



FOUNDING FEMALES Female Qualifying Ancestor Index

Female Ancestor Number: 166

Name: Steel, Rebecca (Steel)

Dates: c.1704-bur. 29 Dec 1783

Colonial Society: PA

Date added to ROA: 9-5-2024

Service: Woman of Distinction: Business Owner

Authority: Advertisement, The Pennsylvania Gazette, 9 October 1766, p. 1; Cleary, Patricia. "'She Will Be in the Shop': Women's Sphere of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia and New York." The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Vol. 119, No. 3, July 1995, pp. 193-194.

Biography:

Rebecca Steel was born into a Philadelphia Quaker family who had immigrated from Chichester County, Sussex, England just two years before her birth. Her father, James Steel, was a housewright. He requested a certificate from the Monthly Meeting at Steyning indicating himself along with "wife and family" to remove to Pennsylvania. We do not know the name of Rebecca's mother, but Rebecca was apparently the seventh daughter, and perhaps the only one born outside of England. She was preceded by Sarah, Martha, Mary, Elizabeth, Ann, and Ruth. The next record of her father was when he requested a certificate from the Monthly Meeting of Philadelphia in 1708 to remove to Duck Creek Meeting in present-day Delaware. And in 1711, he was asking permission to marry Martha Bowen, a widow, at the Philadelphia Meeting. Evidently, Rebecca lost her mother at an early age. Her father seemed to split his time between an office in Philadelphia and his home in the "lower counties". He served in many capacities from Justice of the Peace, Assemblyman and Supreme Court Justice in the three lower counties (present-day Delaware), to Secretary for the Proprietors of Pennsylvania and Receiver General of quit-rents, and a boundary surveyor in Philadelphia.

Ironically, Rebecca would marry her cousin, a man with the same name as her father, who was himself a junior. Not much is known about James Steel Jr. other than his listing as a yeoman. He died in 1741. Assuming they had been married for about twenty years, we can assume Rebecca's children were at least in their teenage years when they lost their father; they were Henry, James, Elizabeth, and Hannah. Still Rebecca had to carry on and pay the bills. We find Rebecca advertising in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (Dec of 1742) to "all persons indebted to the estate of James Steel... do immediately make payment..." or they will be duly summoned to court!

In Oct of 1766, Rebecca advertised again in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* that she had moved from Third Street



FOUNDING FEMALES Female Qualifying Ancestor Index

to a house on Race Street at the corner of Third Street. She states that she continues to sell dry goods, various teas, and several types of silks. She is also asking those who owe her money to make “*speedy payment*” otherwise she will “*be put to the disagreeable necessity of suing for same.*” Like other female merchants, she was working within a tight-knit community. In the account books of merchant Mary Langdale Coates in the 1740s and 1750s there are numerous payments to Rebecca Steel for cloth, a parcel of shoes, and sundry other goods “*bought in partnership in vendue.*” These receipts indicate these women were working together to purchase goods at a public auction. Another way women worked together was by renting rooms to each other. According to insurance records from the Philadelphia Contributionship, Rebecca was a landlord who rented exclusively to women. Perhaps her move to a new house in 1766 was a means for increased income.

On Dec. 30, 1783, Elizabeth Drinker noted in her diary that she went to the burial of Rebecca Steel, who died at about the age of 79.