



March 2013

*Spring Program Sunday, March 24, 2013*  
**The Free Hospital for Women:  
The Concept, the History, the Personalities, and the Present**



Join us on March 24<sup>th</sup> to hear Historical Society member Ronald Brown talk about the Free Hospital for Women (now Olmsted Park Condominium) on Pond Avenue.

We'll meet in the condominium library to hear how hospitals evolved in the United States, how the Free Hospital came into being, who the people were

who made it so famous, and how the hospital campus, with its architecturally significant buildings, was eventually turned into beautiful condominium homes.

Because of the high interest in this program, speaker Ronald Brown will do **two presentations**: One at 12:30 pm and another at 2:00 pm

**Space is limited! Please reserve a spot by emailing [brooklinehistory@gmail.com](mailto:brooklinehistory@gmail.com) or calling 617-566-5747 & let us know which session you plan to attend.**

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## Highlights from Fall and Winter

### Brookline's First Light Celebration: Music at the Edward Devotion House



Scenes from First Light 2012: (Left) Stephen Lokith conducts a quartet and choir in the Edward Devotion House; and (right) visitor Teresa Mazzulli chats with members of the Rowe's Lane Quartet

For Brookline's 2012 First Light celebration, visitors to the Brookline Historical Society were treated to an evening of live late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century American music played in the period-appropriate Edward Devotion House. The music was performed by a three-voiced women's choir, accompanied by the Rowe's Lane Quartet, a period-instrument group specializing in early American music. The program included a string quartet by Italian immigrant and founder of America's first music conservatory, Phillip Trajetta, and choral music by Massachusetts-born William Billings, Jacob Kimball, and Samuel Holyoke. The choral music was transcribed and arranged from the original sources for the chamber choir and string quartet by Brookline Historical Society volunteer and musicologist Stephen Loikith.

### Winter Members Program Invention & Innovation: New Ideas Born in Brookline



More than 75 Historical Society members and their guests gathered in the historic Holtzer-Cabot Building on Station Street on February 7<sup>th</sup> for this special program on Brookline inventors and their work. Society President Ken Liss (on the left chatting with members Frances Shedd-Fisher and Sean Lynn Jones) told the stories of Charles Holtzer and the electric car, King Gillette and the safety razor, Edward Atkinson and the Aladdin Oven, deaf inventor William E. Shaw, and Dr. John Rock and the birth control pill. The program was held in the Inner Space with Middle Eastern fare and dessert provided by KooKoo Café. (Elie Dunford and Ali Mohajerani of Inner Space and KooKoo are on the right.)

[The following article about Brookline-born Susanna (Boylston) Adams was published in *American Ancestors* magazine and is reproduced here with permission.]

## *Was Susanna (Boylston) Adams Illiterate?*

by Harry Faulkner

Comparatively little is known about Susanna (Boylston) Adams (1708–1797), the mother of President John Adams (1735–1826). Even so, I was surprised by this passage in David McCullough’s Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *John Adams*:

Nothing written in her own hand would survive—no letters, diaries, or legal papers with her signature—nor any correspondence addressed to her by any of her family, and so, since it is known that letters were frequently read aloud to her, there is reason to believe that Susanna Boylston Adams was illiterate. [1]

In a March 13, 2002, address to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, McCullough reiterated his view that John Adams’s mother “was almost certainly illiterate.”[2] However, an investigation into this question has uncovered conclusive evidence, both circumstantial and from primary sources, that Susanna could read and write.

Susanna was born on March 5, 1708/9, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Her parents, Peter and Ann (White) Boylston, came from prominent local families and were members of the Congregational church.[3] Many of the men in the White family graduated from Harvard College.[4] Peter’s father and brother were physicians, and his youngest brother was a wealthy merchant and philanthropist. Because parental literacy is a key factor in a child’s attaining literacy, that Peter and Ann Boylston each signed their own wills is significant.[5]

Scholars have estimated that the rate of female reading literacy in early eighteenth-century New England was as high as 70 percent.[6] The principal driving force for New England literacy stemmed from the Puritan belief that everyone should read the Bible. A 1642 Massachusetts law empowered town selectmen to levy fines to ensure that parents were teaching their children to read. A 1647 law required all townships of fifty or more households to hire a schoolmaster to teach all children to “write & reade,” as “the old deluder, Satan, tried” to keep mankind from knowledge of the scriptures.[7]

In 1711 the citizens of Brookline voted to allow private individuals to erect two new schoolhouses (in addition to one already built) and “maintain a good school dame half of the year at each house.”[8] “Once towns funded school dames, we can be confident that little girls as well as boys were admitted.”[9] By the time Susanna was about seven years old, each of the town’s three precincts had its own schoolhouse supported by a combination of public and private resources.[10]

Legal documents, such as wills and deeds, are an important source of evidence for women’s literacy. Scholars have examined these documents to compare the proportion of those people who signed by forming the letters of their name (“signature literacy”) with those who could only make their mark, which was as legally valid. Because reading was taught before writing, a signature implied at least a rudimentary level of both literacy skills. The rate of “signature literacy” among white females in early eighteenth-century New England has been estimated by scholars at 45 percent — as not all people who could read learned to write.[11] Social class was an important determining factor.

