

Mason, Martha ^[1]

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31 May 1937–4 May 2009

By Kelly Agan, N.C. Government & Heritage Library, 2015

On September 13, 1948, eleven year old Martha Mason of Lattimore, N.C. came down with polio on the very day her parents buried her older brother Gaston who had succumbed to the disease days before. They were both victims of a major polio outbreak in the U.S. that year. Newspaper articles during that month reported that North Carolina had attained the second highest number of cases in the country, just behind California. Martha survived, but the ravages of the disease left her a quadriplegic dependent for the next 60 years on the iron lung.

She was born on May 31, 1937 in Cleveland County to parents Willard and Euphra Mason.

Her condition did not inhibit her spirit, sense of humor, or intellectual curiosity. With the help of parents, teachers, and friends she graduated first in her high school class and then summa cum laude from Wake Forest in 1960 with a B.A. in English. She wrote newspaper articles with her mother taking dictation, until incapacitating illnesses struck both parents.

Mason chose to remain at home in the iron lung despite the development of other, less restrictive ventilators. She was known in Lattimore for her sense of humor and outgoing personality. And in the 1990s, the advent of the personal computer and assistive technology broadened her social reach and allowed her to realize her dream of writing. She then began a memoir of her life in the small North Carolina town -- *Breath: A Lifetime in the Rhythm of an Iron Lung* published in 2003. She was the subject of a documentary film *Martha in Lattimore*, and she appeared in another, *The Final Inch*, about the effort to eradicate polio.

At her death on May 4, 2009, she was believed to be the longest survivor of a life lived in the 800-pound device.

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Origin - location:

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