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# AMERICAN ancestors

*New England, New York, and Beyond*

## *The Lives of* **New England Mill Workers**

[AmericanAncestors.org](http://AmericanAncestors.org)

FROM ABOUT 1830 TO 1850, THOUSANDS OF NEW England girls and women, ranging in age from about seventeen to twenty-four, worked in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. (In 1834, about 5,000 Lowell “mill girls” were employed in the city’s factories.) According to a rather romanticized view held by earlier historians, these Yankee farmers’ daughters lived through an industrial “golden age.” Attracted by high wages, “agreeable” living conditions, and social



Lynn Betlock

and cultural advantages, these mill girls lived in boardinghouses, forged bonds with one another, attended educational lectures, and even wrote for the famous mill operative journal, *The Lowell Offering* (1840–45). In her 1898 memoir, *Loom and Spindle, or Life Among the Early Mill Girls*, Harriet H. Robinson — a former mill girl and an NEHGS member from 1898 to 1911 — recalled that her fellow workers “had comfortable homes, and did not perhaps need the money they would earn; but they longed to see this new ‘City of Spindles,’ of which they had heard so much from their neighbors and friends, who had gone there to work.”<sup>1</sup> Most of these “factory girls” worked for a year — or two or three — and then went on with their lives in the New England countryside or elsewhere. Later, as factory conditions worsened, wages were reduced, and production increased, the native-born New England mill girls were replaced by immigrants and others in more dire economic circumstances.

When we announced plans for an issue focused on New England’s textile workers, we received an enthusiastic and rather overwhelming response. Stories and anecdotes — about native New Englanders and Irish, Scottish, French-Canadian, and Azorean immigrants who settled in mill cities in all six New England states — poured into our office. Examining them more

closely, we realized that these accounts detailed many dark days and much hardship. No one wrote to us with a story of a Lowell mill girl ancestor who availed herself of the high wages and cultural opportunities. The stories we received described decidedly less rosy mill town existences. Unquestionably, through much of the industrialized period, the harsh and demanding life of a mill worker took a toll. As a result, family stories and knowledge gained from genealogical research left many descendants with rather bleak views of their ancestors’ lives. The articles presented here describe issues which loomed large for nineteenth-century mill workers: isolated urban living, illness, workplace accidents, separation from family members, and even catastrophic disasters.

The positive aspects of the mill experience, according to the accounts in this issue, derived solely from the opportunities presented by a relatively steady job. The thriving economies of New England mill towns offered countless individuals and families an escape from grim conditions in Ireland — or even impoverished rural New England. These transplants generally found work, earned a subsistence, and perhaps sent money to help their families back home. For this first generation of mill workers especially, the transition to an urban factory life was generally not smooth or easy. The benefits of their hard work and sacrifice often seemed to be deferred to later generations. The dissonance caused by migration and the onset of the industrial revolution — a cataclysmic shift from an earlier way of life — still echoes in the stories told here.



Our genetics column is on hiatus this issue but will return in the spring. We have retired the Diaries at NEHGS column but we look forward to future “excerpts from the past” from both NEHGS collections and other sources.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle, or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (1898), 66.



## RESEARCHING THE LIVES OF *19th-Century* NEW ENGLAND MILL WORKERS

by Judith A. Ranta

*The textile industry brought the Industrial Revolution to the United States. A nation of farmers was transformed into one that included factories and bustling mill cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts, and Manchester, New Hampshire. As the first employer of large numbers of women outside the home, the textile industry changed individual lives and societal expectations.*

In 1775, the American Manufactory at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, introduced to North America the spinning jenny, a machine for spinning thread. In 1814, a Waltham, Massachusetts, factory became the site of the first power loom for the mechanized weaving of cloth. During the nineteenth century, textile manufacture became the largest American industry, employing millions of people. Many Americans today — whether they know it or not — can claim ancestors who worked in the mills.

From time immemorial, at least in Western cultures, the spinning of thread has been performed by women

and children. Accordingly, the earliest U.S. factories, such as the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, were spinning mills employing mostly children. Child labor was generally accepted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since children were already accustomed to working long hours on their families' farms. In the early republic, men's physical strength was needed for farming and construction. People believed that machinery made textile mill work "easy" enough for women and children to provide most of the labor, under the supervision of male overseers. Nonetheless, some of the working and living conditions — such as twelve- to fourteen-hour workdays six days a week for both adult and child workers; low wages; deafening noise; dangerous machinery; unhealthy, fiber-laden air; and overcrowded housing

*Above: "Gate House to Amoskeag Mills, Manchester, N.H." From a circa 1910 postcard, which was part of the Chamber of Commerce series.*

— prompted growing criticism of workers’ exploitation as the century progressed.

Many nineteenth-century towns in the Northeast possessed one or two textile mills. In smaller towns, especially in southern New England, the “family system” of labor, in which entire families labored in the mills and purchased their necessities from factory stores, prevailed. The larger mill towns and cities drew workers from near and far. Among the most flourishing mill cities were Chicopee, Fall River, and Lowell, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire; and Biddeford and Saco, Maine.

The mill cities initially employed Yankee farm men, women, and children attracted by steady wages and the social and cultural advantages these places offered, such as shops, libraries, lectures, museums, evening schools, and ballrooms. Well into the nineteenth century, racial segregation often prevailed in mill work. African Americans were restricted to service occupations, such as laundress and housekeeper. Nonetheless, there is evidence that some mixed-blood Native people worked in the mills. Beginning in the late 1840s, immigrant workers, particularly Irish, French Canadians, Portuguese, and Greeks, replaced many of the Yankee workers.

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, young women typically toiled for only a few years in the mills during their late teens and early twenties before marrying and leaving the factories to start a family. Other women, however, such as widows, spinsters, and poor immigrants, could work for many more years. During a stint in the mills, younger women can disappear from their hometown records. When I was researching the life of Betsey (Guppy) Chamberlain of Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, I met a gentleman through the Genforum website who had been tracking the Chamberlain family in the Wolfeboro area but could not account for Betsey Chamberlain after 1830. During my research on the *Lowell Offering* (1840–45) and the *New England Offering* (1847–50), magazines produced by female mill workers in Lowell, I had found the widowed Chamberlain living, working, and writing in Lowell from 1831 to 1850. Following clues in Chamberlain’s periodical pieces, I had uncovered evidence in land, church, and vital records of her mill employment first in Newmarket, New Hampshire, and then in Lowell during the 1830s and 1840s. Putting our discoveries together, the gentleman and I were able to fill the gaps in Chamberlain’s life story.

### Federal censuses

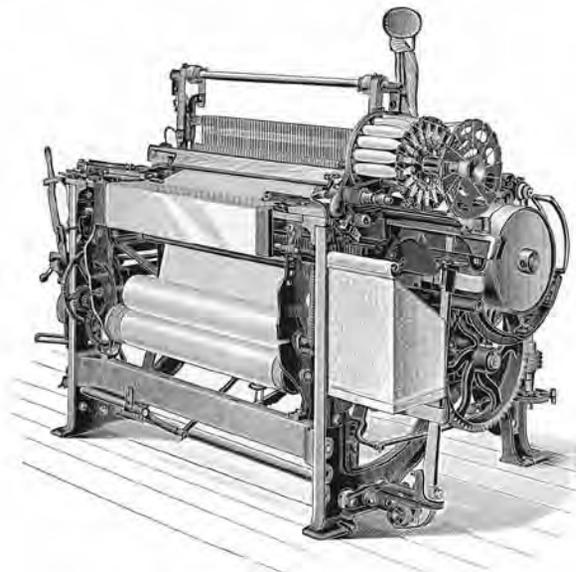
In the major factory towns with corporation-owned boardinghouses, censuses show mill workers residing

in large households headed by a middle-aged woman or man and sometimes members of the boardinghouse keeper’s immediate family. Anywhere from fifteen to fifty workers boarded in one house. Bedrooms accommodated six to eight individuals sleeping two or three to a bed. A private bed was a luxury unknown to many nineteenth-century people. The 1840 and earlier federal censuses list only the names of heads of households, such as boardinghouse keepers. Boardinghouses appear as households with large numbers of young people.

In federal censuses from 1850 onward, boarders’ names, ages, occupations, and sometimes birthplaces are given. Census takers often obtained information from boardinghouse keepers during the day when boarders were at work in the mills, so specific details can be inaccurate. It is common to see individuals sharing a surname — often sisters or cousins — dwelling in the same house. A female worker’s occupation may be cited as operative, spinner, weaver, or mill hand, but occupations are sometimes unidentified. A male worker may be similarly described, although occupations such as machinist or overseer are always held by men, except for the rare female “petticoat overseer.”

### City directories

For the larger mill towns, city directories are important sources of genealogical information. A directory often contains data gathered during the previous year. Besides listing the names of inhabitants, city directories



*An 1890s Northrop Loom B model manufactured by the Draper Corporation, Hopedale, Massachusetts. Draper, which operated for over 130 years, was the country’s largest producer of power looms for the textile industry. From Labor-Saving Looms, 3rd edition (1907). Courtesy of the Bancroft Memorial Library, Hopedale, Mass.*

## THE MANCHESTER HISTORIC ASSOCIATION

Since 1896, the Manchester Historic Association has been collecting and preserving the history of Manchester, New Hampshire. Through its Research Center in downtown Manchester, the Historic Association offers a variety of resources for anyone researching the history of the city and its people.

