



EPISODE 11, 2004: KORANIC SCHOOLBOOK, MULVANE, KANSAS

Gwen: Our final story reveals some surprising facts about the history of Islam in America. It is the late 1790s. In frontier Kentucky, pioneers are settling what was then the northwestern edge of the United States. Most of these settlers are white, European and Protestant. Or are they? We've heard about a young woman's schoolbook that could change the way we think about life on the frontier. The book originally belonged to a young Kentucky woman named Mary Steele. It's now in the care of her descendants, Clarice Guznee Horton and her daughter Catherine Weiss. Catherine and Clarice are especially intrigued by two of the book's entries. Hidden among math equations, poetry and prose are passages attributed to the text sacred to Muslims, the Koran. But how could a young woman in frontier Kentucky have come into contact with Islam?

Catherine Weiss: There are clues in there, but I don't know what they're trying to tell me.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright. I've come to the town of Mulvane, Kansas, to meet Catherine and Clarice and investigate their mystery.

Clarice Horton: hello, I'm Clarice.

Gwen: Wow, this is very beautiful penmanship. "Mary Steele's Book, 1800."

Catherine: If you get to page 5, you'll find something that we have been curious about for years.

Gwen: So this is page 5. "A few particulars taken from the alcoran." That's lovely.

Catherine: We want to know, how did quotes from the Koran end up in Mary Steele's 1800 workbook? Where did she even learn that there was such a thing as, as she calls it, the alcoran?

Gwen: What have I got to go on? What do we know about Mary Steele?

Catherine: Well, we know that she was unmarried when she wrote this book in 1800. She was 23 at the time.

Gwen: Catherine also knows that Mary Steele was born in Scotland but moved to America in 1777. Her family settled in Kentucky's Pendleton County. Her father John owned a small plot of land, but he was too poor to own slaves to help him farm it. Mary remained single until 1804, when, at 26, she married a Baptist minister named William Griffin, which seems to make her interest in Islam even more unusual.

Gwen: So I think this is a -- it's a fascinating question.

Gwen: My first step is to confirm the schoolbook really is, as its date claims, from 1800. I'm not an expert at authentication, so I'm visiting Christie's auction house in New York. I'm hoping manuscript expert Chris Coover will be able to date the book.

Gwen: so, Chris, here it is.

Gwen: Chris starts by looking for a watermark. If he finds one, he can match it against the published directory and accurately pinpoint where and when the paper was made.

Chris: Let's see. Any evidence of a watermark from that?

Gwen: Nothing there, nothing.

Chris: Any watermark there?

Gwen: No.

Chris: Too bad.

Get more on History Detectives at: www.pbs.org/historydetectives



EPISODE 11, 2004: KORANIC SCHOOLBOOK,
MULVANE, KANSAS

Gwen: Next Chris inspects the paper itself.

Chris: It looks, on first inspection, to be handmade paper, laid paper.

Gwen: Laid paper was made from old rags mashed to a pulp and spread across a wire mesh mold, leaving indentations known as chain lines.

Chris: See the chain lines here?

Gwen: Mm-hmm.

Chris: That confirms it's handmade paper.

Gwen: Then Chris looks at the ink. If this was written in 1800, it's likely Mary made the ink herself.

Chris: I think if you look at a page like this, you see that there's some variation.

Gwen: Mm-hmm.

Chris: It's darker here and lighter brown in this portion. This shows that there were different batches of ink being used when this book was prepared. And that, I think, argues pretty conclusively that this was homemade ink.

Gwen: Taken together, these clues lead Chris toward a clear conclusion.

Chris: Well, I think all the factors we've looked at reflect the fact that this book is likely to have been prepared in the late 18th or very early 19th century.

Gwen: So this date of 1800 seems accurate to you?

Chris: That date I have no question about. I'm sure it's an accurate one.

Gwen: Well, this is a good start. Next, I need to take a detailed look at Mary's work in the schoolbook. I'm meeting historian and colonial education expert professor Patricia Cohen. First, I want to know what sort of schooling a young frontier woman like Mary Steele would have had.

Patricia Cohen: Well, the typical education for both boys and girls was to start when you were fairly young, say around five or six, learn the basic skills of reading, writing and perhaps arithmetic. Children would go to a school like this until they were nine or ten. But then boys' labor was needed on the farm. Girls typically didn't get much education beyond that.

