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NANCY EDWARDS MEREDITH:
WOMAN OF AFFAIRS OF THE 1800'S

by

Ralph H. Ferrell, Jr.

History Thesis
1933

NANCY EDWARDS MEREDITH:
WOMAN OF AFFAIRS OF THE 1800'S

Mrs. Nancy Edwards Meredith was the youngest daughter of a very rich and prominent citizen, Ambrose Edwards, of King William County, Virginia. Ambrose Edwards was a close friend and neighbor of Martha Custis who later became the wife of George Washington.¹ The date of Nancy's birth can be set in the period 1785-1790. She had three brothers, Martin, Dandridge B., and George, and three sisters, Judith, Martha, and Wealthean.² Nancy was raised at the old Edwards Homestead, "Cherry Grove", in King William County, and received the customary education for girls of her day.

About 1805 Nancy Edwards became the bride of Fleming Meredith.³ Two sons, Fleming and Robert, and six daughters were born of this union. We surmise that Fleming was born in 1806 and Robert in 1809. Her daughters, the dates of whose births are unrecorded, were named Atalanta, Tabitha, Cumi, Phatoma, Ademizade, and Olymphina.⁴

1. Clarke, Peyton Neale. Old King William Homes and Families, page 124.

2. Ibid.

3. In 1827, oldest child 21 years of age, see will Ms.a.

4. Clarke. Opus Cit., page 127.

Of Fleming Meredith, Nancy's husband, we know little. From a doctor's bill, however, we have record of his death in September, 1827. His will was drawn up June 23, 1827, and was probated by the Quarterly Session Court of the County of King William on November 27, 1827.⁵

From this will we find that three of his daughters and two sons were still living. Fleming was the oldest and was given the privilege of choosing one part "of the land to be divided with his brother Robert." It was also stipulated that each of his daughters was to have one negro slave girl, a bed, and complete furniture upon her marriage.⁶ Olymphina was the only one to take advantage of this provision.⁷ Robert was to be educated out of the proceeds of the estate. His education was to be "equal in every respect to that of his brother Fleming". A distillery was to be kept for the joint use of the two sons.

The request to allow Robert, at the age of eighteen, to be joint executor with his older brother Fleming gives us a clue to the dates of their births. Mrs. Meredith was to hold life interest in the estate, which was to be kept intact until she died.⁸

5. Will Ms.

6. Ibid.

7. Clarke. Op. cit., page 127.

8. The will was witnessed and attested by Robert I. King (later to become Olymphina's second husband), George M. Southgate, and William H. Spiller.

Tradition leads us to believe that the estate lay south of the Court House about three miles from the present highway.⁹

Fleming Meredith's coffin cost \$10.00, according to Dandridge B. Edwards, the Administrator. Dandridge Edwards, Mrs. Meredith's brother, and was for many years sheriff of King William County.¹⁰ He and Judith Edwards boarded with their sister Nancy for the years 1827 and 1828, paying respectively \$50.00 and \$45.00 a year.

Olympia Meredith, Nancy's youngest daughter, married a Captain Moody Blood and had two sons, Fleming (1836) and John Friendless (1839). It is common talk today among the present inhabitants of King William Court House that the Merediths had once gone by the name of Blood, which was afterwards changed to Meredith by legal action of the County Court. In support of the tradition we have two letters from J. B. Young, a Richmond attorney, to Mrs. Nancy Meredith. One is dated July 30, 1839, and the other December 22, 1839. In the first letter we discover that Captain Moody Blood was Mrs. Meredith's son-in-law and lived upon her land by permission. Some strife had developed between them - just what it was we are not told - and she was trying to eject him from her property. Young advised her to make some motion of taking formal possession before witnesses and then she would

9. Information from Ben Chapman, present clerk County Court of King William.

10. Ms. Court Records.

have the law on her side if force was still necessary.¹¹

The letter on December 22, 1839, states that Captain Blood was in jail and the lawyer was beginning some legal action before he was to be released. Just what this action was we are not told in the letter of Young. One will notice the omission of the name of Olymphias first husband in the Edwards' Genealogy found in Peyton Neale Clarke's Old King William Homes and Families. Here, too, the children of this marriage are listed as Merediths. Our conclusion is that the last names of the children were changed by court action from Blood to that of their grandfather Meredith. We also suppose that Olymphias was either granted a divorce or that Captain Blood died about 1845.¹² Later Olymphias married George King and had a third son, Henry King.¹³

