MEHITABLE JOHNSON - A PURITAN FOREMOTHER.

BY MARY P. WELLS SMITH OF GREENFIELD. 1905

This is a talk given to the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association in 1905 – Deerfield MA. This text was posted by Bev Butler to the ancestry tree Butler Family Tree. Only portions of the talk will be given below.

***Please remember this was given in 1905, a different time than now (2023) (LSR)***

…The virtues of our Puritan forefathers have not lacked chroniclers. Their praises are familiar to us in song and story, as well as in history's solid pages. But it sometimes seems that justice has hardly been done to the worth of the Puritan foremothers. What would the forefathers have done, pray, but for the staunch English helpmeets who said to them, like Ruth, "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me;" the women who cheerfully, for conscience sake, but also for love sake, renounced the home of youth, and native land, even civilization itself, often with a tiny brood of children clinging to them, to face the weary months of voyage over stormy seas, the discomforts and perils of founding a new home in the savage wilderness? The women who were wives and mothers, and manufacturers, too; who not only cooked and brewed and nursed, but who also made and mended, wove and knit and spun, and, if need were, moulded the bullets and loaded the guns, were a power in the early history of this country not to be ignored. Privations severe for men to bear were doubly hard for women. When, to all the inevitable hardships of their lot, we add the strain of anxiety and terror often suffered, we wonder at their endurance and fortitude. They seem made of stronger stuff than the human beings of to-day.

Occasionally we get a glimpse of one of these foremothers in the old records, as in Sewall's touching tribute to his aged mother at her grave, given in his diary….[or Rev John Norton’s poem to Anne Bradstreet, wife of Gov. Bradstreet, married at 16 and mother of 8 children]

But in this mention of their virtues, Mistresses Bradstreet and Sewall were almost the exceptions. History takes little note of the faithful lives of the everyday wives and mothers.

Mehitable Johnson, wife of Samuel Hinsdale, has been chosen as the subject of this paper for these reasons : she seems to have been the first white woman living in Deerfield; I cherish for her the personal interest one feels in an ancestress, even of two hundred years ago; and hers may fairly be considered a typical woman's life of her period. Not exceptional, for many women were called to undergo even greater hardships than hers; but simply a typical life of one among the Puritan foremothers. To briefly consider its incidents will perhaps make real to us their day.

Mehitable Johnson came from good Puritan stock, being probably daughter of Humphrey Johnson of Roxbury. Her grandfather was John Johnson, who is supposed to have come from England in the fleet with Gov. Winthrop in 1630. We are told that the little fleet which sailed with the Arbella, was nine weeks crossing the Atlantic, but the devout passengers beguiled the tedium of the voyage by "preaching and catechizing, fasting and thanksgiving." No doubt Humphrey, Mehitable's father, then a young boy, was one of the victims of the "catechizing." Palfrey, in a note, quotes the learned English antiquary, Hunter, as saying of the emigration which followed Winthrop from England, that it "consisted very much of persons who, though not of the very first rank, were yet men of substance and good alliances,—will-making families, families high in the subsidy books, while some of them, as the Winthrops, were among the principal gentry of the country." This honorable description seems true of John Johnson, for Savage says he was "a man of estate and distinction," a representative to the first General Court in 1634, and for many years following ; also a member of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, and surveyor general of arms and ammunition.

John's oldest son, Mehitable's uncle, Isaac Johnson, was a captain in the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, and was killed by the Indians at the head of his men, during the great fight at the Narragansett Fort, December 19, 1675. Palfrey says of this skillfully constructed fort, in the heart of a hideous swamp, that its only entrance was "over a rude bridge consisting of a felled tree, four or five feet from the ground, the bridge being protected by a block house." Over this treacherous bridge, slippery with ice and snow, rushed the English troops to the attack, after a march of eighteen miles in deep snow through the pathless forest. Palfrey says, "The foremost of the assailants were received with a well-directed fire. Captain Johnson of Roxbury was shot dead on the bridge, as he was rushing over it at the head of his company." Well may Savage allude to him as " the brave Captain Johnson of Roxbury."