Gwen: Next, I show Pat the schoolbook.

Patricia: Well, these are pages where she is working out problems in square roots. For a student to get up to square roots is unusual, and for a female student to be there is extremely unusual.

Gwen: What would you say in terms of where she'd be learning this?

Patricia: She might have learned it from some itinerant teacher or local teacher who had somehow acquired this knowledge himself and almost certainly would have been a male teacher.

Gwen: Then Pat spots something surprising.

Patricia: There are no mistakes, there's no blotting out of numbers, and so I think what she has probably done is worked

out these problems on a slate or some other -- more scrap piece of paper and transferred them into this book for a permanent record. But it also contains poetry, aphorisms, words of wisdom. Here's a poem very neatly planned for this space. "The gospel plow." she knows exactly when she starts how many verses there are, and she's got eight in one column and eight in another. But she's planned all of this to fit on each page. I've seen books like this before, although I've never seen one by a girl that had such advanced mathematics in it, so that is very extraordinary. And basically what this is, is a copybook, an 18th-century, early 19th- and late 18th-century school copybook kept by a student for a permanent record of what they learned.

Gwen: If this is a copybook, a personal collection of useful math techniques and inspirational passages, what can it tell us about its author, Mary Steele?

Patricia: I think she's a very extraordinary young woman. She's learning arithmetic way beyond where boys in her culture would have learned it and extraordinarily beyond where young women would have learned it. She's learning it at the age of 23, so she's not considering that school is behind her and something that's done with. She's ambitiously working out problems in fairly advanced arithmetic and early algebra here.

Gwen: So she's doing this for her own pleasure and edification.

Patricia: Yeah, right.

Gwen: Finally, I show Pat the passages that mystify Catherine and Clarice. What do you make of this reference to the Koran?

Patricia: Hmm. Well, a copybook like this would have wisdom from many places, and this is a student who has got selections from the Bible, as you say, and then from -- and other religions, sacred text as well. So I'm not sure what to make of it.

Gwen: Before I go any further, I want to make sure these quotations really do come from a translation of the Koran. There are two distinct passages Mary attributes to it. One begins: "four things should never flatter us, the familiarity of princes, the caresses of women, the smiles of our enemies, nor a warm day in winter, for these things are not of long duration." I'm searching an online translation of the Koran. If the verses are authentic, I should find a close match. No results. Well, I'll try a later phrase and see. How about, "the familiarity of princes?" No results again. So what about the other passage? It begins: "forgive easily, do good to all and dispute not with the ignorant." Let's start simply with the word "forgive." Okay. There are a lot of verses with the word forgive in the Koran, but do any of them match the one in the workbook? Wait a minute. Here it is. It's translated somewhat differently, but it's very much in the same spirit. "Take to forgiveness and enjoin good." So we have a match. At least one passage in the copybook really is a translation from the Koran. But where did Mary copy it from? I'm meeting a man, who I hope will have an answer, Professor Bob Allison. He's an expert on the relationship between the early United States and the Muslim world. The first thing Bob tells me is that even on the frontier, late 18th-century Americans were much more aware of Islam than we might imagine.

Bob Allison: Americans had a great awareness of the Muslim world for a number of reasons. One was a political awareness. Americans were trying to create a political society and they didn't want the American people to suffer the same fates that people in other parts of the world had. And they looked around the world for examples of how other people had gone badly wrong in doing this. And their favorite negative examples were turkey, the Ottoman Empire and Morocco. There's also a religious understanding among Protestant ministers, Puritan ministers. Protestants typically viewed any religion other than Protestantism as heresy.

Gwen: Those negative stereotypes were challenged in the 1780s when, encouraged by Britain, the Muslim state of Algiers seized several American merchant ships. Despite being held captive, the crews were surprised to find Algerian Muslims were much more worldly and tolerant than they'd expected. And when they arrived home, around 1800, many of these Americans published accounts of their experiences.

Bob: People actually were reading lots of the books written by American captives, or reading in published form the plays, or reading newspapers that have all kinds of stuff on what's happening in the Mediterranean, a different kind of image of

the Muslim world begins to emerge.

Gwen: According to Bob, these widely available accounts may well have made Mary Steele curious about Islam. But there's another explanation. She may have met someone who was Muslim.

Bob: A large number of Muslim slaves from West Africa are brought to America at this time, so having a literate Muslim as a slave really fosters a different kind of understanding.