Fleming Meredith, Nancy's older son, died in 1831.¹⁴ Robert F. Meredith, his younger brother, lived near his mother during her lifetime and married his cousin, Ursula Kendall, of Orange County, Virginia.¹⁵

Mrs. Nancy Meredith's grandchild Fleming, son of Olymphias and Moody Blood, was born October 10, 1836. During

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11. Letter of July 30, 1839. Ms.
 12. Olymphias referred to as Mrs. Blood on Doctors' Bills as late as 1845.
 13. Clarke. Op. cit., page 127.
 14. Doctor's bill, Ms.
 15. Clarke, Op. cit., page 127.

the Civil War he served as an officer in the Ninth Regiment, Virginia Volunteers, Lee Rangers, and his name is found on the monument now standing in the yard of the King William Court House. After the war he went to Richmond where he worked in the office of the Sheriff of Richmond.¹⁶

John Friendless Meredith, second son of Olymphina and Captain Blood, was born on March 15, 1839. He served in the Confederate Army for three years and four months. At the close of the war he moved to Richmond where he served one term as Collector of the Port and afterwards worked in the customs service.¹⁷

The entire Meredith family were members of the Episcopal Church. We have record of a contribution by Mrs. Meredith in 1843 of \$36.00, a liberal donation at that time.

From the large number of bills for tuition and the educational provision in the will of 1827, the Merediths were great believers in schooling, at least for the boys. Olymphina, however, studied under a Mr. Lipscomb for a brief period.¹⁸

Fleming Meredith Jr. went to Rumford Academy in 1828 at a cost of \$12.00 a term. This famous academy is still standing, just off the highway of King William Court House, and is marked on Route No. 13 by an appropriate state highway

16. Clarke. Op. cit., page 127.

17. Ibid.

18. Bill Ms.

marker, O-16. Rumford Academy is one of the oldest places of education in Virginia. It was built and formerly endowed by the proceeds of a lottery, such as was eustomary at the beginning of the last century. It served as a preparatory school for William and Mary College. The glazed brick used in the building was imported from England.¹⁹

In 1829 Fleming Jr. and Robert received instruction from William H. Spiller. For his services Mr. Spiller received one barrel of corn, five gallons of vinegar, and \$17.10 in cash.

Olympia went to Sterling Lipscomb for tuition in 1833 and her bill including board was \$22.00 for the term. The same year Robert Meredith went to R. A. Hill for instruction at the charge of eight dollars.²⁰

Mrs. Meredith gave a much more extensive education to her grandchildren, Fleming and Friendless, sons of Olympia. In the period 1847-1849 they attended the schools of Cowen S. Garrett, Roger W. Terry, and Bettie C. Wyatt. In 1850 Friendless continued his studies under Mr. Garrett, and his brother Fleming attended Richmond College.²¹ Friendless attended the University of Virginia from 1852-1854.

It is reasonable to suppose that Mrs. Meredith herself read very little and was not a good penman. Her son Robert was a regular subscriber to the "Richmond Enquirer", "Richmond

19. Clarke. Op. cit., page 21. ?

20. Bill Ms.

21. Bill Ms.

Examiner" and the "Southern Planter". In the years 1844 and 1845 we have record of the subscription of the daughter Atalanta to the "Ch. (Christian ?) Intelligencer."

Mrs. Meredith received in 1828 more than \$600.00 from the estate of her father Ambrose Edwards, and in 1857 she inherited \$460.32 from her brother Dandridge B. Edwards. She bought two pieces of land, 174 and 243 acres respectively, in the county of King William, from Mr. and Mrs. Walter Hogan.²² In 1849 and 1850 Mrs. Meredith and her son Robert bought property in Henrico County near Richmond from Edwin Hillyard, Alfred S. Lee, and John B. Lipscomb. Lipscomb's property consisted of four parcels, totaling 80 acres and costing \$400.00. The Hillyard property was a house on South Elmwood Street and was covered by an insurance policy of the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia.²³ The total cost of these additions to Mrs. Meredith's property was \$4900.00. She held also many bonds, as follows:

George Edwards	\$1339.02
William Pollard	300.00
Baylor Temple	1600.00
John Pemberton	600.00
Baylor Temple and William Harrison	5000.00
Total	
Total	<u>8839.02</u>

Receipts found in her papers show that these were all collected. Most of them were handled by W. A. Gregory, her attorney.

