



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

From the Archives of Museums on the Green



The unhappy Marshalls are believed to be the first residents of Conant House, 65 Palmer Avenue, now part of Museums on the Green.

time past in daily fear of my Life . . . He hath frequently threatened to beat out my brains, and to send my soul to Hell . . . he hath cursed & Damn'd me time out of mind, calling me the worst Names that can be mentioned.”ⁱⁱ

In August 1730, a council of local ministers, without passing judgment on Josiah’s actions, advised him to resign from the Falmouth church, which he did. Hannah moved back into her father’s home. She petitioned the court to order her husband to return her dowry, or at least to pay for her upkeep. Josiah was briefly jailed in connection with this suit. Once freed, he left as fast as he could for North Carolina. While he was absent, Hannah petitioned for a divorce, but was denied.

Divorce, Colonial Style

by Meg Costello

Josiah Marshall had a problem. He and his wife Hannah couldn’t stand each other. But he lived in Massachusetts in 1730, when you couldn’t get out of a marriage lightly—if at all. Especially not if you were the minister of the principal church in town.

Josiah was a Braintree native and Harvard graduate. He accepted a call to the pulpit at Falmouth’s First Congregational Church in 1724. Three years later, he married Hannah Hatch, granddaughter of one of the town’s first white settlers, Jonathan Hatch. The congregation provided the couple with a house, which tradition holds to be Conant House, now part of Museums on the Green.

Josiah and Hannah had one child, Mary, born in December 1727, who died in March 1728. Her death was followed by years of bitter division between her parents. Josiah felt betrayed by his wife’s “treachery.” He believed that she was conspiring with disgruntled parishioners and encouraging them to rebel against his authority.

For her part, Hannah asserted, “I have lived with him a Considerable



Reproduction of a colonial kitchen in West Falmouth’s Bowerman homestead. Photo in Museums archives.



ABOVE: Sampler made by unknown artist, c1830, in Museums' collection. Shows First Congregational Church on Falmouth's Village Green.



LEFT: Sampler made by Hannah Masters, 1768, in Museums' collection. Girls made samplers to prepare for their future lives as housewives. Note: the maker of the sampler is not the Hannah featured in the tale. We have no items that belonged to Hannah (Hatch) Marshall.

Ebenezer Miller, another Harvard alumnus who was aware of the situation, wrote a letter to the Anglican Bishop of London, warning him that Josiah might try to become an Anglican priest while in the Carolinas. Apparently this was “a favorite move of unfrocked Congregational ministers.”ⁱⁱ Perhaps because of this friendly ecumenical warning, Josiah was unable to find a position as a minister or teacher in North Carolina. Soon he was back in Massachusetts, and now it was he who petitioned for a divorce, in 1738.

Once again the court refused. At that time, a divorce was granted to an “innocent party,” who was deemed to have been wronged by a “guilty party.” Evidently, the court believed that both Josiah and Hannah were guilty of misbehaving toward each other. Their punishment was to remain married.

Josiah was soon free anyway, as Hannah died in 1739, at the age of 34. He fades into obscurity after a failed attempt at teaching school in Mendon, and is seen no more.

Two generations later, Susanna (Weeks) Bradford suffered a social penalty for trying to escape from a bad marriage—and she wasn’t even trying to get a divorce.

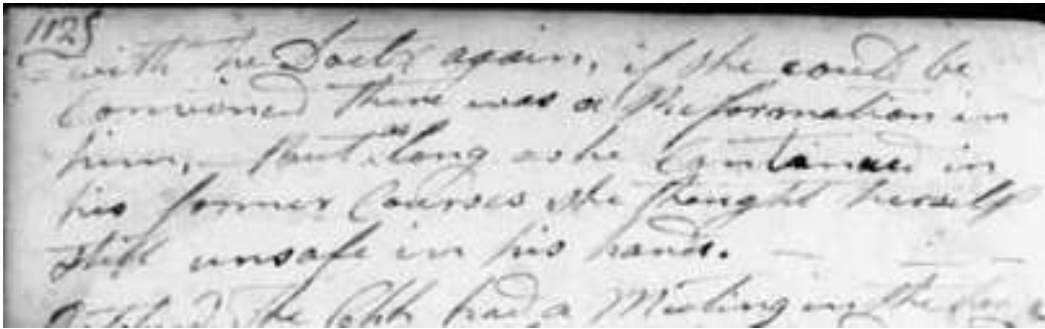
Susanna married Joseph Bradford, a descendant of the Pilgrim Governor William Bradford, in 1772. Joseph practiced medicine in Rochester, Massachusetts. He may have taken Susanna’s younger brother, Francis Wicks, as his apprentice. The couple had no children of their own.

