

# WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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# 38. She Carried with Her Neither Memory Nor Archive

Ellyn Toscano

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*She carried with her neither memory nor archive. Even if the migration—the deracination—nearly completely erased her birth and eradicated any memory that young life could hold, a trace remained.*

*That trace, my conductor.*

*Uncanny, this memory of a past of which I was unaware.*

*Her hands trembled slightly, maybe a scar of her loss, an instantiated trauma, an absence speaking.*

*I was tempted by the gap between the seen and unseen, the spoken and left unsaid. Maybe nothing was withheld. Maybe I just never thought to ask questions.*

*I knew very little about my grandmother—I did not grow up around her and visited her no more than a week or so every summer. I knew my mother and she were very close, despite the infrequency of our visits. When we visited, they would close themselves in my grandmother's room and talk for hours. All we heard were quiet, conspiratorial giggles. They were happiest in each other's company.*

On July 18, 1904, Father Thomas F. Hopkins, retired pastor of St. Mary of the Annunciation Catholic Church in Charleston and a recent resident of Summerville, South Carolina boarded the Clyde Line Steamship Comanche to sail to New York City. Traveling with him was his housekeeper, Mary Hussey. Their passage was noted in the *Charleston Post and Courier* on 19 July 1904, along with the names of other notable Charlestonians. Not listed among the passengers, but with the pair, was a six-year-old Black child whom Father Hopkins called Mary Godfrey.

One month later, on 22 August 1904 Father Hopkins died in Bad Nauheim Hesse, Germany. As reported in the Charleston papers, he had been sick and had travelled "to try the healing qualities of the famous German resort." His obituary, entitled "Safe, Safe at Rest" rhapsodized about him:

Doctor Hopkins was more than an ordinary man. He was an extraordinary priest. A scholar, a student, an orator, a theologian, a zealous priest, he was learned to an eminent degree. There was no subject worth knowing, his friends have said, upon which he could not well converse. Stately in style, his movements were majestic to a most admirable degree, and in his ministrations before the altar, he brought all the dignity that was in the power of his soul to do honor to the God whom it was his mission to serve.

What Mary Hussey did in New York is unclear, as are the circumstances of her travel back to Charleston, where she died of gastritis two months later, on 2 October 1904. She died in the home of Father Hopkins in Summerville that he had devised to her in his will along with his personal effects.

Mary Godfrey was left in New York. On 20 July 1904, two days after the three departed Charleston, Mary Godfrey, was "surrendered" to St. Benedict's Home for Destitute Colored Children in Rye, New York by Rev. Thomas Hopkins, Summerville S.C. The document recording her admission indicated that Mary was six years old, "colored", born in South Carolina and baptized. Her date of birth was unknown or unrecorded. The verso of the card listed her mother as Mary F. Washington, a Catholic, and deceased, but failed to name her father, noting only that he was alive and Protestant. "Father. Living. Protestant."

*If they knew Mary Godfrey's father was alive and Protestant, they must have known who he was. Why was his name not recorded?*

Mary made her communion and confirmation at St. Benedict's Home in 1908 and took the name Angeline as her confirmation name. She stayed at the home until she was twelve, when children were discharged from St. Benedict's, into service. She was discharged to another Irish priest, Rev. Thomas O'Keefe, pastor of St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church on 53rd Street in Manhattan. An entry in St. Benedict's Home's Numerical Register for the years 1887 to 1907, a conclusion to the record initiated with her admission in 1904, states that on 2 March 1910, Mary

Godfrey was “adopted by Mrs. Noonan, Great Barrington, Mass.” The “adoption” was more in the nature of an indenture and the 1910 census more accurately lists her in the household of Mary Noonan in Great Barrington as the fifteen-year-old “colored servant.” The next records of Mary Godfrey, found within the records of St. Benedict’s Church, were her 1921 marriage certificate and the record of the baptism two years later of her daughter Margaret, my mother.

This is the sum of the documentary evidence of the early life of Mary Godfrey. That’s all there is, a few records, created by bureaucrats charged with recording lives for public purposes unrelated to the inner life of the subjects. Somebody at St. Benedict’s Home for Destitute Colored Children, a registrar with fluid, cursive handwriting, noted Mary’s arrival and the incomplete information about her parents in the Numerical Register, a green, cloth-covered accounting ledger with numbered pages, lines and columns. Credits and Debits. Somebody typed that woefully inadequate information on a 3x5 index card, front and back, and put the card, in alphabetical order, in a long, gray metal card box.

Surely there was more to tell. Clearly things were omitted. A small child, a maternal orphan, just arrived from a two-day steamship voyage up the eastern coast of America, at sea, doubtless frightened and cautious in the company of people in what relation to her? Most certainly there was more to say. What was she wearing? Did she carry any belongings—a doll, a toy, a picture of her mother?