Among the Historic Association's most important collections are the records of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, the textile manufacturing giant that turned Manchester into an industrial city and dominated its development from 1831 to 1936. Included are accounting, payroll, and production records, engineering reports, correspondence, and fabric sample books, plus documentation for the locomotives and steam fire engines produced by the Amoskeag Machine Shop. The collection also includes employment cards for each employee from 1910 to 1935, which list the person's age, address, and occupation and often include family data and other personal information. A finding aid for the Amoskeag collection can be found on the Association's website at [www.manchesterhistoric.org](http://www.manchesterhistoric.org).

The Manchester Historic Association also has an extensive photograph collection, with thousands of images of buildings and people from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. This collection has been digitized and is accessible in a searchable database from the Association's website.

In the Reading Room at the Historic Association's Research Center, visitors can browse a variety of publications and other resources relating to the history of the city and neighboring towns. Clippings files cover a variety of topics including textile production, labor history, notable residents, buildings, neighborhoods, and events. Also available is a complete set of Manchester city directories from 1844 through the 1990s.

The Research Center's archives contain personal or family papers from prominent Manchester citizens, including Governor Frederick Smyth (1819–1899). Supplementing all of the above are maps and blueprints, ephemera, oral histories, records of various city-planning and urban renewal projects, miscellaneous records from small businesses, clubs, and other organizations, and a collection of engravings, paintings, and other artwork.

The Research Center is located at 129 Amherst Street and is open Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and by appointment. The Manchester Historic Association also operates the Millyard Museum, at 200 Bedford Street, open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

— Jeffrey Barraclough, *Assistant Executive Director*,  
*Manchester Historic Association*

often include material about the municipality's history, government, demographics, businesses, social life, etc. Listings of manufacturing corporations, houses of worship, newspapers, schools, and cemeteries can lead the researcher to other types of records.

One drawback of city directories is that single women not running businesses were not considered heads of households and might not be listed. In Lowell, female mill workers' names did not appear in most early directories, with the important exception of the 1836 *Female Directory*, the full text of which is freely available on the Internet Archive website ([www.archive.org/details/lowellmassachuse1836floy](http://www.archive.org/details/lowellmassachuse1836floy)). Additional Lowell directories can be seen by clicking on the "Lowell City Directory" link at the bottom of the Center for Lowell History's website ([www.library.uml.edu/clh](http://www.library.uml.edu/clh)). Directories for other cities can also be found through the Internet Archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)). In the "Search" box, enter the city — for instance, "Fall River" — followed by "directory"; choose "Texts"; and click "Go."

### Corporation records

Some nineteenth-century corporation records are available to the public. These are widely scattered among historical societies and libraries, sometimes but not always in the vicinity of the original mills. In general, more records relating to mill management and business operations have been preserved than material concerning employees, although genealogically significant records on workers can be found. Available collections include those of the Appleton Manufacturing Company (Lowell) and the Essex Company (Lawrence, Massachusetts) held by the Osborne Library at the American Textile History Museum in Lowell. This library houses some 90,000 additional items, including books, manuscripts, postcards, trade literature, images, and periodicals.

The Lawrence History Center holds Essex Company records dating from 1847, as well as city and population records. The Manchester Historic Association Library holds extensive material from the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, which includes some early payroll records. MHA also owns a large collection of Amoskeag employee cards from 1910 to 1935. The Massachusetts Historical Society holds some employee records for the Boston and

Roxbury Mill Corporation (1794–1912). The Maine Historical Society holds material from the Robinson Manufacturing Company (1823–1994) of Oxford, Maine.

The Archive at the Slater Mill, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, has payroll books from the Lorraine Manufacturing Company (Pawtucket), the Samuel Lord Company (Pawtucket), and the Seekonk Lace Company (Pawtucket and Barrington, Rhode Island). More Rhode Island corporation records can be found at the Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence. The Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, holds material from several Connecticut textile manufacturers and other businesses. The preceding list is not exhaustive, but suggests the kinds of institutions holding mill records.

### Museums

Genealogical research can, of course, involve much more than names, events, and dates. Researchers can seek to understand the historical and cultural context of their ancestors' lives. Several museums recreate historical working and living conditions. In Pawtucket, Rhode Island, the Slater Mill Museum features three restored buildings: the Slater Mill (1793), the Wilkinson Mill (1810), and the Sylvanus Brown house (1758). On display are antique textile machinery, a working water wheel, and other artifacts. Guides focus especially on child labor.

In recognition of Lowell's importance to the American Industrial Revolution, the National Park Service operates an extensive museum in that city, which includes a recreated 1920s weave room in an historic Boott Cotton Mill building. Due to the high volume of noise (which is lower than the noise of nineteenth-century weave rooms), the Park Service supplies visitors with ear plugs. Nineteenth-century boardinghouse conditions have been recreated in the "Mill Girls and Immigrants Exhibit" at the Mogan Cultural Center, 40 French Street, which also includes displays on Lowell's working people.

In Manchester, New Hampshire, the Millyard Museum has been installed in a renovated textile mill.

This museum houses a permanent exhibit, "Woven in Time: 11,000 Years at Amoskeag Falls," illustrating the story of Manchester and its workers. Displays explain the development of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, which became "the largest textile producing company in the world, employing over 17,000 people, including immigrants from many countries." Also on view are looms, an animated illustration of the workings of water power, and "a re-creation of Elm Street on a Thursday night — complete with lighted arches, 'cobblestone' pavement, [and] a variety of stores."

### Online sources

The Center for Lowell History regularly adds primary records and secondary sources to its website, [www.library.uml.edu/clh](http://www.library.uml.edu/clh). Especially useful website features include Mill Life in Lowell, 1820–1880, a collection of links to specific topics ([www.library.uml.edu/clh/mo.htm](http://www.library.uml.edu/clh/mo.htm)); the Lowell Corporation Hospital Association Registry of Patients, 1840–1887 ([www.library.uml.edu/clh/Patient.htm](http://www.library.uml.edu/clh/Patient.htm)); and the Lowell Institute for Savings Bank Records, 1829–1992 ([www.library.uml.edu/clh/LIS.htm](http://www.library.uml.edu/clh/LIS.htm)).

The Harvard University Library, through its Open Collections Program "Women Working, 1800–1930" ([ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww](http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww)), makes freely available page

images of published texts, manuscripts, and images — a number of which relate to the textile industry and its workers. Titles include factory women's periodicals, such as the *Lowell Offering* (1840–1845) and the *Operatives' Magazine* (1841–1842) (under "Magazines"). Also available are workers' memoirs (under "Diaries and Memoirs")

by Frederic K. Brown, Salome Lincoln, Harriet Hanson Robinson, and Lucy Larcom. The "Books and Pamphlets" category includes many secondary titles relating to textile workers.

While in general it is true that fewer records exist for working-class and poor ancestors, these individuals can be traced. And with persistence one might get lucky — some personal papers, including mill workers' letters and diaries, have been preserved in local libraries and historical societies. ♦

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*"Researchers can seek to understand the historical and cultural context of their ancestors' lives."*

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# A Boardinghouse Keeper's Letters

Ellis (Meloon) Gilman of New Hampshire

by Judith A. Ranta

THE MANCHESTER (N.H.) HISTORIC ASSOCIATION possesses a collection of letters written by Ellis (later known as Alice) (Meloon) Gilman, who ran a boardinghouse for Manchester mill workers in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>[1]</sup> First-person accounts by boardinghouse keepers are extremely rare, so the Gilman letters are an important resource. I was able to sketch the outlines of Ellis's life using federal censuses and the New Hampshire vital records collection available on *Familysearch.org*. Ellis's death record indicates that she was born in Gilford, New Hampshire, in 1809, the daughter of John Meloon, a tailor, and Abigail Richardson.<sup>[2]</sup> In 1827, Ellis married Nehemiah L. S. Gilman (1805?–1848) in Littleton, New Hampshire.<sup>[3]</sup>

## A new life in Manchester

Ellis, Nehemiah, and their six young children arrived in Manchester in June 1845. They were among the many poor New England farming people who migrated to mill towns such as Manchester seeking oppor-

tunities to earn money. Like Lowell and Lawrence in Massachusetts, Manchester was a planned industrial city built on the site of an agricultural hamlet. Named for Manchester, England — that nation's industrial giant of cloth making — America's Manchester was incorporated in 1846. Demographic information found in city directories reveals that the population swelled from 3,234 in 1840 to 14,000 in 1848.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ellis addressed many of her letters to her sister and brother-in-law Abigail (Meloon) and Benjamin Burnham, who worked a farm in Bethlehem, New

*Above left: A Manchester boarding house, probably similar to the one in which Ellis Gilman and her family lived. Although this photograph was taken in the 1880s or 1890s, the building likely dates from forty or fifty years earlier. Courtesy of the Manchester Historic Association. Above right: Ellis Gilman, likely photographed in the 1850s. Judith Ranta Papers (Mss 1081). R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, NEHGS.*

Hampshire. Ellis's writing style is often lively, poignant, and humorous, as her account of her husband's efforts to find work in Manchester shows: "husband run the street a week then went to tending masons he worked three days and then went to Boston and Bought fish and went to pedling but that did not suit and now he has bought out two men and is keeping Confectionary Shop and he is as happy as a clam in high water."<sup>[5]</sup> She could even laugh at herself in the midst of problems, concluding one letter: "when you get done reding this you will think that i am crazy and i think so to some times."<sup>[6]</sup> Excerpts from the letters are reproduced here verbatim; the idiosyncrasies of spelling, punctuation, etc., show that Ellis had probably not received much formal education. Her girlhood must have involved much more house and farm work than schooling.