Susanna was at least “signature literate.” On March 1, 1733/4, she signed her name as a witness to the last will and testament of her future father-in-law, Joseph Adams, Jr. The original will, preserved at the

Massachusetts State Archives, clearly shows Susanna Boylston's signature, written in a legible and strong cursive hand. Joseph Adams, Jr. set his hand and seal to his will "in the presence of us the Subscribers aver Thomas Baxter, Susanna Boylstone [*sic*], & Richard Thayer." John Adams and Susanna were married on November 23, 1734, and Joseph lived to see the birth of his grandson John Adams, Jr., on October 19, 1735. After Joseph's death on February 12, 1736, his will was submitted for probate in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, and on March 22, 1736, Probate Judge Hon. Josiah Willard, Esq. attested the instrument as follows:

The foregoing will being presented for Probate by the Executor therein named. Thomas Baxter & Susanna Boylstone [*sic*] made oath that they saw Joseph Adams the Subscriber to this Instrument Sign and Seal & heard him publish and declare the same to be his Last Will & Testament and that when he so did he was of sound disposing mind & memory according to these Deponents best discerning and that they together with Richard Thayer now absent *set to their hands as Witnesses thereof in the said Testators presence.*[12] [Emphasis added.]

In his *Autobiography* John Adams wrote that his mother could read. "As my Parents were both fond of reading. . . I was very early taught to read at home. . . ."[13] Historian E. Jennifer Monaghan notes, "On the rare occasions when we know who taught a child to read at home, the mother is singled out . . . and pious mothers were particularly motivated to teach their children to read." [14]

John Adams's diary described a quarrel between his parents that took place in 1758, shortly after he returned to live at home and start his law practice. Susanna became upset when her husband, Deacon John, in his role as town selectman, brought home two destitute servant girls. Frustrated that she had never been able to persuade her husband to resign his office — with all the headaches it entailed — and concerned about the strain the girls' upkeep might put on the family finances, Susanna demanded to know what he planned to charge the town for the girls' board. After he stubbornly refused to tell her, Susanna (who reportedly had a fiery temper) angrily threatened to review her husband's financial records, exclaiming, "I can read yet." [15]

More evidence of Susanna's literacy is provided in the letters of others:

1. While John and his brother Peter were in Boston in 1764 undergoing the smallpox inoculation procedure (introduced into America in 1721 by Susanna's uncle, Dr. Zabdiel Boylston), John and his fiancée, Abigail Smith, exchanged letters. Abigail obviously believed her future mother-in-law could read, as she wrote to John, "Your Mama doubtless would rejoice to hear from you, if you write you may enclose to me, I will take good care of it." [16]

2. John wrote to Abigail in 1778 that their son, John Quincy, "will write to his Grand ma [meaning Susanna, as Abigail's mother, Elizabeth Quincy Smith, had died], to whom present, his and my most affectionate and dutiful Respects." [17]

3. Abigail wrote to her sister, Mary (Smith) Cranch, in 1784, responding to a report that Susanna had complained about being financially dependent on her sons. Abigail explained, "I know Mr. Adams has written to her [Susanna] desiring her to call upon the dr [Abigail's uncle, Dr. Cotton Tufts] for what she may want." [18]

4. Abigail told John in a 1792 letter, "your Mother was well this day she has been out with me to meeting all day, and bears the cold well. no one appears more anxious or interested in the choice of V P than she does — she sends for the Newspapers and reads them very Regularly." [19] (Abigail also described Susanna as possessing an "open, candid mind, with a naturally good understanding." [20])

Comparatively few letters written by colonial American women have survived the passage of time. Most people, especially women, had little time or vocational need to write. Paper and ink were expensive, and mail service was slow and unreliable. Susanna's sphere of life was circumscribed to a short distance from home, and to her roles of wife, mother, and neighbor — none of which required writing. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in her extensive research for *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England*, found “the archives contain no female diaries written in New England before 1750 and few female letters.”[21]

In her later years — she lived to be eighty-nine — Susanna must have needed help reading, having been weakened by several near-fatal illnesses and suffering from a chronic inflammation of the eyes.[22] Likely this painful condition was hereditary. John Jr. had complained of inflamed eyes and weak vision since 1774.[23]

The best explanation of why letters were sometimes read to Susanna is that John and Abigail, because of their busy lives and large extended family, often sent expressions of love and remembrance to many family members in a single letter, all or parts of which were intended to be shared and read aloud.[24] When Abigail was away, her letters home were often addressed to her sister Mary Cranch. The receipt of a letter provided a reason for the family to gather to hear the latest news. McCullough notes that when Abigail wrote home from Paris, “Her every letter was treasured and read aloud to the delight of all. When Mary [Cranch] called on Susanna, to say she had come to read Abigail's letters to her, the old lady replied, ‘Aya, I had rather hear that she is coming home.’”[25]

