

Mary Elizabeth Graves
Fierce Defender of Old Town Bluffton
By John Samuel Graves, III

My Aunt, Mary Elizabeth Graves, was the last Graves family member to live in the Graves House at 85 Calhoun Street. She once wrote “I am a native of Old Bluffton and it gives me great pleasure to say that the natives were, and are, the most caring, thoughtful and unselfish people I have ever known. I am proud of my heritage, as all people should be.” Mary was well educated, principled, tough minded and smart—and a fierce defender of Old Town Bluffton and its values as she saw and remembered them.

She brought her formidable intelligence into spirited battles with town leaders and developers over multiple issues concerning the directions that Bluffton was taking. She tended to be blunt and straightforward in presenting the truth as she saw it. She was fearless and considered by many to be a difficult person because she was so intractable about things she believed in and held dear. Once she had made up her mind about an issue, she made an imposing opponent. Some would have called her a “stumbling block,” but her contentious, often contrarian character made her the “Bluffton original” that she truly was. She once said, “I’m not kind, I’m honest.” At times, her honesty got her into trouble.¹

Some people considered her views about Old Town Bluffton extreme, but she cared deeply about Bluffton's Historic Preservation District and was very proud of the fact that her home was listed as a contributing structure in that district. She also cared deeply about public land remaining public, and that it not be subject to what she called “land grabs” by developers or other parties. She cared deeply about the quality of the environment in and around Bluffton’s Old Town, especially May River and its accesses. Anyone who threatened the integrity of the Historic Preservation District, the public lands and rights of way in Old Town, or the health and accessibility of May River would have to do battle with her. She



considered herself one of the last members of Bluffton's “Old Guard,” and she felt that she had a personal responsibility to defend and fight for “Old Town” values. Those who opposed her quickly discovered that she possessed a rock solid integrity and could be a genuine thorn in the side. Many locals who had sparred with Mary over the years had more blunt assessments of where she caused pain.

By the time she died in 2009, members of the Graves family had lived in her house for over 100 years. Her grandfather, George Sewell Guilford, the builder of the Graves House, was Bluffton's first mayor after its incorporation in 1903, and had served as mayor for twelve terms. He and his wife, “Doctor” Jane Guilford, had arrived in Bluffton around 1887.² (Mary had been born in the Graves House in 1921, delivered by her grandmother, “Doctor” Jane Guilford.) Mary was concerned that much of Bluffton's colorful history was being lost, and indeed, if it had not been for her the list of the names of Bluffton's mayors in the early 1900's, and hand copies of their town council meeting notes and ordinances, would have disappeared. (Due to a leaky roof in a storage building where some of the old town records were kept, many of these kinds of records were destroyed.) Her grandfather, George Guilford, had handwritten many of them.

¹ Please read J. Mitchell Brown's article, *Bluffton's Thorny Rose*, originally printed in the February 2009 edition of *The Bluffton Breeze* shortly after her death. The article can be viewed on graveshouse.org under the *Articles* tab.

² See *A Short History of the Graves House* on graveshouse.org.

Others were signed by her father, John Samuel Graves, Sr. (my grandfather), also a mayor of Bluffton. Some of the more amusing ordinances involved the condition of "outhouses" (their lids

must be kept down and the doors kept shut), the use of sling shots within town limits (they were prohibited), and the fact that yard grass had to be kept cut short (to prevent a build up of mosquitoes).

Disturbing the Peace.

It shall be unlawful for any person or persons to make use of or to speak or utter any profane or obscene language, or to disturb the quiet and peace of the Town by loud and abusive language on the streets or any public place within the corporate limits of the Town. Any and all violations of this ordinance will upon conviction be punished by fine or imprisonment not to exceed the limits prescribed by the law of the State.

*Ordained
May 6, 1903*

*Approved
G. S. Guilford
Intendant*

Mary Graves was proactive in her defense of Old Town's public roads and rights of way, and of the personal property rights of its residents. She regularly attended public town meetings, spoke her mind and often wrote letters to the editor. She once said in one of her letters, "I am compelled to speak out."

A prime case in point was her fight against the rezoning of the two parcels of land on either side of **The Bluffton Oyster Company** from residential to commercial. She knew a lot of the history about that land since her brother, John Samuel Graves, Jr., (my father) had owned and operated the oyster factory (then called **The Bluffton Seafood Company**) for over thirty years.

She knew the town ordinances pertaining to PUD's and was quick to point out that the two separate parcels could not meet those requirements. In a Letter to the Editor of the **Carolina Morning News** in October of 1999 she expressed great fear of "a movement under way to close the public boat landing which juts off Wharf Street. The facility had been in use by the public for 80 to 100 years and is the only such water access in the old section of town. Closing it would be a terrible mistake." She produced documents that proved how long the landing had been part of

Bluffton's public land and rights of way. My father, John Samuel Graves, Jr., had leased it from the city for over thirty years.

