

Untold Virginia
Episode Three Transcript
“Grace Sherwood: The Witch of Pungo”

Elizabeth: Okay, okay, where's that button? Ugh. Oh, okay. Recording on and now... now what do I need to do? I need to - the one day she decides to be late. Okay. Test. 1, 2, 3, 4. Test. 1, 2, 3, 4. Fine. Hey, listeners! This is Elizabeth, back in studio after last week's adventure. Ruth is not here in studio. Sometimes when she gets too into her work, she falls off the map a little bit. Normally I'd wait to start the show with her. But Frank says that we only have a limited amount of recording -

Ruth: Hey.

Elizabeth: Hey.

Ruth: Sorry.

Elizabeth: Where have you been? You look exhausted.

Ruth: Let's just be quick about this. Frank needs the studio soon.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I know. Are you ready?

Ruth: I'm fine.

Elizabeth: Do you need the rundown or anything since you were -

Ruth: I'm fine.

Elizabeth: Well, I wrote it down for you. In case you didn't remember.

Ruth: I'm good.

Elizabeth: Okay, well, can I get any water?

Ruth: I said, I'm fine! Stop! Can you just count us down?

Elizabeth: Fine. 3, 2, 1. Welcome to -

Ruth: Wait, can you start over? Okay, so we're doing the whole thing.

Elizabeth: Welcome to "Untold Virginia." All together. Like we did last time.

Ruth: Okay. Okay, okay, okay.

Elizabeth: Cool. Great. Got it?

Ruth: Yep.

Elizabeth: 3, 2 -

Ruth: Welcome -

Elizabeth: Oh, my God, Ruth. 3, 2, 1. Are you sure you're ready?

Ruth: Let's go.

Elizabeth: 3, 2, 1.

Elizabeth/Ruth: Welcome to Untold Virginia.

Elizabeth: Fine.

[theme music]

Elizabeth: Hello, and welcome back. We've got a jam-packed show for you today and we're excited to dive into it. But first, we thought it would be a good idea to talk about last episode. First and foremost, after we left the cave you missed not a whole lot. We met up with Deidre, finished the actual tour and then went home. Thank you again to Deidre, who went above and beyond with an amazing tour. She doesn't have social media, but she wanted me to tell you that this December, she'll be starring in "Hello Dolly" at the Kimball theatre.

Ruth: You - alright.

Elizabeth: I do want to apologize for the really abrupt end to last week's episode. It was not professional.

Ruth: Very unprofessional.

Elizabeth: Yes, it was unprofessional. Um, my goal with this show -

Ruth: Our goal.

Elizabeth: - is to bring you the most exciting and interesting stuff that we can, but always in a professional way. We didn't do that last episode, and we are truly sorry. And we'll try to wrap up our episodes more efficiently next time.

Ruth: And for the people who have been asking, my hands are fine. But thank you regardless.

Elizabeth: Wait, what? People were asking?

Ruth: I mean, yeah, a few.

Elizabeth: Ruth! We have listeners! That's amazing!

Ruth: Yeah, yeah. We do.

Elizabeth: Okay, sorry. Keep going.

Ruth: Anyway. Hi all. We're here and we can go on with the show.

Elizabeth: That's right. Today, we have a new segment for you. It's called - drumroll, please.

[drumming on table]

Elizabeth: Historical Context! Context, context, context...

Ruth: You need to be more careful with the table.

Elizabeth: The equipment is fine. Historical Context is our brand new segment where we tell you a story about Virginia and talk about why it's important to history.

Ruth: And as we all know -

Elizabeth/Ruth: Everything is important to history.

Elizabeth: That sounds -

Ruth: Yep.

Elizabeth: Bad.

Ruth: Didn't work.

Elizabeth: Uh, okay. Historical Context is our brand new segment where we tell you a story about Virginia and talk about why it's important to history.

Ruth: And as we all know -

Elizabeth: Everything is important to history.

