

# Coosaponakeesa, AKA Mary Musgrove: An Early Owner of Ossabaw Island

*In 1747, as England was colonizing the area now known as coastal Georgia, Ossabaw Island transitioned from belonging collectively to Native Creek and Yamacraw groups and tribes, to the English model of private, titled ownership of land as practiced today in the United States.*

*The first people to “own” Ossabaw Island in the English tradition were a married couple—Coosaponakeesa of the Wind Clan, a woman of Creek and English ancestry; and her husband Rev. Thomas Bosomworth, rector of Christ Church in Savannah. To most Georgians, Coosaponakeesa is known by her English name – Mary Musgrove. An important historical figure, for several years Musgrove/Coosaponakeesa served as interpreter and negotiator between the Creek and Yamacraw native Americans of the coastal region and General James Oglethorpe, leader of the English colony of Georgia established on the high bluff of the Savannah River by the Georgia Trustees of England in 1733.*

*The following profile of Coosaponakeesa is excerpted from a longer piece written by Rt. Rev. Frank S. Logue, 11th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia.*

Coosaponakeesa of the Wind Clan was essential to the success of the Colony of Georgia. Born in 1700 in the Lower Creek Nation’s capital of Coweta, she was the daughter of Edward Griffin, an English trader, and a Creek woman usually referred to as Brim, which was also the name of her relative who ruled the Creek Nation. By the time of her death in 1765, Coosaponakeesa was the largest landowner and the wealthiest person in the colony.

At the age of 10, she was sent to Charles Town, South Carolina. She would spend five years living with an English family and attending school where she learned English language and customs. There she was baptized in the Church of England, taking the name Mary Griffin.

The English Colonel John Musgrove brought his son, John, with him when he traveled to Coweta to negotiate a treaty establishing a border between the Carolinas and the Creeks. The young John fell in love with Coosaponakeesa. The two married and would have four sons in the years that followed. They lived among the Creeks until 1725, when they returned to Charles Town. When the Creek Nation invited the British to build a trading post in Creek territory, they wanted a member of their nation to run the

store. John and Mary Musgrove were perfect for the work as the matrilineal Creeks recognized her as one of their own, while the British trusted John.

Mary Musgrove became translator for James Edward Oglethorpe (founder of the colony of Georgia) and Yamacraw mico (chief) Tomo-chi-chi, and also assisted the colony’s founder in understanding Yamacraw and Creek customs.

After John’s death from fever in 1735, Mary/Coosaponakeesa ran the trading post, Cowpens, alone until 1737 when she married Jacob Matthews. Throughout this time from 1733 to 1743, she remained Oglethorpe’s chief interpreter. When war broke out in Georgia and Florida between Britain and Spain, the Creeks sided with the British and the Cowpens Trading Post prospered.

Jacob Matthews died in 1745. With her third marriage in 1747, Mary became the wife of the Rector of Christ Church in Savannah, the Rev. Thomas Bosomworth. The two became a power couple with strong connections in both Creek and British society. In 1747, The Creek Nation granted Coosaponakeesa ownership of the barrier islands of St. Catherines, Sapelo, and Ossabaw as well as more than a thousand acres along the Savannah River.

A legal conflict arose over the Bosomworths’ ownership of this coastal land. The couple pressed their coastal land claim in a ten-year battle, traveling to England at one point to meet with the British Board of Trade. In 1759, a compromise resolved the issue. The Board of Trade auctioned off Sapelo and Ossabaw Islands, giving the proceeds to Mary. The land sold for £2,100, which would be worth approximately \$535,000 today. She and Bosomworth were also permitted to keep St. Catherine’s Island “in consideration of services rendered by her to the province of Georgia.” Mary moved to the island in 1760 and lived her remaining five years there.

Coosaponakeesa leveraged her connections and ingenuity to become the most influential person in the Colony.

A version of this article was originally published in *From the Field: News from the Diocese of Georgia*. May 11, 2022 Volume 12, No. 19. Reprinted with permission.