

Burke, Mary ("Polly") Williams ^[1]

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Burke, Mary ("Polly") Williams

By Mary Claire Engstrom, 1979

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1 Feb. 1782–31 Jan. 1869



A photograph of a drawing of Mary "Polly" Williams Burke, the only child of governor Thomas Burke.

^[3]Mary "Polly" Williams Burke, educator, was the only child of North Carolina's third governor, [Dr. ^{\[2\]} Thomas Burke](#) ^[2] (1747–2 Dec. 1783) of Hillsborough, and Mary ("Polly") Freeman (1752–23 Mar. 1836) of Norfolk, Va., a pioneer Presbyterian educator in North Carolina and Alabama in her own right. Mary Williams Burke was born in [Warren County](#) ^[4], the granddaughter of Ulick Burke and Letitia Ould (sister of Sir Fielding Ould) of County Galway, Ireland, and of the eccentric Englishman William Freeman and Tabitha Wilson of Norfolk. Miss Burke is thought to have been named for her father's friend, Colonel John Williams, in whose household Mrs. Burke had taken refuge for some time before the birth of her daughter.

Nothing is known specifically about Mary W. Burke's childhood years in Hillsborough. It seems likely that she lived but a short time, if ever, at her father's plantation Tyaquin, northeast of Hillsborough. By the terms of [Governor Burke's](#) ^[2] will, her education was to have been supervised by his executors, [Willie Jones](#) ^[5] (who did not serve) and James Hogg, but no record touching the matter has survived. Her girlhood was apparently spent at her mother's home on Churton Street in company with her two half-sisters, Frances Wilson Doherty (later Mrs. William H. Bond) and Helen Mason Doherty (later Mrs. David Yarbrough), children of her mother's second marriage, which took place on 25 Apr. 1785, to Major George Doherty (d. 1792). Her mother's older sister, Mrs. Frances Freeman McKerall Child, widow first of Captain John McKerall and second of Comptroller [Francis Child](#) ^[6], had lived in Hillsborough since 1769 and was almost certainly the reason the Thomas Burkes had settled in [Orange County](#) ^[7]. The large McKerall-Child connection, together with her Doherty half-sisters, then and in later years constituted Mary W. Burke's family.

On 5 June 1810, Miss Burke, then twenty-eight years old and in command of virtually all of her father's estate, purchased for four hundred dollars her own modest home (now enlarged and known as Heartsease) on East Queen Street, Hillsborough. No earlier record associates the house with [Governor Burke](#) ^[2]. On 6 Nov. 1817 her friend and neighbor Dr. [James Webb](#) ^[8] deeded to her, for twenty-five dollars, a twenty-five-foot wide strip of land from the western side of his adjoining Lot 63. Here a log schoolhouse was built, in which Miss Burke was to teach the Webb children. It has been suggested, and seems likely, that she may have been teaching the young Webbs in her own home as early as 1812. In any case, the new schoolhouse, known as "Miss Polly Burke's School" from about 1818 to 1834, was opened to neighborhood children. No formal records remain of the little grammar school, usually cited in Presbyterian records as a significant forerunner of Mrs. Burwell's Female School (1837–57) and the Nash and Kollock Select Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies (1859–90).

An unpublished volume of reminiscences by Margaret Isabella Walker Weber, a former Burke student, noted that little five-year-old girls in bibs and pinafores were set to hemming sheets and towels before they could read, and that one of her own public appearances as a small child involved the difficult reading of Beattie's *Hermit*, printed with the old-fashioned long *s*'s. Local tradition still has it that discipline within the school was severe. Students included Strudwicks, Nashes, Phillippes, Kirklands, the Carleton Walker children, and various daughters of Presbyterian families. The log schoolhouse still stands as part of the [John Graham Webb house](#) ^[9].



"Walking Tour," Heartsease, Mary Burke's home. Photo taken in Hillsborough, NC on June 25, 2008. Photo courtesy of Flickr user IVisit Hillsborough.

