

To Memories Now I Can't Recall: The Origins of Anne Bonny and Mary Read



Figure 1. *Anne Bonny and Mary Read*, copper engraving by Benjamin Cole, in Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* (London: T. Warner, 1724), plate facing p. 157; Project Gutenberg, public domain. Source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/40580/40580-h/40580-h.htm>

In 1724, a writer using a pseudonym published a book on piracy, promising to enlighten and entertain readers with tales of pirates from across the seas in the West Indies and the Indian Ocean. It was not intended to be serious scholarship; it was a profit-driven book, with, as journalist Colin Woodard noted, some undercurrents of the political Jacobite movement.¹ On the front cover were numerous chapters on various pirates,

featuring names that remain legendary 300 years later, and some names that have been buried by history. But on that front cover stand two names, both larger in font and more feminine in tone. They were Anne Bonny and Mary Read, the big attractions for buyers of Captain Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most notorious Pyrates*.²

This book would become a bestseller the world over, with multiple editions printed,³ translated into languages such as Dutch,⁴ and plagiarized by others for decades.⁵ For most people, this is the ground floor of pirate history; *A General History of the Pyrates* became the basis for almost every famous fictional pirate story in Anglophone culture, from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films (2003-2017).⁶ It is the centerpiece of much historical writing, forming the backbone of works by popular historians such as David Cordingly,⁷ Marcus Rediker,⁸ and Rebecca Simon.⁹ Colorful details like Blackbeard burning matches under his hat originate within these pages.¹⁰

One of the enduring questions about *A General History of the Pyrates* is the identity of the author. "Captain Charles Johnson" was not the writer's real name; attempts to track down a man under that name have resoundingly failed.¹¹ The author's false identity was probably inspired by a popular playwright of the era, Charles Johnson, who gained considerable notoriety for his 1712 play, *The Successful Pyrate*.¹² For many years, "Captain Charles Johnson" was assumed to be one of Daniel Defoe's many pen names,¹³ a belief that only fell out of favor in the 1980s.¹⁴ In the early 2000s, a new theory emerged centered on Nathaniel Mist, a journalist and printer who had employed Defoe.¹⁵ Modern-day reassessments now believe Mist was the publisher, alongside a cavalcade of writers working under a single name.¹⁶ So much ink has been spilled trying to find "Captain Charles Johnson" that the body of the text has been somewhat ignored.

So much of the book is unsubstantiated, primarily due to the difficulty of fact-checking it. Many details in *A General History of the Pyrates* lack substantiation in primary sources, such as Blackbeard's burning matches.¹⁷ At its worst, the book creates pirates out of whole cloth, like Captain Misson.¹⁸ Whether he wrote *A General History of the Pyrates* or not, Nathaniel Mist's overall involvement is problematic, as he was Britain's most prominent Jacobite printer.¹⁹ Mist was a staunch Jacobite who frequently wrote allegorical stories to mock and delegitimize the monarchy, making any association with *A General History of the Pyrates* now tinged with political allegory, which is a heavy bias when writing about criminals who acted against the monarchy. As a result of likely being written by multiple authors on behalf of a man with a political agenda, the overall quality of writing and believability of the accounts swing wildly from chapter to chapter; nothing within this book should be taken for granted. The two female pirates featured on the front cover are perhaps the worst examples.

Anne Bonny and Mary Read in the Johnson Narrative

Each chapter in *A General History of the Pyrates* is about the life of a particular pirate, from whom the chapter takes its name—Captain Bonnet, Captain Roberts, plus their crew, and so forth. Most chapters introduce the titular pirate during their careers, with, perhaps, a brief mention of their early life. The Bonny and Read chapters are unique in that most of them are devoted to discussing the women's early lives, including even the circumstances of their births. Every other chapter in the book specifically focuses on a captain; the Bonny and Read chapters explicitly portray their time as members of a pirate captain's crew. Johnson even admitted that the stories of these two women sounded fictional, but he promised that all he had written was the truth.²⁰

According to *A General History of the Pyrates*, Anne Bonny's origin was both quaint and utterly unbelievable. More than half of her chapter concerned the circumstances of her birth in a town near Cork in the Kingdom of Ireland.²¹ Bonny's parents were an unnamed Irish attorney and a maid named Mary, who was not the attorney's wife. Bonny's birth happened due to an affair between Mary and the attorney while the unnamed wife was away from home recovering from an illness.

The wife discovered the affair following a long misunderstanding concerning the theft of silver spoons. A man Mary had known stole three silver spoons and hid them in her bed. When the attorney's wife returned, she found the lost spoons in Mary's bed, leading her to believe the maid had been sleeping in her husband's bed. The wife slept in Mary's bed, and her husband snuck in, uttering the maid's name. When Mary returned to her bed, she found the spoons and put them in her trunk. Around this time, the wife called for a constable, who found the spoons and arrested Mary. With the affair exposed, the attorney's wife separated from him and moved to a different home. While still in prison, Mary gave birth to an illegitimate daughter named Anne.²²

This interlude is only believable as an eighteenth-century theatrical trope alongside perhaps some slight moralizing about how children born of extramarital affairs are predestined to living a rough life.²³ After the long explanation of Anne's birth, we are told she was raised as a boy by the attorney to disguise her sex from his separated wife, who still harbored fond feelings, despite his affair with Mary.²⁴ The attorney hoped to make the child his clerk in time. Eventually, the separated wife discovered the boy was the attorney's daughter. The relationship was firmly over, alongside any financial dependencies.²⁵