Ruth: Nice.

Elizabeth: Today. Ruth's going to be our historical guide. Take it away, Ruth!

Ruth: Thank you. So, listeners, I have two stories for you today. I will start with the first, more modern one and then segue to the more storied, more classic one. Elizabeth. How do you feel about squirrels? In Sunday's edition of The Virginia Gazette ran an article about how squirrels are overpopulating the state of Virginia. Specifically, the Virginia Peninsula -

Elizabeth: Wait. Sorry, sorry. You want to start off with a story about squirrel overpopulation?

Ruth: Virginia squirrels are overpopulated and it's defying population trends for squirrels and similar creatures worldwide. I think that's weird.

Elizabeth: Yeah, but it's not historical.

Ruth: Squirrels have been native to Virginia for centuries.

Elizabeth: I just, I - what's the other thing you have?

Ruth: The Witch of Pungo.

Elizabeth: Great. Let's do that.

Ruth: It's my segment.

Elizabeth: And we're supposed to be a history podcast that's cool and mysterious and exciting. I thought we were on the same page about that.

Ruth: We are. It's our show.

Elizabeth: It's a bad idea. We're not doing it.

Ruth: I need you to be my friend here. Not my producer.

Elizabeth: Well, I'm both.

Ruth: You got to wave your zoom around last week. It was ridiculous but I let you do it.

Elizabeth: It wasn't ridiculous. Talking about squirrel science is ridiculous.

Ruth: Maybe to you. But it's what I want to do for my segment. I just don't understand why you're not taking me seriously.

Elizabeth: No. We're not doing it.

[Ruth coughs]

Ruth: You know what? Never mind. Moving on. So, listeners. I have one story for you today. A more classic one. For today's Historical Context, we're going to talk about Grace Sherwood, also known as -

Elizabeth: The Witch of Pungo.

Ruth: Um, if you're a Virginia native, you probably recognize Grace's name. She's one of Virginia's most prominent colonial women and is best known as the last woman to be tried for witchcraft in Virginia.

[music plays]

Ruth: Grace was born to John and Susan White in 1660. It's not clear if her parents were born in America or not but we do know that Grace was born in Virginia specifically in Pungo. Grace married a small farm landowner James Sherwood in 1680. Though James owned land, it wasn't much. Grace, James, and their three sons spent their lives on the farm and relied on it for survival and business. But

Grace didn't let James do all the work. It was common for Grace to ditch her dress and put on a pair of trousers while working on the farm. And not only did she help with the crops, but she also grew her own herbs. This even continued after James passed away in 1701. He left Grace with property and because she didn't remarry, it was all hers.

Elizabeth: She was both a trendsetter and a businesswoman.

Ruth: We don't have any drawings or paintings of Grace, but contemporary accounts describe her as attractive, tall, and funny. Honestly, I couldn't think of anything else but combining that with her being a woman and the fact that she owned land -

Elizabeth: You get a bunch of jealous neighbors.

Ruth: This is when the tales of witchcraft started. In those days, if somebody wanted to accuse you of witchcraft, they accused you of it with a lawsuit.

Elizabeth: An actual real life lawsuit with a document and everything.

Ruth: Grace's neighbors accused her of all sorts of crimes via witchcraft. They said that she ruined their crops, conjured up storms, killed livestock, turned into animals and snuck into their homes... absolutely bizarre stuff. This continued for years, but none of the cases actually went to court. Grace answered every charge and pay all the costs that she was told to until eventually, she missed one. So she was ordered to appear in court to answer to the charge of witchcraft. Grace complied and after a trial, the court ordered that Grace's case be decided by ducking and nope! You might think that's an iPhone typo. But I literally mean ducking. Authorities were going to throw Grace into the water. If she floated, she was a witch. If she didn't float, she was human and therefore innocent.

Elizabeth: And this is one of those things that you don't question too much because it doesn't make any sense at all.

