mary was the daughter of Elizabeth Faulcon

Mary, the daughter of Nathaniel and Catherine Sebrell mentioned in the November 1750 will of his mother, may have died young, and Nathaniel Sebrell gave the name of *"Mary"* to one of his daughters born several years later to his second wife, Elizabeth Faulcon. This possibility is seemingly suggested by autosomal DNA results of one of Mary Sebrell Stiles' descendants that show matches of 11 centimorgans each with six different descendants of John Faulcon, the son of Nicholas Faulcon Sr. and brother of Elizabeth Faulcon Sebrell. While relying exclusively on autosomal DNA matches among such distant descendants do not provide conclusive evidence, it definitely suggests that Mary Sebrell Stiles descends from Elizabeth Faulcon, Nathaniel Sebrell's second wife.

If this latter scenario is correct, then Mary Sebrell who married John Stiles Sr. was born later, probably between about 1755 and 1760, making her between about twenty-two and twenty-seven years old in December 1782 when she married John Stiles.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Notes

1. Surry County VA Marriage Bonds, 1782, LDS Film #4129125, Images #40–41; Surry County VA Marriage Register (1763–1853), p. 11, LDS Film #7579167, Image 133 (John Stiles to Mary Sebrell, *"Spinster;"* 9 December 1782). Burwell Sharp served as Stiles' security on his marriage bond. Personal property tax records of Surry County for the 1782–1810 period show that Sharp was a neighbor of both John Stiles and his father-in-law, Nathaniel Sebrell.
2. 1850 Union County AR Federal Census, El Dorado Township, p. 236b, Dwelling #419, line #31: J---[illegible name beginning with *"J"*] Stiles (age: 66; Farmer; born: Virginia). 1850 Union County AR Federal Census, Agricultural Schedule, El Dorado Township, pp. 480–481/29, line #24: Jack Stiles, farm owner, agent, or manager. 1860 Union Parish LA Federal Census, P. O. Farmerville, p. 587/82, Dwelling #528, line #23: James Boatrite [sic] (age: 38; Farmer; born: Arkansas); #24: J. E. Boatrite [sic] (age: 36; female, Housekeeper; born: Tennessee); #32: John Stiles (age: 76; Farmer; born: Virginia); #33: Becca Stiles (age: 66; *"House Keeper;"* born: Virginia). These census records place the birth of John Stiles Jr. in late 1783 or early 1784 in Virginia. He was undoubtedly born in Surry County, where his parents are documented as residing at the time of his birth.
3. 1803–1804 Surry County VA Personal Property Tax Books, LDS Film #8188299, 1803: Image #562, line #13: John Stiles (Free Male Tithes: *"J. Stiles, Jn^o^ Stiles"*); 1804: Image #594, line #14: John Stiles (Free Male Tithes: *"John Stiles, John Stiles Jr."*). In the 1803 and 1804 Personal Property Taxes assessed to John Stiles, he also paid the tithes for John Stiles Jr., implying a father/son relationship between the pair.
4. Coffee County TN Will and Probate Records, LDS Film #4727878, Images 73–74. Coffee County TN Will Book 1 (1833–1859), pp. 40–41, LDS Film #4776229, Image #37 [original]. Coffee County TN Will Book 1 (1833–1860) [typed], pp. 34–35, LDS Film #4769001, Images 622–623 (Will of John Stiles, written 6 November 1841, proved 4 March 1844). In his will, John Stiles identified three children: Mary E. Nevill, John Stiles, and Leroy Stiles.
5. Surry County VA Wills, Etc. Book 3 (1815–1821), pp. 140–142 (Will of Nathaniel Sebrell, written 25 December 1813, filed 22 April 1816); Book 4 (1822–1827), pp. 613–619 (Nathaniel Sebrell Estate Account, filed 26 October 1826); Book 5 (1827–1830), pp. 208–214 (Nathaniel Sebrell Estate Account, filed 22 October 1827). Surry County VA Wills & Inventories (1797–1879), LDS Film #4124856, Images 1146–1147, 1323–1324 (Will of Nathaniel Sebrell, written 25 December 1813, filed 22 April 1816). In his will written on Christmas Day 1813, Nathaniel Sebrell divided his slaves not specifically given to his two surviving children into six equal lots, leaving the lots to his two living children and the heirs of his deceased children, including this bequest: *"And the other lot I give to my Grand son John Stiles Jr. to him and his heirs forever."* On 1 January 1826, Sebrell's executor, his son, David Sebrell, finalized his accounting of the Nathaniel Sebrell Estate, with John Stiles' share consisting of $457.52, described as *"By your Legacy from your Grandfather & Int. to this day."* On 1 May 1827, David Sebrell reported a balance due to John Stiles of $63.02 from the estate of Nathaniel Sebrell. This proves that Sebrell was the father of Mary Sebrell who married John Stiles in 1782.
6. Surry County VA Census of Persons and Buildings (1772–1785), LDS Film #4131664, Image #34: *"A List of white Persons and Buildings in Johnchecohunk Precinct in Surry County, taken by James Kee, 1784,"* #11: Nath. Sebrell, #32: John Stiles.
7. Surry County VA Marriage Bonds, 1788, LDS Film #4129138, Images #28–29; Surry County VA Marriage Register (1763–1853), p. 23, LDS Film #7579167, Image 145 (John Stiles to Jane Cooper *"of full age,"* 22 July 1788).
8. "*The American Beacon and Commercial Diary*" (Norfolk, VA), 1 November 1816, p. 3, column 1. "*The New–York Herald*" (New York, NY), 9 November 1816, p. 3, column 1.
9. Surry County VA Order Book (1751–1753), p. 57 (Court session 21 April 1752); p. 62 (*"On the Motion of Nathaniel Sebrell who made Oath according to Law certificate is granted him for obtaining Letters of Administration of the Estate of Catherine his deceased Wife"*). Camp, Stafford V. III. *The Camps of Barn Tavern, Virginia.* Privately published, 2011, p. 117–118.
10. Surry County VA Will Book 12 (1783–1792), p. 17–19; Surry County VA Wills, Inventories & Estate Inventories #2 (1770–1873), LDS Film #4125015, Images #427–428 (Will of Nicholas Faulcon Sr., written 6 January 1781, filed in court on 23 December 1783).
11. Surry County VA Deeds, Wills, Etc. Book 9 (1738–1754), p. 419 (Will of Susanna Sebrell, dated November 5, filed in court 20 November 1750).
12. 1830 Franklin County TN Federal Census, p. 64, line #21: *"John Stiles Sen^r.^"* 1840 Coffee County TN Federal Census, p. 187, line #1: Mary Neville. The 1830 census gives John Stiles' age as 60–70. Records below show that when John Stiles Sr. wrote his will in 1841, he identified his daughter as *"Mary E. Neville,"* naming her as his executor. Her 1840 household includes a male aged 70–80, undoubtedly John Stiles Sr. These census records place Stiles' birth between 1760 and 1770. Assuming he was at least eighteen years old at his December 1782 marriage, his birth occurred in the 1760–1764 range.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