The attorney initially lived with Anne as his child, but the scandal damaged his reputation with clients, and few in town wanted to work with him, so he left for Cork. The people of Cork still knew who the attorney was, so he took Mary and Anne to the Carolinas, where, soon after, Mary died, and the attorney became a wealthy merchant.²⁶ Anne is described as possessing a fierce temper, with rumors that she killed a servant with a knife, something Johnson himself found groundless, while noting she did

severely beat a man for trying to rape her.²⁷ Anne enraged her father by marrying a poor sailor, upon which they moved to the island of New Providence in the Bahamas. New Providence was home to the town of Nassau, the center of pirate activity in the West Indies. The sailor husband is unnamed in early editions, but in the appendices of *A General History of the Pyrates'* second volume, he was named James Bonny.

Anne Bonny was unhappy with her husband, a small-time pirate who eventually became a minor officer for the new governor of the Bahamas, Woodes Rogers, after the island was retaken by the British. James Bonny had to accept the 1717–1718 Acts of Grace, also known as the King's Pardon to serve Rogers.²⁸ Eventually, Anne Bonny fell for a pirate named John Rackam, leading her to leave her husband and become a pirate herself.²⁹ She was soon pregnant and gave birth on the island of Cuba. Afterward, she continued a pirating career until the King's Pardon was given out, which she took but eventually broken by returning to piracy. During a final showdown with a privateer referred to in another chapter as Jonathan Barnet,³⁰ Anne Bonny, and another female pirate, Mary Read, fight back but are ultimately captured.³¹ According to Johnson, Anne Bonny has the final words for Rackam before his execution; "She was sorry to see him there, but if he had fought like a Man, he need not have been hang'd like a Dog."³²

No dates are given for any of these events, and the flow of time is very vague until the final two pages, which suddenly describe historical events such as the King's Pardon,³³ and the brief 1720 career of John Rackam.³⁴ It ends with the following note, "She was continued in Prison, to the Time of her lying in, and afterward reprieved from Time to Time; but what is become of her since we cannot tell; only this we know, that she was not executed."³⁵

Mary Read's chapter follows a similar pattern, although less emphasis was placed on her birth. Read was born in London and was the daughter of an unknown woman and an unknown man, the result of another morally tainted affair. Read's mother and her husband together had one child, a boy whose name was never stated. Read's mother's husband then went on a voyage and never returned, yet her mother was eventually pregnant again.³⁶ To avoid shame and damage to her reputation, she left London for the countryside. Who the real father was, is never revealed. Tragically, the older brother did not live long, not even a year. Shortly after the brother's death, Read's mother gave birth to Mary. The mother lived with her daughter in the countryside for three or four years, until they were nearly destitute. Read was then disguised as a boy by her mother, in order to receive money from her late husband's mother by assuming her brother's identity. This plan worked, and the grandmother-in-law sent a crown a week to help the family. Read lived with her mother for many years in good enough condition until the grandmother died, and money became difficult once again.³⁷

To make money, Read's mother made her a footboy for an unnamed French lady. Read was then 13 years old. Not long after the child became a footboy, Read's mother died. Likely unhappy with the footboy job, Read volunteered as a cadet and fought in

Flanders, later becoming a cavalry soldier. She fell in love with a Flemish soldier, eventually revealed her true sex, and got married. They ran an eating house called Three Horse Shoes near the castle of Breda. The Flemish husband soon died of unspecified causes, and with the Peace of Reswick declared, there was little Read could do as a soldier.³⁸

The Peace of Reswick, usually spelled Ryswick, ended the Nine Years' War in 1697, marking the first confirmed date in Read's chapter. The actual conflict described here is vague enough to be either the Nine Years' War or the War of Spanish Succession, but making Read an adult woman at the Treaty of Ryswick raises questions about her age. She is supposed to be pregnant by the time she turned to piracy, after all.

After the Peace of Ryswick, Read set sail for the West Indies, but was intercepted by pirates, whom she joined until the King's Pardon of 1718 was offered. Read then joined a privateer's crew, who later became pirates; this group is implied to be Rackam's crew. Anne Bonny, in time, fell for Read, believing her to be a man, until Read revealed her sex, disappointing Bonny, but making Rackam jealous until he was also let in on the secret.³⁹ In another romantic incident, Read fell for an unnamed pirate in Rackam's crew, revealing her sex and love for him. The unnamed pirate at some point angered another crew member, initiating a duel that Read undertook in her lover's place. Read killed the pirate in a fair fight.⁴⁰

Later, during the very real battle with Jonathan Barnet, all of Rackam's crew but Bonny and Read fled below decks. Read called them out as cowards, demanding they fight like men, even firing a shot into the hold, killing one pirate and wounding others.⁴¹ Bonny and Read were put on trial and found guilty, but avoided execution by pleading the belly, i.e., claiming to be pregnant. Read's chapter has a more definitive ending than Bonny's, with Johnson speculating that while she might have been released in time, she died of a fever while still in prison.⁴²

Altogether, both chapters are only a bit over 5000 words, yet they form the bedrock of every story ever told about Bonny and Read, from Johnson's account in 1724 to books released today. Are any of the details in these chapters considered trustworthy? Perhaps, but taken as a whole, there is much to be skeptical of. Some of the details immediately questionable include how Johnson knew about the stolen spoon saga in Bonny's story? How old was Mary Read supposed to be if she was a soldier for years in Europe? Why were most of Bonny and Read's parents unnamed if the writer knew the intimate details of their birth? The only way to get closer to the truth is with the actual documentation concerning the two female pirates. Unfortunately, the number of primary source documents is quite low.