Ruth: Seriously. Virginia citizens literally tied Grace up, sent her out on a boat in the Lynnhaven River to throw her into the water -

Elizabeth: And that point where they threw her into the water is known today as Witch Duck Point.

Ruth: I was gonna say that. But. So. They threw her off. To save her life. Grace managed to untie herself. She floated up to the surface of the water and was promptly declared a witch. Grace was put into prison for seven years. When she was released, she somehow lived peacefully until she died at the -

Elizabeth: Eighty. She died at eighty.

Ruth: And that's it. The end.

Elizabeth: So, Ruth, what is your favorite part of Grace Sherwood's story?

Ruth: Well, I think she's one of the earliest American feminists.

Elizabeth: That's true. She didn't know how to rock a pair of trousers.

Ruth: Yeah, but -

Elizabeth: What I like most about her is that her story is really emblematic of the way that Colonial America treated women in general. Women rarely moved between classes, and it was even more rare for them to assume traditionally male leadership roles. Isn't it interesting in that that was one of the factors that incited her neighbors against her?

Ruth: Yep.

Elizabeth: Well, that was Ruth's segment, Historical Context. We'll have this segment every so often. So stay tuned for more Historical Context in the future.

[Ruth yawns]

Elizabeth: Did you sleep?

Ruth: Nope. Not really.

Elizabeth: Really?

Ruth: Really, really.

Elizabeth: God, how much coffee have you had?

Ruth: Today? Too much. Can we just go with too much as an appropriate measurement for that?

Elizabeth: Ruth, you can't just not sleep.

Ruth: Listen, it's not like I haven't been trying. It's like, how should I describe this? It feels like I can't get energy, like the coffee isn't giving me the extra boost that it usually does. It's just helping me sustain my current motion. And even when I try to sleep I oscillate between tired and hungry and tired and hungry and tired, hungry, tired, hungry. It's awful.

Elizabeth: Weird, sorry. I mean, I wish you would have told me.

Ruth: I mean, there's not really a great way to bring that into conversation.

Elizabeth: Maybe you're just not eating enough meat or your iron is low or your hormones are unbalanced.

Ruth: Okay.

Elizabeth: I mean, I'm just saying. I just think that maybe if this continues, you should go see a doctor. We can record it and include it in the podcast.

Ruth: Oh, no, that is a hard pass.

Elizabeth: Well, Ruth. I mean, we'll see about that.

Ruth: Anyway, where's Jess?

Elizabeth: Jess? Oh, Jess, they should be here.

Ruth: So we just kept someone out there waiting?

Elizabeth: Hey, I was on time today. You wanted to talk about squirrels.

Ruth: Seriously? Really? You're gonna do this right now? You, you really want to bring up the squirrels again?

Elizabeth: It's not about the squirrels.

Ruth: Say it. Say it. What do you want to say?

Elizabeth: I, I feel like we're just not on the same page about what kind of show we want this to be.

Ruth: What's that supposed to mean?

Elizabeth: I don't know. I don't know. I'm just thinking about it.

Ruth: Well, lots to unpack there.

Elizabeth: What does that mean?

Ruth: You asked me to do this with you and now you act like I can't even handle it.

Elizabeth: That's not true.

Ruth: Oh, yeah?

Elizabeth: Yes, you do just as much talking as me. You literally had a whole massive segment just now and I let you do the whole thing. Because I respect you as a creative and I wanted to give you space to speak.

Ruth: Sure.

Elizabeth: God. Ruth, it's not wrong to want to talk about the interesting stories.

Ruth: If you didn't like the history idea, then why did you agree to it in the first place?

Elizabeth: It's just different than what I thought it would be. That's it.

Ruth: Frank has a coffee pot going right?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Ruth: I'm going to refill this and then I'll get Jess. Do you respect that decision?