According to the 1846 Manchester Directory, N. S. Gilman, a "laborer," occupied a house on Vine Street.<sup>[7]</sup> In May of that year Ellis wrote to her mother that she was then caring for thirteen boarders. As a boardinghouse keeper, Ellis provided meals, cleaning, and some laundry services for her boarders, who paid a weekly fee. Most or all of the boarders would have been mill workers. Paying eight dollars per month rent, Ellis referred to her dwelling, which contained other households, as a "tenement."<sup>[8]</sup> Regarding this usage of "tenement," the 1850 Manchester directory indicates that the Amoskeag New Mills possessed "109 tenements used as boarding houses" and the Stark Mills "66 tenements used as boarding houses."<sup>[9]</sup> Thus, the buildings were known as tenements, while apartments within them, such as the Gilmans,' served as boardinghouses. Ellis's letters do not indicate the size of the family's living quarters, but with twenty-one people they must have been crowded.

### Working children

The Gilman children were expected to work in the mills to help support the family. In a December 1846 letter, Ellis informed her sister and brother-in-law that her son Joseph (age fourteen) made ten dollars per month in the mills, while Althera (about eleven) earned eight dollars.<sup>[10]</sup> The Amoskeag Manufacturing Company payroll records — which are incomplete but still copious — note that Joseph R. Gilman worked in the carding room from March to September 1847.<sup>[11]</sup> Althera appears in the dressing room payroll from November 1846 to April 1847. She was employed preparing warp beams for the looms. From October 1848 to January 1850, she worked in the spinning room, earning higher wages. For instance, in September 1849, she was paid \$19.58 for 30 days' work.<sup>[12]</sup>

In the abovementioned December 1846 letter, Ellis wrote that her younger sons, Charles and Gardner, attended school, but she thought that Charles would have to enter the mills soon.<sup>[13]</sup> By February 1849, when he was about eleven, Charles was working in the Amoskeag spinning room.<sup>[14]</sup> A letter written by Ellis in 1850 reveals that Gardner (age ten) was employed in the mills.<sup>[15]</sup> The normalcy of child labor in this era is conveyed by Ellis's matter-of-fact mention of these matters.

### The boarders

The 1848 Manchester directory shows the Gilman family residing in a house on North Chestnut Street.<sup>[16]</sup> Within the next two years, the family again moved. In the 1850 city directory, the widowed "Gilman, E. Mrs." is listed as running a boardinghouse on Elm Street, Manchester's principal business thoroughfare. The 1850 directory also furnishes statistics that reveal the scope of the textile industry and the predominance of female workers — 1,675 males but 3,900 females. The directory also notes that Manchester had 318 boardinghouses.<sup>[17]</sup>

The 1850 federal census shows six boarders residing with Ellis.<sup>[18]</sup> There were few boarders at this time probably because the census was taken in August. Mill workers often left the cities in summer to help out on their families' farms and escape the heat and disease that flourished in warm weather. Two boarders enumerated in Ellis's household in the 1850 census, John S. and Tamer H. Maloon, were relatives, as Ellis wrote in her 2 June 1850 letter: "i have the best of friends but no relatives except John S Meloon and wife thay bord with me."<sup>[19]</sup> The other boarders, all New Hampshire natives, were Betsey and Mary Kincaid, aged 45 and 35 respectively; Eliza Annis, aged 35; and Harriett Durant, aged twenty-one.<sup>[20]</sup>

In autumn 1851, after a brief residence in Nashua, New Hampshire, Ellis returned to Manchester and rented her former rooms at 30 Elm Street, upstairs.<sup>[21]</sup> She then sought "girls" as boarders. The historian Thomas Dublin has studied "[t]he kin and friendship networks" that prevailed in the boardinghouses and mills.<sup>[22]</sup> Ellis's letters accordingly reflect her efforts to recruit boarders from the Bethlehem area, and report news of hometown friends and relatives working in Manchester, suggesting boardinghouse keepers wished to maintain kinship and other ties with home communities. Ellis asked Benjamin and Abigail Burnham to "tell Mrs Phillips that i will brd her girls if thay want to bord with me if thay come down thay had better come soon if thay come down wright and i will meet

Manchester, Sept 8<sup>th</sup> 1849  
 With solemn thoughts i take my wife to let  
 you know that we are all well and hope these  
 few lines will find you the same the time is long  
 since i have seen you or have heard from you and  
 i should like to have from you or see you very  
 much i went up to Brothers in July found  
 Mother verry sick but sister has been  
 since and she that she is better they are looking  
 for you to come down and if you do come down  
 keep along to Manchester and see me i am poor  
 but can accomodate you one or two nights i guess  
 without much trouble i keep 14 Boarders besides  
 my one family my three oldest work in the  
 mill and get good pay the three youngest go  
 to school if you cant come down i wish you  
 would take the trouble to write to me once  
 more for i am verry lonely and feel bad to think  
 that all of my connections should for sake me my  
 love to the General and family tell him i think  
 he has forgotten to write my love to his wife and  
 family to your father Bursham and family your  
 self and family if you will except the same hope  
 you will not get weary of reading my letter if  
 you do send not write again and what i  
 write amiss please forgive for i am alone in  
 this woe world but there is one thing i have to

A letter written by Ellis Gilman on September 8, 1849. Courtesy of the Manchester Historic Association.

them to the depot.”<sup>[23]</sup> By November 1851, she had succeeded in acquiring six boarders.<sup>[24]</sup>

### Illness and bereavement

Near the beginning of her May 1846 letter, Ellis described her family as healthy (“i and My family are the wellist now that they ever have ben since we left Bthlehem”), but she soon revealed that their present state of health was very much a relative and tenuous condition. Ellis next recounted her children’s illnesses: “my Children have all ben verry sick with the Mumps and Measles and lung fever Althera was the first that was tacon [taken].” Ellis then bluntly remarked, “it is verry sickey in this place two has died in the same teniment that i live in and i did not know it untell the herse come to the door.”<sup>[25]</sup>

By the following December, Nehemiah Gilman’s health began to fail. Ellis described his condition as “verry slim,” requiring her “to take the care of my family myself.” Her son Gardner had also “ben verry sick.” Illness within the family was scaring away their boarders. Ellis wrote that because all but five of her boarders had left, she was having trouble paying her doctor’s bill. She remarked that the mayor had reas-

sured her that she would have a living “with out keep- ing so meny borders,” but Ellis does not specify how.<sup>[26]</sup> The mayor’s involvement in the fortunes of one of hundreds of boardinghouse keepers may seem strange, but he was probably much invested in promoting Manchester’s success. Moreover, the 1846 and 1848 Manchester directories reveal that the mayor served as Chairman of the city’s Overseers of the Poor.<sup>[27]</sup>

Nehemiah Gilman died of a “Bowell Compt [com- plaint]” on 12 November 1848.<sup>[28]</sup> Ellis wrote to her sister and brother-in-law on 30 January 1849 to express her grief and distress over her deepening finan- cial difficulties; “i am In trouble the loss of husband is great I am lonsom and in trouble.” She now owed the city twenty dollars for the funeral costs, but if she paid that debt she would not be able to cover her store bill. To add to her woes, the children’s mill wages had been reduced.<sup>[29]</sup> Manufacturers commonly reduced wages during times of financial stress; these reductions prompted many early workers’ strikes.

### Struggling to make ends meet

The Gilman family’s poverty is rather shocking con- sidering how hard Ellis and her children were work- ing. Not only did Ellis care for her family and boarders, but she also earned extra money doing outwork such as knitting and binding shoes. The letters also reveal that even though Ellis resided in an industrial, textile- producing city, she and her sister Abigail were engaged in hand weaving. In 1851, Ellis wrote to Abigail that “i will send you some yarn to double and twist and weeve for bed spreds for me.”<sup>[30]</sup> At the time, “yarn” denoted what is today considered thread as well as yarn. It was probably more affordable for Ellis and Abigail to hand weave bedspreads than to purchase them. (As a boardinghouse keeper, Ellis had to furnish her boarders with bed linens.) Like many early-nine- teenth-century New England women, Ellis herself was skilled at hand weaving. In another letter, she asked Abigail to send her the “Draft” for a particular “web” she was weaving.<sup>[31]</sup>

After a sojourn in Nashua where Ellis worked mak- ing shoes, she and her second husband, James Fern, returned to Manchester in 1851, because James and three of her children (Althera, Charles, and Gardner) could earn better wages there. Joseph’s health had been permanently weakened by toiling in the mills. In her plainest acknowledgment of the hazards of textile mill work, Ellis confided to her relatives that Joseph was training to work in a foundry, because she “thought it would kill him to work in the mill.”<sup>[32]</sup>

## Life after the mills

Subsequent letters reveal that neither James Fern nor the Gilman children continued to work in the Manchester mills for very long. (The two youngest Gilman children did not work in the mills.) The family is listed in the 1852 Manchester directory under the new head of household, James Fern.<sup>[33]</sup> James and Ellis do not appear in Manchester directories after 1852. By June 1853, Ellis's letters indicate that she, James, and her youngest children had moved to Plymouth, New Hampshire. All of the Gilman chil-

dren survived to adulthood and married. Later letters trace Ellis's movements and last three decades. She worked at making boots and shoes, kept a boarding-house in Lake Village, New Hampshire, and married a third husband, Jeremiah M. Smith. She eventually returned to her childhood environs. Described in her death record as a widowed housekeeper, aged 80, Ellis (then known as Alice G. Smith) died of pneumonia on 11 November 1889, in Littleton.<sup>[34]</sup> Her life history exemplifies the hard work and struggles of so many who built America's first industry. ♦