Twelve years after her marriage, Susanna, aged 31, was back in her home town of Falmouth. On August 29, 1784, she applied for full membership at the First Congregational Church. But where was her husband? Was he still in Rochester, or had he accompanied her to Falmouth?

Wherever Joseph was living, it wasn’t with Susanna. The Bradfords were separated, and church officials couldn’t decide if this “singular” situation should disqualify Susanna from membership.ⁱⁱⁱ The elders’ first two meetings to consider the issue failed to produce an agreement, so they scheduled a third meeting, which vaguely resembled an intervention.

On October 20, 1784, mediators from the church met in the home of a Dr. Smith, with both Susanna and Joseph present. “Doctor [Bradford] then made his proposals of Living together again as Husband & Wife; Promised to be Temperate, made some Concessions of ill Treatment towards her.”^{iv} Bradford’s promise implies that he had been “intemperate” in the past. Intemperance was often a code word for drunkenness. His admission of “ill treatment” may imply that physical abuse had occurred as well.

Susanna “acknowledged her duty to live with the Doctor again, if she could be convinced there was a Reformation in him, but as long as he continued in his former courses she thought herself still unsafe in his hands.”^v Susanna was standing firm. She had no Christian duty to live with a husband who was unreformed and dangerous.



ABOVE: First Congregational Church Record, noting Susanna's refusal to live with her husband because "she thought herself still unsafe in his hands."



LEFT: Susanna Bradford's gravestone in Falmouth's Old Burying Ground.

her Husband." On October 26, 1784, they voted to reject her bid for membership "for the Present."^{vi}

Like Josiah Marshall before him, Joseph Bradford decamped to North Carolina. He died in August 1787, aged 42, after a short residence in the town of Washington, Beaufort County.^{vii}

Word of his death traveled fast to Falmouth. Susanna's irregular situation was now transformed into respectable widowhood. The church quickly accepted her as a full member with little fanfare. On September 16, 1787, "Wid. Ruth Butler and Susanna Bradford [were] admitted to full Communion, the latter Renewing her desire, and the

Objections which were [formerly against her] being Removed."^{viii}

Susanna never remarried and had no children. She lived for the rest of her life in Falmouth, dying in 1826 at age 73. She shared a household with her mother until Anna's death in 1815. After that, she apparently lived with her cousins in the John Davis family. Though Susanna's brother Francis Wicks was a prominent citizen with a spacious home, there is no evidence that she lived with him at any point.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the brother was scandalized by his sister's behavior. Francis Wicks named his first and only child after his sister, calling the baby girl "Susan Bradford Wicks." Young Susan was born in 1786, while her aunt was still living under the cloud of marital separation. Francis and his wife Betsey must have felt that there was no shame attached to Susanna's name.

ⁱ *Colonial Collegians, 1642-1774: Biographies of Those Who Attended American Colleges before the War for Independence*, Volume: Harvard; Pages 2387-2389 (quoting from *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*); sketch of Josiah Marshall (Harvard, 1720). Accessed at online database, *AmericanAncestors.org*.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Falmouth, Mass. First Congregational Church, records, 1731-1790, p 139. Accessed at <http://congregationallibrary.org/neh/series1/FalmouthMAFirst4930>.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

^v *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 140.

^{vii} Plympton, MA, VRs, p. 448.

^{viii} Falmouth, Mass. First Congregational Church, records, 1731-1790, p. 154.

Some on the admissions committee must have supported her. No doubt she also had sympathetic friends in the wider congregation, which included her own mother, Anna (Davis) Weeks. But in the end, too many of the gatekeepers "could not see their way clear to admit her, in Consequence of her Refusing to live with