

“It was a Day of great Temptation”:  
Judith Bellows and the Process of Discipline in the Westborough Church, 1754-1761  
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When the confession of Judith Bellows was presented to the members of the Westborough church on March 25, 1761, she was “restored to the Churchs Charity, and to the Enjoyment of Special privileges again” – a full five years after having been suspended from those privileges (i.e., communion and baptism). The vote in 1761 capped a long and tangled process through which a recalcitrant Judith Bellows was finally brought to the point where, as she said, she “would not Stand out any longer.”

Judith Bellows and her husband Jonathan probably moved to Westborough from Lancaster soon after their marriage in 1732. Their first two children, Ebenezer and Ezra, died shortly after birth, Ebenezer when he was barely four weeks old, Ezra at seven months. Judith was seven months pregnant when she and Jonathan came to the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman on February 24, 1736, “to be Examined” for church membership. Parkman did not mention when he propounded them for membership, but there may have been an impediment until, as he noted on May 18, he “Reconciled [S. or I. Belknap and Jonathan Bellows” (May 18, 1736). Judith and Jonathan were admitted to the church on June 3, and ten days later their daughter Comfort, now seven weeks old, was baptized.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Twenty-eight-year-old Jonathan Bellows married Judith Tezer of Southborough in Lancaster on \_\_\_\_ [sic] 27, 1732; Henry S. Nourse, ed., *The Birth, Marriage and Death Register, Church Records and Epitaphs of Lancaster, Massachusetts, 1643-1850* (Lancaster, 1890), 397. Her birth date does not appear in the *Vital Records of Southborough, Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin P. Rice, 1903). The births and deaths of their first two children are in the *Vital Records of Westborough Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin P. Rice, 1903), 17, 229. Ebenezer was born Dec. 13, 1733, died Jan. 16, 1734; Ezra was born May 19, 1735, died Dec. 13, 1735. Judith and Jonathan Bellows were admitted to the church, along with three other individuals, on a lecture day: “although it was Lecture Day yet there having been some particular Occurrences which occasioned it the church manifested their Satisfaction herein.” Westborough Church Records, 41 (personal copy of the original records which are now held by the Westborough Public Library). Comfort Bellows was born on Apr. 16, 1736; baptized June 13, 1736, *ibid.*

Over the next eighteen years Judith Bellows appeared only once in Parkman's diary (Dec. 8, 1745).<sup>2</sup> Her husband, not surprisingly, appeared more often: working occasionally for Parkman, "pressed to go out a soldier" (Apr. 1, 1748), and visited when he was ill (Mar. 5, 1754). More dramatically, in 1744 Parkman admonished him "for his late Conduct and call'd him to Repentance" (Mar. 1, 1744), and four months later Bellows "offered a Confession of his having been guilty of Negligence in his Business, and Dishonesty and Lying in Trading."<sup>3</sup>

While Jonathan Bellows's conduct soon led to a confession, Judith Bellows became embroiled in a protracted controversy over conduct that also involved dishonesty and lying. The case may have been related to "a peculiar Domestic Difficulty" to which she alluded, without details, when asking Parkman to visit them (Oct. 14, 1754). Jonathan was not at home when Parkman visited, but the minister "discours'd with his Wife according to her particular Case, and pray'd with her and Such as were in the House" (Oct. 24, 1754). Two months later the minister visited them again "in order to compose their strife" (Dec. 24, 1754). He noted that Ebenezer Chamberlain was "there and much disquieted with Mrs. Bellows." On a subsequent visit, the Chamberlains expressed "their bitter Complaints of Mr. Jonathan Bellows's" (Apr. 9, 1755). Whatever the nature of the complaints, Judith Bellows later came to Parkman, "complaining of Messrs. Belknap and Chamberlain"; they in turn showed up that evening, "inveighing against her" (July 7, 1755). The circle of animosity widened twelve days later when Joseph Woods "brought a Complaint sign'd by Ebenezer Chamberlain and Mary (wife of Ithamar) Bellows" against Judith Bellows (July 19, 1755). Whatever was at issue, it was now neighbor against neighbor and family member against family member, as Ithamar and Jonathan Bellows were

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<sup>2</sup>Parkman presumably saw Judith Bellows when he visited their home (Aug. 1, 1738; Jan. 15, 1746; Mar. 5, 1754).

<sup>3</sup>Westborough Church Records, 70 (July 1, 1744).

cousins. Mary Chamberlain visited Parkman three days later, expressing dissatisfaction with Parkman's "lenity" toward Judith Bellows, but, Parkman hoped, "she went away easy with my just Vindication" (July 24, 1755).

The heart of the dispute was revealed two days later when Parkman visited Judith Bellows and "a most amazing scene open'd" when he began to examine Judith and her nineteen-year-old daughter Comfort. Judith "constantly and very Solemnly" denied that she knew "what became of the Things which Comfort stole from Belknaps"; indeed, she was not willing to acknowledge that Comfort "came by them in a dishonest way." Judith affirmed that what she said was "as true as that the Heavens are over her Head and the Earth under her Feet."