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Transcriptions of these letters are also held by the R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Mass.
- <sup>2</sup> Alice G. [Gilman] Smith, death record, 11 November 1889, New Hampshire Death Records, 1654–1947; viewed at *FamilySearch.org*.
- <sup>3</sup> Nehemiah L. S. Gilman and Ellis Maloon [*sic*], marriage record, 5 August 1827, New Hampshire Marriage Records, 1637–1947; viewed at *FamilySearch.org*.
- <sup>4</sup> *A Business Directory of the City of Manchester* (Manchester, N.H.: C. A. Brown, 1848), 153.
- <sup>5</sup> Ellis Gilman to Abigail Burnham, 19 June 184[5?], Correspondence of the Ellis Gilman Family, Manchester Historic Association Library (hereafter cited as CEGF).
- <sup>6</sup> Ellis Gilman to Abigail and Benjamin Burnham, 8 September 1849, CEGF.
- <sup>7</sup> James O. Adams, *Directory for the City of Manchester, September, 1846* (Manchester, N.H.: Printed at the American office, 1846), 47.
- <sup>8</sup> Ellis Gilman to Abigail Meloon, 18 May 1846, CEGF.
- <sup>9</sup> Henry A. Gage and F. F. Forsaith, *The Manchester Almanac, and General Business Directory, for the Year 1850* (Manchester, N.H.: Printed at the Manchester Messenger Office, 1850), 149, 150.
- <sup>10</sup> Ellis Gilman to Benjamin Burnham, 13 December 1846, CEGF.
- <sup>11</sup> Amoskeag Manufacturing Company, Records, 1838–1922, Manchester Historic Association Library (hereafter cited as AMCR), Payroll vol. 206.
- <sup>12</sup> AMCR, Payroll vols. 211, 212.
- <sup>13</sup> See note 10.
- <sup>14</sup> AMCR, Payroll vol. 212.
- <sup>15</sup> Elis [*sic*] Gilman to Benjamin and Abigail Burnham, 2 June 1850, CEGF.
- <sup>16</sup> *A Business Directory of the City of Manchester* [see note 4], 55.
- <sup>17</sup> Henry A. Gage and F. F. Forsaith, *The Manchester Almanac* [see note 9], 146.

- <sup>18</sup> Elias Gilman household, 1850 census, Manchester, Hillsborough, New Hampshire; Roll: M432\_432; page: 111B; viewed at *Ancestry.com*. The enumerator records Ellis as Elias Gilman, a 40-year-old male. We know, however, that this is Ellis Gilman's household because it includes her six children.
- <sup>19</sup> See note 15.
- <sup>20</sup> See note 18.
- <sup>21</sup> Ellis [Gilman] Fern to [Benjamin and Abigail Burnham?], 30 November 1851, CEGF.
- <sup>22</sup> Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 81; see also 42–49, 82.
- <sup>23</sup> Ellis [Gilman] Fern to Benjamin and Abigail Burnham, 28 September 1851, CEGF.
- <sup>24</sup> See note 21.
- <sup>25</sup> See note 8.
- <sup>26</sup> See note 10.
- <sup>27</sup> James O. Adams, *Directory for the City of Manchester . . . 1846* [see note 7], 118; *Business Directory of the City of Manchester* (1848) [see note 4], 155.
- <sup>28</sup> Nehemiah S. Gilman, death record, 12 November 1848, New Hampshire Death Records, 1654–1947; viewed at *Familysearch.org*.
- <sup>29</sup> Ellis Gilman to Benjamin and Abigail Burnham, 30 January 1849, CEGF.
- <sup>30</sup> See note 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Ellis Fern to Benjamin and Abigail Burnham, 13 June 1853, CEGF.
- <sup>32</sup> See note 23.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Manchester Directory, (also) a Business Directory, for 1852* (Manchester, N.H.: William H. Fisk, 1852), 108.
- <sup>34</sup> See note 2.

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# The Missing Mill Girl

A TALE OF LIFE AND DEATH  
IN ANTEBELLUM NEW ENGLAND

by Christopher R. Benedetto

**I**N 1809, THE FIRST TEXTILE MILL WAS BUILT ALONG the Amoskeag falls of the Merrimack River in rural Derryfield, New Hampshire, then home to Revolutionary War hero John Stark. Stark's small community would later become an epicenter of a different revolution. Ambitious citizens soon changed Derryfield's name to Manchester, to emulate the industrial might of its English rival. By August 1846, Manchester had exploded into a bustling city of more than 10,000 residents, and its industrial capacity seemed limitless.<sup>[1]</sup> But two years later, bizarre events akin to a gothic horror novel raised concerns about the social consequences of industrialization and exposed dark, unseemly aspects of life in antebellum New England.

## Life in Manchester

In the spring of 1847, twenty-one-year-old Sarah Furber left her parents, William and Dorcas (Butler) Furber, behind in rural Nottingham, New Hampshire, and became one of 1,400 "mill girls" who annually produced over thirteen million yards of cloth for Manchester's Amoskeag Manufacturing Company.<sup>[2]</sup> Surviving payroll records at the Manchester Historic Association show that Sarah operated a loom at the Number Two mill, and was paid once a month, according to the number of "cuts," or lengths of saleable cloth, she produced. Sarah was first paid \$6.64 on April 24, but by the end of May 1847, she had quickly become a more skilled weaver, doubling her earnings

*Above: Title page of The Manchester Tragedy: A Sketch of the Life and Death of Miss Sarah H. Furber: And the Trial of Her Seducer and Murderer by George Carroll (1848). Courtesy of the Manchester Historic Association.*

to \$13.75. This was a substantial sum for a young woman; when the Civil War began fourteen years later, U.S. army privates were paid \$13 a month.<sup>[3]</sup>

Like thousands of other mill workers, Sarah Furber was likely attracted to Manchester by its quality of life. Jackson & Paige along the main thoroughfare, Elm Street, offered “bonnets, ribbons, laces,” and at the saloon of S.H. Bowman, Sarah could have her hair done “in the most fashionable manner.” Then she could visit C.M. Putney, a “wholesale and retail manufacturer of confectionary,” to indulge in “ice creams.”<sup>[4]</sup> But some observers, such as Reverend Henry Martyn Dexter, expressed concerns about the impact of this new culture of consumption on the bodies and souls of young women without families to guide them. In a December 1847 sermon given in Manchester, Dexter noted with disdain that “a young girl with money monthly in her purse can hardly walk by our brilliantly illuminated show windows . . . and be expected to resist the temptation to gratify her love of dress.” He further believed even the sweets consumed by the mill girls were a moral danger: “Satan tempted Eve with an apple, and it is much to be feared that his hook, in our time, is often baited at the confectioners.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Sarah Furber also went to Frank Brown’s “daguerreotype rooms,” where she posed for a haunting portrait, which survives only as an engraving. Later, Sarah was described by a contemporary as having a “form . . . of perfect symmetry . . . and . . . dark brown locks which fell upon her neck . . . which added new beauty to a face which otherwise was not destitute of attractions.” Sarah began to attract attention. “Her society began to be courted . . . At the dance and social party her hand oftenest solicited.”<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps at one of these gatherings Sarah met the much-older Gardner Ingalls (b. 1800), a portrait painter who shared a studio with his brother in Manchester. Ingalls was described as a “fine looking man of commanding appearance, high forehead and keen black eye.”<sup>[7]</sup> Although he had a wife and daughter in Lowell, Massachusetts, Ingalls and Sarah Furber apparently began a torrid affair. But in late May 1848, Sarah

suddenly vanished. On June 7, the *Manchester Messenger* reported “no little excitement has been caused in this city for two weeks past, in consequence of the mysterious disappearance of a young lady named Sarah Furber . . . who boarded at No. 10 Amherst St. Two weeks ago, she left her boarding house . . . since which she has not been heard of in any way.” On June 9, the *New Hampshire Statesman* even claimed that Sarah Furber had been found dead in nearby Goffstown “with her throat cut.” But macabre events in Massachusetts soon revealed the true fate of this Manchester mill girl and shocked New England to its core.

### A body in Boston

On the evening of Monday, May 22, 1848, the famed physician and Harvard professor Oliver Wendell Holmes had an unexpected visitor at his home in Boston. Dr. John McNab of Manchester boldly inquired if Holmes was interested in buying the corpse of a young woman. Holmes had recently published his groundbreaking study, *The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever*, which linked infection to the deaths of many women after childbirth. McNab knew that Holmes needed a supply of female cadavers for his research, and at medical schools across New England during the nineteenth century, a notorious “traffic of dead bodies” arose, as medical personnel raided cemeteries for fresh corpses under the cover of darkness.<sup>[8]</sup> Seizing the opportunity to obtain a “subject,” Holmes hastily gave McNab ten dollars for the body, and sent his servant Ephraim Littlefield to discreetly transport the macabre



“View of Amoskeag Millyard,” possibly by James B. Baker, c. 1840. Courtesy of the Manchester Historic Association.

cargo to Harvard. But prior to this dubious transaction, the residents at the boardinghouse where McNab had arrived with a large, coffin-shaped crate were disgusted when the box emitted a foul odor and he rudely refused to divulge its contents. The landlord then wrote a damning letter to authorities in Manchester, alerting them to McNab's suspicious behavior.