Humphrey, second son of John, although he lived for a time at Scituate and Hingham, made Roxbury his chief home. Here he married March 20, 1643, Ellen Cheney, and here their eldest child, Mehitable, was born in September, 1644. On October 31, 1660, when only sixteen years old, she married Samuel Hinsdale of Dedham, he being aged about eighteen.

We know nothing of Mehitable's personal appearance. Fancy is therefore free to make its own picture of her. We are safe in ascribing to her more than usual attractiveness of person, and many sterling qualities of character. A woman who married three times, twice when a widow with a large family of young children, was certainly not devoid of fascinations. I picture her large, strong, vigorous, her face radiant with the combined charms of good health and good sense. She was not only fair to look upon, but of the sturdy stuff in mind and body fit for a pioneer's wife, or she could not long have borne up under the hardships of her life. We may imagine her to resemble the second wife of Cotton Mather, of whom his son Samuel wrote:

"She was one of finished Piety and Probity, and of an unspotted Reputation, one of good sense, and blessed with a compleat Discretion in ordering a Household ; one of singular Good Humor and incomparable Sweetness of Temper; one with a very handsome, engaging Countenance;" and no doubt it could be said of Samuel Hinsdale, as his son adds of Cotton Mather: "He rejoiced in her as having great spoil, and in finding her found great Favour of the Lord." Certainly Mehitable's life furnished opportunity for the use of all these virtues. And the forceful Samuel Hinsdale probably knew what he was about, when he selected a life partner for pioneer wilderness life.

The Hinsdales were a family of good birth, having a coat of arms, as we learn by the will of the widow of Col. Ebenezer Hinsdale, who is buried in Hinsdale, N. H. She left by will to her niece "a silver cup with Coat of Arms of Hinsdale family engraved upon it;" and to the church in Hinsdale "my great Silver Tankard with Hinsdale Coat of Arms."

Great energy, what in modern phrase is called " push," seems to have characterized the Hinsdales. Robert, father of Samuel, came from England in 1638, as one of the first settlers of Dedham, and was one of the eight men who founded the Dedham church; he moved thence to Medfield as a pioneer, being one of the founders of the Medfield church in 1650, and in 1673 we find him, with four stalwart sons, again a pioneer, this time in the remote wilderness settlement at Pocumtuck. But his son Samuel, apparently endowed with more than his share of the family energy and courage, had preceded his father to the Connecticut Valley several years, going first to Hadley. How little can we imagine what this journey of several days on horseback, through primeval forest whose only denizens were wild beasts and still more savage Indians, with three or four little children on the pillions behind the parents or in their arms, must have been for the young wife and mother; what high-hearted courage, what strong common sense, above all, what firm trust in God and his leading must have been hers, to carry her through it.

In May, 1669, Dedham records tell us "Samuel Hinsdale of Hadley in the County of Hampshire" appeared before the selectmen of Dedham, stating that having "purchased some propriety in Pocumtucke," and made improvement " by ploughing land there," he demanded "the laying out" of the rights so purchased " that he might settle himself upon it, .... or if it could not yet be layed out, that then some parcell of upland might be granted and laid out to build a house upon." Alone had he come up here into the wilderness, twelve miles north of any habitation, and his ploughshare was the first to turn up the virgin soil of Deerfield meadows.

The town street and highways were not laid out until two years later, in 1671, when the committee in charge of the work allowed Samuel Hinsdale to " injoy the percell of land—on which at present he is resident." Hence we may assume that some sort of house was already built on said "percell of land," that his family were here with him, and that, consequently, Mehitable Hinsdale was the first woman living under the shadow of old Pocumtuck, a worthy forerunner of all the many "desirable" women who have, since her day, walked Old Deerfield Street, and borne conspicuous and honorable share in her history.