The Limited Documented Truth

The first actual mention of Anne Bonny and Mary Read appears in the *Boston Gazette* on October 17, 1720, as a reprint originally run on September 4, recounting that the

pirate, John Rackam, had stolen a sloop out of Nassau harbor and swore vengeance on all those who inhabited the island. The article briefly stated that two women were serving among his crew, but gave no other details.⁴³

The same day, the *Boston Gazette* also published a proclamation from Governor Woodes Rogers of the Bahamas, issued September 5, 1720. In it, he went into further detail, noting that John Rackam, twelve male pirates, and two women stole the sloop *William* from the merchant and former pirate, John Ham, on August 22,⁴⁴ and proceeded to rob at least one sloop and an unnamed ship. Rogers dispatched several pirate hunters to go after Rackam. The majority of the pirates were named, including the two women, Ann Fulford, alias Bonny, and Mary Read.⁴⁵

The fact that Rogers was aware of these women's identities contradicted Johnson's account of Read's true sex being unknown to anyone; it appears she was openly a female pirate under Rackam from the moment this all began. Bonny, with the last name of Fulford, is something that cannot be fully explained; it could have been a false name or a maiden name. It was not uncommon for women of the era to be referred to in this manner, akin to calling Abigail Adams, Abigail Adams alias Smith. It is also briefly worth noting the pirate Bonny and Read served under, a man whose legacy far outstrips his actual career.

John Rackam is overall a minor pirate in the Golden Age of Piracy. His chapter in *A General History of the Pyrates* is relatively short, describing a close relationship with the more notable pirate Charles Vane, before overthrowing him via a crew vote and serving as captain until he accepted the King's Pardon, only to return to piracy for a time and eventually being captured by Jonathan Barnet. Almost none of that can be corroborated.⁴⁶ According to the sources found thus far, his pirate career began on August 22, 1720, the same as Bonny and Read. Much of his modern-day fame comes from a fictional flag he flew, a fictional nickname, and the fact that he went to sea with two women.

A handful of scattered letters mentioned Rackam and his crew attacking vessels between September and October of 1720, but made no mention of women aboard.⁴⁷ It was not until 1721 that more information appeared. In early 1721, Robert Baldwin, a printer in Jamaica, published a pamphlet detailing the trial of John Rackam and other pirates, including Anne Bonny and Mary Read. This document gave the most complete picture available concerning the two women pirates. Rackam and most of the crew were tried on November 16, 1720, found guilty, and hanged on November 18. Bonny and Read were tried on November 28 and were introduced as spinsters of New Providence.⁴⁸

The trial transcript noted that Bonny and Read assisted in the ransacking of seven fishing boats, taking fish and tackle worth £10, two unnamed sloops with cargo valued at £1,000, a schooner likely called *Neptune* with cargo valued at £20, a sloop called *Mary and Sarah* with cargo valued at £300, and one canoe.⁴⁹ The transcript included statements from several witnesses of these attacks.

Thomas Dillon of the *Mary and Sarah* testified that he was held hostage, and that Bonny and Read swore and cursed and were clearly members of the crew, not prisoners.⁵⁰ Two Frenchmen, John Besnik and Peter Cornelian, recounted through a translator that after being kidnapped on the island of Hispaniola while hunting hogs, they noticed Bonny handing out gunpowder during an attack. Giving gunpowder to gun crews was a ship job usually referred to as a powder monkey.⁵¹ They also noted that the women wore men's clothing while on duty and women's clothing while off duty.⁵²

Finally, Dorothy Thomas of Jamaica said the two women robbed her while she was in her canoe, and they demanded she be killed to leave no witnesses. She provided the best description of the women, noting they carried a machete and pistol, wore long pants, a sailor's jacket, and a handkerchief tied about the head. Ultimately, the women were overruled by the other pirates, letting Thomas live.⁵³

At the end of the trial, the court, led by Governor Sir Nicholas Lawes of Jamaica, pronounced the two women guilty of piracy and sentenced them to hang with the following words, "You Mary Read, and Ann Bonny, alias Bonn, are to go from hence to the Place from whence you came, and from thence to the Place of Execution; where you, shall be severally hang'd by the Neck, till you are severally Dead. And GOD of His infinite Mercy be merciful to both of your souls."⁵⁴

The women, after being sentenced, pleaded their bellies, claiming to be pregnant. Under British law, it was not lawful to execute a pregnant woman. The two were reportedly taken to a Jury of Matrons, women who would examine a prisoner and judge if they were pregnant. No record exists of the results, but since neither woman was hanged, presumably the jury confirmed the pregnancy. However, despite approval from the Jury of Matrons, it is most likely that the two women were not pregnant and instead lied to spare their lives.⁵⁵ Claiming pregnancy at trial was quite common in the era and fairly easy to do.⁵⁶

Almost nothing is said of Bonny and Read after their trial, aside from a brief statement in *The American Weekly Mercury* on December 8, 1720, which only repeated the news of two women being captured in battle alongside male pirates.⁵⁷ In late April 1721, Read died in prison of an unknown cause. She was buried on April 28th, with a burial registry for Saint Catherine Parish, listing her as Mary Read, Pirate.⁵⁸ Bonny's fate is less clear; she was never noted to have been hanged, but also never noted to have been set free. A few newspapers published in 1721 began early contributions to the legend, with one mistakenly calling her Sarah Bonny, likely because a Jamaican woman shared that name.⁵⁹ After 1721, there was no more mention of the two female pirates who served under Captain Rackam until *A General History of the Pyrates* in 1724.