After examining the body, Holmes and his colleague Frederick Ainsworth also became alarmed and questioned McNab about the circumstances of the young woman's death. McNab would only admit "he had got into a bad scrape, and he must get out of it the best way he could." McNab then paid Ephraim Littlefield five dollars to dispose of the corpse, but Dr. Ainsworth was "convinced that crime was connected with the body . . . and thought it my duty to keep track of the body and await further developments." Ainsworth then embalmed the body to make identification possible. On the morning of June 7, Manchester's mayor, Jacob James, arrived at Harvard and positively identified the deceased as Sarah Furber. The two men accompanied the body on a train back to Manchester, and on Saturday, June 10, Sarah's body was brought home to her devastated family in Nottingham.<sup>[9]</sup>

### **Sarah Furber's fate**

At the Manchester City Hall in June 1848, a sensational grand jury hearing learned the disturbing details of Sarah Furber's final days and charged Dr. John McNab and Gardner Ingalls with causing her death. But what was the motive? A search of Sarah's belongings uncovered a letter dated April 27 from Gardner Ingalls that read, "You need not think I am going to forget you, for I can't if I try ever so much. Walter, my brother, is in Manchester painting in the room back of the one I occupied. . . . I wrote to him Monday, and told him to get the Doctor down to his room, and to have you go there and have it decided whether it is the case or not, so as to make suitable arrangements when it is necessary. I am impatient to know certain."<sup>[10]</sup> Ingalls was apparently desperate to know whether Sarah was pregnant.

Sarah Furber's roommate, Sarah Clay, testified that Sarah Furber tried to conceal her pregnancy and had planned to have an abortion: "I suspected she was pregnant . . . she had enlarged her dress . . . made a new waist to one dress. She left the mill Monday at noon . . . before she left she came to my room . . . said she was going to be out of the mill about a week." Boardinghouse keeper Phebe Lufkin recounted the troubling events of Wednesday, May 17, 1848: "On Wednesday morning . . . she [Sarah Furber] complained of being unwell, and said she was sick enough to die . . . then she soon vomited two mouthfuls or

more of dark colored matter which smelt like laudanum. . . . I told her she had better go upstairs and lay down . . . but she said she was better now, and could go without help."<sup>[11]</sup>

On the corner of Amherst Street, where Sarah Furber lived, was the shop of "H.G. Connor, apothecary and druggist," where she perhaps obtained laudanum — a potent mixture of opium and alcohol — to induce a miscarriage.<sup>[12]</sup> Since the laudanum made her very ill and apparently failed to induce an abortion, Sarah was forced to turn to Dr. McNab to save her from having a child out of wedlock. Another damning note found in Sarah's belongings read: "Miss Furber: — Do me the favor to call this evening — say 8 o'clock . . . Wednesday evening. P.S. Do not disappoint me."<sup>[13]</sup> But that night, all would go horribly wrong.

Oliver Wendell Holmes served a dual purpose for the prosecution: participant in the black market sale of Sarah Furber's body and unrivaled expert on female reproductive anatomy. But even Holmes humbly admitted that after performing an autopsy on Furber, "never in my practice have I seen anything like this . . . hope I never shall again."<sup>[14]</sup> After the abortion was performed by McNab, probably with highly unsanitary instruments, Sarah probably developed an abdominal infection known today as peritonitis, which caused severe pain and swelling as the infection spread through her body. One writer grieved with a shudder that, "none but her murderer is known to have been with her, during those days of deepest agony, to alleviate one pang, or whisper in her ear one kind word. There, with him alone, she died . . . no friend was there to hear her last requests or bear a long farewell to her parental home."<sup>[15]</sup> Even contemporary Edgar Allan Poe could hardly have composed a fictional tale as horrific as the fate of Sarah Furber.

### **Fallout from the tragedy**

Sarah Furber's death ignited a debate over whether her own actions were to blame, or rather that she was a victim of the new industrial, morally corrupt society. Not surprisingly, gender often defined the opposing sides of this controversy. In 1848, journalist George Carroll wrote a pamphlet titled "The Manchester Tragedy," in which he claimed Sarah Furber's "moral training might . . . have been . . . defective. It probably was, or she would not have yielded to the allurements of the deceiver, and sacrificed that virtue which is above price — a woman's honor."<sup>[16]</sup> In contrast, fellow mill girl Lucy Hall was outraged by the crude medical practices which led to Sarah's death. She published "Lines Composed on the Abduction and Cruel Murder of Miss Sarah H. Furber," which read in part:

In men of art and science,  
 She thought a sure redress,  
 For all her grief and sorrow,  
 In long oblivion rest;  
 O hellish cruel practice,  
 Which none but fiends should know,  
 Yet in our land of science,  
 It's practised not by few.<sup>[17]</sup>

The legal and political impact of the Furber tragedy traveled swiftly up the Merrimack River to the state capital of Concord. In January 1849 almost all abortions in New Hampshire were outlawed, and the state pledged to prosecute “every person who shall administer to any pregnant woman with . . . child, any medicine, drug or substance whatever, with intent to destroy such child, unless the same shall have been necessary to preserve the life of such woman . . . upon conviction, be punished by fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and by confinement to hard labor not less than one year, nor more than ten years.”<sup>[18]</sup>

What became of the men linked to Sarah Furber’s gruesome demise? John McNab and Gardner Ingalls were finally indicted in November 1848. They pleaded not guilty, and their trials were postponed until May 1849, when McNab became a fugitive and possibly fled to California to join the Gold Rush.<sup>[19]</sup> McNab returned discreetly to New Hampshire in the 1860s

and, according to contemporary historian John Quincy Bittering, “was frequently called in critical cases, especially in surgical operations in which he displayed great daring and skill.”<sup>[20]</sup> McNab died in 1879 at age ninety-four. Gardner Ingalls apparently served no jail time — he does not appear in the nineteenth-century Register of Convicts at the New Hampshire State Prison. He died in obscurity on August 15, 1874, and was buried in Sanbornton, New Hampshire.<sup>[21]</sup>

The life and death of Sarah Furber brutally confirmed the fears many Yankee families and officials shared concerning the social and moral consequences of the Industrial Revolution, as thousands of young women ventured out into a world far from the safety of home. In late 1848, when mill girl Elizabeth Nute died at a local poorhouse near Dover, New Hampshire, and was buried in a pauper’s grave, the editor of the *Dover Gazette* demanded “in the name of . . . the farmers scattered all over our Granite Hills, whose daughters are continuously flocking to these cotton mills, hot-beds of all vices, as they are . . . a full and thorough investigation.”<sup>[22]</sup> Any investigations, however, came much too late for Sarah Furber and her contemporaries, who suffered the dislocation and disruption caused by the transition to a new urban, industrial world. ♦

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Maurice Clarke and John B. Clarke, *Manchester: A Brief Record of Its Past and A Picture of Its Present* (Manchester: 1875), 23–32.
- <sup>2</sup> Elliott C. Cogswell, *History of Nottingham, New Hampshire* (Manchester: 1878), 687–688; *A Business Directory of the City of Manchester* (Manchester: 1848), 80, 153.
- <sup>3</sup> Amoskeag Mfg. Co. Payroll, Factory #2, Ledger 209 (1846–1848), Manchester Historic Association Research Library, Manchester.
- <sup>4</sup> *A Business Directory of the City of Manchester* [note 2], 157, 194–195.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry Martyn Dexter, *The Moral Influence of Manufacturing Towns, Delivered at the Dedication of the Franklin Street Church of Manchester, N.H.* (Andover, Mass: 1848), 13, 15, 18.
- <sup>6</sup> George L. Carroll, *The Manchester Tragedy: A Sketch of the Life and Death of Miss Sarah H. Furber* (Manchester: 1848), 7–9.
- <sup>7</sup> M. T. Runnels, *The History of Sanbornton, New Hampshire* (Boston: 1881) 2: 390. Gardner Ingalls’s genealogy is detailed in Charles Burleigh, *The Genealogy and History of the Ingalls Family in America* (1903), 99.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Sappol, *A Traffic of Dead Bodies: Anatomy and Embodied Social Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 13–73.

- <sup>9</sup> *Manchester Democrat*, June 16, 1848.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Manchester Democrat*, February 11, 1848; and *Directory of the City of Manchester* (1848), 201.
- <sup>13</sup> *Manchester Democrat*, June 16, 1848..
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Carroll, *The Manchester Tragedy*, 12. The symptoms of peritonitis were taken from an actual case described in *The Half-Yearly Abstract of the Medical Sciences . . . January–June 1862*, (London: John Churchill, 1862), 218.
- <sup>16</sup> Carroll, *The Manchester Tragedy*, 12.
- <sup>17</sup> Lucy Hall, *Some Lines Composed on the Abduction and Cruel Murder of Miss Sarah H. Furber, Late of Nottingham, N.H.* (Manchester: 1848), held at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.
- <sup>18</sup> *Laws of the State of New Hampshire Passed January Session 1849*, (Concord: 1849), 708–709.
- <sup>19</sup> *Farmer’s Cabinet*, May 3, 1849.
- <sup>20</sup> John Quincy Bittering, *History of Haverhill, New Hampshire* (Haverhill: 1888), 310.
- <sup>21</sup> Runnels, *The History of Sanbornton, New Hampshire* [note 7], 390.
- <sup>22</sup> *Dover Gazette*, December 2, 1848.

