

**Biography of  
Mrs. Catherine Babington**

by J.P. Babington

Foreword by Karen Kidd

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## Forward

*“Some contend that it is impossible for a woman to get possession of the Secrets of Masonry and others have conceived the idea that the publication of the book would damage the cause of Masonry and that it was contrary to Masonic teachings to publish matters of that character.”*

– Joseph Peck “J.P.” Babington,  
“The Biography of Mrs. Catherine Babington”<sup>1</sup>

When you open “The Biography of Mrs. Catherine Babington”, you are about to do what many Freemasons and Masonic scholars hope(d) you never would: read it.

From their perspective, you are reading a dangerous book.

The reality, in my opinion, involves far less drama. I believe when you read the biography, you allow yourself to be better informed and make up your own mind about this well documented early woman Freemason. You don’t have to take my word for it that Catherine Babington was a Freemason. You don’t have to take anyone else’s word that she wasn’t.

So, to those who can bear this Light . . . read on<sup>2</sup>.

Joseph Peck “J.P.” Babington wrote his biography about his mother two decades after her death. Comments from critics, detractors and “doubting Thomases” followed quickly on the first edition in 1906 and continued to howl thru the next two editions.

At least as many were eager to read JP Babington’s small volume. “A number of members of the Masonic Fraternity, in North and South Carolina, since the death of my mother, in 1886, have asked me to write and publish a biographical sketch of her life and let the Masonic world know how she became a Third Degree Mason,” Babington explained in his book’s forward, penned Nov. 1, 1906.

“I have deferred the work, from time to time, thinking that perhaps I might find ‘A more convenient season.’

“Another reason for my delay was that I wanted to talk the matter over with my oldest Brother, B.B. Babington<sup>3</sup>, of Shelby, N.C., to get from him some valuable information to aid me in the work; but I received notice, a few days ago, that he had been called from labor to rest and I am now the only

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living member of the family who can say, from a Masonic standpoint, that my mother, Mrs. Catherine Babington, was a Mason and knew all of Masonry that can be obtained from the Blue Lodge.”<sup>3a</sup>

Despite the criticism, JP Babington’s delay is understandable. He was himself a Freemason of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and, so, had more than an inkling of the unkindness that would follow. He also knew how very little he had to gain.

It was clear that many would be interested in his book; and that many of his Brothers would criticize and even slander not only him but also “the sacred memory” of his “beloved mother”<sup>4</sup>.

So, after long delay, JP Babington’s love for his mother and desire to give the story “to the world”<sup>5</sup> proved strong enough to overcome these obstacles. He stood upon his word as a Freemason that what he wrote was the truth as he knew it, published it himself and let the world do what it would.

And so it has.

It’s not known how many copies of “The Biography of Mrs. Catherine Babington” were issued<sup>6</sup> but it did run into three editions, the last of which was published in 1912, about four years before JP Babington’s death at the age of 65. After that, no other publisher would touch it.

The biography quickly became very rare. Many “disappeared” into grand lodges while others languished in, and were subsequently discarded from, private collections. Within a decade, it was impossible for the casual reader to obtain a copy. Until the rerelease now in your hands, copies simply haven’t been available anywhere at any price<sup>7</sup>.

Over the years, even objective scholars often wrote second hand about the biography, at times quoting the work of others who also had not seen a copy. In that climate, a number of inaccuracies were published and republished.

Reading this biography is crucial to anyone who wants to form their own opinions about the truth in this case. I am much indebted to the Library of North Carolina for twice loaning me their third edition copy; to my knowledge, the world’s only existing circulating copy. Without it, I would have had a much more difficult time plowing thru the misunderstandings, misinformation and outright lies of prior

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Masonic Scholars who too often wrote with their own agenda: to prove Catherine Babington was not a Freemason, regardless of evidence otherwise<sup>8</sup>.

That was my obstacle as a Masonic scholar. The average reader faced a similar hurdle. Before this rerelease, readers could not sort out for themselves what actually is in the biography from the published inaccuracies. Now they can.

A paradox in this study is how dependant we are on even the most insistent denying Masonic Scholars for their lists of, and stories about, early women Freemasons such as Catherine Babington. Their accounts often make up the bulk of what is still known about these women. Gleaning those facts usually requires sifting out the “double-speak” in which these prior Masonic scholars wrote. They often stated, from the beginning and then repeatedly throughout, there were no early women Freemasons – and then wrote about them all the same.