When comparing the few available primary sources to *A General History of the Pyrates*, numerous discrepancies appear. There is no record in the transcript of anyone asking Bonny or Read about their previous lives. This raises the question of how Johnson knew that Bonny was an Irish woman and Read a former English soldier. He

was almost certainly not present for the trial. He claimed Anne Bonny was married, but the trial transcript calls both women spinsters, unmarried women. The trial took place a full month after they were captured. If they had been married, government officials would likely have learned it. No James Bonny appeared in any list of pirates who took the King's Pardon, casting doubt on whether he even existed.⁶⁰

Even minor details do not match. In the second volume of *A General History of the Pyrates*, the merchant John Ham of the twelve-ton *William* is changed to John Haman of a forty-ton unnamed sloop.⁶¹ Such alterations suggest a writer or editor trying to make a story more grand. According to the trial transcript, the final battle with the pirate hunter Barnet ended almost as soon as it began with no deaths.⁶² Johnson claimed Bonny and Read fought back for a while and even killed a fellow pirate, a detail nobody would have forgotten, and yet is left unmentioned.

The only details that match up occur at the very end of the chapters, which, coincidentally, all appeared in the trial transcript, to the point that Neil Rennie noted the verbiage is almost word-for-word the same.⁶³ Johnson did mention Read's death in prison and that Bonny was not executed, which is true, but this perhaps only proves he or an associate came to Jamaica and found the absolute bare minimum of information alongside the trial transcript. It is likely that Johnson, upon procuring the trial transcript and at least the governor's proclamation, realized how little there was to the story of Bonny and Read, so he fleshed out the story with details of his own imagination, ultimately creating a story that only occasionally overlapped with reality.

If the Bonny and Read of *A General History of the Pyrates* are almost undoubtedly largely fictional caricatures born of theatrical tropes and crumbling transcripts, who were the real women? It is difficult to say; the origins of many pirates are shrouded in mystery owing to limited primary accounts, their working-class backgrounds, and the frequent use of pseudonyms. For example, Blackbeard's origins are often debated with claims that he was from Bristol,⁶⁴ Jamaica,⁶⁵ or perhaps North Carolina,⁶⁶ with no evidence strong enough to say either way. Apart from a handful of wealthy pirates, such as Stede Bonnet,⁶⁷ we rarely know for sure.

Over the years, many authors have claimed to uncover more details about the two women, particularly Anne Bonny. Many websites and books claim she was the child of William Cormac and Peg/Mary Brennan; some even say, with confidence, that she was freed from prison by her father and returned to the Carolinas, where she lived until the 1780s.⁶⁸ Such claims, whether they come from Tamara Eastman,⁶⁹ David Cordingly,⁷⁰ or Rebecca Simon,⁷¹ all have a singular beginning: a romance novel.

John Carlova's 1964 book, *Mistress of the Seas*, is a pulp fiction novel inspired by earlier pulp magazines that emphasized lurid, sensational content, such as *Black Mask*, as well as the growing 1960s exploitation film genre.⁷² It repeatedly claims to be a biography of Anne Bonny, even presenting "original" citations and sources.⁷³ However, the book is duplicitous, as many of the sources are not real or appropriately cited, and

the details within them are not plausible eighteenth-century details.⁷⁴ Yet, beginning in 1982 with historian Linda Grant De Pauw,⁷⁵ this book was treated as an authentic historical tome, cited across numerous works.⁷⁶

If Johnson's story is false, and Carlova's fictional tale is taken more seriously than it should be, is there any plausible origin for Bonny and Read that is supported by contemporary documentation? It turns out, there are a few.

The Possible Origins of Two Near Mythical Women

Anne Bonny is a curious name for a woman of purported Irish origins, because neither of her names are Irish. Bonny is an English surname derived from the French word *bon*, meaning good.⁷⁷ Bon with two Ns also happens to be an alias of Bonny, as noted in her trial transcript. The surname is not the most common, but it is most frequent in Lancashire County, England, although it does appear across the country.⁷⁸ The other name given, Fulford, is also English in origin, almost exclusively so.

Anne was the third most common girl's name in England for much of the seventeenth century, likely owing to Anne Boleyn, the mother of Queen Elizabeth I, and later Queen Anne of England.⁷⁹ While given names and surnames do not always correspond to national origin or heritage, there is yet more evidence to doubt the connection with Ireland.

When tracing the origins of historical figures in the eighteenth century, church baptism and burial records are among the most valuable sources. The majority of children born in this era were baptized, usually within days after birth, although gaps during wartime, such as the English Civil War, do occur. Burial records are much the same; if someone was buried in a church or in a region, it was likely recorded. Prior to the emergence of Civil Registration, this was the best evidence an historian could hope for.