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# Ellen Flynn

## SPEEDER-TENDER

by Michael F. Dwyer

ELLEN FLYNN, OCCUPATION: “SPEEDER TENDER.” THE occupation listed on the death certificate of my grandmother’s beloved aunt conveys a wealth of information. Ellen’s life divides in even halves: the first as a farmer’s daughter in rural Mayo, Ireland, and the second as a mill worker in booming Fall River, Massachusetts, at a time when the city’s population more than doubled.<sup>[1]</sup> Ellen’s life must be viewed in the larger context of the forces that pushed her from Ireland and those that pulled her to America. Poverty, deprivation, and limited prospects at home led her, along with thousands of others, to toil in textile mills for the promise of a better life. My family resided in Fall River for another three generations, but no one living today knows why Ellen and her sister Annie chose the city when they apparently had no close relatives living there. My father’s eldest cousin, Eleanor, recalled that the sisters boarded with a family “near the King Philip Mill and Cook Pond,” and experienced winter conditions so cold that the urine froze in their chamber pots.

Family lore maintained that the sisters, only a year or two apart in age, traveled from Ireland together as teenagers and remained extraordinarily devoted throughout their lives. Ellen and Annie’s youthful arrival seemed to be validated by an 1882 confirmation record, their reported ages in 1900 and 1910 censuses, and respective birthdates of 1865 and 1866 carved on their gravestone.<sup>[2]</sup> However, finding their baptismal records in Ireland proved that at the time of their emigration, Ellen was, in fact, thirty-five and Annie, twenty-five. Perhaps their misrepresented ages can be attributed not to vanity but to better economic and marriage prospects for younger women. Examining ship manifests indicated that Ellen arrived in 1880, a year before Annie — another myth debunked.<sup>[3]</sup>

I fortuitously discovered, within the folds of a tablecloth, a letter written in December 1885 by Ellen’s father to his daughters and Annie’s new husband,



Patrick Cassidy. The letter suggested the expectations and responsibilities that followed families from the old world to the new. These lines indicate that their father believed the move to Fall River was temporary:

My dear children, we have received the sum of one pound ten shillings in your loving letter. May the Almighty God bless ye. My dear and loving son and daughters ye are welcome to us any moment we have plenty of milk and butter before ye and potatoes. We were expecting ye home before Christmas.

These sentences from this sole surviving remnant of correspondence gave voice and life to Ellen’s family. Ellen was the third child of John<sup>[4]</sup> and Bridget (Staunton) Flynn, born in the townland of Curraghmore, Mayo, about four miles south of Castlebar, Mayo, in October 1845, at the onset of the potato famine.<sup>[5]</sup> Annie, born in March 1856, was the next-to-youngest child. Given the magnitude of County Mayo’s exodus, the Flynns must have experienced destitution and hunger as well as separation from friends and family who left the area. Another failure of the potato crop occurred in the late

*Above: Ellen Flynn of County Mayo and Fall River, Massachusetts, circa 1885. (Note her bandaged left finger, which was injured in an accident at the mill.)*

1870s and produced a corresponding degree of agitation for land reform. Charles Boycott, whose notorious surname became a word in its own right, lived near Ballinrobe, fifteen miles east of Curraghmore. Reaction to ensuing social upheaval may have acted as a catalyst in even the most complacent of families. In 1880, four decades after John and Bridget Flynn's marriage, none of their five surviving children had married or left home. Ellen was the first of her immediate family to emigrate, with Annie soon following.<sup>[6]</sup>

Another section of John Flynn's letter revealed how news traveled. Ellen apparently had a workplace accident:

Young Michl McDonnell came home on a visit to his Uncle Dick's your brother and Maria went to see him at the hour of ten o'clock at night. He told us Ellen's finger was hurted, you will let us know in your next letter was she much hurted.

Michael McDonnell was part of the sisters' network of connections. Ellen and Annie belonged to a well-established community of Mayo exiles in St. Patrick's parish in Fall River's South End, an area which came to be known as "The Globe," for the mills of the same name. Castlebar area surnames in this parish were Madden, Concannon, Gannon, Mooney, Joyce, Naughton, McGough, and Iago.

Through this network, Annie Flynn likely met her Mayo-born husband, Patrick Cassidy, whose earliest Fall River address was only a few doors away from the McDonnells. When she was married at St. Patrick's

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*"He told us Ellen's finger was hurted,  
you will let us know in your next  
letter was she much hurted."*

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Church in February 1885, Annie gave her occupation as weaver.<sup>[7]</sup> In October 1887, Ellen and Annie, acting singly as grantees, bought adjoining lots of land from the Slade Mills in a developing millworkers' neighborhood.<sup>[8]</sup> Their six-room cottage — with enough land for cows in the yard — was at 13 Palmer Street (later renumbered to 47). This property later offered a significant contrast to the tenements that otherwise lined the street. The home was only one block from the busy intersection of Globe Four Corners and two blocks from the Globe Yarn Mills, where Ellen would toil for the next twenty five years, advancing from weaver to speeder-tender, a job that required her to set up, operate, and oversee machines that spun fibers into yarn.

Patrick Cassidy died in October 1891, as the result of a mill accident. Exactly seven months later his fourth and last child was born. Patrick's death placed his family in economic peril. Adapting to their new life circumstances, Annie and Ellen sold part of their property and, with money from a life insurance policy, erected a three tenement house on the back lot. Each of their cold-water flats brought in about \$1.50 a week in rent. As landlords, they had a variety of tenants: Irish mill workers, supplanted by growing numbers of French Canadian families, and in 1909, a tailor from Russia named Hyman Schwartz,<sup>[9]</sup> who remained friendly with the family long after he moved.

A textile strike that caused seventy-two mills to close in 1904 affected thousands of Fall River mill workers. The Globe Mills was one of the few factories in Fall River that stayed open, albeit with reduced wages. Ellen worked six days a week, from 6 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., earning about eight dollars a week. Upon completing eighth grade at St. Patrick's School, Ellen's nieces, Mary and Annie Cassidy, joined their aunt at the Globe Mills. Typical for many first-generation families, the education of their brother, John P. Cassidy, took precedence over the girls' aspirations. Ellen's wages, as well those of her nieces, paid for John to earn a doctorate from the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy. By 1910, Ellen could quit the mills.<sup>[10]</sup>



*The house at 13 Palmer Street in Fall River shared by Ellen Flynn and Patrick and Annie (Flynn) Cassidy, circa 1891.*

Annie's early widowhood had prevented the sisters from sponsoring other family members to come to the United States, but now they could welcome two nephews. In 1914, after their brother Patrick Flynn lost two children to tuberculosis and another to meningitis, he sent his two surviving sons, John and William, to Fall River.<sup>[11]</sup> William lived on Palmer Street with Annie and Ellen until he enlisted as a soldier in World War I. Later that same year, in December 1914, with her health failing, Ellen deeded her half of the properties to Annie's children.<sup>[12]</sup>

Ellen died of cancer in the Palmer Street cottage on 23 July 1916, at age 51, according to her death certificate, which was in error by twenty years; she was 71.<sup>[13]</sup> Ellen's obituary in the *Fall River Herald News* noted: "She always lived in the South End and was one of the best known members of St. Patrick's Church, being highly esteemed in that section." Her funeral was "largely attended."<sup>[14]</sup>

Since I spent my early childhood in this same cottage where Ellen and Annie lived, that experience of place inspired my quest. Discovering the connections between Ellen Flynn's lives in Ireland and the United States has been deeply satisfying. As the first person in her family to emigrate, Ellen possessed courage, ambition, and perseverance. Her earnings as a speeder-tender in the mill enabled her to buy property and contribute towards the education and upward mobil-



Annie (Flynn) Cassidy, Patrick Cassidy, and Ellen Flynn, Providence, R.I., 1885.

ity of the next generation, none of which would have occurred if she had remained a farmer's daughter in County Mayo. ♦

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In 1880, Fall River's population was 48,961; in 1910, it was 119,295. *Living Conditions of Wage-Earning Population in Certain Cities in Massachusetts* (Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1911), p. 227.
- <sup>2</sup> An entry in Annie's hand, in *Her Life of Christ*, notes that Ellen and Annie were confirmed in Providence, R.I., on 14 July 1882.
- <sup>3</sup> Ellen likely arrived in New York aboard the *Adriatic* on 13 August 1880.
- <sup>4</sup> According to John Flynn's great-granddaughter, Mary Fahey of Manulla, Mayo, he had moved from County Roscommon to teach in Belcarra, Mayo.
- <sup>5</sup> Record from the Church of St. Crohan, Balla, County Mayo, Ireland. Ellen was baptized 21 March 1845.
- <sup>6</sup> Annie's 15 February 1919, obituary in the *Fall River Herald News* stated she arrived in 1881.
- <sup>7</sup> Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841–1910. (From original records held by the Massachusetts Archives. Online database: *AmericanAncestors.org*, NEHGS, 2004.) Though Annie was five years older than her husband, she gave her age as one year younger. For more about Patrick Cassidy's family, see

Michael F. Dwyer, "Hart-Cassidy Migration from the Parish of Kilmovee, County Mayo to Fall River, Massachusetts," *Register* 165 (April 2011): 100–120.

<sup>8</sup> Bristol County Deeds 130: 542–544.