She had at this time four children; three little girls, Mehitable, about seven, Mary five, Sarah about three, and a baby boy, Samuel. The site of the first land occupied by Samuel Hinsdale is unknown. The Dedham records say the piece of land thus taken up not being over three or four acres, and not "prejudicing any man's lott or lotts," he was allowed to "Injoy it,—considering his expense on the same," probably in the erection of his house and other improvements. A little later, by some trade, doubtless, Samuel Hinsdale became owner of Lot 14. Moving his family hither, here he was residing at the time of his death.

Lot 14 is that now owned and occupied by Mrs. Whiting and daughters.

How priceless would be one letter from Mehitable Hinsdale's quill, giving us a glimpse of her life in the solitary little cabin, around whose doors played the sturdy children, while the young mother, alert and cheerful, stepped briskly to and fro at her spinning wheel, or plied the flying shuttle at her loom. We can see the little ones scampering to the safe shelter of mother's linsey-woolsey gown, when dusky Mashilisk or her son Wuttawwaluncksin, or Masseamet came striding out of the forest on the mountain side, coming to the cabin perhaps to barter Indian brooms for a taste of Mehitable's savory bean porridge. But as Mehitable, like most women of her period, probably could not write, we can only infer her life from the conditions then prevailing.

Samuel Hinsdale was a large proprietor, in 1670, owning onetwelfth of the original 8,000 acre grant. With his indomitable energy, he would no doubt have been eminent in the settlement's early history, but for his untimely death. Several times during these earliest years of settlement, from 1670 to 1673, he was sent as a deputy to Dedham with petitions from "the inhabitants at Pecomtick." What anxiety Mehitable must have suffered, during her husband's absence on these long, hazardous journeys to the Bay! He was also appointed on a committee with such leading men as Lieut. Samuel Smith and Peter Tilton of Hadley, and Lieut. Wm. Allis of Hatfield, to supervise the affairs of the new settlement, to have charge of the sale of lands, the admission of new settlers, and the procuring "an orthodox Minister to dispenc the word of God among them."

In the fall of 1673, Samuel's father and three brothers cast in their lot with the promising settlement at Pocumtuck. In this year, too, was born Mehitable's fifth child, and the first white child born in Deerfield, Mehuman Hinsdale. Deerfield, as the settlement began to be called, had now about one hundred and twenty-five inhabitants, thirty of whom were men. All was happy and prosperous in the little plantation until the outbreak of King Philip's war. The events of that war are too familiar to need recapitulation here. Even the most vivid fancy must fail to depict the constant anxiety and terror filling the hearts of the women in this isolated frontier settlement during the summer of 1675, the marching to and fro of soldiers, the discomfort of living, inhabitants and soldiers being huddled within the few palisaded houses, the Indians in September having burned all houses outside the stockade. Then came the morning of the fatal 18th of September, when Captain Lothrop and his gallant soldiers marched out of Deerfield escorting a train of loaded wheat carts to Hadley. Samuel Hinsdale was one of the seventeen Deerfield men chosen by lot to drive these carts. Elsewhere I have thus pictured his adieu to his wife.

"Mehitable Hinsdale stood there holding little Mehuman by the hand, smiling bravely through the tears shining in her eyes, tears stoutly held back, as her husband, after lifting little Mehuman and kissing him with unwonted tenderness, turned to her, and taking her hand, said:

"'Good-by, Mehitable. Keep up thy courage, good wife. Thou hast soldiers here in plenty to guard thee. And it be God's will, I trust soon to come safely back.'

"'God be with thee, Samuel,' said Mehitable, from a full heart.'"

No doubt she stood in front of her house, so near where we are to-night assembled, her little brood around her, watching her husband and father go down the hill and out upon the meadow till the long train disappeared to the south.