There are very few people with the name of Anne Bonny recorded as born in Ireland in the late seventeenth century. A few historians, such as Rebecca Simon, claim that there are Bonnys who could plausibly be the pirate, but these claims come from websites such as MyHeritage, which often contain unverified data entered by users, along with claims of relations to well-known historical figures.⁸⁰ Such claims also usually add that Bonny's parents were Cormac and Brennan, the fictitious names from *Mistress of the Sea*.

Lancashire County has a few Anne Bonnys noted in the records, but all record the baptism before 1670, making it impossible for any of them to be the woman who convinced people she was pregnant in 1720. The only baptism record that fits the chronology is in October 1690 for St. Giles in the Fields Church in St. Giles district, London. It is noted that a couple, George and Mary Bonny, had a child, Ann,⁸¹ who was baptized.⁸²

No other documentation exists for this child, implying she did not die young, but little more can be extrapolated. The family had multiple children listed as baptized, and St. Giles is an interesting location. The district was typically accessed by the Great North Road, which passes through Yorkshire County, very close to Lancashire County. It was also notable for containing a large number of immigrants, with poverty so infamous that even a century later, Charles Dickens would write about the crushing misery of St. Giles.⁸³

This leads to a reasonable assumption about the women; the trial transcript never called them native colonists of New Providence. They must have arrived at Nassau after 1713, when Benjamin Hornigold first set up the pirate's nest he and his so-called Flying Gang would inhabit. Around 1716, after the sinking of the 1715 Spanish treasure fleet, Nassau experienced a significant growth of pirates, smugglers, and sex workers. Many people, either down on their luck or of a shady persuasion, felt there was much money to be made there.⁸⁴ Many women arriving in Nassau would have almost certainly been sex workers, who accurately judged that money stolen by pirates would mostly be spent on alcohol or companionship.

Life in Nassau continued on in this manner for quite some time, until 1718, when Woodes Rogers was named governor of the Bahamas and retook New Providence with a small fleet of British ships. After offering the King's Pardon to all pirates and hunting those who refused it, he began to stamp out vices. Rogers was a staunch Anglican who wrote in his own book that he whipped women for any impropriety.⁸⁵ The short War of the Quadruple Alliance put aside any long-term plans, but the conflict was over by early 1720. If Anne Bonny were a sex worker, then she may have lacked options, leading to the risky decision to become a pirate, although its also worth considering it is certainly plausible that Johnson was somewhat correct about Bonny and Rackam being lovers.

Bonny's ultimate fate is perhaps her most enduring legend, the woman pirate who disappeared into history, without warning or a word. It is a fate almost certainly less glamorous than many writers have envisioned. Female prisoners were usually quietly let go if they pleaded the belly, both to avoid the government having to assume responsibility of the child, and because citizens rarely enjoyed the execution of women.⁸⁶ In Bonny's case, she was probably set free after Mary Read's death; no other members of Rackam's crew survived and she was just one woman. Governor Lawes was probably the one to make the decision for clemency, but it is doubtful it was recorded. She did not die in prison; such a death would have been noted in burial records, none of which list anyone under that name as buried in 1720s Jamaica.

There is, however, a burial record for an Ann Bonny, dated December 29, 1733, in Saint Catherine Parish, in the same region where Bonny was tried in 1720.⁸⁷ Bonny's trial transcript refers to her multiple times as Ann without the E. While there is a Bonny family that lived in Jamaica as early as the 1690s, with one member named Ann, that woman died with her husband, Philip, in 1747.⁸⁸ She had multiple children, including a

daughter also named Ann, but that child died young and was buried in 1714.⁸⁹ The record of the Ann Bonny burial in 1733 does not mention direct family; unlike other Bonny burials, she appears unconnected to anyone in Jamaica. It is highly plausible, although not definitive, that this could be the pirate, Anne Bonny.

The connections are tenuous: an Ann Bonny born in 1690s London, living in poverty; an Ann Bonny who resided on New Providence for an unclear period of time; an Ann Bonny who died in late 1733 in Jamaica. Even if it is the same woman, we still know remarkably little about her life. However, when it comes to Mary Read, there are a larger number of possible primary sources, with a far more detailed story with many implications.

Regarding baptism records, the name Mary Read is everywhere. Mary was the second-most-common girl's name of the era, and Read was also a common surname. Parceling out which one was the pirate is impossible without additional information. One notable possible baptism record is that of Mary Read, born in Bristol around May 1681, daughter of Ann Canterell and John Read.⁹⁰ At face value, this offers little promise, but a letter Canterell wrote in the 1690s is fascinating. Four years after their marriage began, John Read left Canterell to become a pirate in the Indian Ocean. Read sailed to St. Mary's Island near Madagascar, which, for many, is the original pirate nest. Read was absent from the family for nine years, until he died of an undisclosed reason.⁹¹

In March of 1698, Canterell wrote to the famous pirate-turned-trader Adam Baldrige of St. Mary's Island, begging for her late husband's money as she was deep in poverty.⁹² It is unknown if there ever was a reply. John Read's story is not unique, however; many pirates died on St. Mary's Island, and he was not even the only pirate named John Read.⁹³ This letter and baptism record do not prove their child is the eventual pirate Mary Read, but a woman with that name and a pirate father is worth consideration.

