

Rees, Mary De Berniere Graves ^[1]

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By Martha B. Caldwell, 1994

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Mary De Berniere Graves Rees, portrait painter, was born in Chapel Hill, the daughter of Ralph Henry (1851–89) and Julia Charlotte Hooper Graves (1856–1944). Ralph Graves taught mathematics at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2] from 1875 until his death; his father was a member of the class of 1836 and an educator, and an earlier ancestor on the Graves side was the first steward of the university at its opening in 1795. On her mother's side, Mary's grandfather and great-grandfather were professors at the university. William Hooper, her great-grandfather, also served as president of [Wake Forest College](#) ^[3] and was buried with his mother and stepfather, [Joseph Caldwell](#) ^[4], first president of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2], at the foot of the Caldwell monument. An earlier William Hooper was one of the three signers of the [Declaration of Independence](#) ^[5] for North Carolina.

Mary Graves Rees was the youngest of the four surviving children of Ralph and Julia Graves. Her older brothers were Ralph, a journalist in New York; Earnest, an army engineer; and Louis, editor of the *Chapel Hill Weekly*. After the early death of her husband, Julia Graves maintained a popular boardinghouse on the site of the present Carolina Inn until her children were grown. Mary spent a year at the university with the class of 1909 but left to pursue her artistic interests, studying at the [Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore](#) ^[6], [the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia](#) ^[7], and with [Henry McCarter](#) ^[8] and [William Chase](#) ^[9] in New York.

Living in New York during World War I, she illustrated a number of war posters and drew sketches for newspapers and magazine covers such as "Slackers," which was on the front cover of the magazine section of the *New York World*. Her illustrations appeared in the [New York Evening Post](#), [the New York Tribune](#) ^[10], the *Southern Magazine*, the *Ruralist*, *Country Life*, and others. Her major work, however, was portraiture. While maintaining a studio in New York, she painted portraits of such people as Mrs. Fred Astaire, Tony Heard, son of the editor of *Home and Field*, and E. N. Potter III, great-grandson of Bishop Potter. Some of her pastels were exhibited in the Ferargil Galleries in New York.

On 18 Sept. 1919 Mary Graves married Arthur Dougherty Rees (d. 28 Dec. 1961), playwright and teacher of history. The couple had one son, Pembroke, born in July 1920.

In 1923 Mary Graves Rees and her son returned to Chapel Hill to live with her mother on Battle Lane (later they moved to Hooper Lane). After teaching art at the university for one year, she turned first to pen-and-ink drawings (many copies of her scenes of the university are in Chapel Hill homes) and then to portraits in oil and pastel. Establishing a studio in Baby Hollow, she painted numerous children in the neighborhood, many of them children of professors; some she sold, others she displayed in her studio. Among the favorites of viewers were several oil portraits of Black children, now in possession of her family.

Her major and best-known portraits are of [Thomas Walker Bickett](#) ^[11], governor of North Carolina; [William Rufus](#) ^[12] King, a graduate of The University of North Carolina, minister to France from 1844 to 1846, elected vice-president of the United States in 1852 but died soon after taking the oath of office in Cuba (this portrait is in the American Embassy in Paris); the Reverend William Hooper (after one painted by John Singleton Copley, now in Trinity Church, Boston); Representative [John Steele](#) ^[13], in [Durham Public Library](#) ^[14]; W. W. Fuller and Howard Alexander Foushee, lawyers in Durham; [Edward Kidder Graham](#) ^[15] and [Frank Porter Graham](#) ^[16], presidents of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2], and Charles S. Mangum, Collier Cobb, Archibald Henderson, Horace Williams, [Elisha Mitchell](#) ^[17], W. D. Toy, and Kent Brown, all professors at the university; Paul Green, playwright; Gertrude Pahlow, novelist; [Lamar Stringfield](#) ^[18], musician; [Cornelia Phillips Spencer](#) ^[19], a resident of Chapel Hill who was instrumental in the reopening of the university after the Civil War; Sally Foard MacNider of Chapel Hill; and Emily Pemberton of Durham.

In 1926 the [North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs](#) ^[20] awarded Mary Graves Rees its prize for the best work by a North Carolina artist. In 1927 the Southern State Art League selected her portrait studies of [Archibald Henderson](#) ^[21] and [Paul Green](#) ^[22] for a traveling exhibition showing the work of representative southern artists, and in 1928 she won a silver cup for a portrait in an exhibition at the Kenilworth Art Galleries, Asheville. In 1931 she was instrumental in organizing the North Carolina Association of Professional Artists and served as the first president of this group.

Mary Graves Rees was a handsome, generous person with a quick mind and wit. Her studio was a popular gathering place in Chapel Hill. She was a very talented artist and with her portraits produced fine records of many North Carolinians and others. After a year's illness, she died suddenly in Chapel Hill and was buried in the old Chapel Hill Cemetery.

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Additional Resources:

Worldcat, Mary De Berniere: <http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-no00-74906> [23]

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