

# Mary Morrell

## From Indentured Servant to the Grandmother of Benjamin Franklin

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Long before the name Franklin became woven into the story of America, there was a young woman named Mary Morrell.

She was born around 1620 in England, during a century of upheaval, religious conflict, disease, migration, and uncertainty. Like many ordinary people whose names survive only in fragments, Mary's early life is mostly lost to history. What we do know is enough to remind us how fragile and difficult life could be in the early colonial world.

Mary crossed the Atlantic to the Massachusetts Bay Colony as an indentured servant — not as a wealthy settler, not as part of the colonial leadership, but as someone whose labor belonged to another person for a period of years. The voyage itself was dangerous. The New World offered opportunity, but also hunger, isolation, harsh weather, disease, and the constant uncertainty of survival.

She likely served under the prominent Puritan minister Hugh Peters. In those years, indentured servants often occupied an uneasy place between freedom and bondage. Their labor built homes, settlements, farms, and communities, yet their own stories were rarely recorded.

Then, in 1644, Mary's life changed.

A man named Peter Folger paid Hugh Peters twenty shillings to purchase Mary's remaining servitude. Folger would later say it was the best use of money he had ever made.

Peter Folger himself was a remarkable frontier figure. One of the earliest English settlers connected with Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, he worked closely with the Wampanoag people as a teacher, interpreter, and translator. In an era when many colonists viewed Native peoples only through fear or conflict, Folger's work required patience, communication, and cultural understanding.

Together, Peter and Mary built a life on the edge of the known colonial world.

Their home became part of the early foundation of Nantucket — a windswept island that would eventually become famous for whaling, seafaring, endurance, and independence. Life there

was not easy. Isolation, storms, scarcity, and relentless labor shaped the community. Families survived because they adapted, cooperated, and kept going.

Mary and Peter's daughter, Abiah Folger, was born in Nantucket on August 15, 1667.

Abiah would later become the mother of Benjamin Franklin.

That simple family connection quietly links Mary Morrell — once an indentured servant crossing the Atlantic with little control over her own future — to one of the most influential figures in American history.

Benjamin Franklin would become a printer, writer, inventor, diplomat, scientist, philanthropist, and statesman. But behind Franklin's story stood generations of ordinary people whose resilience made later achievements possible. Mary Morrell's life reminds us that history is not built only by famous men in portraits or political halls. It is also built by women whose courage survives mostly through traces.

More than two centuries later, even Herman Melville remembered her.

In Chapter 24 of *Moby-Dick*, titled *The Advocate*, Melville defended the character and intelligence of Nantucket's whaling people against those who looked down on them. Addressing criticism that Nantucket lacked "good blood," Melville answered with one of the most beautiful lines ever written about Mary Morrell:

"They have something better than royal blood there. The grandmother of Benjamin Franklin was Mary Morrel; afterwards, by marriage, Mary Folger, one of the old settlers of Nantucket, and the ancestress to a long line of Folgers and harpooners—all kith and kin to noble Benjamin—this day darting the barbed iron from one side of the world to the other."

Melville understood something central to the American story.

True nobility is often not inherited through castles or royal titles. It is inherited through endurance. Through work. Through sacrifice. Through adaptation. Through ordinary people who survive difficult worlds and quietly hand strength forward to future generations.

Mary Morrell's life stands as one more reminder that America was shaped not only by famous founders, but by servants, mothers, laborers, immigrants, translators, settlers, and survivors.

People who kept going.

People who kept loving.

## Documented Family Lineage

**Mary Morrell** -1704  
*wife of 10th great-granduncle*  
∨  
Peter Folger 1617-1690  
*Husband of Mary Morrell*  
∨  
John Folger\* 1590-1660  
*Father of Peter Folger*  
∨  
Sarah FOLGER 1619-1708  
*Daughter of John Folger\**  
∨  
jonathon smith 1641-1691  
*Son of Sarah FOLGER*  
∨  
abigail smith 1678-1732  
*Daughter of jonathon smith*  
∨  
Daniel HARRISON 1701-1770  
*Son of abigail smith*  
∨  
Abigail Harrison 1738-1811  
*Daughter of Daniel HARRISON*  
∨  
Jeremiah Reagin 1784-1852  
*Son of Abigail Harrison*  
∨  
Mary Ann Reagin 1819-1886  
*Daughter of Jeremiah Reagin*  
∨  
Easter J. Hicks 1845-1898  
*Daughter of Mary Ann Reagin*  
∨  
Samuel S. Gray 1876-1923  
*Son of Easter J. Hicks*  
∨  
Clarence Ward Gray 1898-1949  
*Son of Samuel S. Gray*  
∨  
Dorothy Anna Gray 1932-2003  
*Daughter of Clarence Ward Gray*  
∨  
Thomas Hensler 1957-  
*Son of Dorothy Anna Gray*  
∨  
**Thomas (Tommi) Hensler Jr**  
*You are the son of Thomas Hensler*