A later signed document, possibly from the same woman, also raises questions. In 1708, a former pirate named John Breholt attempted to get a blanket pardon for all the pirates still on St. Mary's Island. Breholt hoped to obtain some of the pirates' stolen cargo for monetary gain.⁹⁴ To show popular support, Breholt found 48 individuals, mostly women organized by the popular writer and merchant woman Penelope Aubin, despite her misgivings about Breholt, and asked them to sign a petition meant for Queen Anne.⁹⁵ The signatories were the families of pirates still on St. Mary's Island, who wanted to see their loved ones again.⁹⁶ One of the women who signed the petition with her mark, a sign that the writer was illiterate, was named Mary Read.⁹⁷ The pardon ultimately never occurred, with multiple officials concluding Breholt was untrustworthy, and after the William Kidd debacle of the 1690s, such a scheme was not worth pursuing.

We do not know whether this is the same Mary Read who was born in Bristol with a pirate father. It is possible, though it may be a different woman altogether. Although two women named Mary Read having pirate connections is an interesting

coincidence. These two Mary Reads - perhaps the same person, perhaps not - are the only women found in the historical record so far who could plausibly be the famous female pirate of the 1720s. Other examples exist, including a thief caught in 1719 London,⁹⁸ and later sent to Maryland.⁹⁹ But she was later arrested again for theft and sentenced to death in 1723, two years after the pirate Read died in 1721.¹⁰⁰

Pirate Truth Will Always Be Hypothetical

When taken all together, the possible origins of Anne Bonny and Mary Read, are both mundane, and yet captivating. Many women throughout history were born to an unfaithful parent, and some women went to war disguised as men. However, not many women who turned to sex work, became pirates, and not many fatherless daughters, graduated to stealing ships in their memory.

If Anne Bonny is the woman born in 1690s London, then her life started typical of the era for those who were poverty-stricken and hopeless. She became just one of many girls who either walked the streets or worked in brothels; the ones writer John Gay described as wearing tawdry ribbons and high-dragged petticoats, with hollowed cheeks and strong blushes applied.¹⁰¹ She sought a better income and took the first ship out of London Harbor, bound for the West Indies but found a life that was still as miserable and violent as the one she left behind. Even when law and order returned, it brought her no comfort, eventually forcing her to flee again, this time as a member of an incompetent fool's pirate crew. She alone escaped death, only to slowly sink back into her previous life, remaining anonymous, even into death, as a legend grew in parallel.

The life of Mary Read presents many options. Maybe she was the child of a man who sought his fortune in the Indian Ocean, never to return, leaving her financially destitute. Perhaps she fell for a man who turned to piracy, and was lost, or maybe she held out hope that her father still drew breath and would one day return. She never learned to write, maybe not even read, but her name remained. Perhaps this family legacy eventually steered her life in the same direction, ending in tragedy, yet leaving her with a legacy and immortal recognition that many desire but few achieve. Of course, it could be a different history altogether, and these mentions could be mere coincidence.

We can never be sure, for despite three centuries of fascination, Anne Bonny and Mary Read remain ghostly vestiges of the past, reflections of what we believe or at least want to believe. They were women and they were pirates, of this we can be sure. We can be sure of very little other than that as we continue to look for clues to the lives of these women. Buried treasure may be fiction, but within archives and libraries, reside documents that connect to a greater treasure of knowledge and truth.

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Notes

¹ Colin Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates: Being the True and Surprising Story of the Caribbean Pirates and the Man Who Brought Them Down* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007), 325.

² Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* (London: T. Warner, 1724).

³ Four London editions were printed, in two volumes, with the second volume released in 1728. The larger title text for Bonny and Read is present starting in the second edition onward. They are called out on the title page of the first edition as well, though their prominence increases in the second.

⁴ The Dutch translation included original engravings of various pirates including Anne Bonny and Mary Read; Captain Charles Johnson, *Historie der Engelsche zee-roovers...*, trans. Robert Hennebo (Amsterdam: Hermanus Uytwerf, 1725).

⁵ Examples of blatant copies of *A General History of Pyrates* include *The History and Lives of All the Most Notorious Pirates, and Their Crews...Adorn'd with Twenty Beautiful Cuts* (London: Edward Midwinter, 1725); Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book; or, Authentic Narratives of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers* (Boston: Samuel N. Dickinson, 1837); Philip Gosse, *The Pirates Who's Who: Giving Particulars of the Lives and Deaths of the Pirates and Buccaneers* (London: Dulau and Company, Ltd., 1924).

⁶ Neil Rennie, *Treasure Neverland: Real and Imagined Pirates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ David Cordingly, *Under the Black Flag: The Romance and Reality of Life Among the Pirates* (New York: Random House, 1995).

⁸ Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon, 2004).

⁹ Rebecca Simon, *Pirate Queens: The Lives of Anne Bonny & Mary Read* (Barnsley, England: Pen and Sword History, 2022).

¹⁰ Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most Notorious Pirates*. ed. Johan Franzén (Turku, Finland: Lennart Media, 2017), 86.

¹¹ Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most Notorious Pirates*. with an introduction and commentary by David Cordingly (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2002), 11.

¹² Frederick Burwick, and Manushag N. Powell, *British Pirates in Print and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 29-30.

¹³ This claim first appeared in John Robert Moore, *Defoe in the Pillory and Other Studies*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1939), 126-188.