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22. Deed Ms.
23. Policy Ms.

Robert Meredith sold his share of his father's estate to his sister Atalanta for \$2000 on September 25, 1845. In September of the following year Atalanta Meredith died. Her estate was valued at \$5668.50 by the appraisers.²⁴ Her slaves, Mary, Page, William, Joe, and Tom were worth \$2350.00, her wardrobe and Lady's Cabinet \$50.00, and her bonds totaled \$3268.50. Atalanta must have inherited her mother's business ability. Her brother Robert was appointed administrator. There is no record of a will.

According to the tax records of King William County for 1816, Fleming Meredith, Nancy's husband, had five slaves. No records are available of the number at the time of his death in 1827, or during the intervening period (1815-1827). There are papers showing that in the year 1814 he paid \$100.00 a year for the hire of two negro slaves, "Charles and Sam".

In 1833, Mrs. Nancy Meredith sold a slave girl named Maria for \$300.00. Beginning in 1837 she began to buy slaves. The dates, number of slaves bought, and prices paid were as follows:

May 18, 1837 - 4 slaves	\$450.00
Dec. 8, 1838 - 3 " (2 children)	925.00
Nov. 11, 1839 - 1 "	650.00
Aug. 24, 1840 - 2 " (1 child)	480.00
Feb. 28, 1842 - 3 " (1 child)	600.00 (approx)
Mar. 6, 1842 - 1 "	325.00
Jan. 22, 1844 - 2 "	1038.00
August 31, 1848 - 1 "	275.00
Sept. 5, 1848 - 5 " (4 children)	1000.00
Total bought 22 slaves, costing	5743.00

24. Report Ms.

25. Slave sale receipts Ms.

Adding the slaves her husband had, we estimate the largest number ever at one time in the possession of the family at about thirty.

Atalanta bought one slave for \$650.00 on January 25, 1847, and on February 28, 1847, her brother Robert bought a slave for \$250.00.

A slave named Patsy, belonging to Mrs. Meredith, ran away and was caught by the authorities in Richmond. After identification she was ordered sold by her owner. The sale price was \$500.00.

On May 16, 1834, John, Davy, and Jack, negro slaves on Mrs. Meredith's estate, were placed on trial for "Felony and Burglary". They were defended by Thomas S. W. Gregory by order of the court and his fee was set at \$10.00.²⁶ Davy and Jack were convicted and sentenced to be hanged.²⁷ They were appraised by the state to be worth \$450.00 and this amount was to be paid by the state to Mrs. Meredith when they were executed.²⁸ The death sentence, however, was not carried out. Instead the negroes were turned over to Mrs. Meredith, who sent them out of the county.²⁹ Where they went, or why the death sentence was revoked, remains a mystery.

26. Indictment Ms.

27. Court order Ms.

28. Virginia law at this time; appraisers' note in Court order.

29. Court order Ms.

In October, 1827, the Merediths received \$155.00 for a shipment of wheat to Baltimore. In 1828 Baylor Temple paid \$90.00 for Mrs. Meredith's corn crop, and Campbell and Co. paid \$126.53 for her wheat crop. Baylor Temple bought \$232.97 worth of wheat and corn in 1829. The same year Wortham and McGruder bought \$144.00 worth of corn.³⁰ The commodities sent to Baltimore were shipped on schooners, which sailed up the Pamunky River to take on their cargoes. In 1844 the "Cathrine Margaret", captained by John Fitzhugh, carried 287 bushels of wheat to Robert B. Burns in Baltimore. For this shipment Mr. Burns sent a "Farmers and Merchants Bank" check for \$207.64 to Mrs. Meredith's account at the "Bank of Virginia in Richmond." On August 8, 1846, she sent 750 bushels of white corn to George W. Richardson and Co. in Baltimore aboard the schooner "John Francis". In 1852 she received \$272.46 for 370 bushels of red wheat from Burns. This same year she shipped 363 bushels of white corn on the schooner "Blooming Youth" to Norfolk.³⁰ In 1834 Mrs. Meredith paid \$10.00 to have her wheat crop thrashed and in 1850 she paid \$27.50 for the same work.