Her eyes never again rested on the husband of her youth. Samuel Hinsdale, his father and three brothers, slain that bloody day by the Indians, not, we may believe, without the stout resistance of brave men fighting for their lives, were buried by Moseley's and Treat's soldiers in the huge grave under the shadow of MtWequamps. A few days more, and Mehitable with her little ones, mounted behind Major Treat's troopers, with wet eyes looked her last on what had been her happy home, and rode with grief unutterable over the still bloody battle ground, past the dreadful mound, to take refuge with kind relatives, probably in Hatfield. Deerfield was abandoned to Indian ravage and destruction, and was soon burned. A few blackened cellar holes and ravaged and trampled fields, and one melancholy frame, left unburned, through whose bare timbers the desolate winds howled mockingly, were all the traces left of the settlement. "The small remnant that were left of Deerfield's poor inhabitants " scattered through several towns below, pathetically said, in a petition to the General Court for aid (in 1678), "our houses have been rifled and burnt, our estates wasted, our flocks and herds consumed, the ablest of our inhabitants killed; our plantation has become a wildernesse, a dwelling for owls."

Mehitable, now thirty-one years old, was left a widow with five little children, the oldest a girl of barely twelve. Samuel Hinsdale's personal estate of forty-five pounds, a much larger sum relatively then than now, was by his will" given his widow to bring up their children," while "the Land at Deerfield alias Pocumtuck, not being valued in regard to the present Indian war rendering it at present of little worth, but being hopeful to prove a Real Estate hereafter," was given to his sons, Samuel and Mehuman, " the Eldest to have a double share."

In those days of war, death, uncertainty, there was little time for mourning. Broken families and lives must be patched up somehow, and the duties and business of life must go on. Mehitable with her little flock needing a father's care, soon married John Root of Northampton, aged thirty-one, son of Thomas Root, one of the founders of Northampton, one of the "eight pillars of the church" there, a selectman, etc. The records give John Root but one child, Thankful, born in February, 1677. He probably married Mehitable in the spring of 1676, and Thankful Root was her sixth child, perhaps so named from the sense of gratitude to God filling the mother's heart that life, which had looked so dreary, began to smile again with love and hope.

The General Court, in answer to Mehitable's petition, had given her as her own, Lot 14, and in the spring of 1677 John Root, with Quintin Stockwell and a few others, returned to Deerfield full of hope and courage, to begin rebuilding the ruined settlement, feeling themselves entirely safe now that Philip was slain, and the war ended, while no hostilities had recently been committed. Root was building a house for Mehitable and her family on Lot 14 when on the evening of September 19, 1677, exactly one day over two years since the slaughter at Bloody Brook, a band of 26 Indians from Canada, led by Ashpelon, fell upon the workers. All were taken captive, and Root soon slain, perhaps because of his desperate resistance. Again was Mehitable widowed by the cruel hands of Indians. Truly could she echo the words of Deerfield's desolate "remnant" to the General Court, " We find it hard work to live in this Iron age." She was probably living either with her father-in-law, Thomas Root at Northampton, or with Hatfield friends. Her first husband's fourth brother, Ephraim Hinsdale, had settled at Hatfield after King Philip's war, and there were other relations living there. Among these various friends the family were doubtless scattered. Hearts were warm and hospitable in those troubled days, and those as yet uninjured shared freely with their suffering friends.

A prominent man in Hatfield was Deacon John Coleman, son of Thomas Coleman from Wethersfield, Ct., one of the "engagers" who settled Hadley. Deacon Coleman married Hannah Porter of Windsor, and by her had six children. This family were living on a lot in the heart of the present village of Hatfield, just north of the stockade. Ashpelon and his Indians suddenly fell upon peaceful Hatfield about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of Sept. 19, 1677, killing twelve persons, wounding four, burning several buildings, then retreating northward in haste, bearing seventeen captives. Those captives were concealed in the woods east of Mt. Pocumtuck until dusk, when the deadly assault already described was made upon the men rebuilding at Deerfield.

Deacon John Coleman's house, as has been stated, was without the stockade. He himself, with most of the men of the settlement, was at work on the meadows when this unexpected blow fell. He left home in the morning, everything seeming serene and secure. He returned ere noon to find his wife and baby Bethiah slain, another child wounded, his barn with all his summer's crops burned, and two children carried off into captivity, one being Sarah Coleman, but four years old, whose little shoe worn during her eight months of captivity, now rests in Memorial Hall. The same day Mehitable Root had lost her second husband.