*Memories float haphazardly over conscious work, slowly pushing down into thought, gaining in strength and substance, obstinate.*

*It wasn’t until I was living and working in Italy, in another world—a voluntary, desired, privileged life but also an uprooting, a migration, and yes, like hers, an opportunity—that I divined this descent—mine, my heritage. It was not really a surprise that people in my life were not what they seemed. I knew there was a mystery.*

*Could it be that the homogeneity of the quotidian world I inhabited as a child prevented me from recognizing what was plain? My grandmother was never more or less than my grandmother, the beloved, respected mother of my beloved mother. I am the daughter of Margaret, who called herself Margo. I am the granddaughter of Mary Godfrey. Both were strong women who celebrated strong women and insisted on an unyielding matriarchal line that I now know reaches back through Mary F. Washington. Where did it begin? Mary Godfrey’s*

*exile removed her from the sources of her history and annihilated her knowable past, leaving her to imagine herself as the single subject of her own life.*

*A line untethered from memory, origin, history.*

*I knew my grandmother and as I look at pictures of her now (of which I have very few), I should have been able to understand something that had never been brought to my attention.*

*But stories are powerful and complacency is destructive of doubts.*

If Mary Godfrey was indeed six at the time of her admission to St. Benedict's, she would have been born in 1897 or 1898. While my grandmother's name, as it was given to me and recorded in the records of St. Benedict's, was not particularly unusual, the fact of her Catholicism carried the potential to limit the range of possibility.

In the suffocating Southern heat of the summer of 2019, I traveled to Charleston to devote some time to the archives. I had communicated with the archivists in the Diocese of Charleston, who were welcoming and discouraging. Over the course of a week, I pored through the parish records, beginning with the records of St. Mary's, the church of Father Hopkins, and expanding the search through all of the Mixed Sacrament Registers for all of the parishes within the diocese in the closing decade of the nineteenth century.

There is no Mary Godfrey in the records of baptisms in diocesan records, no record of Mary Washington as the mother of a child being baptized in the church in the relevant years. Records of St. John the Beloved Catholic Church in Summerville, founded in 1898 (the year of Mary's birth), begin in 1909. In the rural areas outside of Charleston, Catholic sacraments were administered informally, by traveling priests from other parishes, and frequently noted in records maintained by the diocese of Charleston. But there is no Mary Godfrey in any of those sacramental records.

The following week, I started on the municipal records. Again, no Mary Godfrey in the municipal records of births or "colored" births in Charleston in the years 1897 to 1900. Birth records were not kept in Summerville until 1915, so it is impossible to say whether a child was born with that name in those years.

Since Mary Godfrey was born in or around 1898 and her mother Mary F. Washington had died by the time she was surrendered to St. Benedicts, the death occurred between the years 1898 and 1904. I

searched the municipal death records for the death of a black woman named Mary Washington of child-bearing age who died and whose death was necessary to record. One woman fit this description. Mary E. Washington, a twenty-two-year-old Black woman who died of septicemia on 9 April 1901 in the City Hospital and was buried in "ColScotch." The death certificate stated that Mary E. was born in the city of Charleston to parents who themselves were born in Charleston, and lived there her full short life. She was Black and married. All that remains of the Colored Scotch Cemetery are a few old stones, leaning haphazardly against a fence that encloses the property of the St. James Church. Who Mary E. was, to whom she was married and from whom she descended cannot be determined from the single record of her life. Whether she had a child is also impossible to know.

*I take the scant records as authoritative, though I have no reason to trust their reliability. Mary Godfrey's mother's name was specific and substantial, differentiated with a middle initial: Mary F. Washington. The name of her father was withheld. Was his name Godfrey? Is that a distraction? Was that name fabricated, a gift of the Catholic priest or the nuns who admitted her to the Home for Destitute Colored Children, a red-herring, a loyal reference to an omnibenevolent god? A god who freed?*

*I walked the streets of Charleston following an itinerary of addresses: the opulent homes of Father Hopkins and the beneficiaries and executors of his will; the homes of all of the Mary Washingtons I found in the records of deaths; the cemeteries, or remains of cemeteries reserved for Black Charlestonians. I don't know what I expected to find, or to feel.*

*I walk from my hotel on Wentworth Street two blocks to St. Mary's church on Hasell Street. I walk slowly through the cemetery to the side and behind the church looking for Godfrey or Washington or anything else that might have relevance.*

*Finding nothing, I go into the church, arriving just in time for the celebration of the Eucharist.*

*Do this in memory of me.*

*The congregation is devout and attentive, and noticeably White. The church is full, including the balcony. There was one Black family in the congregation and a Black altar boy. The rest—White families dressed in their Sunday dresses, and suits with ties. There are five White priests serving mass—how is this still possible?*

*I sit alone in the back of the church, on the right, very conscious of Rev. Thomas F. Hopkins buried a few rows ahead of me, in a place of honor in the aisle. I watch the well-dressed children walking back and forth across his marker, during communion and at the conclusion of the mass.*

*The single Black altar boy joins the only Black family outside the church.*

*I have come all this way to find silence, a haunting void, 120 years after the birth of my grandmother in an historical obscurity that cannot be overcome by determination.*

*But the obfuscations have their own revelations.*

Perhaps Father Hopkins's documented life, however replete with intriguing gaps and inconsistencies, might provide some clue to my grandmother's early life. What did Father Hopkins and Mary Hussey have to do with Mary, and why did they bring her north to New York in 1904?