<sup>9</sup> *The Fall River Directory* (1909), p. 484.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1910 census, in her sister Annie Cassidy's household in Fall River's First Ward, Ellen Flynn, "boarder," is listed as having her "own income."

<sup>11</sup> John and William Flynn arrived in Boston aboard the *Cymric* on 1 May 1914. The manifest errs in calling William "Patrick." Correspondence from William's granddaughter, Mary Fahey of Manulla, Mayo, provided details about Patrick Flynn's family. John returned to Ireland within a short time and remained on the family property for the remainder of his life.

<sup>12</sup> During this period, Annie's son, John Cassidy, was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the spine after a barrel broke his back. John's wife left him, and he spent the remaining years of his short life unable to walk.

<sup>13</sup> Death certificate, number 1504, Fall River, Mass.

<sup>14</sup> *Fall River Evening Herald*, 24 July 1916, p. 6, and 26 July 1916, p. 7.

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# The Fate of My Irish Ancestors

by Paula Casey Wood

FAMILY STORIES IMPLIED THAT MY IRISH IMMIGRANT ancestors experienced tragedy on both sides of the Atlantic. I began my genealogical research to uncover the facts — and I uncovered a sad story indeed. The Civil War pension papers of my great-grandfather, Ailbeus Hannon (1846–1933), pointed to his origin in Emly, County Tipperary, I visited Emly in 2002, located the Church of St. Ailbe, tapped on the rectory door, and was soon seated in Father Seamus Rocheford’s parlor. He held the great, old black church register open in his lap. He would not let me touch the book, but instead read the information aloud. The register listed the marriage of my great-great-grandparents, Daniel and Ellen (O’Brien) Hannon, on 26 December 1826 and the baptisms of their eight children born in Moanmore, Emly.

My great-grandfather, the last of the family born in Moanmore, was named for St. Ailbeus, from whom the church took its name. (Our Ailbeus was known as Elias in the United States.) The family left Emly between 1846, when Ailbeus was born, and 1848, when the last Hannon child, Anne, was born in Ballylooby, Galbally, County Limerick, only a half-mile from Emly. In 1853, Griffith’s Valuation placed Daniel Hannon in Ballylooby.

The Great Famine (1845–1853), must have severely impacted the family. Between 1853 and 1857, my great-great-grandmother, Ellen (O’Brien) Hannon, and at least five of her nine children — (Margaret, Denis, Catherine, Ellen, and Ailbeus) — left Ireland. (I have not been able to find death records for Daniel or the other three children, although some or all of them must have died before the family departed.) In 1857, Ellen is listed in

the Lawrence, Massachusetts, city directory as “Widow Hannon.” Lawrence, a city built on textile mills, offered employment.

On January 10, 1860, Ellen’s daughters, Catherine, aged 18 and Ellen, 16, were at work in Lawrence’s gigantic Pemberton Mill when catastrophe struck. At about 5 p.m., the six-story mill collapsed, one floor crashing down atop the next until only a huge pile of rubble remained. *Disaster in Lawrence: The Fall of the Pemberton Mill* (2008) by Alvin F. Oickle describes



“Ruins of the Pemberton Mills, at Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Morning After the Fall.” *Harper’s Weekly*, January 21, 1860.

the tragedy in great detail. Approximately 100 workers were killed and many more injured. According to our family story, Catherine made it out of the building alive but, unable to find Ellen, returned to the rubble to search for her. We don't know the truth of this story, but records show Catherine died in the ensuing fire and Ellen, although badly injured, escaped.

The American Textile History Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, has an extensive collection of

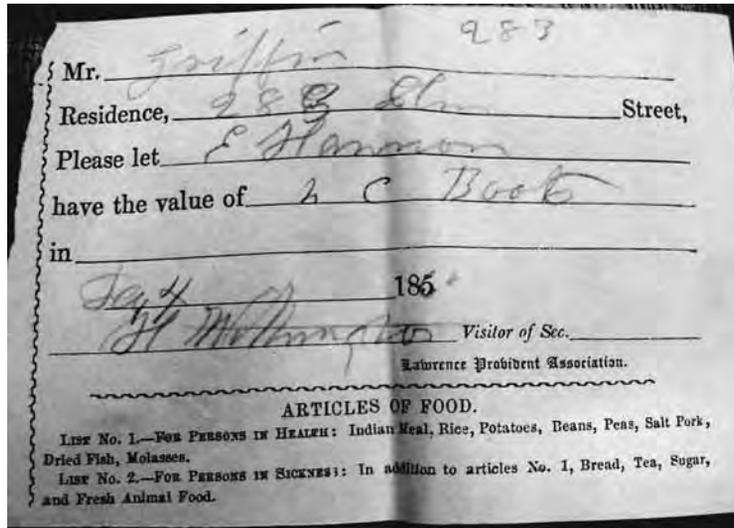
girl killed, one girl injured." Another page reads, "Mrs. Hannon, nothing to eat. Destitute!!"

One large box is filled with many old envelopes, each containing small slips of paper. The slips are the original vouchers given to the victims and their families to purchase coal, groceries, and boots; the collapse had literally torn the boots from mill workers' feet. I found several slips with the notation "Mrs. Hannon," and realized I was holding the actual papers my great-great-grandmother carried to various merchants. This discovery was a very moving experience. I also found a receipt showing that the family was given \$12.25 to pay for Catherine's coffin, the only coffin paid for by the relief fund. A map of Lawrence's Immaculate Conception Cemetery shows Catherine's unmarked burial plot; the family could not afford a gravestone.

Barely a year later, in March 1861, Ellen (O'Brien) Hannon died of heart disease. Her daughter Ellen, who had been injured, continued with mill work. She never married, but lived with her sister Margaret and Margaret's family. Margaret worked in the mill before her marriage to James Carroll, had at least four children, stayed home until the last child was of school age, and then returned to the mill. Catherine, Margaret, and the two Ellens are buried together

in the Immaculate Conception Cemetery. Elias, who was wounded in the Civil War, married Catherine McNamara and moved to Billerica, Massachusetts. Elias and his seven surviving children also worked in the mills. Denis moved to Lowell, married, and had three children. He, too, spent time working in mills.

The lives of Ellen (O'Brien) Hannon and her five children were, in large part, determined by the Great Famine and then by Massachusetts textile mills. Had Ellen known their ultimate fates, I wonder whether she would still have chosen to emigrate. ♦



*A voucher for boots issued to Ellen Hannon for James Griffin's store after the Pemberton Mill disaster. The store was located at 135 Essex Street, Lawrence. From the collections of the American Textile History Museum, Lowell, Massachusetts. Photo by Laura Piraino of Untravel Media.*

Pemberton Mill materials. When I made a research trip to investigate the family tragedy, I was uncertain what I would find. A large cart that was rolled in for me contained boxes of records, including books detailing medical care and costs, plus lists of donations, and notebooks written by inspectors who had gone door to door to determine each family's needs. The mill collapsed on payday so survivors and bereaved family members badly needed cash. In one notebook are penciled the words, "Mrs. Hannon, not in need." These words are crossed out and written underneath is "One

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# THE WILL *to* ENDURE

## The Life of June (Pennell) MacDonald

by Barry MacDonald

*Family historians can spend years researching remote ancestors. With more recent relatives, like parents, we usually feel we already know them. But do we?*

My mother, June Miriam (Pennell) MacDonald, often remarked that her life would be good grist for a novel. From my childhood, I was certainly aware of some key facts. June was born on 4 June 1919, at Brockton, Massachusetts, to Leon and Helen (Covert) Pennell. Her older brother, Leon, died the next year at age three in a drowning accident near the family home. In 1925, her father Leon, already estranged from Helen, died in Boston, aged twenty-eight, as the result of a railroad accident. Helen's second marriage to Harold Jepson was a disaster, but produced a son named Lawrence. He and a school companion, each age six, both drowned, plunging through the ice on the Town River in West Bridgewater in 1933. Family instability and the constant search for work during the Depression meant that June lived in several towns in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont, as well as Indianapolis and Detroit — twice — by the time she was ten.

While I knew the basic facts of my mother's life, as an adult I realized that I was still missing much of the substance of her childhood. I suggested that at my birthdays or Christmas, she give me pieces of her story as presents. The well-written account she produced and several of my grandmother Helen's diaries provided great insight into June's chaotic life as a young

child and introduced me to what befell her as a teenager and young adult.

Some subjects are not discussed with children. The first documentation of a defining issue in my mother's life — of which I knew nothing as a child — comes from my grandmother's diary for 1933:

*Saturday – 18 February:* Pleasant weather. We buried our little darling [Lawrence] today. Oh God how can life be so cruel . . . I think my heart is made of stone.

*27 February:* . . . June went to the show and was ill. Poor girl — what can I do.

*17 April:* . . . June was ill and fell downstairs

June was indeed seriously ill — with epilepsy, which had appeared several years earlier. (The condition might have been a genetic legacy from her grandfather, Leroy Covert.) Later, when June told her own story, she wrote:

It is a horrible disease if only for the fact that it isolates you from daily living. No one wants you around to play with and you are barred from all the regular activities. . . . [T]he biggest disappointment of all was the graduation cantata. It was the bicentennial of George Washington's birth (1932) and the eighth grade was going to put on a big cantata for its graduation exercise [in Plymouth, Mass.]. Each teacher was given a scene and she could choose her singers. Every

*Above: June Pennell in 1934, at age fifteen.*

day I read the list of the ones who were chosen for a part, but I waited in vain.

