



GRACIA MARIA DU ROBIN TURNBULL-A STRONG LADY IN A NEW WORLD

Who was Gracia Maria du Robin Turnbull?

“Gracia Maria du Robin was born in Smyrna, Turkey in 1736. She is the daughter of Jean Baptiste Robin and Katerina Jary. Her birth name has been recorded in places as 'Dura Bin', which has since been clarified as being an incorrect transcription from audio, of 'du Robin'. The family was French Levantine. Gracia married Dr Andrew Turnbull (1718 - 1792), a Scottish physician on 22 Aug 1753 in Smyrna, (Izmir) Turkey and they had 12 children, 9 of them born in Turkey.”²

Gracia Maria had two brothers, Louis and Paul, and three sisters, Marguerite, Catherine, and Flora. Her mother, Catherine Jary, was born around 1700. Her biography lists her as a French subject who married Dr. Jean Baptiste Robin in 1720.³ Contained in the family history of Gracia Maria’s mother is the phrase, “Base de données sur les familles Levantines - principalement catholiques - de l'Empire Ottoman,” which translates to “Database on Levantine families - mainly Catholic - from the Ottoman Empire.”⁴ Father Michel J. Curley in his Dissertation refers to Gracia Maria as being Catholic.⁵ The author has not been able to confirm whether she was Catholic, but she likely participated in Father Camps' parish activities, as she is reportedly the godmother of several Minorcan children.

¹ GRACIA MARIA DU ROBIN TURNBULL

² [Gracia Maria \(Robin\) Turnbull \(1736-abt.1798\) | WikiTree FREE Family Tree](#) website 09/20/2024

³ WikiTree- [Catherine \(Jary\) Robin \(abt.1700-\) | WikiTree FREE Family Tree](#) website 09/21/2024

⁴ *Family Tree-Catherine Jary*. [Catherine JARY : Family tree by marmara2 - Geneanet](#) website 09/21/2024

⁵ *Church and State in the Spanish Floridas 1783-1822*), Michael J. Curley

Three of Andrew and Gracia Maria's children passed away at a young age in Smyrna, Turkey. It must have been incredibly heartbreaking, particularly with the loss of their firstborn, Jane, in 1754, followed by Katherine in 1758, and Flora in 1766. However, their sons, William, Robert, and John, were born at the New Smyrna Colony and lived well past adulthood.

Gracia Maria has been referred to as a "Frank lady," which speaks to her French origin. The distinction between Franks and Levantines is significant. While the Franks maintained a sense of European identity, shaped by their diverse European origins, the Levantines represented something entirely new. They emerged from the blending of Franks with various Ottoman groups, creating a distinct cultural hybrid that, despite its novelty, still preserved traits from both parent cultures. This author believes Gracia Maria Du Robin Turnbull was a French Levantine.⁶

Because of earthquakes and fires, 1864 and 1922, most of the records stored in buildings in Izmir, including church documents, have been destroyed. Earthquakes have long been part of life in Izmir with the latest one on October 20, 2020, killing more than 100 people and injuring thousands.⁷ However, journals, letters, and written accounts scattered around the world provide insights into what life was like for Gracia in Izmir, Turkey. These sources offer extensive information about Gracia Maria's brother-in-law, William Barker (1731-1825).

Izmir was a bustling port city that drew a diverse mix of nationalities, including Greeks, Armenians, Jews, French, and other Europeans. This cultural melting pot shaped the region, and Gracia Maria likely spent her early years in a rich, cosmopolitan environment and of necessity probably learned to speak several languages. This multilingual environment might have shaped her ability to navigate the later challenges of her life on the New Smyrna colony, which included Minorcans, Greeks, Italians, Corsicans and several from other Mediterranean regions.