That double-speak, always insulting to the intelligent reader, was the only way these scholars could have written about these women and hoped to be published in their own, less tolerant times. Much of the history of these women, including Catherine, has been obscured, neglected and not a little willfully destroyed. My gratitude to those prior Masonic scholars is immense.

One of these, the late Carl Claudy, describes Catherine’s story as “probably the best authenticated”<sup>9</sup> and Catherine herself as “this estimable lady”. He indulges – to the point it’s easy to imagine he believed it himself – in that required double-speak. He very inaccurately retells JP Babington’s story and then builds on the mistelling, ever certain his readers will not be able to check the biography for themselves and recognize, for themselves, where he got it wrong. But Claudy admits there are parts of her story that even he cannot refute:

“There seems to be no doubt that (1) Mrs. Babington lived; (2) that she knew at least some Masonic ritual and (3) that hundreds if not thousands of her neighbors and friends believed the story.”<sup>10</sup>

Claudy’s three givens in mind, the reader can approach Catherine’s biography with an open mind. That is certainly my greatest hope.

Even so, JP Babington’s story about his mother, sadly, is a bit

flawed. He seemed not to have had much of an editor assisting him. Misspellings and grammatical errors are quite plentiful in the biography, even in the third edition.

The biography also is brief. The original editions were only about the size of a modern Masonic ritual book and fits easily into a man's suit coat pocket. Given its brevity, there clearly is much JP Babington left out.

Babington also assumed his readers would not exist much outside of the Carolinas or outside his time. He drops names, such as William Murdock, then Grand Lecturer of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina, as well as "Major L.P. Erwin", "Dr. Vernon" and "Sheriff Pascal". JP Babington clearly believed his readers would know these men and, so, he provided no background information about them. The passage of time rendered them largely unknowable to most modern readers.

The book's greatest flaw is the glaring error in its title. JP Babington claims his mother was the only woman Freemason in the world. In "Haunted Chambers" I document dozens of whom we know anything about, many of them Catherine's contemporaries. There likely were many more about whom we know nothing.

JP Babington is not to be faulted for not knowing about these other early women Freemasons or for his genuine, perhaps even treasured, belief that his mother was the only one. Many Freemasons, then and now, knew/know nothing about these early women Freemasons.

It also is best to recall that JP Babington waited his entire life for that "more convenient season". He wrote the biography very soon after his older brother died and decades after everyone else involved in the story had passed away. In waiting so very long, he could no longer confer with his uncles, his father or even Catherine herself to verify the details. This means he had only his own recollections.

Unfortunately, his recollections were not always accurate. For instance, JP Babington writes:

"My recollection is that several of her uncles were physicians and the most of them, if not all, were Masons."<sup>11</sup>

JP Babington was mistaken at least about the livelihood of his maternal uncles. Only one, Ben Ulen Jr., is known for certain to have

been a physician. Though JP Babington was more accurate about their Masonic affiliation (see below), this error about their livelihoods does raise brows among very biased scholars eager for any excuse – any excuse at all - to dismiss the story.

Viewed more objectively, JP Babington's uneven recollections about his Ulen kin is quite understandable. He certainly could not have been close to them, having spent most of his life, often moving and seldom settled, in the Southeastern US, well away from East Kentucky. He also was writing decades after the fact and no longer had any living relatives with whom to confer. It's not at all startling that a few errors – none strong enough to negate the entire account - would creep in.

JP Babington honestly wrote with what he had to work with. Luckily, enough records remain that correct his errors, fill in details he left out and corroborate much that is in the biography. This kind of research makes a good companion for the biography's modern reader and helps us better understand what really happened with this teen-aged Freemason. And why.

The scene is early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Eastern Kentucky, in the still young county of Greenup, in a portion that today is Boyd County. The land lies deep in Appalachia, north of the Cumberland Plateau, on the Ohio River, in the northeast corner of what is now Kentucky. This already was home to the Shawnee and other native peoples when the first Europeans arrived but the area was settled long before. Burial mounds of the Adena people, there more than 2000 years before the first white settlers arrived, still exist near Siloam and Old Springville<sup>12</sup>.

The first Europeans, mostly hunters and trappers, entered the area in 1669. Christopher Gist, representing the Ohio Land Company, arrived in the 1750s and founded a community of mixed European (largely French fur traders) and native peoples. These formed the earliest Kentucky town, "Lower Shawnee Town", at the mouth of the Scioto River in about the place where Portsmouth, OH, and South Portsmouth, KY, are today. This preceded the more famous founding of "Boonsboro" by Daniel Boone in 1774.