Elizabeth: Alright, listeners. Since we're talking about witchcraft, we're going to use some audio magic to take a quick break and bring in our guest for this episode. But for you, it'll be like we never even stopped. Alright, Ruth, ready for some magic?

Ruth: Hmm.

Elizabeth: 3, 2, 1.

Ruth: The button.

Elizabeth: I know, I know. I need to hit the button, I'm not stupid -

[button click]

Elizabeth: And we are back! See, I told you. It's like we were never even gone. So since Ruth was talking about Grace Sherwood, we thought it might be good to hear about Grace and Jamestowne and witchcraft perhaps from a more academic perspective. That's why we've brought in Jess Fitzgerald. Say hi, Jess.

Jess: Hello, everybody.

Elizabeth: Jess is currently pursuing a graduate degree at William and Mary's Lyon G. Tyler Department of History. Their focus is on early America and they recently were a fellow at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Ruth: How long were you there for?

Jess: Well, it's a year long program. So just last May to this current one.

Ruth: Cool.

Jess: Yeah, everyone was great. I'm super lucky that I got to work there.

Elizabeth: So Jess, can you tell us a little bit about your current research?

Jess: Sure. Well, are you familiar with graduate programs at all?

Elizabeth: Yes, definitely.

Ruth: Not really, no.

Jess: Okay. So essentially, the way you approach your thesis is that you catalog what your research interests are. The things that you're curious about, questions you want answered, topics that you naturally gravitate toward. From there, you narrow it down even further and you get your dissertation

topic. So right now I'm looking into the cross section of women's relationships in between their communities and the societal factors that impacted that.

Elizabeth: So are you exploring that through the lens of women in witchcraft and that history? Or is it broader than that?

Jess: I, I mean, I certainly wouldn't say that. It's through the lens of it. It comes up a fair amount, especially if you're, if you're looking into people like Grace Sherwood. They're sort of figures that are a little bit outsized in, in our public perception of, of what life was like back then versus what it may actually have been. But yeah, witches is come up a fair amount.

Elizabeth: Very exciting. Jess, can you speak a little bit about what you know about Grace Sherwood and her life prior to being accused of witchcraft,

Jess: She came from a relatively well-off family and her community but she married into one that was quite destitute. The family that she, she sort of married into had less money than her, her proper family.

Elizabeth: Well, how how was her family able to cope with that? Or even, how did that happen? You know, 'cause you hear about in, in history, all of these stories about making sure that their daughter's families were married off to wealthier families, sort of to ensure that they have a better life. So how did that come about?

[Ruth yawns]

Jess: Well, I think is, as you can all probably tell based on the story she was a relatively strong-willed woman and she wasn't necessarily going to take no for an answer from, from the objections of her, her. her family.

Elizabeth: So her marriage was, was based in love and truth and those values? More so than kind of security?

Jess: I would, I would say it's, it's difficult for me to put myself in the mind of Grace herself. And I, it's, academically speaking, I don't think that that's necessarily something I can say for certain. But I do know, that John Sherwood was, was a man of far less means and he was actually gifted land by Grace's father for marrying him in sort of a traditional dowry format.

Ruth: Now, do you think that? You know, we talk about Grace as like a, one of the earliest feminists, which is one of the reasons why I really like her.

Elizabeth: Yeah, she is such a feminist.

Ruth: Right -

Elizabeth: I mean, it's one of the, it's one of the things I admire most about Grace, and why we're even talking about her on this show! So Jess, I have a burning question about when people were being accused of witchcraft and deemed quote, unquote, cursed. How did that manifest itself in those accused people?

Jess: Sure, I think you bring up a really interesting question and the idea of a witch being a cursed woman, as something we do see fairly often in, in diarists of the time. For example. And one of the things that that we see very regularly in in the victims of these curses is the idea that the curse has been not, not thrust upon someone else but spread from the witch to, to the victim. And many of these victims, we would see cases of restlessness. Nocturnal, nocturnal lifestyles. But honestly, I think one of the things that's important to note here is that these are also things that we can associate with lower classes, people that don't live in the townships proper. We're seeing people who live further away on the outskirts of town and larger pastures.