Many historical accounts show her father and grandfather as French Levantine merchants.⁸ Her family's status as merchants suggests they were relatively prosperous. As Izmir was a major trading hub in the Mediterranean, merchants of her family's background typically dealt in goods like silk, spices, minerals and textiles. Because her father was involved in trade, Gracia Maria was exposed to a wide range of people and cultures from an early age, preparing her for the multicultural environment she later encountered in Florida. Whether or not her father was a member of the Levant Company this author has not been able to discern, but most of the European merchants were part of this monopoly.⁹

Education for women in the 18th century was generally limited, especially in the Ottoman Empire. However, there is a story that Gracia Maria met Andrew Turnbull in Paris while pursuing higher education, at a time when he was already a doctor. If this account is accurate, Gracia Maria would have been in her mid-teens when they met, as she married Turnbull at the age of 17 in Izmir, Turkey on 22 Aug 1753.¹⁰ Their marriage would have been a notable union,

⁶ [Maria Gracia Dura Bin Turnbull \(1736-1798\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#) 09/20/2024

⁷ [Izmir Earthquake Rapid Assessment Report November 2020 - Türkiye | ReliefWeb](#) website 09/20/2024

⁸ [Gracia Maria \(Robin\) Turnbull \(1736-abt.1798\) | WikiTree FREE Family Tree](#) website 09/20/2024

⁹ [The Case of Currants: The Levant Company Monopoly as a Stimulus for Bristol's Illicit Trade 1590-1666](#). Page 3

¹⁰ [Maria Gracia Dura Bin Turnbull \(1736-1798\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#) website 09/20/2024

merging two people from distinctly different cultural backgrounds—Turnbull, a Scottish physician and diplomat, and Gracia Maria, hailing from a Levantine heritage and growing up in Ottoman-controlled Izmir, Turkey.

Unfortunately, few personal accounts or documents offer direct insight into Gracia Maria's life in Izmir. However, her formative years in such a vibrant, multicultural environment undoubtedly shaped the strong woman she would become.

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Gracia Maria Turnbull is mentioned 47 times in the James Grant Letters¹¹

The first time Gracia Maria was mentioned in the Letters of Dr. Turnbull¹² was in a letter from Turnbull to Sir William Duncan on January 21, 1767. He wrote, “Mrs. Turnbull and my family are well, She desires her respects to Lady Mary, I beg the favour of mine also.” He pointed out that “he spent 20 days touring the land along the St. Johns River and then locating their tracts of land near Mosquito Inlet.” He informed Duncan they were “building houses for the Greeks.”

Turnbull was sailing to Charleston the next day. He would go to London to meet with Sir William Duncan and others and then begin his journey to various ports in the Mediterranean Sea nations to gather his colonists. In passing he wrote, “I saw a negroe load his canoe in twenty minutes with some very fine fish: he made use of a hand cast net.” This observation demonstrates that enslaved individuals were using cast nets to catch fish even before the arrival of the Minorcans, who employed the same netting techniques they had practiced on Minorca for centuries.

This letter contains a wealth of information. Andrew Turnbull secured his land and “purchased forty Negroes, with two able overseers,” to begin clearing it. He also declared his plans to set sail in search of “500 Greeks.”

Turnbull quickly recognized the abundance of fish in the local waters, comparing his colony to the prosperous fishing grounds of Newfoundland. He appointed Mr. Earle as the chief manager of the New Smyrna colony, giving him the authority to select the next group of enslaved individuals for Turnbull to purchase. Since this was early 1767—nearly two years before the Minorcans arrived—the enslaved workers were likely assigned the task of clearing land for huts and establishing the colony's central area. At that time, the region was a dense forest, overrun with snakes, alligators, and swarms of mosquitoes capable of driving anyone to madness.

In his letter to Governor James Grant, dated February 4, 1767, he writes that Mrs. Turnbull had to pay thirty pounds sterling for the freight on ninety bushels of corn. He also tells the governor that he has hired an agent to take care of Mrs. Turnbull “with whatever she may want for, as well as for what may be wanted for the plantation.” In January 1767, Turnbull left his family and did not return until June 1768, leaving the entire responsibility of raising their large family on the

¹¹ [The-Letters-Of-Dr-Turnbull-pdf-SEARCHABLE.pdf \(minorcans.com\)](#)

¹² Ibid

shoulders of Gracia Maria Turnbull and her staff. These eighteen months would have been far more challenging had she already been living in New Smyrna during that time.

