



FOUNDING FEMALES Female Qualifying Ancestor Index

Female Ancestor Number: 259

Name: Alexander, Mary (Spratt) Provoost

Dates: 17 Apr 1693 - 18 Apr 1760

Colonial Society: NY

Date added to ROA: 8-4-2025

Service: Woman of Distinction: Business Owner

Authority: Death Notice, The New-York Mercury, 21 April 1760, p. 3, Jordan, Jean P.

"Women Merchants in Colonial New York," New York History, vol. 58 (1977), pp. 416-418

Biography:

Mary Spratt was born April 17, 1693, in New York City, the daughter of John Spratt, a Scottish immigrant, and Maria DePeyster. Mary's father was a prominent merchant who served as alderman of New York City and member of the New York Assembly. Her mother came from a family of wealthy merchants and politicians; her uncles included two mayors of New York and a governor of New Jersey.

John Spratt died in 1697; Maria DePeyster Spratt, in 1700. After her parents' deaths, Mary was raised by her grandmother, Cornelia DePeyster. Family lore describes her as a "daring, mischievous sprite, full of tricks" when she was a child.

Mary had three children from her first marriage and seven from her second marriage. She married, first, Samuel Provoost, another merchant, on October 15, 1711. After Samuel's death in late 1719 or early 1720, she negotiated a prenuptial agreement protecting the interests of her Provoost children, then married James Alexander on January 5, 1720/21. James was an engineer, surveyor, land speculator, and lawyer. He became a prominent politician, holding high offices in both New York and New Jersey. He was one of the founders of the New York Library Service and King's College (now Columbia University). He is also remembered for supporting John Peter Zenger in defense of freedom of the press. He died April 2, 1756.

Mary's death notice in the New-York Mercury called her "a very eminent Trader". She had received a large inheritance from her parents, which she invested in Samuel Provoost's trading ventures. After Samuel's death, she continued the business herself, importing goods from abroad and operating a retail store. She continued her business interests in her own name after her second marriage, while raising her children and supporting James's legal and political careers. James reported that, the day after giving birth to one of their daughters, Mary was back in her store selling more than £30 worth of goods – thousands of dollars in



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today's money.

Her store was “acknowledged to be one of the best-appointed in the city”; it was said that scarcely any ship arrived from abroad without some goods for her on board. She built a row of sales offices in front of her house, with the counting house on a side street, and had flat stones laid on a path connecting them all, thus becoming the first person in New York to install a paved sidewalk in front of her business.

According to one story, she had asked city officials to install a finished walkway, but was told that would be impossible. So she took the initiative on her own and paved the route connecting her buildings with stones. The amenity became an attraction that drew visitors and added to her reputation as a woman of “liberality and intelligence – for her mental vigor, as well as her skill and activity in business”.

Mary died on April 18, 1760.