The writer has in his possession a contract between Mrs. Meredith and an overseer for the year 1850, which gives the latter's duties and stipulates a payment of \$90.00 for his service for the year. There is also a receipt for \$20.00

30. All material for this paragraph found in bills of lading and receipts in manuscript.

from the overseer Henry Morison for his quarterly wage. James Hearne repaired Mrs. Meredith's time-pieces. In 1845 he charged \$3.50 for fixing her gold watch and guaranteed it "to perform 12 months".

During the period 1830-1838 William Slaughter did the greater part of Mrs. Meredith's blacksmith and carpentry work. His bills reveal that she possessed oxcarts, wagons of various kinds, two gigs (one of them a double gig), numerous ploughs, a plough sharpener, and many other farming implements. In 1833 Mrs. Meredith traded in one of her gigs together with \$80.00 for a gig belonging to John H. Anderson.³¹ Clements and Quarles shared in the smithy work during the period 1830-1833.³² Mrs. W. F. Terry built a kitchen for Mrs. Meredith in 1834 at a charge of \$10.00.

On September 19, 1832, Philip Crexton built a lined coffin for Nancy's son Fleming for the sum of \$15.00.³³ Crexton was often employed to saw walnut logs into lumber. In 1835 Crexton sent her another bill for a coffin. It was for \$5.00 and must have been for a slave. Thomas Nixon also made a coffin for Mrs. Meredith. From his bill for carpentry work, dated May 10, 1837, we learn that she had a large carriage house with double doors.

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- 31. Sale receipt Ms.
 - 32. Bills Mss.
 - 33. Bill Ms.

James H. King sawed over 2,000 feet of lumber for Mrs. Meredith in 1841 and in 1848 made a bedstead for \$35.00 and a coffin for \$30.00.³⁴ This coffin must have been for her daughter Atalanta.

James C. Blake kept Mrs. Meredith's scythes and cradles and her wheat fan in good condition. The heavy smithy work during the years 1843-1850 was done by Gary and Straughan.

John Edwards was the family shoemaker. For making shoes for slaves he charged 29 cents each. "Brogs" at the time cost 38 cents. The materials were supplied by Mrs. Meredith. It is interesting to note that even as late as 1832 we find a bill, "the making of six pairs at one shilling and one pence \$1.75." Harness for her horses and mules was furnished by T. J. Chappell, J. C. Laughton, and Lewis Pollard.

Scythe blades cost \$2.50 each; mules, \$75.00 each; mares, \$50.00 each; and hogs, \$5.00 each. To season a mare cost anywhere from \$5.00 to \$25.00.³⁵

Mrs. Meredith employed several lawyers during her lifetime. We have already mentioned J. B. Young of Richmond who advised her on the Captain Blood episodes in 1839. She had dealings also with Fendall Gregory Jr., who later represented King William County in the Secession Convention at Richmond in 1861.³⁶ His fee for a suit in 1849 was \$5.00.

34. Bill Ms.

35. Bills Mss.

36. Clarke. Op. cit. page 60 under paragraph # 10, William Gregory.

In 1843 William A. Gregory was her lawyer. He was a distant cousin of Fendall Gregory who was her lawyer in 1845. No less than five suits were filed during the period 1835-1845. The records are scant in these cases and merely record the names of the parties concerned. Robert Pollard was clerk of the court and R. Gwalthney sheriff during this period.³⁷

