

# A Year in the Life of Martha Ballard: An Exploration of Her “Enclosed Garden”

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On March 16, 1794, Martha Ballard wrote, “Cloudy & moderate. we all attended worship yt were at home. mr Ballard was absent. Seth Hollowel & Tylors Dagt were Publisht ye first time. Revd mr Turner Discoarst from Luke 12 C 15 Verse, beware of Covetousness.”<sup>1</sup> This was the only sermon she felt compelled to describe in her diary in 1794, a reminder to herself to be satisfied with what she had and not to covet that which she did not. She was a fifty-nine year old Christian woman who was a wife, mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, neighbor, and midwife.<sup>2</sup> Ballard managed to fulfill the obligations of those familial roles and establish a lucrative niche for herself as a reliable, knowledgeable midwife, despite living in a patriarchal society, by respecting herself and submitting to the cultural and religious boundaries of her society—her “enclosed garden.”<sup>3</sup>

In her book *The Enclosed Garden*, Jean Friedman defined the term as the sexually integrated patriarchal community, revolving around the church and kinship, in which women lived.<sup>4</sup> Although her research was meant to illuminate the cultural restrictions on Southern women of the nineteenth century, Friedman’s metaphor of an enclosed garden also applies to Martha Ballard’s life. Friedman stated, “[T]he social demands of integrated kinship networks, church discipline, and farm labor compressed southern women’s experience into the confines of a rural, kin-dominated, church-related community.”<sup>5</sup> In 1794, Martha Ballard experienced the same confines in the rural, pre-industrialized, religious northern New England, yet managed to circumnavigate obstacles—young doctors, bad weather, and mysterious illnesses—within her enclosed garden, prospering as a midwife of high regard. Indeed, Ballard’s biographer Laurel Thatcher Ulrich stated, after analyzing Martha Ballard’s diary and other documents

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Moore Ballard, *Martha Ballard’s Diary Online*, <http://dohistory.org/diary/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1985), xii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, *Enclosed Garden*, 39-40.

pertaining to the region, that there is little doubt that Ballard was the most important practitioner in the area.<sup>6</sup> Ulrich's research of Ballard's diary, a document that spanned the years 1785 to 1812, provided the details of Ballard's contribution to her community during her entire career as a midwife. In her diary entries from 1794, Martha Ballard wrote about her participation in the practices of kin keeping, religion, and domesticity, behavior that corresponds closely to Friedman's concept of the enclosed garden, and, through this correspondence, allows a better understanding of the value of the midwife's role in early American society.

Kin keeping involves "remembering birthdays, sending cards, preparing for holidays, keeping in touch with relatives, and providing spousal career support by entertaining."<sup>7</sup> Martha Ballard wrote about those activities in her diary. For example, on March 4, 1794, she wrote "this is ye anniversary of Son Jonas Birth." And, in the margin—the area of the page where she would put the day's most important events—she noted, "Son Jon a is 31 yearsold this Day."<sup>8</sup> Ballard did not just record her children's birthdays, she also made special note of the birthdays of her husband and her niece, Mrs. Shubal Pitts.<sup>9</sup> Ballard sent letters regularly to her brothers and sisters, posting them with travelling friends and storekeepers, and noted in her diary when she received their letters back. On June 13, 1794, she wrote, "I receivd Letters from Brthers Collins, Moore & Barton, my friends there are well Except Doct Barton. Old Lady Town Deseast in may last."<sup>10</sup> The deceased woman she mentions was her aunt.

Addressing another aspect of kin keeping, Martha Ballard supported her husband's work efforts and entertained Mr. Ballard's colleagues, particularly after they returned from their land surveying tours. After one such journey that lasted from April 27 to May 18, Martha wrote that Mr. Ballard, Mr. Hamlin, Mr. Hamlin's son, her son Jonathan, and "S. & P Densmore" took tea at her home, discussing the snow levels and discoveries of their expedition.<sup>11</sup> Mr. Ballard went on two surveying tours in 1794 and, both times, Martha Ballard prepared meals or served tea to the men as they were making plans to leave and after they returned.

Although holiday preparation had a different meaning in the eighteenth century than it does today, Ballard did acknowledge keeping holidays. On April 17, 1794, Maundy Thursday, she wrote, "I have been at home. this is the day appointed for a Fast."<sup>12</sup> Three days later, she celebrated Easter with her husband and all her children who lived nearby.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the year, Ballard stayed connected to her married children, her extended family, and her neighbors by giving her time, support, and care.

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<sup>6</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "The Living Mother of a Living Child?: Midwifery and Mortality in Post-Revolutionary New England," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 1989): 27-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1922406>

<sup>7</sup> Susan M Shaw & Janet Lee, *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 395.