On February 14, 1767, Lord Adam Gordon wrote to Governor Grant, saying, “Sir William Duncan is hard at work to make himself master of the modern Greek to converse with Mrs. Turnbull and the Greek settlers who you will soon have out with you.” At this point, everyone felt that Turnbull would be bringing 500 Greek colonists to Florida.

On July 19, 1767, he wrote to Governor Grant showing concern about Mrs. Turnbull. “I am afraid that Mrs. Turnbull will be uneasy about the risk she thinks I [take] on this Levant expedition. I beg, sir, that you assure her I do not visit any place where there is danger.” In December 1767, Governor Grant informed Turnbull that Mrs. Turnbull and others would be joining him for dinner: “Mrs. Turnbull, Mrs. Dames, Moultrie, Box, and Catherwood dine with me tomorrow.”

Governor Grant was well-known for hosting parties at his house with meals prepared by his personal chefs. According to an article by historian Daniel L. Schafer, published by the St. Augustine Historical Society and referenced in an article by Dr. Susan Parker, an enslaved man named Baptiste “served as Grant's most valuable cook.”¹³

On August 31, 1769 Turnbull wrote Grant informing him that Mrs. Turnbull had only recently moved from her house in St. Augustine to New Smyrna when he wrote, “Mrs. Turnbull presents her complements to your Excellency. She has had one severe fit of a seasoning fever, but it is now quite recovered, she thinks that the fatigue of the journey from town was the cause of it, which will probably make her apprehensive of taking another jaunt.”

On the following day Governor Grant wrote Turnbull in reply saying, “I am glad to hear that Mrs. Turnbull has got the better of the indisposition with which she was vexed upon her arrival at Mosquitoes. I beg leave to assure her of my best respects. I wish she may like the place.”

There is no record of how long the journey from St. Augustine to New Smyrna took for Mrs. Turnbull and her five children. During this 70-mile trek, her youngest, Margaret (1763-1848), was just six years old. With King’s Road still incomplete, not being finished until 1773¹⁴, the journey would have been arduous for the young family. The rough terrain, surrounded by dense forests and swamps, made the trip especially difficult and likely frightening during the hot August nights for 31-year-old Gracia Maria, her children, and those helping care for them. It is likely Governor Grant assigned armed soldiers to accompany the Turnbull entourage.

In October Governor Grant again wrote Turnbull concerning Mrs. Turnbull, “I have had the pleasure to receive your letters up to the 7th current from Smyrnea and am glad to hear that Mrs. Turnbull is well pleased with her house and the prospect of a good garden....”

According to archaeologists, the Turnbull mansion was located four to five miles north of the wharf and the main gathering place of the colony. It needed to be far away from the stench of

¹³ *St. Augustine Record*, Dr. Susan Parker, published January 2, 2022.

¹⁴ *King’s Road (Florida)* Wikipedia 09/21/2024

dying indigo plants and the millions of flies that congregated because of the indigo processing method.

A great deal of very important work was done by Roger Grange and Dot Moore uncovering artifacts and buildings from the New Smyrna Colony. Their first report is described in the booklet, “Archaeology of the New Smyrna Colony.” More information by Grange and Moore is contained in a newer booklet presented by the New Smyrna Museum of History in 2016, but the “New Smyrna Colony” became the “Smyrnea Settlement,” a most significant revision. Changing colony to settlement reduces the Minorcan immigrants to “settlers” instead of what they truly were, “colonists.” Not only were they colonists¹⁵ in the true sense of the word, but members of the largest European colony brought to America during the colonial era.