^[10]In September 1816, Miss Burke joined with eight other persons and the Reverend [John Knox Witherspoon](#) ^[11], pastor, to organize the [Hillsborough Presbyterian Church](#) ^[12]. The first pew rental list of 1816 shows that she rented Pew 13 on the north side of the new brick church, and preserved sessions books and other church records disclose that she was a steadfast supporter of church activities for the next eighteen years.

In August 1834, Miss Burke sold most of her household goods and joined the considerable exodus of Hillsborough citizens to Alabama, a curious migration still not fully explained, but animated in part by a desire to escape the mounting local controversy over slavery. Mary W. Burke accompanied her niece, Eliza Mary Bond Johnston, Eliza's husband, George Mulholland Johnston, and their two-year-old son, George Doherty, to Greensboro, Ala., where she apparently planned to make her permanent home with the Johnstons. George Mulholland Johnston died on 5 Sept. 1834, however, after only two weeks in his new Greensboro home. Miss Burke, together with her niece and grandnephew, thereupon removed to nearby Marion, where her half-sister, Helen Mason Doherty Yarbrough, and her brother-in-law, David Yarbrough, were already established. Various Strudwicks, Webbs, and Youngs also lived in the area. The Perry County Court appointed Miss Burke guardian of little George Doherty Johnston, and she took complete responsibility for the boy's education and inheritance as well as temporary charge of Eliza Johnston's affairs.

On 4 May 1837 she sent her "unconditional" power of attorney to Dr. James Webb to dispose of her remaining Hillsborough property, excepting only her father's mahogany bookcase and a few oddments. In the 1840s she further directed Dr. Webb to present Governor Burke's papers to the North Carolina Historical Society; these became the Burke collections now in the [North Carolina Division of Archives and History](#) ^[13], [Raleigh](#) ^[14], and in [The University of North Carolina Library](#) ^[15], Chapel Hill. A small group of illuminating letters from Miss Burke to Dr. Webb has been preserved, demonstrating her own very considerable business ability and her constant reliance on Dr. Webb's judgment and advice.

Miss Burke began immediately to teach again, purchasing a schoolhouse of her own, where she welcomed the children and grandchildren of her relatives and old friends. Somehow, also, she managed to teach black children, especially the descendants of the remarkable Freeman servants. General George Doherty Johnston, her ward and himself a testament to the efficacy of her teaching, wrote after her death that she had taught "many hundreds of students" and four generations in one family (probably his own). He noted, too, that she had virtually educated herself out of her own hunger for knowing, and that her remarkably retentive memory had stood both herself and her pupils in good stead. Her lengthy teaching career, over half a century, extended almost to her last days and encompassed the teaching of both females and blacks in an era when neither was usual.

When Miss Burke was seventy-nine, she suffered a fall resulting in a serious hip injury that confined her to her bed and an "armed chair" for the last eight years of her life. Even so, and in spite of exhausting bouts with asthma, she persisted in giving Latin lessons to a neighboring boy. She died at the home of her niece Eliza (then Mrs. Leonard A. Weissinger) and

was buried in the Marion Cemetery in the Johnston lot. A photograph of a crayon portrait of Miss Burke in her later years is in the possession of the [North Carolina Division of Archives and History](#)^[13], [Raleigh](#)^[14].

References:

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Henry Poellnitz Johnston, *The Gentle Johnstons and Their Kin* (1966)

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Southern Historical Collection (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), for Thomas Burke Papers, Heartt-Wilson Papers (William Huntington to Caroline E. Heartt, letter, 1 Feb. 1869), Peter Mallett Papers ("Reminiscences of Margaret Isabella Weber"), and James Webb Papers (Mary W. Burke to Dr. James Webb, letters, 1836–45, and related records)

Additional Resources:

"Photograph, Accession #: [H.1952.61.13](#)^[3]." 1890-1910. North Carolina Museum of History.

"Walking Tour," Heartsease. Photo taken in Hillsborough, NC on June 25, 2008. Photo courtesy of Flickr user Visit Hillsborough. Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/hillsborough/2613388562/>^[10] (accessed April 11, 2012).

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Authors:

[Engstrom, Mary Claire](#)^[19]

Origin - location:

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[Warren County](#)^[21]

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