

Grace Sherwood – The “Witch of Pungo” Pardoned After 300 years

By Denise Watson Batts
The Virginian-Pilot

On July 10, 1706, Grace Sherwood stood accused of witchcraft. Her thumbs were tied to her toes, and she was thrown into the Lynnhaven River. When she bobbed to the surface – thus rejected by the “pure” water – she was placed in prison.

Virginia Beach resident Belinda Nash has championed restoration of Grace Sherwood’s good name for more than 20 years.

On the 300th anniversary of her trial, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine exonerated Grace Sherwood, who had been convicted of witchcraft.



Belinda Nash

Virginia Beach Mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf read the announcement to the 40 or so who clustered at Ferry Plantation House for a reenactment of the trial, shortly before proclaiming Grace Sherwood Day.

“With 300 years of hindsight, we all certainly can agree that trial by water is an injustice,” Oberndorf read from the governor’s faxed letter. “We also can celebrate the fact that a woman’s equality is constitutionally protected today, and women have the freedom to pursue their hopes and dreams ... I am pleased to officially restore the good name of Grace Sherwood.”

Kevin Hall, the governor’s press secretary, said the governor doesn’t have to respond to all pardon requests, but this one caught his attention. In addition to the anniversary hook, Virginia Beach resident Belinda Nash made a passionate plea on Sherwood’s behalf.

“Nash is persistent and persuasive,” Hall said by phone on the road with the governor. “She made a compelling case.”

Nash, a volunteer at Ferry and a Sherwood champion for more than 20 years, stood glowing near the mayor as he read the announcement. For years, Nash has spoken to school and civic league groups about Sherwood’s life, of how the independent woman was misunderstood and eventually dunked in the Lynnhaven River to “test” her for sorcery. Nash appealed to the governor a few months ago, and as July 10 approached,

began calling his office every two hours to get an answer in time for the anniversary.

“This is so exciting,” Nash said. “You can’t believe how relieved I feel for Grace.”

Nash latched onto Sherwood shortly after moving to Virginia Beach in 1982 and hearing about Witchduck Point on the Western Branch of the Lynnhaven River. She heard the story and became intrigued.

Sherwood had gone to trial not once, but several times. Years before the famous trial, neighbors accused Sherwood of such tricks as “blighting” their cotton crop. She and her husband responded by charging them with slander and defamation. When Sherwood’s husband died in 1701, she did not remarry as many would have, but worked the land with their three sons.

Sherwood lived near the water and could swim, Nash said. She often wore pants, which – Nash believes – was probably viewed as scandalous for the time.

So, on July 10, 1706, Sherwood’s thumbs were tied to her toes, and she was thrown into the river. The theory, Nash said, was that if she was innocent she would sink; if she was a witch, the waters would reject her evil spirit and she would float.

Sherwood bobbed to the surface.

Records appear to show that Sherwood was jailed for eight years. She eventually returned to her land and lived a quiet life until her death in 1740, at age 80.

Nash has recognized the anniversary of the trial for the past two decades, initially by simply tolling the bell of Old Donation Episcopal.



Grace Sherwood

Yesterday’s reenactment was the sixth in which Nash corralled friends and family to don wigs and period clothing, including the group chanting, “Duck the witch!” as an actress climbed into a boat, pulled next to Ferry’s porch.

Following the trial, Nash unveiled an almost life-sized photo of the Grace Sherwood statue, which she began raising money for seven years ago, hoping to have it in place by the anniversary. A lack of money and a site have delayed the work.

She’s hoping that news of Sherwood’s exoneration will make a difference in finding a site for it. She believes some groups nixed the

statue because Sherwood carried the title of witch.

“Since she’s no longer a witch, I believe we’ll have some turning around,” Nash said. “We have a statue of a free woman.”

Reprinted with permission. Originally published as: “Witch of Pungo” pardoned by governor after 300 years, By Denise Watson Batts, *The Virginian-Pilot*, July 11, 2006.



Life-sized statue of Grace Sherwood

Belinda Nash told *Justice: Denied* that the life-sized bronze statue of Grace Sherwood was delivered to Virginia Beach, Virginia on September 29, 2006. She said the statute’s \$92,000 cost was paid through donations. Not only did Nash work for more than 20 years to clear the stain from Sherwood’s name of being a convicted witch, but she and her husband got the ball rolling by donating the first \$17,000 towards the statute’s cost.

Since Sherwood’s July pardon by Virginia Governor Kaine, resistance by people in Virginia Beach to providing a site for the statute evaporated. As of late September 2006 Nash was deciding between the two final locations under consideration.

The statute was created by world-renowned sculptor Robert Cunningham of Culver City, California. Nash explained the statute was designed with a racoon at Sherwood’s feet, because she was known as a friend to children and kind to animals. As soon as the statute’s location is selected, and its marble base is built, it will be erected at its final resting place. The statute’s public dedication will be the culmination of Nash’s seven year campaign to make her dream of a statute commemorating Grace Sherwood a reality.

Nash has written a book, *A Carpenter’s Daughter or a Witch?*, based on what she learned about Sherwood during the more than 20 years it took to clear her name. She said it was difficult condensing the wheelbarrow full of material she has accumulated into several hundred pages of text. Liberally illustrated with pictures, the book is expected to be published by the end of 2006.

To people outside Virginia, Grace Sherwood’s pardon and statute may seem to be much ado about nothing, but Nash said the attention is deserved because her trial 300 years ago is the most famous in Virginia’s history.