

GEORGINA GRANT-BROOKS

BORN: 17 Oct 1890, St. Catharines, Ontario

INCARCERATED: ANDREW MERCER REFORMATORY on 26 Jul 1922

DIED: 18 Sept 1922, Toronto General Hospital, Toronto, Ontario

There isn't a great deal of historical documentation on the short thirty-year life of Georgina Grant-Brooks. And anyone who personally knew Georgina during her lifetime has already passed away. Although Georgina is a close-blood relative of mine, being my 1st cousin, 3X removed, I have had to rely on census, marriage, military, and death records, plus historical newspaper articles along with archival records from the Andrew Mercer Reformatory in order to narrate an overview of her all too brief life.

Georgina Grant was the second of eleven children born on 17 Oct 1890 to George Grant of St. Catharines and Mary Miller of Owen Sound, Ontario. Georgina was born on her father's twenty-eighth birthday. Her mother Mary was one of thirteen children born to the prominent Owen Sound, Ontario Black spiritual and community leader, Thomas Henry Miller, and his second wife Sarah Boardly. He was the co-founder of both the BME Church and the longest-running Emancipation Celebration which in August 2023 will be celebrating its 161st year. This festival recognizes the British Commonwealth's Emancipation of Slavery of 1834.

Georgina's parents were married in Niagara Falls on 23 May 1889¹ and settled in her father's hometown of St. Catharines where he worked as a mason and general labourer.² Unfortunately, her father George had a reputation within the community as a hard drinker and rabble-rouser.

Before Georgina reached her second birthday, according to a notice in The Daily Standard on 9 Aug 1892, her father George was sent to spend several months in Toronto's brutal Central Prison³. Then just seven months later in March 1893, he was sentenced to 30 days in jail for assault on another man⁴. Her father George continued to find himself in trouble throughout the years thanks to his strong attachment to liquor.

Unfortunately, her brother William who was only a year younger than Georgina succumbed to tuberculosis after suffering for six months on 8 July 1899⁵. Her mother Mary was

¹ Archives of Ontario; Toronto, Ontario, Canada; *Registrations of Marriages, 1869-1928*; Reel: 66, *microfilm page 38*.

² Year: 1891; Census Place: St Catharines, Lincoln and Niagara, Ontario, Canada; Roll: T-6351; Family No: 25, *microfilm page 132*.

³ Newspapers.com - The Daily Standard – 9 Aug 1892 - Page 4, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/st-catharines-standard-george-grant-sen/124870998/?xid=637>

⁴ Newspapers.com - St. Catharines Standard - 28 Mar 1893 - Page 4, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/124871450/george-grant-on-trial-for-larceny-and/?xid=637>

⁵ Archives of Ontario; Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Collection: MS935; Reel: 93, *microfilm page 63*

still mourning the loss of her young son when she gave birth to another son whom they named Edward one month later. Being one of the oldest daughters the task of helping with household chores and child-caring would have most likely fallen on Georgina's shoulders. According to the 1901 Canada Census⁶ Georgina is noted as being a ten-year-old girl going to school and residing with her parents and five other siblings.

Sadly, Georgina's father was constantly in trouble with the law because of his habit of consuming large quantities of alcohol, which must have had a negative effect on the family. Her mother Mary struggled to care for a growing family, and it seemed that she reached a breaking point on 8 Apr 1904 and regrettably was jailed on the grounds of insanity.⁷ This type of punishment makes no sense to us in today's world, however, in the early part of the twentieth century, it was not unusual for people, especially women to be jailed when they suffered from any type of mental instability. At the time of Mary Grant's incarceration, she had nine children all living at home. The task of caring for both the home and the children in their mother's absence would have most certainly fallen to Georgina and her older sister Alice.

A few years after her mother Mary returned home from being inhumanely imprisoned, she gave birth to her last child, a boy whom they named George Jr in May 1910. We found that when the 1911 census⁸ was taken Georgina is noted as being twenty years of age and working as a servant for a private family and now has 9 other siblings whom all are living at the family home with her parents. At this time in history, most women of colour had few choices when it came to employment. Often with marginal education opportunities, many women of colour had no choice but to work as domestics, cooks, or laundresses, to name a few easily attainable low-paying occupations.

On 25 July 1911 Georgina took a trip to Buffalo, N.Y., USA to visit a friend⁹. We are not sure how many times she went back and forth across the border to Buffalo, but we are quite positive that is where she met her future husband, Joseph Nathan Brooks. Joseph was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on 4 Oct 1894 and was working as a fireman for the Buffalo Coffee and Brass Rolling Mills. He would have stoked the boilers in the coffee factory that roasted the coffee beans.

