

Gregory, Mary Lloyd ^[1]

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By Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1986

1768–5 Aug. 1858

Mary Lloyd Gregory, innkeeper, was born in Edgecombe County ^[2], the daughter of Nicholas and Mary Lloyd. Nothing is known of her early life. On 30 June 1796 she gave birth to a son, Joseph, fathered by Joseph Ross, a citizen of Tarboro. On 2 Sept. 1796 Ross deeded to Mary Lot 40 in the town, evidently in some effort to provide for mother and son. The antecedents of Joseph Ross are not known. He appears in the Edgecombe ^[3] records as a merchant, and for many years he was in partnership with Weeks Parker, a prominent local citizen. Ross had moved to Petersburg, Va., by 1803, and in 1811 he settled in Raleigh. Here he lived for the remainder of his life. Joseph Ross never married and apparently had no children except his son by Mary Lloyd. It is not clear why the relationship was never legalized. The will of Ross, dated 3 Aug. 1830 and probated in Wake County ^[4] in 1832, devised all his estate to his son, Joseph Ross Lloyd, who was also named executor.

In 1807 Mary Lloyd married one Edmund Gregory, who happened to be passing through Tarboro. It is not known where he came from. He had been married before and had one daughter. Prior to marrying Gregory, Mary Lloyd took the precaution of deeding the lot given her by Ross to their eleven-year-old son, Joseph. Mary's venture into matrimony was brief and unsuccessful as Gregory left almost immediately for Tennessee. The records imply that he remained there until 1814, when his wife petitioned the state legislature for divorce ^[5] from bed and board, the only recourse available to her at that time. Mary Gregory's petition has been lost but it was probably based on desertion. The plea of Edmund Gregory that the divorce not be granted has survived. His motives are questionable, for his petition contained a long diatribe as to how his wife had mistreated him and unfavorable comments on her behavior in Tarboro during his long absence in Tennessee, behavior, he floridly remarked, that would not even be tolerated by a Turkish pasha. As the years went by Mary became well-to-do. Gregory must have remained a problem, because his former wife and her advisers were not satisfied that the 1814 legislative divorce protected her estate from any claim of his. On 28 June 1836, the county sheriff sold at auction the lands of Edmund Gregory in which Mary Gregory had an interest. This included all the real estate ^[6] she had acquired since her marriage in 1807. At the sale, the property was bought by her son, Joseph R. Lloyd, who very shortly afterwards appointed George W. Mordecai of Wake County ^[7] as trustee to hold the property for his mother.

Mary may have begun her long and successful career as innkeeper when Ross gave her the lot in 1796. Business prospered and in 1809 she purchased Lot 37 in Tarboro from Henry Cotten and the adjoining Lot 48 the following year from David Marsh. At the time of the 1836 sale her tavern was described as being at lots 37 and part of 48, with the stable on Lot 39. The first two of the above lots were located on the west side of St. George's Street, as Main Street was then called, on the original town plot of Tarboro. Mary Gregory's tavern has been referred to as the Tarboro Tavern and in newspaper notices of the time as the Tarboro Hotel. Mrs. Gregory continued to invest her profits in real estate, not only in Tarboro but also in the Conetoe Swamp section in the eastern part of Edgecombe County. Joseph Blount Cheshire ^[8], in his book Nonnulla (1930) ^[9], related an episode concerning Mary Gregory and her Conetoe holdings. Elder John Daniel, a prominent Primitive Baptist preacher in the section, conceived the idea of draining Conetoe Swamp to render its rich land fit for cultivation. Mrs. Gregory owned the land where the swamp drained into the Tar River and operated a mill at that site. Elder Daniel presented to the lady the advantages of a constant water supply for the mill, and she became the largest subscriber to the project. When the work was finished all went well until the mill and its dam were suddenly washed away after a heavy rain. Cheshire reported that thereafter, when Elder Daniel had business in Tarboro, he took care not to pass in front of Mrs. Gregory's tavern on Main Street, wryly commenting that few cared to face her when she had a grievance. Cheshire, a native of Tarboro, knew Mary Gregory well. He described her as a picturesque character, a woman of strength and intelligence, and among the best known and most forceful of the inhabitants of Tarboro in the days of his youth.

For the times, Mary Gregory's career was remarkable. It was not easy then for a woman to succeed in business, but succeed she did; at the time of the 1850 census she was worth \$25,000, then a considerable fortune. No less difficult was the rearing of her son Joseph. The life of Joseph Ross Lloyd, though disadvantaged by his having been born out of wedlock, was an amazing success story as well. Following graduation from The University of North Carolina ^[10] in 1815, he became an attorney. It is likely that he read law with George Mordecai, as there was a lifelong association between the two men and Lloyd named a son for Mordecai. In 1821 Joseph Lloyd represented Edgecombe County ^[2] for one term in the legislature, and in 1832 he was one of the attorneys for his alma mater. For a while Lloyd was postmaster of Tarboro, and at the time of his death in 1841 he was president of the local branch of the state bank. Mary Gregory outlived her son by many years and died at the age of ninety. She was buried under an impressive marble obelisk in Calvary Churchyard, Tarboro, near her son and his family.

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