Despite the mixed population in Lower Shawnee Town, tensions were high between the European settlers and resident native peoples. Atrocities were committed on all sides. The Indian Wars of Appalachia were bloody enough but the native peoples also were displaced by European diseases to which they had no immunity and the con-

stant invasion of their traditional lands by settlers of European descent. These three factors lead to a dramatic reduction in the number of native peoples in East Kentucky by Catherine's time, which meant the situation was not quite as tense as in her grandfather's youth. However, incidents were still reported.

Kentucky became a state in 1792. Greenup County was formed from Mason County in June 1803 and Greenupburg, the county seat, became a bustling center of activity. There's indication that Catherine's maternal relatives made periodic trips to town and Greenupburg was an important city in their lives.

Freemasonry also settled into Kentucky, which early was under the Masonic direction of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Masonic evolution in Kentucky compared well with the rest of the country, described quite succinctly in "Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York, May 1902":

"At the close of the eighteenth century there were in the United States fourteen Grand Lodges, the last to be organized being the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, October, 1800. These fourteen Grand Lodges governed 470 Lodges with a membership of about 18,000."<sup>13</sup>

By 1800, there were five lodges and an unknown number of Freemasons in Kentucky<sup>14</sup>. Given the distance, mountains and often dangerous travel conditions, journeys to the Grand Lodge in Virginia were quite treacherous for Kentucky Freemasons, not to mention travel of Grand Lodge officers to lodges in Kentucky, which seems not to have happened much at all.

These conditions likewise made it virtually impossible for the Grand Lodge of Virginia's Charity Fund to make it to Kentucky Masons or the families of Masons in distress<sup>15</sup>. The Grand Lodge of Kentucky, by necessity, was organized Oct. 16, 1800<sup>16</sup>.

From that date, Masonry in Kentucky grew very fast. The Grand Lodge of Kentucky also chartered Lodges in what became the states of Mississippi, Indiana, Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri and Tennessee. Greenup Lodge was one of dozens of lodges established in the Grand Lodge's first three decades.<sup>17</sup> So by the year our story begins, Freemasonry was well into its second decade in Kentucky.

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Catherine Babington was born December 28th, 1815<sup>18</sup> to Charles and Margaret “Peggy” Sweet<sup>19</sup>, probably, as JP Babington wrote in her biography, in Princess, later Princess Furnace<sup>20</sup> and still later Princess again. Her birth place may also have been on her father’s property in Greenupburg<sup>21</sup>, visible on the plat map of the town of Greenupburg, as published in “Greenup County, Kentucky” by Nina Mitchell Biggs and Mabel Lee Mackoy. The Sweet’s property in town was on Water Street on the south bank of the Ohio River<sup>22</sup>.

Of her father, little is known besides his name. A family history lists Charles Sweet’s birth place as New York<sup>23</sup>. His marriage to Margaret Ulen<sup>24</sup> is listed in Jordon Dodd’s “Kentucky Marriages, 1802-1850”<sup>25</sup>, which lists the date as July 26, 1815<sup>26</sup>. The following spring, he stood as bondsman<sup>27</sup> at the wedding of his oldest brother-in-law, Benjamin Ulen Jr., to the widowed Eleanor Cornelius<sup>28</sup>. This strongly suggests the two men were close friends.

Which is important in Catherine Sweet Babington’s story because Ben Ulen Jr.:

- is the maternal uncle about whom we know the most
- was a Freemason and member of Greenup Lodge No. 89, the largest and best documented lodge then present in the area<sup>29</sup>
- is the uncle who, I believe, played the most pivotal role in Catherine’s upbringing and her initiation into the Craft.

His friend, her father, Charles Sweet, may also have been the revolutionary soldier of that name, a member of Joshua Conkey’s Company, listed in “Historical Register of Virginians in the Revolution” by John H. Gwathmey. There is, otherwise, little mention about him in the period’s records<sup>30</sup>.

About Catherine’s mother, we know a little more. Margaret Ulen Sweet was born in the late 1790s<sup>31</sup>, one of the many children of Benjamin Sr and Catharine Carpenter Ulen. Details about Margaret Sweet’s later life are few. She appears to have married again, perhaps twice more, after Charles Sweet died. Benjamin Ulen reported, in the history of his father included in the Draper Manuscript, that by 1853 she was “the widow Simpson”<sup>32</sup> living in “Penalton Sity”, in Greenup County<sup>33</sup>. I could find no record of her death but it seems unlikely Margaret Sweet outlived her daughter as J.P. Babington probably would have mentioned it in his book.