It is not strange that these two fellow-sufferers, probably old acquaintances and fellow church members, were drawn to each other by their common sorrow and common need. We can fancy good Deacon Coleman seated in the "fore room" with the comely and capable Widow Root, pleading his suit something in this wise, while the firelight shone out on his earnest face, on Mehitable's, still pleasing, though the shocks of sudden sorrows had somewhat dimmed its girlhood beauty.

"Goodwife Root, the hand of the Lord hath verily been laid heavily upon us twain. In the same dread day, thou didst lose thy staff and stay, and I my sweet and comfortable spouse, by the hands of the same murderous savages, whom, doubtless because our sins called down His just wrath, the Lord suffered to fall upon us to desolate our pleasant places and destroy our goodly heritage. In this bereavement so strangely befalling us, methinks I discern a leading of the Lord, that we widowed ones who are left desolate to mourn shall comfort each other under these sore distresses. Thy little flock needeth a father's protection and guidance, and my poor desolate children a loving mother's care. Shall we not join hands in the sweet estate of wedlock, and walk together, comforting each other, during the days that remain of our earthly pilgrimage?"

And so, eighteen months after the deaths of Hannah Coleman and John Root, on March 11, 1679, Mehitable, now thirty-five years old, became the second wife of Deacon John Coleman of Hatfield. The deacon moved within the palisade soon after the assault. Mehitable bore him two sons, Ebenezer and Nathaniel. At the time of the marriage, Deacon Coleman had five children living, the oldest a boy of thirteen. The two little captives had returned in safety early in June, 1678, thanks to the heroic efforts of Benjamin Waite and Stephen Jennings. Mehitable had six children, the eldest a girl of 16. With the two sons born to Deacon Coleman, she was thus the maternal head of a household of thirteen young children. Did she not need all the virtues I have ascribed to her and would she have been chosen to fill so difficult a position by a "grave, judicious " elder of the church, had she not possessed the rare qualities of head and heart enabling her to fulfill its duties faithfully and wisely? She lived ten years with Deacon John Coleman, probably years of domestic peace, though there was still a constant apprehension of Indian raids, not baseless as was shown by the assault on Northfield in August, 1688, when six persons were slain. A
year after this raid on Northfield, when her youngest child, Nathaniel, was but five years old, August 4th, 1689, she died, at the early age of 45.

She had borne eight children, had lost two husbands as well as relatives, neighbors and friends innumerable by the sudden and horrible shock of Indian butchery, and, in addition to the care and toil inevitable to the mother of so large a family amid the hardships and privations of the period, she had lived most of her life under such a nervous strain and apprehension as are inconceivable to us more fortunate ones,—the impending dread of Indian assaults. Small wonder is it that her vitality was exhausted, and that she early laid down the life so full of usefulness, but also of turmoil and sorrow.

She was undoubtedly buried in the old burying ground at Hatfield, beautiful for situation then as now, where the clear waters of Mill River glide by under the bank to-day as peacefully as when mourning husband and children lowered to quiet rest at last the worn body which had housed Mehitable Coleman's brave soul. But I find there no gravestone, or even trace of an unmarked grave near her husband's. Perhaps this is not strange, after the lapse of two hundred and eleven years. At the time she died, few graves were marked with stones. The mound has long since sunk down into a grassy hollow, and the body Mehitable wore has blossomed again in grass and flowers. Little it all troubles Mehitable now! A stone, large for the time, in fact probably erected later, marks her husband's grave, its partly effaced inscription stating, "Deacon John Coleman dyed on Jan. 21, 1711, Aged 76 years, and here byred."