In another letter the issue of cost overrun came up and the governor expressed confidence in Turnbull, writing, “My good Doctor don’t be hurt by what Mr. Nixon writes you. Your friends in England have advanced you a great deal of money, nearly twelve thousand pounds apiece, ‘tis natural for them to be anxious about so large a capital, which from your being hurried into numbers at Mahon, has been laid out without their concurrence. Far from having a diffidence of you, they have had more confidence than most men have in the money way. You must not differ with them, you are too far embark’t. I mean well in what I say, they are strangers to me. I have no connection with them, my concern is and always has been for you.”¹⁶

This letter highlights the strong support Governor Grant showed Turnbull from the very start. Was it due to their shared Scottish heritage? This nearly unwavering backing from the governor's office vanished in 1774 when Governor Patrick Tonyn arrived. Unlike the harmonious relationship between Grant and Turnbull for the first years, tensions arose after Turnbull expressed interest in becoming Lieutenant Governor. His ambition strained the relationship with Grant, Tonyn, as well as with Lt. Governor John Moultrie. The conflict with Governor Tonyn culminated in Turnbull’s confinement for a period of time.

In many of Turnbull’s letters he almost always says. “Mrs. Turnbull presents her respects.” In his March 1770 letter to Sir William Duncan¹⁷ he notes, “Mrs. Turnbull is raising poultry and gardening, she has raised about 500 head of poultry, which are mostly distributed among the Farmers.” Mrs. Turnbull seems to be kind to everyone she meets. In a March letter to Governor Grant telling him about Mrs. Turnbull’s gardening, “She brought a turnip from the garden the other day for a crock. It measured nineteen inches round, but Bisset told her he had seen one at Mt. Oswald double that size. That was a lowering talk....”

In a letter from Turnbull to Governor Grant dated November 4, 1770 seems when speaking about another son being born, Turnbull was unfeeling. Grant had complimented him on the new arrival and Turnbull wrote, “I return you thanks for your congratulations on Mrs. Turnbull’s being brought to bed of a son. That piece of news was so old to me that when I wrote to your

¹⁵ *Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida*-Carita Doggett. ISBN: 1611530261, Note: The title of this book by Dr. Turnbull’s direct descendant confirms the Minorcans were colonists.

¹⁶ *The Minorcans of Florida, Their History, Language and Culture*- Philip D. Rasico- ISBN 1-877633-05-4- Chapter 2,

¹⁷ [The-Letters-Of-Dr-Turnbull-pdf-SEARCHABLE.pdf \(minorcans.com\)](#)

Excellency on the 22nd of last month I had quite forgot it. I in return congratulate you, Sir, most heartily, on the family estate falling into your hands.”¹⁸

William Duncan Turnbull, was born on September 27, 1770 while the family was still in St. Augustine. Robert James Turnbull, was born on January 14, 1774 and John Turnbull, was born on February 11, 1775 when the family was living in their mansion in New Smyrna.

Mrs. Turnbull and the family began living in St. Augustine in 1767, enjoying the lifestyle that their social status provided. She and her friends often were invited to dine with Governor Grant. Her children must have made friends with other children of their status. In a letter dated February 15, 1771, from the Dundee archives, Andrew Turnbull wrote to Sir William Duncan, saying, "I have given up my residence in town. My family agreed to live [at Smyrnéa] with me as exiles from every convenience and amusement." This letter indicates that Mr. Turnbull traveled between the colony and St. Augustine while his family's house was being built in New Smyrna. Each time he went from St. Augustine to New Smyrna would have taken several days going and coming back. Each trip from St. Augustine to New Smyrna and back would have taken several days.

The move from St. Augustine to the remote colony of Smyrnéa was especially hard on the Turnbull children. They were uprooted from the friendships they had formed with other children and separated from the familiar school, or teachers, where they had found companionship and structure in their daily lives. In Smyrnéa, they found themselves in a harsh, isolated environment, surrounded by forest land, far from the town they had known.

The sense of loneliness must have been overwhelming, as they no longer had playmates nearby or the comforts of communal life. The absence of familiar faces and activities made life in Smyrnéa a lonely and difficult existence, as they grappled with the isolation and the stark difference between the lively streets of St. Augustine and the wilderness.

Another essay on Gracia Maria du Robin Turnbull is in the works, focusing on her life in the colony up to her death on August 2, 1798, and her burial at Saint Philip’s Episcopal Church Cemetery¹⁹ in Charleston, South Carolina.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ [Maria Gracia Dura Bin Turnbull \(1736-1798\) - Find a Grave Memorial](#)