Mrs. Meredith carried on most of her trade with "Baylor Temple, Agent and Company" of King William Court House. Temple ran a store of general merchandise, in connection with a tavern not far from the Court House itself.³⁸ There one could buy almost anything - from hats, shoes, needles, thread, cigars, and toothbrushes, to horse collars, medicine, and intoxicating liquors. One finds the prices very interesting. Some of them are as follows: Port, 25 cents a bottle; champagne, \$1.75 and \$2.00 a bottle; corn and rye whisky, 40 and 50 cents a gallon; coarse shoes, \$1.25 a pair; fine shoes, \$2.75 a pair; toothbrushes, 25 cents each; suspenders, \$1.10 a pair; molasses, 86 cents a gallon; salt, \$2.00 a sack; nails, \$4.25 a keg; castor oil, 68 cents a bottle; boots, \$3.75 a pair; cigars, 30 cents a dozen; percussion caps, 10 cents a box; coffee and sugar, 9½ cents a pound; linen, 88 cents a yard; bowie knives, \$10.00 each; shot, \$2.75 a bag; plates, \$1.50 a dozen; French brandy, \$2.24 a gallon; gun

37. Court Records.

38. Information from Benjamin Garrett, present clerk of the court of King William.

flints, 13 cents a dozen; calfskins, \$2.75 each; calico, 30 cents a yard; nutmeg, 25 cents an ounce; and curry combs, 25 cents each.³⁹

Mrs. Meredith also traded with many Richmond firms. Among them were W. O. Duval and Co., Dickinson and Co., John S. Slaughter, Waller and Redwood, Lewis Littlepage and Co., Burch and Sweet, and A. Johnson and Co.

The doctors' bills tell us that Atalanta suffered acutely from rheumatism. Even as far back as 1834 she was put through "a course of medicine" each month and at one time boarded at the doctor's house in order to have more attentive treatment.⁴⁰

On September 17, 1831, Fleming Meredith Jr., died after an illness of ten days. Dr. Aylett Hawes attended him and gave the customary treatment of blood letting, and records "17th visit, when dying, no medicine-----\$2.00." This doctor certainly believed in blood letting, for he practiced it many time on Mrs. Meredith and on her daughter Atalanta.⁴¹

Mrs. Meredith's health began to fail in 1843, and from this time on her personal doctors' bills were quite large. Medical care of her slaves was constantly given by physicians.⁴²

39. Merchandise bills Mss.
40. Doctors' bills Mss.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.

A vaccination of her slave Page is recorded by a Dr. Cabell on December 9, 1847.

For pulling a tooth the physician received \$1.00.

Robert Meredith was not blessed with healthy molars, from the number of teeth he had to have extracted. It was expensive in 1836 to take castor oil at 68 cents a bottle, but the Merediths seemed to believe, or at least their doctors did, in this "cure-all".

The last will and testament of Mrs. Meredith was drawn up on May 24, 1849. In this she provided that, after her debts were all paid, \$1,000 was to be given to each of her grandchildren, Fleming and Friendless.⁴³ Her brother George Edwards was to act as trustee until they became twenty-one years old. If either died or married before this time, his portion was to go to the other. The sum of \$3,000 was to be used for the support of Mrs. Meredith's daughter Olymphina and her children for the rest of her life -free from the control of George King, Olymphina's second. husband. The children were to be cared for until they became of age. One "equal moiety" was to go to Mrs. Meredith's son Robert, the other to her brother George Edwards. The latter moiety was to be used also for the support of her daughter Olymphina King and her children until the latter were 21 years of age, at which time the property was to be divided among her grandchildren in equal shares.

43. Will Mss.

The last available record the writer has of Mrs. Meredith is dated 1852. It is very probable that she died during the period 1852-1855, for her doctors' bills show evidence of a rapidly failing health.

Thus ends an account of a woman of affairs a century ago. Mrs. Nancy E. Meredith carried on a man's task for more than twenty-five years and upon her death left a legacy far more valuable and extensive than the one left by her husband. She was the real brains in her family. Her son Robert was dependent on his mother all his life. Few realize how important the part of a woman was on the plantations of the old South. The Civil War days brought forcibly to our attention their business and managing abilities while their "men folk" were in the armies of Johnson, Jackson, and Lee.

Nancy Meredith was not only a good business woman and farmer but was also a good mother to her children. Doubtless few women in the world of affairs today could administer adequately a plantation such as that of the Merediths.

End.