Part of Helen's 1933 diary entry for June 3 also reveals the cumulative impact of her losses and the tumult of her life with Harold Jepson: "Tried to die but failed." She had swallowed iodine. The diary continues with constant references to quarrels with Harold and June's increasingly severe illness. Finally, on October 19, Helen writes, "Well I finally made the break and got out." At some point after this final break-up with Harold, Helen boarded June with family friends in Plymouth.

In Helen's 1935 diary, there are many references to June, usually associated with the word "Palmer." As a child I would occasionally hear my mother refer to Palmer in conversations with my father. I came to realize that it was a town in central Massachusetts somehow associated with my mother's epilepsy. Much later I would learn that Palmer had been the location for a long series of state institutions. The traditional town poorhouse in Palmer was transformed into a state-run almshouse. After the Civil War, the almshouse became a training school that housed orphans and children from broken families.

In 1898, the Palmer facilities were converted into the Massachusetts Hospital for Epileptics, designed for about two hundred patients. The Depression had a huge impact on what became known as Monson State Hospital. One of Monson's superintendents, Dr. Ronald Rosen, wrote: "Many hundreds of persons who would not ordinarily have been admitted to State institutions were admitted from 1929 to 1935. . . . Many came from families who, if times were better, could have kept their relatives at home."<sup>[1]</sup> By 1960, Monson would house more than 1,600 patients.<sup>[2]</sup>

On a trip home to visit my mother one year, I finally asked her about Palmer. She said she had gone to Palmer because the State Hospital was there. Blithely assuming that she was at the hospital for a few months, I asked her how long she was there. She replied, "Seven years."

I was speechless. I contemplated that length of time and the period involved — my mother's teen-



*Administration Building, Monson State Hospital, Palmer, Mass., circa 1920.*

age years and part of her young adulthood. (I would later learn that June was at Palmer from ages fifteen through twenty-three, and that her stay was eight, not seven, years.) Noticing my shocked expression, she said something I will never forget: "Oh no, don't worry, I was happy there." This was an amazing statement, but because of the shambles of June's family life at the time, her attitude was not totally surprising.

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*"Noticing my shocked expression, she said something I will never forget: 'Oh no, don't worry, I was happy there.'"*

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So how did June become institutionalized? Some of that story lay buried until 2005, when I asked my mother if she would like to return to Palmer for a visit and she agreed to go. At that time, the institution, renamed the Monson Development Center, was still run from the same Administration Building that was its headquarters in the 1930s. However, it housed only 160 patients with severe brain disorders, a tenth of the population it had once housed as the state hospital for epileptics. Upon arriving there, I inquired if we could see the campus and was directed to the Director of Placement Planning and Training, Susan Boucher, who conducted us on a driving tour. Many of the buildings clearly were abandoned, beginning to disappear into the weeds that surrounded them. Later my mother

would say she hardly recognized anything except the Administration Building.

After the tour, we chatted further with Ms. Boucher, who said we could obtain the records of my mother's stay at the hospital. With Mrs. Boucher's help, we applied for the records on the spot. About two weeks later, an inch-thick envelope arrived. It contained a remarkable trove of information about my mother's life at Palmer: several photos (including the one on page 35, which was likely taken when June was admitted), medical records, a list of visitors, correspondence between my grandmother and the hospital, and letters between the hospital and my mother after her full-time residence had ended.<sup>[3]</sup>

Of particular interest is the letter from my grandmother addressed to the Head Social Worker dated 13 August 1934. Helen recounted the family's and June's history, including the progressively worsening epilepsy. She noted that she was working as a housekeeper and had room and board for herself, but not for June, and that her friends in Plymouth, due to their own illnesses, could no longer keep June. Helen concluded, "I have no home for the girl and no money. The situation is desperate. . . . Do you know anything or any way I could get help."

The staff must have responded positively because eight days later, on August 21, 1934, June was admitted to Monson. The records show that June was allowed to leave two or three times a year for several weeks during her permanent stay. The last visitor's entry is Helen's on August 24, 1942 — probably when she arrived to take June home for good. However, June was not formally discharged until November 1950, two years after her marriage and six months after my birth.

I couldn't help but wonder what there was to be happy about living at a state hospital in rural Massachusetts for eight years. Over time, my mother explained. Dances were held every Friday night. Once a year, the chief pharmacist and his wife put on a major musical production. June's vocal talents — ignored in that eighth grade ode to George Washington in Plymouth — led to starring roles. Although men and women lived in separate buildings, shared time on the job, at meals, and at dances meant everyone got to know one another. My mother said she had her first real boyfriend at Palmer. Everyone was employed, a key part of the institution's philosophy on treating epileptics. My mother pressed many a piece of clothing in the hospital's laundry. An attempt to establish a high school failed because the hospital's resources were not up to the task — a major disappointment. And my mother made clear that while there were happy times, this was still an institution that operated on a strict schedule,



*June Pennell's graduation photo, taken in 1946 after completion of her LPN training program at Harley Hospital in Dorchester, Mass.*

with bells to signal the major events of the day, and without the freedoms any other budding American young adult would expect.

June's life was changed in the early 1940s. Medical advances were being made in the drugs used to treat and control epilepsy. She was selected for an experimental trial of a new drug, Dilantin, still in use today. The drug worked for her, finally bringing her seizures under control. This breakthrough was my mother's passport out of Palmer.

In 1942, in her words, June was "Home at last! . . . To be able to control your own life to a certain extent means a great deal. . . . I was twenty-one [actually, twenty-three], in good health and anxious to be out in the working world." So, despite the protestations of Helen and Bert Barry, who would become Helen's third husband, June began a job hunt. She tried a shoe factory in Stoughton and the lunch room of the Kresge's Department Store in Brockton. After giving up on Kresge's, my mother saw an ad for a housekeeper at Brockton's Goddard Hospital. She got the job, and her experience at the Goddard convinced her that she could be a nurse. The war was on and nurses were badly needed.

I had long heard of June's training at the Harley Hospital in the Dorchester section of Boston. However, the Palmer records contain several letters that mention a

Marlboro Hospital. Why had I never heard of this place? Because, I discovered, it recalled an episode my mother preferred to forget. Epilepsy at that time carried a great stigma, socially and certainly in the working world. When June began to train at Marlboro, she hid both her epilepsy and her hospitalization at Palmer. In June 1943, she had a seizure on the job. The truth became apparent, and she lost the Marlboro position. The report of the Household Nursing Association and Training School for Attendant Nurses of Boston dated September 1943 states: "Hospital Physician advised attendant to give up nursing in any form and go into other work."

June did not see it that way and appealed to the Nursing Association and the physicians at Palmer to help with reinstatement. The superintendent at Palmer was of no help and ended his short reply by stating: "This patient is still on our records and in case of necessity, could be returned to this hospital at any time."

Others might have thrown in the towel then, but not June. She read in the newspaper about a training program for Licensed Practical Nurses at the Harley Hospital. June found a doctor in Boston who gave her a clean bill of health, and she was accepted at the Harley. A year and a half later, of the initial five students, June was one of only two young women who completed the program, passed the State Boards, and were awarded the dark blue ribbons to wear on their caps that signified they were bona fide LPNs. My mother wrote: "I had reached my goal and I was very happy!"

Other momentous events occurred during June's training at the Harley Hospital. As she recounts, "It was not all drudgery and hard work. It was wartime and Boston was teeming with soldiers, sailors and all types of service men. . . . It was funny, we'd come off duty, tired out and longing for a shower and a nice bed. The phone would ring and somehow we'd get our second wind and off we'd go, dining, dancing, roller skating,

movies, whatever the night had to offer." One of those offerings was Irving MacDonald, a Boston boy, home from the service. June immediately dubbed him "Mac."

June and Mac were married on May 31, 1948, in Dorchester. In 1953 the family relocated to Brockton. From our home there, June not only cared for her husband and son and continued her nursing work, but also cared for the aging previous generation. For a number of years she maintained a household for her mother, Helen, in Wareham, Mass. My grandfather, James Alfred MacDonald, came to live with us for four years, until the end of his life in 1964. June also cared for her Aunt Grace in her final years. Grace was Helen's sister, who had periodically served as June's surrogate mother when the need arose.

Amidst all this activity, June also found time to return to school. The lack of a high school at Palmer meant she had never graduated. By attending night school, she finally received her diploma in 1966, two years before I received mine.

June's later life included several setbacks. A brain tumor progressively robbed her of a portion of her mobility and ended her hard-won nursing career. A heart attack took her beloved Mac in 1985. Still, she soldiered on. Ironically, epilepsy led to her death. Most likely June lost track of the only medication she ever took regularly, the Dilantin needed to control the epilepsy. She had a seizure and hit her head as she fell. She died at Boston on April 3, 2009, age 89.

Now June is a memory. However, that memory is greatly enhanced by her own words — both written and spoken — as well as by my grandmother's diaries, and the remarkable Monson State Hospital records. Altogether, these sources add context and depth to a portrait of a woman whose life was beset by tragedy but who, in the face of so many major challenges, found the will to rise above them. ♦

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ronald Rosen, "Monson State Hospital: A Short Past, but a Long History," a three-part series originally published in *The Aurora*, February, May, and November 1978, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *History of Monson, Massachusetts* (Monson, Mass.: Monson Historical Society, 1960), pp. 105–108.

<sup>3</sup> The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Mental Retardation, Monson Developmental Center, Palmer, Massachusetts: the records of June Pennell, admitted August 21, 1934 and discharged November 16, 1950.

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