In the same letter to the editor, Mary also took the governing body of Bluffton to task by saying, "Voters elected the present mayor and the Town Council to positions of authority and responsibility on the premise that they would protect the public interest. We trust they will not abuse their power by yielding to the will of special interests." Mary Graves' resistance "to rolling over for special interests" was a constant theme, and one of her greatest strengths. Her remarks had a lot to do with the fact that the Bluffton Oyster Park Landing is here today.

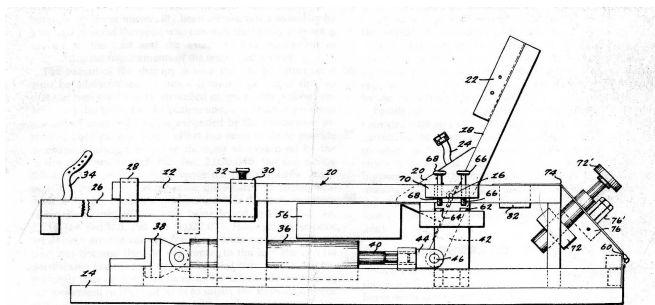
Mary Graves was, like each of us, a deeply flawed person with all the attendant shortcomings and difficulties of being human, but when she was right, she was often profoundly right. On more than one occasion she was instrumental in preserving some of the things that we love most about Bluffton.

In 2009, shortly after her death, I created the **Mary Elizabeth Graves Endowment at The Community Foundation of the Lowcountry** on Hilton Head Island in her memory. I will continue to contribute

to this endowment until my death. It is my hope that other people who find themselves in agreement with its goals will also contribute to the endowment.

The three foci of the endowment are historic preservation, environmental protection and animal rights, all in and around Bluffton, reflecting three of my Aunt Mary's most passionate concerns. She was deeply disturbed about the exploitation and destruction of buildings and property in Bluffton's Historic District. She also was alarmed about the pollution of the rivers and environmental degradation and predation. She loved dogs and was always rescuing them. What a great irony, that within two years of her passing, with her endowment already on the books, her home, listed as a contributing structure in Bluffton's Historic District, was condemned and slated for destruction. Aunt Mary would have been absolutely horrified—as was I.

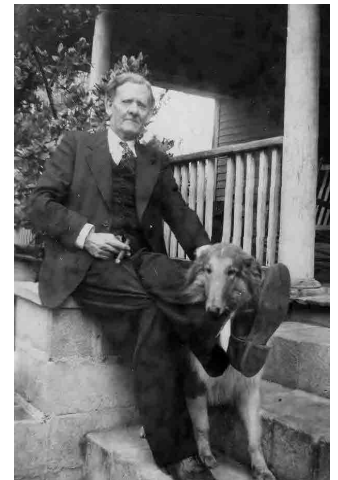
Mary Graves was an accomplished woman from a large family. She had six brothers and one sister. She held a Bachelor of Science degree and had multiple certifications in physical therapy. She had enlisted in the Army Medical Specialist Corps during WWII and rose to the rank of Captain. Following in the footsteps of her Grandmother Guilford, who was very much a healer,³ she became interested in physical therapy while in the service and became a licensed physical therapist who invented and patented a mechanical, therapeutic device to relieve and prevent heel cord contractures. She became an authority on the physiology of the nervous and muscle systems of the hand.



Inventor: Mary Graves, No. 3,580,244

After Mary retired, she relied entirely on a meager social security income and was not able to tend fully to the needs of her old house. Nevertheless, she did try over the years to maintain it as best she could on her limited income. Mary believed that houses have souls. Her house was filled with the ghosts of her immediate and extended family. A large picture of her Grandmother Guilford hung in her living room. Every room presented her with over eighty-five years of memories. Neither she nor her heirs wanted her home destroyed.

Those of us who have lived in Bluffton know what a jewel Bluffton is and has been. Many of us want to see the old homes in the Bluffton Historical Preservation District and their histories preserved. Historic homes, as long as they are permitted to stand, present a living testimony to the lives, loves, struggles and triumphs of those who came before us. Let us not forget these people.



Just placing homes on a “contributing structures” list of historic properties has proven completely inadequate. For more information about placing real protections on these homes please read the material under the ***Historic Preservation Easements*** tab on ***graveshouse.org***.

³ Please read ***Remembering Doctor Jane Guilford*** under the ***Articles*** tab on ***graveshouse.org***.