<sup>8</sup> Ballard, *Martha Ballard's Diary Online*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/03/17940303\\_txt.html?d=17940304](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/03/17940303_txt.html?d=17940304).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940513\\_txt.html?d=17940517](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940513_txt.html?d=17940517) and [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940809\\_txt.html?d=17940813](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940809_txt.html?d=17940813)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/06/17940610\\_txt.html?d=17940613](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/06/17940610_txt.html?d=17940613)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940513\\_txt.html?d=17940518](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940513_txt.html?d=17940518).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/04/17940416\\_txt.html?d=17940417](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/04/17940416_txt.html?d=17940417)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

She wrote on June 20, 1794, that after attending the birth of Mrs. Norcross's third child, she "Calld at Capt Neys, Gows, Parmers, Sewalls. there Bot 2 Skeins Silk, 1/2 Dozn table Spoons... Calld at mr Danys, Norcross, & T. Hinkleys, arivd at home at 7h pm. Dolly returnd at Evn. mr Town... Sleep here."<sup>14</sup> In a matter of one day, Ballard socialized with seven families, supported a local shop with her patronage, and visited with her son-in-law, Mr. Town, and her daughter, Dolly.

Although it was her profession, her midwifery services were a form of kin keeping, too. Ballard did not just show up when her patients were in labor; she built relationships with them, visiting them while they were pregnant and checking on them about a week after they had given birth. Ballard took care of the women in her community, networking and meeting new people through the kinship relationships she cultivated. On May 5, 1794, Ballard wrote,

[M]r Beaman was here, Desird me to Go & See his Lady; left his hors for me to wride. I went & Dind with her. went to See mrs Carr, find her much More Comfortable; her husband is Some Better. I Calld to See mrs Fillebrown, Shee is Cleverly.... Came back to mrs Beamans, was Calld by mr Waid to See his wife who was in Labour, & was Safe Deld at... 10h Evn of a Dagt. I tarried all night.<sup>15</sup>

Ballard had lunch with Mrs. Beaman and, a few weeks later, on May 23, Ballard came back to assist in the birth of her son.<sup>16</sup> Since she was in the vicinity, Ballard paid a follow-up visit to Mr. and Mrs. Carr, whom she had treated for illness about ten days before. Also, she stopped by to see Mrs. Fillebrown, who was five to six months pregnant at that time; Ballard assisted her in giving birth to her second child, a son, on September 15, 1749.<sup>17</sup> To round out her busy day on May 5, Ballard, called by Mr. Waid, was the attending midwife at the birth of a baby girl. Ballard stayed with Mrs. Waid all night, left the next morning, and came back to check on her a few days later.<sup>18</sup> Ballard seemed to take her position as a midwife very seriously; she seldom complained about the lack of sleep or dangerous travel conditions in her diary, even though both occurred often, especially in March of 1794. During that year, Ballard assisted in the births of forty-eight children, all alive with living mothers; one newborn was her own granddaughter, Daughter Pollard's firstborn.<sup>19</sup> According to Ulrich, Ballard's diary listed fourteen stillbirths out of 814 deliveries for the period from 1785 to 1812, and only five maternal deaths during the laying-in period after giving birth, which was an impressive career record at that time.<sup>20</sup> Ballard's role as a midwife provided an important service to her community while enabling her to live with purpose, earn extra income for her

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/06/17940619\\_txt.html?d=17940620](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/06/17940619_txt.html?d=17940620)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940503\\_txt.html?d=17940505](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940503_txt.html?d=17940505)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940519\\_img.html](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940519_img.html)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/09/17940913\\_txt.html?d=17940915](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/09/17940913_txt.html?d=17940915)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940507\\_txt.html?d=17940507](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/05/17940507_txt.html?d=17940507)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/06/17940629\\_txt.html?d=17940630](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/06/17940629_txt.html?d=17940630)

<sup>20</sup> Ulrich, "Living Mother of Living Child," 30.

family's needs, and live as a confident, capable woman within the gender boundaries placed on her by the community.