Susanna died in 1797, living just long enough to see her son become the second president of the United States. John grieved, “My Mother's countenance and conversation was a source of enjoyment to me that is now dried up forever, in Quincy.”[26] Although no letters to or from Susanna have been found, one should remember the maxim that “the absence of proof is not proof of absence.” And, as presented here, references to letters written to her and about her strongly suggest that she could read, and her signature as a witness on the will of Joseph Adams, Jr., proves that she could write. All this documentation, when considered with the high rate of female literacy in Massachusetts, especially among members of Susanna's social class in Brookline, provides more than sufficient evidence to conclude that she was literate.

## Notes

1 David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 30.

2 David McCullough, “John Adams and the Good Life of the Mind,” *Records of the Academy* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences) (2002), 12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786002>.

3 *Muddy River and Brookline Records, 1634–1838* (Boston: J. E. Farwell & Co., 1875), 113.

4 Thomas J. Lothrop, “John White of Watertown and Brookline, and Some of His Descendants,” *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 52 (1898): 421–26.

5 Suffolk County, Mass., Probate Records, Docket #7961, vol. 36, 426–27 (will of Peter Boylston, 13 Aug. 1743) and Docket #15248, vol. 72, 192–95 (will of Ann Boylston, 13 March 1754).

6 Rosemary Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1995), 10.

7 Jennifer E. Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 38.

8 *Muddy River and Brookline Records* [note 3], 96.

9 Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* [note 7], 44.

10 *Muddy River and Brookline Records* [note 3], 101, 107.

11 W. Ross Beales and Jennifer E. Monaghan, “Literacy and School Books,” in Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds., *A History of the Book in America, Volume 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 380.

- 12 Suffolk County, Mass., Probate Records, Docket #6956. vol. 33, 83–84 (will of Joseph Adams, Jr., 1 March 1733/4).
- 13 L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams. The Adams Papers*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), 257.
- 14 Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* [note 7], 43.
- 15 Butterfield, *Diary and Autobiography* [note 13], 1:65.
- 16 L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 31. Abigail Smith to John Adams, 15 April 1764.
- 17 Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, eds., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 210.
- 18 Richard Alan Ryerson, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 6 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 278. Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 15 Aug. 1785.
- 19 Margaret A. Hogan et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 354. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 Dec. 1792.
- 20 Margaret A. Hogan et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 10 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 65. Abigail Adams to Abigail “Nabby” Adams Smith, 3 Feb. 1794.
- 21 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650–1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 5.
- 22 Hogan, *Adams Family Correspondence*, [note 19] 22, 38. Mary Smith Cranch to Abigail Adams, 28 Feb. 1790 and 1 April 1790.
- 23 L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 163. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 18 Feb. 1777.
- 24 Hogan and Taylor, eds., *My Dearest Friend* [note 17], 323. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 1 May 1789.
- 25 McCullough, *John Adams* [note 1], 310.
- 26 Paul C. Nagel, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 49–50.

*Above: Susanna Boylston's March 1, 1733/34, signature on the will of her future father-in-law, Joseph Adams, Jr. The will is held by, and photograph reproduced courtesy of, the Massachusetts State Archives.*

**Harry Faulkner** is an attorney, amateur historian, and NEHGS member. He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife, Nikki, who is a sixth great-grand-niece of Susanna Boylston Adams and a double first cousin seven times removed of President John Adams.

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## Save the Date

Thursday Evening, May 16, 2013

7 pm at the American Legion / VFW Post

### Remembering Brookline's Civil War Dead

Annual Meeting of the Brookline Historical Society

Brookline's 1884 memorial to its Civil War dead—restored, reinstalled, and rededicated in the lobby of Town Hall on Memorial Day 2011—lists the names of 72 soldiers and sailors who died at such places as Antietam, Gettysburg, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness, and the notorious Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia.

Among them were officers and members of prominent families as well as working men—carpenters, blacksmiths, laborers, shoemakers, and clerks, including several Irish immigrants and sons of immigrants.

Join Brookline Historical Society President Ken Liss for a look at the lives and deaths of some of the Brookline men who gave their lives a century and a half ago in defense of the Union.



This painting, "Even To Hell Itself" by Donna J. Neary, shows Lt. Col. Charles L. Chandler of Brookline, center, in the action at the North Anna River in Virginia where he was mortally wounded. It was made for the North Anna Battlefield Park. Used by permission of the artist.  
Credit: Donna J. Neary, Heritage Studio

**Coming in April:  
Patriots' Day Visit of "William Dawes"**



Join us at the Devotion House on Patriots' Day, April 15th, for an open house and the annual visit of "William Dawes" in a recreation of Dawes' ride through Brookline on his way to Lexington in 1775. House tours begin at 9:30 am, followed by the expected arrival of Dawes on horseback at 10:50 am, with music and activities to follow.

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