Gwen: Could Mary Steele have been taught verses from the Koran by a Muslim slave? I've come to Harlem, to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I'm meeting historian Sylviane Diouf, who's an expert on slavery in 18th-century Kentucky.

Sylviane Diouf: In 1790, there were about 12,000 slaves in Kentucky. So if we say that even maybe 10% or 15% of them were Muslims, so we are talking about several hundred people, probably, let's say, I don't know, maybe 1500.

Gwen: Could Mary have met one of these 1500 Muslims? I know from Clarice and Catherine that Mary's father John was too poor to afford his own slaves.

Sylviane: Even when people did not own slaves, in many cases they hired them. So there's a high chance that she would have indeed met with Muslims.

Gwen: So we might have found the connection, until Sylviane takes a closer look at Mary's workbook.

Sylviane: Now the translation is really, really polished and, you know, it's written in this old English style. I find that a little peculiar. They would have been able to translate from Arabic into their own language in a very literary fashion, but in English, probably not.

Gwen: So these verses seem to have come from an English translator rather than a slave. To find out if there were English translations of the Koran in circulation in America in the late 18th century, I'm meeting New York university Professor Ziad Amersafi. He tells me Mary could have had access to not just one but two versions.

Ziad Amersafi: Translations that would have been available to someone in the late 1700s in English would have been the George Sale translation, which came out in 1734 and circulated widely. And then there was an earlier translation by Alexander Ross, which was published in 1649.

Gwen: Did Mary copy her passages from one of these books? First, Ziad checks the Sale translation.

Ziad: Yes, here it is. "Use indulgence and command that which is just, and withdraw far from the ignorant." So these aren't quite the words she uses. She begins by saying; "forgive easily" rather than use indulgence. So apparently it's not the sale translation that she was reading. The other possibility might be the Ross translation. Why don't I take a look at that? Here we go. "Do what is lawful to be done, command things honest and depart from the ignorant." so again, it's not "forgive easily." It's not the same text that we find in this -- in the copybook. So apparently it's not the Ross translation she was working with, either. I don't know where that comes from.

Gwen: I've drawn another blank. Then I remember Bob Allison's comment that during the Algerian crisis of the late 1790s, many books and periodicals carried information about Islam. to see if one of these could be the source, I've come to the rare books room in the New York Public Library. I'm looking through material Mary Steele would have had access to at the time. Here's a 1797 copy of Kentucky's first and most widely read newspaper, the "Gazette". There are some illuminating advertisements here. "Mrs. Gray's School for the Instruction of Young Ladies." For sale, three new stills and a Negro man, a good distiller." And look here. Reports from cities all over the world. They obviously had an interest in international affairs. Then I find something fascinating. An aphorism from the "Farmer's Almanac" of 1793. "Four things should never flatter us." It's the passage Mary incorrectly attributed to the Koran. We seem to be on the right track. But what about the other passage, the one we know is authentic? I wonder if I can track that one down.



**EPISODE 11, 2004: KORANIC SCHOOLBOOK,
MULVANE, KANSAS**

Finally, after a long search, I think I've found something. I'm sure Clarice and Catherine will be surprised by this news. Back in Kansas, I tell them that Mary's book is a copybook and what it reveals about their ancestor.

Catherine: For heaven's sake. How about that girl?

Gwen: Then I tell them about my discovery in the library. In a widely available reference book known as "Dobson's Encyclopedia," I found a six-page entry devoted exclusively to the Koran, well written, accurate and surprisingly positive. And look here. The most excellent moral in the whole alcoran is, "show mercy, do good to all and dispute not with the ignorant," almost exactly the words Mary wrote down. Did Mary see the first passage, borrow this encyclopedia, find the second and then decide to preserve both in her copybook? We can't say for certain, but what's clear is that Mary Steele was open-minded about Islam, and even in rural Kentucky in 1800; she had reliable sources available to help her learn more about it.

Clarice: Well, that is remarkable.

Catherine: That is remarkable. That tickles me. You know that tickles me, mother.

Clarice: Of course.

Gwen: Because you understand the value of this extraordinary woman's manuscript, I'd like to give you a professional manuscript box to keep it in. It certainly deserves to be treated with the fullest respect.

Catherine: I really appreciate it. Thank you very much. Just perfect.

ENDS