In keeping with Friedman's concept of how "the enclosed garden" takes shape, a church must ground the kinship-based community. The Ballard family lived in northern New England, which was primarily Puritan, so the Ballard's community did have a strong religious foundation. Mr. Ballard attended public worship fairly regularly; he attended full day services twenty-seven times and half-day services twice in 1749.<sup>21</sup> However, Mrs. Ballard did not go as often as her husband; she attended public worship only seventeen times that year, and six of those were half days.<sup>22</sup> Despite her poor worship attendance, Ballard was a Christian woman with a steadfast belief system. When Mrs. Pitts, Ballard's niece, had been suffering for about eight weeks from fevers, fainting spells, lethargy, and diarrhea, Ballard wrote, "I was at Shubal Pittses all Day. [Mrs. Pitts] is very low, Exercisd with Severe Gripeing & loose Stools. God only knows how it may terminate. I Sent for my hors, but find her So ill I tarried thro the night. Shee had Entervails of Pain & rest, but weak inthead."<sup>23</sup> Ballard was aware that whatever illness Mrs. Pitts was suffering from, she could not cure her, so she put the matter in God's hands, as a faithful Christian would. A few days later, on July 27, 1794, Ballard and all her family attended the public worship meeting because "Prays [were] Diserd on behalf of mrs Pitts."<sup>24</sup> Whenever Mrs. Pitts had a good day and seemed recovered, Ballard would characterize her improvement as a blessing from God. For example, in August Ballard wrote, "I find mrs Pitts greatly revivd, how wonderfull is Gods goodness."<sup>25</sup> Ballard also celebrated with her niece when she was well enough to receive the Ordinance of Baptism on August 17, 1794.<sup>26</sup> The most revealing entry of Martha Ballard's conformity to Christian doctrine was written after the death of Mrs. Pitts on September 1:

[W]e have reason to hope our loss her gain...it is four months this Day Since I was Calld to See my Dead Neace who was Seisd with this, her last illness, which Shee has born with Christian meekness and humility. Shee has manifested her regard to Christianity by an opne Profission of religion & receiving the ordinance of Baptism. [W]e morn the los of her Company, but have the greatest reason to hope that Shee has Changd this for a...world in which Shee will be free from all pain and Sorrow, joind with Glorified Saints to Sing Redeeming lov.<sup>27</sup>

To Ballard, appropriate Christian behavior for a woman meant she should be meek and humble—a validation of the suppression of feminine behavior within her community. The church's doctrine set limitations on how women were allowed to express

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<sup>21</sup> Ballard, *Martha Ballard's Diary Online*, 1794.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/07/17940719\\_txt.html?d=17940723](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/07/17940719_txt.html?d=17940723)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/07/17940724\\_txt.html](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/07/17940724_txt.html)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940814\\_txt.html?d=17940814](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940814_txt.html?d=17940814)

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940814\\_txt.html](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940814_txt.html)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940829\\_txt.html?d=17940901](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940829_txt.html?d=17940901)

themselves and still remain “good” in the eyes of their neighbors. However, Ballard reaffirmed her belief in faith, redemption, and love in that poetic entry.

In *The Enclosed Garden*, Friedman states, “In nineteenth-century culture, maternity, domesticity, [and] self-sacrifice...were expected of women.”<sup>28</sup> In 1794, Ballard also conformed to those same expectations as a mother of nine, a housekeeper, a gardener, and a midwife.<sup>29</sup> In her diary, Ballard catalogued her domestic activities, too. She prepared meals and made pies, pickles, wheat bread, candles, soap, knapsacks, and herbal remedies.<sup>30</sup> Ballard also planted, tended, and harvested the vegetables, herbs, and fruits in her garden. On August 4, 1794, she wrote, “I have gathered Safron, radish pods & parsnip Seed, Done my house work & made Some Pills for my Dagt Dolly.”<sup>31</sup> Ballard was aware of her culturally acceptable gender obligations to her family; she usually referred to the housework as “my housework,” and descriptions of Mr. Ballard’s activities did not occur within their house. He was usually completing his masculine-inscribed duties—harvesting crops, fixing the cellar, butchering animals, surveying, or collecting taxes.<sup>32</sup> Those were the appropriate gender roles for the men and women in their religious, kinship-based community.

Ballard’s demonstrations of faith, kin keeping, and domesticity meant juggling family, neighborhood, and professional responsibilities. She lived within the gender boundaries of her time and place, as was obvious in the wording of the entries of her diary. She consistently referred to her patients as “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s wife,” usually only writing “Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_” after acknowledging the woman’s relationship to her husband. Ballard never referred to a woman by her first name after she was wed, including her own daughters and niece. The husband’s claim was recognized and used when writing in her private diary, which implied its importance within the male-dominated culture. Furthermore, despite Ballard’s common intent to see the lady of the home, her destination was always referred to as a man’s domain. Women were not allowed to own property, and she recognized that limitation in her entries as well.

Ballard lived with those constant restrictions on feminine independence, yet she seemed to be satisfied by her consistent, purposeful daily activities. Like Friedman’s Southern women of the nineteenth century, and despite the cultural limitations of her own time, Martha Ballard was fully active in her “enclosed garden” of opportunity. She continuously cultivated her roles as a kin keeper and housewife, and was in addition a dedicated and valued midwife. She managed to thrive within her gender-bound domain.

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<sup>28</sup> Friedman, *Enclosed Garden*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ulrich, “Living Mother of Living Child,” 30.

<sup>30</sup> Ballard, *Martha Ballard’s Diary Online*, 1794.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, [http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940804\\_txt.html?d=17940804](http://dohistory.org/diary/1794/08/17940804_txt.html?d=17940804)

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1794.

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