Charles and Margaret Sweet had a second child, Benjamin Ulen Sweet, in October 1818, also in Greenup County, KY. JP Babington does mention his uncle in his book. More importantly, Catherine's brother turns up in the Day Book of her eldest maternal uncle, again suggesting a close relationship with him that may have its roots in his friendship with Charles Sweet.

Charles Sweet died when his daughter was very young. J.P. Babington, in his book, records his maternal grandfather died when Catherine was about 6; and that Margaret Sweet, with her two children, moved to her father's home "a short distance from her (Catherine's) birth place". That would have been in "Ulen's Branch" on "Taylor's Run", about four miles from Greenupburg. The 1820 Federal Census lists Catherine's grandfather's household and includes a girl less than ten years old, though it does not name her. If this was Catherine, then it would seem her father died before 1820.

So for a time at least, Catherine's strongest male role model was none other the Ulen clan's pater familias, the formidable Benjamin Ulen Sr. This man's life would make its own book and the temptation is great to tell his story in more complete, thrilling detail. Sadly, that is not appropriate for the present volume, so I will keep it brief<sup>34</sup>.

Benjamin Ulen Sr., a frontiersman in much the same tradition as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, was born in 1760<sup>35</sup> on "rase street" (probably Race Street) in Philadelphia, PA, according to his eldest son's first-hand recollection included in the Draper Manuscript<sup>36</sup>. His parents, Charles and America Ulen, moved him and his younger sister into the wilds of Appalachia when he was still a small boy. Not long after, he and his sister were abducted by members of the Creek nation. His sister soon died. He was raised among the Creek "and I lerned their maners and language and vices."<sup>37</sup>

After a number of adventures, he left the Creek nation, apparently on very bad terms. At what is now Point Pleasant, WV, he evaded recapture - and burning at the stake - by jumping off a high cliff at the confluence of the Ohio and Kanawha rivers. The place took on the name "Ulen's Leap" and retains it to this day. That leap was legendary in his time and the story was told and retold throughout the country.

He made his living as an interpreter and guide, as well as soldier, during the Indian Wars in that part of Appalachia. He was certainly present at the Battle of Point Pleasant Oct. 10, 1774<sup>38</sup>. He also was guide

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and interpreter on the expedition into what is now Western Ohio that lead to the founding of Cincinnati. Later he opened a store in Point Pleasant.

He was in middle age when he married Catharine<sup>39</sup> Carpenter<sup>40</sup>. It appears the couple settled in Greenup County, Kentucky, near Riverton<sup>41</sup>, at nearly the turn of the century. Benjamin Ulen Sr. sat on Greenup County's first jury in 1804 and he is included in a list of Greenup County citizens in 1811<sup>42</sup>. He was a prominent, if feisty, member of the community. In July 1812, he was ordered to appear before Greenup County's Circuit Court, charged with swearing one profane oath ("by God")<sup>43</sup>. Still, he was described as a "respectable citizen" in a story about him in the March 12, 1832 edition of the Maysville, KY., *Eagle*. He also was a Freemason, according to one Masonic Scholar<sup>44</sup>.

Several sources say he died at the age of 80 on Nov. 30, 1834 from a sip of poisoned whiskey and was buried on his farm<sup>45</sup>.

One can only imagine what an impression such a man made upon the very young Catherine. His influence would certainly help explain Catherine's boldness; and, also, her near steely calm, even under great stress that would cow most teen-agers.

In addition to Catherine's mother Margaret, Benjamin and Catharine Ulen had seven other children who survived infancy. They were:

- Benjamin Jr, born 1790 Fort Point Pleasant in Virginia, now West Virginia
- John born Oct. 28, 1792 at Fort Point Pleasant in Virginia, now West Virginia
- Nancy Ulen<sup>46</sup>, born May 10, 1795 in Mason, VA., now West Virginia
- Samuel, born Dec. 5, 1798 in Greenup County, KY
- Frederick, born Jan. 10, 1801 in Greenup County, KY
- Absalom, born April 21, 1803 in Greenup County, KY
- Hamilton, born April 6, 1805 in Greenup County, KY

J.P. Babington mentions the sons and the daughter only in passing and none by name. He also does not give their birth dates or places. It's notable that his recollections line up well with the official records, such as exist from the period, which do give these birth dates and places.

We know, with certainty, not all of Catherine's maternal relatives