In an unusual turn of events, on 12 May 1914, one of Georgina's younger brothers (most probably either John or James), took his father George to court because he was offended by his behaviour. He tried to have George put on the 'Prohibited Persons' list. If a person was put on this

⁶ Year: 1901; Census Place: *St Catharines (City/Cité), Lincoln and Niagara, Ontario*; Page: 3; Family No: 21, *microfilm page 67*

⁷ Newspapers.com - The Daily Standard – 8 Apr 1904 - Page 4, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/st-catharines-standard-mrs-george-gran/124871123/?xid=637>

⁸ Year: 1911; Census Place: *18 - Grantham, Lincoln, Ontario*; Page: 2; Family No: 20, *microfilm page 2*

⁹ The National Archives at Washington, D.C.; Washington, D.C.; *Manifests of Alien Arrivals at Buffalo, Lewiston, Niagara Falls, and Rochester, New York, 1902-1954*; Record Group Title: *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787 - 2004*; Record Group Number: 85; Series Number: *M1480*; Roll Number: *049*

list, they were prohibited to drink and if caught drinking or if anyone was found to have assisted the person to drink, they too would be fined and or jailed. The magistrate found that the Grant boy could not legally put his father on the list.¹⁰ It is painfully obvious that Georgina was raised in a dysfunctional family, and we can only imagine the effect that it may have had on her as she grew into adulthood.

The next time we find Georgina is when she marries Joseph on 2 Aug 1918 in Buffalo, N.Y., USA¹¹. She is then listed as Joseph's next of kin on his WWI military records, residing at 34 Williams St., Buffalo, N.Y.¹² Joseph served overseas until the end of WWI and was then shipped home in July 1919 and was honourably discharged¹³.

We are not certain what happened between the young couple after Joseph came home from the war, but by the 1921 Canada Census, Georgina is noted as still being married but her husband is not listed as residing with her. Instead, she is living with her younger siblings, Arthur, Leonard, and Mary at the home of her older sister Alice and her husband Francis Collins along with their baby daughter.

A year later, on 10 July 1922, Georgina is charged and sentenced by the City of St. Catharines Police Magistrate to pay a fine of \$467.88 plus \$0.13 in interest or serve 6 months in the Mercer Reformatory for Women in Toronto for "selling liquor and conducting a house frequented by both white and coloured men and women"¹⁴. Georgina did not have the money to pay the fine and on 26 July 1922, she arrived at the Mercer Reformatory to serve out her 6 months sentence. Mercer Reformatory records state that she was slated to be released on 11 Jan 1923 unless earlier for good behaviour. (See footnote #15)

Shortly after Georgina arrived at the reformatory, the records show that she became agitated and was put in the basement (solitary confinement) for a period. From Georgina's Mercer records and files¹⁵ a letter dated 1 Aug 1922 from J.H. Campbell, Police Magistrate for the City of St. Catharines introducing Mrs. Edith Riggs who was a former employer of Georgina's and that she was anxious to see her. Mrs. Riggs's letter of 13 Sept 1922 is also included in the Mercer records, where she notes that she has written Georgina without reply and asks Mrs. O'Sullivan

¹⁰ Newspapers.com - St. Catharines Standard - 12 May 1914 - Page 7,

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/124940909/george-grants-son-took-him-to-court-in/?xid=637>

¹¹ New York State Department of Health; Albany, NY, USA; *New York State Marriage Index, microfilm page 464*

¹² US Army WWI Transport Service, Passenger Lists,

<https://www.fold3.com/image/604004788?rec=621219532&xid=1945>

¹³ <https://www.fold3.com/image/322231040?terms=4151855,united,america,states>

¹⁴ Newspapers.com - The Buffalo News - 1922-07-13 - Page 20,

<https://www.newspapers.com/clip/117374141/georgina-brooks-fined-for-selling/?xid=637>

¹⁵ RG 20-50-5 Vanier Centre for women inmate case files (1880-1991), RG 20-200-1 Indexes to Adult Inmate Main Office case files (1920-1991), RG 20-50-1 Vanier Centre for Women prison registers (1880-1997), RG 20-50-9 Andrew Mercer Reformatory for Women index record books (1881-1957), Index by inmate #, RG 20-92-1 St. Catharines Jail registers

(the Superintendent of the A.M. Reformatory), to pass the letter on to her as she basically wants to help her find a place to live upon her release. Strangely, there is a reply to this letter however, it is dated 12 Sept 1922 (?) and informs Mrs. Riggs, that Georgina cannot have visitors as she is suffering from a venereal disease, and she cannot be “released until her health is improved.” Mrs. O’Sullivan also informed Mrs. Riggs that she did not pass on her 13 Sept 1922 letter as she did not want to “upset her [*Georgina*] by acquainting her the letter you sent me to give her, as I fear it will be some time before she can be released.” None of this makes much sense, especially the backward dating of the letters. Perhaps the Sept 12th date is a typo on the part of Mrs. O’Sullivan or her assistant?

According to archival Mercer records (See footnotes #15), on 18 Sept 1922 “while in the basement of the reformatory alone with Asst. Superintendent”, Georgina, “fell in a fit shortly after one o’clock.” According to the record, Georgina was unconscious and could not be brought around so Dr. Edna Guest (the reformatory doctor)¹⁶, had her transferred to the Toronto General Hospital where she died shortly after her arrival. The coroner was then notified of her death.