Elizabeth: And quickly going back to these women who were cursed and accused of being witches, like, how did they get from the point where it was like, I think you're a witch and then all of a sudden, they've like moved this journey up to you are definitely a witch?

Jess: I would like to have us dissect our own biases in that question, and ask why we assume it is the woman being accused... changes and problems with the women being accused. Whereas I would say based on my academic research, we often find that it is poverty in the town at large, famine issues happening with the townspeople that ultimately create a situation where someone is looking for, for a figurehead. For a pariah. So I would say that while the women in these situations often showed symptoms of the sort of internalized hysteria that can can be attributed to larger societal -

Elizabeth: Well, yeah, they were scapegoats. Right?

Jess; Absolutely.

Elizabeth: I mean, they hundred percent were being used as the reason why society was the way it was or to explain the inexplicable about poverty and trying to fix that system and lack of resources. Yeah, I totally agree with you there, Jess.

Jess; You can, you can talk to an animal or run through a pasture at night and not be a witch, I think. Is, is something that we know now, but maybe were a little less certain of and in Grace's time.

Ruth: I think we're running out of time. So if you want to ask one last question.

Elizabeth: Um, okay, well. Jess, um, it was lovely to have you.

Jess: Oh, it's lovely to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

Elizabeth: Thank you so much for chatting with us today.

Ruth: This is, you know, this has been great and everyone listening. Thanks so much for sticking with us and learning about some Virginia history.

Elizabeth: Be sure to tune in next week for another interview some more fun historical facts and hilarious banter between your two favorite hosts.

Ruth: See you then.

Elizabeth: Bye. And that's it!

Ruth: Thanks again. Thanks so much for coming in.

Jess: Oh, yeah. Honestly, this was really great. Nobody ever wants to talk about history this much with me.

Ruth: I know the feeling.

Jess: So when when can I come back?

[Elizabeth laughs; Ruth sighs]

Jess: I'll just I guess I'll just take a left out of here. And then it's a left once I'm in the hallway, correct?

Elizabeth: Yep. You'll see the welcome sign right after the turn.

Jess: Sure. Um, yeah, thank you. Thank you again, this was this was very pleasant.

Elizabeth: Email us if you need anything in the meantime, okay.

Jess: Will do.

Ruth: Bye, Jess.

Jess: Bye, feel better.

Ruth: Thanks.

[Jess leaves]

Elizabeth: Oh, my God.

Ruth: I just don't have it in me. I'm just so exhausted.

Elizabeth: He was like, so rude at the end of that and he didn't even answer any of the questions I asked.

Ruth: Elizabeth, you weren't asking him questions about his dissertation.

Elizabeth: Yes I was! They were related to his dissertation.

Ruth: I mean, I guess sideways related, not whatever. He seemed kind of annoyed at the end.

Elizabeth: He - whatever. You want more coffee?

Ruth: Yes, please.

Elizabeth: How are you feeling?

Ruth: Bad.

Elizabeth: Did you drive or bike here?

Ruth: Drive.

Elizabeth: Why don't you let me bring you back home and I can Uber back here to get your car and go to Publix for you.

Ruth: No, I think I can make it.

Elizabeth: You're half asleep.

Ruth: I'm just tired.

Elizabeth: I do care, you know.

Ruth: I know. I think you might be right. I haven't eaten a whole lot recently.

Elizabeth: Gotta be careful about that.

Ruth: I know, I know. But maybe it is my iron or something. I'm practically half coffee at this point.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that's not great. We'll get you something from the hot bar. They'll probably have that Szechuan Eggplant but you like.

Ruth: I don't think that's what my body wants.

Elizabeth: And what does your body tell you?

Ruth: It's saying... meat. I think I need meat.

[button click]