¹⁴ The theory was largely discredited in P. N. Furbank and W.R. Owens, *The Canonisation of Daniel Defoe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Arne Bialuschewski, "Daniel Defoe, Nathaniel Mist, and the 'General History of the Pyrates,'" *Paper of the Bibliographical Society of America* 98, no. 1 (March 2004): 21-38, doi: 10.1086/pbsa.98.1.24295828.

¹⁶ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. Franzén, 10.

¹⁷ No witness described Blackbeard in this manner; the only known eyewitness physical description of Edward Thatch comes from Henry Bostock, "The Deposition of Henry Bostock Mariner. December 19, 1717," Colonial Office records (CO 152/12), The National Archives (UK) Kew.

¹⁸ Misson was a French pirate with much of his story centered on the pirate colony Libertalia, in Madagascar. For Misson's story, see Captain Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 2, chap. 1 ("Of Captain Misson") (London: T. Woodward, 1728); See also, Gabriel Kuhn, *Life Under the Jolly Roger: Reflections on Golden Age Piracy*, (CA:PM Press, 2020), 128-135.

¹⁹ National Army Museum (UK), "Jacobite Risings."

²⁰ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 157.

²¹ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 165-170 (Bonny's birth); chap. concludes at 173.

²² Johnson *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 165-170.

²³ Kate Gibson, *Illegitimacy, Family, and Stigma in England, 1660–1834* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

²⁴ Johnson *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 170.

²⁵ Johnson *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 171.

²⁶ Johnson *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 171.

²⁷ Johnson *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 1, 171-172.

²⁸ Johnson *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 2, 200-202.

²⁹ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 172.

³⁰ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 153.

³¹ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 172-173.

³² Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 173.

³³ Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates*, 224.

³⁴ *The Tryals of Captain John Rackam, and Other Pirates...As Also, the Tryals of Mary Read and Anne Bonny, alias Bonn...*(Jamaica: Printed by Robert Baldwin, 1721), 7-12, digitized by the National Library of Jamaica, Internet Archive.

³⁵ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 173.

³⁶ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 157.

³⁷ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 158.

³⁸ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 158-160.

³⁹ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 161-162.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 162-164.

⁴¹ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 161-162.

⁴² Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 164-165.

⁴³ "New-Providence, Sept. 4th," *Boston Gazette* (Boston), October 17, 1720.

⁴⁴ Formerly a merchant on St. Kitts, Ham became a notorious pirate during Queen Anne's War, particularly for murdering multiple Spaniards. After the conclusion of the war, he served the corrupt governor Daniel Parke of the Leeward Islands, later moving to Beef Island to become a merchant after Parke's murder, for information on Ham see, Great Britain. Public Records Office. *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: America and West Indies: Volume 24, 1708-1709*, ed. Cecil Headlam (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1922), 16-31, 268.

⁴⁵ Woodes Rogers, "A Proclamation," Nassau (New Providence), September 5, 1720, *Boston Gazette* (Boston), October 17, 1720.

⁴⁶ Scholars have found no primary sources for John Rackam prior to August 1720, although he may be the John Rackham born in Linstead Parva in November 1673 (the spelling of Rackam is very inconsistent; missing the H appears to be the most common going by primary sources). While Charles Vane was overthrown in a crew vote, his trial transcript never gives the instigating quartermaster a name. For information on this baptism record see, "England, Births and Christenings, 1538-1975," database with images, *FamilySearch* (record for John Rackham, 1673).

⁴⁷ Lt. Joseph Lawes to Capt. Edward Vernon, October 20, 1720, in *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series: America and West Indies, Volume 32 (1720-1721)*, British History Online.

⁴⁸ *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 7-18.

⁵⁰ *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 18-19.

⁵¹ Tom Lenfestey, *The Sailor's Illustrated Dictionary* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2001).

⁵² *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 18.

⁵³ *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 18.

⁵⁴ *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 19.

⁵⁵ A review of the baptism and burial registers of Saint Catherine Parish shows no entry for the baptism or burial of any child identified as a pirate's child between November 1720 and summer 1721. Given the detail typically recorded in these registers, such an event would likely appear if it had occurred. For more details see, "Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (baptism and burial records fall 1720 to summer 1721).

⁵⁶ Manushag N. Powell, "The Quick and the Dead (and the Transported)," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830* 13, no. 2 (2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.13.2.1378>.

⁵⁷ *The American Weekly Mercury* (Philadelphia), December 8, 1720.

⁵⁸ "Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," database with images, *FamilySearch*, Saint Catherine Parish registers, "Baptisms Marriages & Burials, Vol. I: 1669-1764."

⁵⁹ "Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (entry for Sarah Bonny, 1726).

⁶⁰ Great Britain, The National Archives (TNA), Kew, Admiralty, ADM 1/2282, Capt. Vincent Pearse to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, 3 June 1718.

⁶¹ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates*, vol. 2, 201.

⁶² *Tryals of Captain John Rackam*, 11.

⁶³ Rennie, *Treasure Neverland*, 78.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *A General History of the Pyrates* vol. 1, 74.

⁶⁵ Baylus C. Brooks, *Quest for Blackbeard: The True Story of Edward Thache and His World* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, Inc., 2016).

⁶⁶ Kevin P. Duffus, *The Last Days of Black Beard the Pirate* (Raleigh, NC: Looking Glass Productions, Inc, 2008).