On the day of Georgina’s death, a telegram was sent to her older sister Alice Collins of St. Catharines, notifying her that Georgina had met with a “serious accident”. Alice immediately responded stating that she was coming to Toronto to plan for her sister’s body. The Superintendent also sent a full report regarding Georgina’s ‘accident’ and subsequent death to W.W. Dunlop, Inspector of Prisons on that same day. (See footnote #15).

On 25 Sept 1922 the Coroner, J.H. McConnell officially noted that “Georgina Brooks came to her death at the Toronto General Hospital on Sept 18, 1922, from natural causes.”¹⁷ Three months later on 21 Dec 1922, the Superintendent finally sent the results of the coroner’s inquest concerning Georgina’s untimely death to the Inspector of Prisons. (See footnote #15).

On Georgina’s County of York, Division of Toronto’s death registration her brother James Grant of St. Catharines is listed as the informant and the attending physician is noted as the coroner, J.H. McConnell. Although she died at the Toronto General Hospital in Toronto after suffering some kind of accident while in custody at the Mercer Reformatory for Women, her death wasn’t registered until a month later on 16 Oct 1922¹⁸. Her death should have been registered immediately by the hospital and the coroner J.H. McConnell should have been listed as both the informant and the attending physician.

Many questions still linger one hundred years after my ancestral cousin Georgina Grant-Brook’s death. Firstly, why was such a high monetary fine levied and such a harsh six-month incarceration sentence to the Mercer Reformatory in Toronto attached (for non-payment of the

¹⁶ Article relating to the 1948 Mercer Reformatory Riot – noting information regarding Dr. Guest, <https://maisonneuve.org/article/2018/04/18/incorrigible-women/>

¹⁷ Toronto Star, 26 Sept 1922, page 3

¹⁸ Archives of Ontario; Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Collection: MS935; Reel: 286, microfilm page 1656

fine), for her first offense? After all, selling liquor was classified as a minor infraction. Did Georgina receive a harsher penalty because of her gender and/or her race?

Why was her brother James who lived in St. Catharines the informant for his sister's death in Toronto while incarcerated in a women's prison?

Why did Emma O'Sullivan, the Superintendent of the Mercer Reformatory send a telegram to Georgina's sister Alice informing her that she had a serious accident if her brother was the informant for her death?

How does a thirty-year-old woman apparently 'fall in a fit' while being incarcerated in the basement of the reformatory, then the cause of death is noted as 'endocarditis' (which is caused by a bacterial or rarely a fungal infection. A valve infection), but noted by the coroner at the inquest of her death as "natural causes"?

These are questions that sadly will never be answered. Regrettably, Georgina's premature death was, in my opinion, completely preventable.

Georgina Grant witnessed her father's drunken and erratic behaviour on a regular basis during her formative years. Her mother was incarcerated in the city jail because she most probably had a breakdown due to a combination of postpartum depression and stress caused by her living conditions while Georgina was in her early teens. She and her siblings would have most likely suffered from a form of PTSD that would have consequently followed them into their adult lives.

I'm not surprised that Georgina fell into some form of unlawful pastime due to the nature of her family life. But I am not only shocked but very dismayed that she was sent to a reformatory like Mercer because she was charged with such an unambiguous offense for the very first time.

I have my own theories concerning my cousin Georgina Grant-Brook's death. I believe that she was most probably kept in solidarity confinement due to her behaving erratically or angrily when she was first invested in the Mercer Reformatory, and that is why she was not allowed visits from Mrs. Riggs (see footnotes #15). She may have acted and reacted out of anger when she was finally released from solitary confinement in the basement of the reformatory. And possibly because of her actions she could have been struck and forcibly restrained by the Assistant Superintendent and attending guards and then something went terribly wrong.

By the time the reformatory doctor was called it was most likely too late to revive Georgina. The reformatory definitely would not have wanted any unexplained death on their hands, which would have been too difficult to publicly rationalize. It was easier to send Georgina to the Toronto General Hospital where they would have pronounced her dead upon arrival. Just another girl from the Mercer Reformatory with medical issues and the coroner most probably just signed off on her death, and with very little fanfare, held a quick and short inquest (as he had to do by law) and pronounced the death to be from 'natural causes'...case closed.

I'm not sure how her brother James' name came to be noted as the informant on her death registration. However, I do not believe that James was the one who actually registered her death. Why would he? Georgina died in a hospital in Toronto while being in the custody of a women's reformatory in that same city, while her brother James was living about 112 km away in St. Catharines, Ontario.

My thanks and deep appreciation to Linda Mayhew who requested Georgina's archival Andrew Mercer Reformatory records on 30 Jan 2023 and received them from the Archives of Ontario on 9 Feb 2023, then forwarded them directly to me.

Each woman who suffered at the hands of those in charge at the Andrew Mercer Reformatory for Women (28 Aug 1880 – 3 Apr 1969), deserves to have their name remembered and said out loud.

...Georgina Grant-Brooks.

Researched and written by: Nancy M. Lee