According to the records of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston, Father Hopkins was pastor of St. Mary of the Annunciation from 1894 until 1901, when he retired due to ill health. For the first year of Father Hopkins's retirement from active service to the church he lived on Rutledge Avenue, in Charleston. In 1902 he moved to 100 Marion Avenue in Summerville, bringing with him his housekeeper of many years, Mary Hussey. He did not spend much time in that house, instead traveling for three months in 1903 in Italy, meeting with Pope Pius X in Rome and visiting Florence, Venice, Genoa and Milan.

St. Mary was the first Roman Catholic Church established in the Carolinas or Georgia, by Irish immigrants and French refugees from the West Indies fleeing the 1793 slave insurrection in Santo Domingo. In 1866 Bishop Patrick N. Lynch, the slave-owning bishop of Charleston, purchased a Jewish synagogue on Wentworth Street, three blocks from St. Mary's, and established St. Peter's Catholic Church to serve the Black Catholic community. In 1880, a second parish was established for Black Catholics, the Immaculate Conception Chapel.

With two parishes for Black Catholics, it would have been unlikely for Mary Godfrey's mother—Mary F. Washington—to have been a parishioner in Father Hopkins's church. Indeed the sacramental records of the church contain no records of Mary F. Washington. Neither can this name be found in the records of either St. Peter's or Immaculate Conception.



While the Catholic Church in Charleston had established parishes for Black Catholics, the orphanage that the church maintained did not admit Black children. Neither did the municipal orphanage—the Charleston Orphan House, founded in 1790. The one orphanage for Black children, the Jenkins Institute founded in 1891 on Franklin Street—adjacent to the city jail—had insufficient records to know with certainty whether Mary Godfrey was, or could have been, an inmate.

If Mary could have been placed in an orphanage in Charleston, why did Father Hopkins take her from South Carolina? A researcher in the diocesan archive suggested that he would have removed her from Charleston, or Summerville, if she was in some kind of danger. Her imagination was as vivid and alive as mine.

Perhaps Father Hopkins was a heroic priest, aware of the desperate context into which this promising child had been born and determined to take part in creating a more hopeful future, after her mother Mary F. Washington died. I returned to the records of St. Benedict's to see if Father Hopkins brought other children north. Mary was the only one. If his concern was with children in poverty and strife, surely his work would have expanded beyond the fate of a single child.

Why Mary Godfrey? What did he know of Mary Washington? The only documentary evidence I have been able to find connecting Father Hopkins to anybody named Washington was found in documents submitted to the court during proceedings to probate his will in 1905. A single entry in "Statement of Receipts & Disbursements" refers to a disbursement made to "Phoebe Washington—Caretaker Hopkins Villa." Could Phoebe be the grandmother of Mary Godfrey and the mother of Mary F. Washington referred to in the record of her admission into St. Benedict's Home?

The 1880 Federal Census records Phoebe Washington, resident of Summerville, twenty-seven years old (born about 1853), Black, with a listed occupation of "cook." Phoebe is listed as the head of the household (unmarried, with no adult man recorded) which consisted of her with three children, a brother and sister. One of those children is Mary Washington, age six. Mary, according to the record, was born about 1874, which would have made her twenty-four in 1898, the year of Mary Godfrey's birth.

The next record of Phoebe was in 1900, when she is listed with a husband and one adult child in the household, with his wife. There is no

listing, in the 1900 census, of Mary or Flora. However it does reflect that Phoebe was the mother of eight children, only six living in 1900. Mary and Flora could have died. Mary Washington would have died between 1898 (the year of Mary Godfrey's birth) and 1904 when Father Hopkins listed her as deceased.

The dates and locations align and the connection to Father Hopkins is direct. Phoebe could be my great-great grandmother. I think she is. I think she is the mother of Mary F. Washington, who is the mother of Mary Godfrey, who is the mother of my mother. Phoebe, the caretaker, the mother of two daughters who died and one granddaughter who was stranded, maybe in danger from or at best rejected by an unnamable father. This was a time when the truth could be very dangerous.

Phoebe's Mary could not be the Mary E. who died of septicemia because the dates do not align but I will hold both in my mind; I will keep the incitement aroused and honor the instincts. There is no need to settle all the rich possibilities. These were lives, deprived for a time of the celebration of their power and resonance. But Phoebe's life may have precipitated all that ensued, inexorably though mysteriously. That is a wonder, even if a compensation for something nobody had the right to take.

*Cardaneto, Umbria. The beauty is indescribable and impossible to hold in my mind. It seizes my attention and holds me unconscious, unable to contemplate what I see. It is unnecessary to try.*

*A kind of suspension.*

*There is something worryingly melancholy, isolated, alone. I cannot successfully experience it together with others.*

*The wind moves through the silence, people sometimes intervene but it is a silent, and affective experience that is solitary, forsaken, uncompanionable.*

*Were the people who settled on that hill, or this, conscious of creating beauty when building battlements to hide behind?*

*How many people have stood on this side of the valley, looking over to the encampment on the top of the opposite hill, across time, wondering who is looking back across?*

*She is looking back, tugging the line, pulling it taut.*

*Calling me to witness.*