⁶⁷ "Geneology," *Major Stede Bonnet*, <https://majorstedebonnet.com/Geneology.html>.

⁶⁸ David Cordingly, "Bonny, Anne (1698–1782), pirate," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 23, 2004. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-39085>.

⁶⁹ Tamara J. Eastman and Constance Bond, *The Pirate Trial of Anne Bonny and Mary Read*, (Cambria Pines by the Sea, CA: Fern Canyon Press, 2000).

⁷⁰ David Cordingly, *Heroines & Harlots: Women at Sea in the Great Age of Sail* (London: MacMillan, 2001).

⁷¹ Rebecca Simon, *Pirate Queens: The Lives of Anne Bonny & Mary Read*. (Barnsley, England: Pen & Sword History, 2022).

⁷² Jillian Molenaar, "Mistress of the Seas by John Carlova." *Depictions of John Rackam, Anne Bonny, and Mary Read*, February 12, 2020, <https://jillianmolenaar.home.blog/2020/02/12/mistress-of-the-seas-by-john-carlova>.

⁷³ Tony Bartelme, "The True and False Stories of Anne Bonny, Pirate Woman of the Caribbean." *The Post and Courier*, November 21, 2018.

⁷⁴ Rennie, *Treasure Neverland*, 254-256.

⁷⁵ Linda Grant De Pauw, *Seafaring Women* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 57-59.

⁷⁶ Notable examples of historians accidentally quoting *Mistress of the Seas* include David Cordingly in "Bonny, Anne (1698–1782), pirate," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and Rebecca Simon in *Pirate Queens: The Lives of Anne Bonny & Mary Read*.

⁷⁷ "Bonny Family History," Ancestry, <https://www.ancestry.com/last-name-meaning/bonny>.

⁷⁸ "Bonny Surname: Meaning, Origin & Family History," *Surname Database*, <https://surnamedb.com/Surname/bonny>.

⁷⁹ Scott Smith-Bannister, *Names and Naming Patterns in England, 1538-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 196-201.

⁸⁰ Rebecca Simon, *Pirate Queens: The Lives of Anne Bonny & Mary Read*. (Barnsley, England: Pen & Sword History, 2022), 24.

⁸¹ The sources use Ann and Anne interchangeably, which is typical of the period's flexible spelling conventions. The trial transcript most frequently uses Ann, but this variation is best understood as orthographic inconsistency rather than any meaningful distinction.

⁸² "Baptismal record of Ann Bonny, October 19, 1690," *Ancestry*, database record.

⁸³ Adam Crymble, "The Decline and Fall of an Early Modern Slum: London's St Giles 'Rookery', c. 1550–1850," *Urban History* 49, no. 2 (May 2022): 310-334, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926821000183>.

⁸⁴ Woodard, *Republic of Pirates*, 131.

⁸⁵ Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage Round the World* (London: A. Bell and B. Lintot, 1712), 204, *Project Gutenberg* ebook no. 55538.

⁸⁶ J.M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660-1750; Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also, James C. Oldham, "On Pleading the Belly: A History of the Jury of Matrons," *Criminal Justice History* 6 (1985). Reprinted *Trial By Jury: The Seventh Amendment and the Anglo-American Special Juries* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 80-114.

⁸⁷ "Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (record for Ann Bonny, 1733).

⁸⁸ "Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (record for Ann and Philip Bonny, 1747).

⁸⁹ "Jamaica, Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664-1880," database with images, *FamilySearch* (record for Ann Bonny, 1714).

⁹⁰ "Baptismal record of Mary Read, May 16th, 1681," *Ancestry*, database record.

⁹¹ John C. Appleby, *Women and English Piracy 1540-1720: Partners and Victims of Crime* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2015), 114-115.

⁹² E.T. Fox, *Pirates in Their Own Words* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press, Inc., 2014), 347-348.

⁹³ A pirate named John Read was active in the Indian Ocean around the 1680s, captain of the *Cygnnet*, thought he was unrelated to the John Read married to Ann Canterell. David F. Marley, "Read, John," in *The Pirate Encyclopedia: Pirates, Privateers, and Buccaneers* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), noting Read as captain of the *Cygnnet*; see also Western Australian Museum, "Background" (William Dampier and the *Cygnnet* landing under John Read's command).

⁹⁴ Charles Ivar McGrath, Chris Fauske, eds., *Money, Power, and Print: Interdisciplinary Studies on the Financial Revolution in the British Isles* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 105-110.

⁹⁵ McGrath and Fauske, eds., *Money Power and Print*, 114.

⁹⁶ Appleby, *Women and English Piracy*, 161-162.

⁹⁷ Appleby, *Women and English Piracy*, 161.

⁹⁸ "Mary Read. Theft; housebreaking. 15 January 1719," *Proceedings of the Old Bailey Online*.

⁹⁹ Maryland State Archives, "Provincial Court Land Records, 1709-1719, Volume 720, Page 529," *Archives of Maryland Online*.

¹⁰⁰ Aubrey C. Land, *The Dulanys of Maryland: A Biographical Study of Daniel Dulany, the Elder (1685-1753) and Daniel Dulany, the Younger (1722-1797)* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1955), 58.

¹⁰¹ John Gay, *Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (London: Bernard Lintott, 1716), 44-45, digitized facsimile, *Internet Archive*.