Through her children Mehitable was still further connected with the Indian troubles. Indeed, her early death seems merciful, in view of the agony she was thus spared, for the sorrows of one's children are more grievous to a mother's heart than her own. Her oldest daughter, Mehitable, became the second wife of Obadiah Dickinson, who, with his child was carried away captive to Canada from Hatfield in the assault of 1677. Her third daughter, Sarah, married Samuel Janes, son of Elder William Janes of Northfield, who during the first settlement at Nbrthfield preached to the settlers under the spreading branches of a huge oak tree. Samuel returned to Northfield at the time of the second settlement, taking up his father's lot. Samuel Janes seems to have been a brave man, for it was he who with one garrison soldier went to Springfield the day after the assault bearing a letter with the news to Major Pynchon. When the settlers were again obliged by the Indian assault in 1688 to abandon Northfield, Samuel, with his brother Benjamin and three other families, settled on a fertile tract in Northampton, at the northeast foot of Mt. Tom, called Pascommuck. Here they no doubt felt themselves entirely safe, in the heart of the old settlements. But in May, 1704, a party of French and Indians fell on Pascommuck. Thirty-three persons were killed or captured. Samuel Janes, his wife, Sarah, and three children were slain (daughter and grandchildren of Mehitable), and two young sons of Samuel Janes were knocked on the head and left for dead, but were found alive and recovered. Mehitable's son, Mehuman Hinsdale, was twice taken captive. In 1704 he was living on his mother's old lot in Deerfield, No. 14, when, in that terrible night in February, which we are here met to commemorate, he and his wife were captured, and taken to Canada, and their only child (another grandchild of Mehitable) was slain before the parents' eyes. On the passage back from Canada in 1706, another son, Ebenezer, was born to the Hinsdales. Mehuman returned to Deerfield to live, but in 1709, when driving an ox cart from Northampton, he was again captured, and carried to Canada, returning only after three years' absence, by way of France and England. Would he had kept a diary of his experiences during these three years!

Mehitable's grandson, Ebenezer Hinsdale, born almost in captivity, was prominent in the settlement of Southern Vermont and New Hampshire, founding the town of Hinsdale, N. H. Mehitable's second daughter, Mary, married Deacon Thomas Sheldon of Northampton, brother of Ensign John Sheldon, so prominent in Deerfield's early history. Deacon Thomas gave the first church in Northampton a communion service of massive silver, still in use, says Sheldon's genealogy. So we may infer that Mary, as the phrase goes, "married well." Thankful Root married Thomas Wells of Wethersfield, Ct. Ebenezer Coleman also settled in Connecticut, in Colchester. The ties with Connecticut, where many of the families in this region had originated, and where many relatives still lived, were strong in those days. Samuel Hinsdale settled in Medford.

Mehitable's youngest child, Captain Nathaniel Coleman, lived and died in Hatfield, as did his son Elijah. His grandson, Elijah, Mehitable's great-grandson, married Tabitha Meekins, a descendant of Goodman Thomas Meekins, the miller of Hatfield, and of his son, Thomas, Jr., slain by the Indians in King Philip's war, when out as a scout north of Hatfield, Oct. 19, 1675. Through her mother, Martha Smith, Tabitha Meekins was also directly descended from Lieutenant Samuel Smith of Hadley. Soon after the Revolutionary War, Elijah Coleman moved from Hatfield to Greenfield, purchasing a part of the old Allen farm in the upper meadows, confiscated and sold, as family tradition has always recounted, because the owners were Tories, the farm now called "Clover Nook Farm." I remember as a child of four, going into this old house, a black frame house with a long roof sloping to the ground in the rear, then used as a store and tool house. Elijah was my mother's grandfather. Had he lived a few years longer, it pleases fancy to believe he might have told my mother family stories or traditions about the momentous experiences of his great-grandmother, Mehitable, and so I should have had, as it were, personal touch across the centuries with this Puritan foremother. But he died in 1818, when my mother was two years old, and his body was taken back to the old burying ground in Hatfield, and laid beside his ancestors, Captain Nathaniel and Deacon John. His stone bears the familiar words:

Present useful, Absent wanted.
Lived desired, Died lamented.

An obituary in the Greenfield paper of the period says of him that he was "a worthy and respectable citizen, and dear to his circle of friends, who cannot but reflect with the highest satisfaction upon his Christian resignation under the infirmities he has long endured, and particularly upon the almost unparalleled consolations he enjoyed during his last illness, nor fail to indulge the joyful assurance that with him death is swallowed up in victory."…..