Comfort, on the other hand, confessed "with great sorrow and shame" that she had taken the things and hoped and prayed "She shall never be left to such sin and folly again." Furthermore, her mother knew about the theft and what became of the stolen items. She was not sure that her mother had burned the stolen items, but her mother told her so and further declared to her daughter, "I will never be such a fool as to acknowledge it as You have done." Not surprisingly, Comfort's confession led to "many bitter Reproaches" from her mother who persisted in denying what Comfort had said.

Parkman then turned to Jonathan Bellows, "strictly" interrogating him as to whether he believed his wife had burned the stolen items. When Jonathan stated that that was his belief, "there arose very terrible Contradictions, and exceeding bitter Charges against him"; Judith "complain'd bitterly" that her husband had beaten her. Parkman turned to the children,<sup>4</sup> asking

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<sup>4</sup>The children included 19-year-old Comfort; 16-year-old Reuben; and 11-year-old Ruth. Another child, Ammariah, had probably died soon after her birth, Nov. 22, 1737, as she was not baptized, there is no record of her marriage or death, and Parkman did not mention her. Her younger brother was born less than 14 months later, Feb. 7, 1739; given common nursing practices and spacing between births, this further suggests that she was a neo-natal death.

whether they had seen their father strike their mother (“unless as He had Said he had been forc’d to do”). The children replied that they had not seen him beat their mother. Judith “oft times rose to Such transports of Rage, and behav’d so furiously” that Parkman was compelled “to rebuke her Sharply.” Given her outbursts, Parkman felt he could do nothing “to any good purpose with her.” With “great sorrow and grief,” he left her, giving “serious Advice and Charge to the poor Man and his unhappy Children.”

Ebenezer Chamberlain urged Parkman to call a church meeting (Aug. 15, 1755), and on the next Sunday Parkman appointed a meeting, urging that “all concern’d must look upon themselves bound to attend” (Aug. 17, 1755). The next day he wrote to Judith Bellows who visited him before the special meeting – to what effect, Parkman did not say. At the meeting the complaint against Judith was heard, “setting forth in substance, that the said Judith hath walked very Disorderly and Contrary to the Rules of the Gospel” and that she was “guilty of *False speaking*” about the things that her daughter had stolen.

After the various parties and witnesses were heard, the church voted, first, that while it could not be determined that Judith had burned the stolen items, she had “Conducted in a very Evil manner respecting her Daughter under her Guilt, and in that whole Affair respecting Said Things.” Second, it was “voted universally” that Judith’s “*false speaking*” was supported. Parkman read the votes to Judith “and Solemnly laid the Evil before her, and Call’d her to Repentance.”<sup>5</sup>

Parkman followed up with several visits to Judith Bellows, finding her “much the same” (Sept. 9, 1755); “incorrigible” (Sept. 18, 1755); “not convinc’d she has been in Error” (Nov. 3, 1755); “unrelenting, Self-vindicating as ever” (Dec. 18, 1755); and “extremely Clamorous”

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<sup>5</sup>Westborough Church Records, 103 (Aug. 25, 1755).

(Dec. 22, 1755). She in turn persuaded Lieutenant Samuel Forbush (“clean worried him out to do it”) to write something for her, but Forbush “did not think it would do much good” (Dec. 23, 1755).<sup>6</sup> Finally, Parkman again visited Judith Bellows, “with out any good Effect,” noting her “very Obstinate Frame” despite the fact that her husband and daughter “as much as testify She is in the wrong” (Mar. 3, 1756).

With these efforts unsuccessful, the church voted on March 21, 1756, that “our Sister Judith Bellows, the wife of Brother Jonathan Bellows, be *suspended* from the Communion and from all Other Special privileges in this Church.” Parkman noted that before the vote was taken, the paper that Forbush had written for Judith Bellows was read. After “sundry remarks,” Parkman asked “the Brethren to Speak their Minds if, any one had anything to offer.” No one spoke, and he proceeded to the vote.<sup>7</sup>

Judith Bellows undoubtedly knew that suspension from communion was a step short of excommunication, so when she later visited Parkman, he found her “somewhat more moderate and mollified and desires we would not immediately proceed further against her in the Church” (Apr. 9, 1756), but after a later visit Parkman wrote that “it was much the Same fruitless Talk as it used to be” (Nov. 9, 1756). And so the matter continued, with Parkman asking the church “to think upon the Affair of Sister *Judith Bellows*” (Jan. 27, 1757). He drew up a confession for her; she returned it, saying “She can’t comply with it” (May 14, 1757). Her husband “Entreated his Wife to put an End to our Trouble with her – but she resists it as much as ever” (Aug. 2, 1757). Parkman again asked the church to “ripen their Thoughts that we might do Something to Effect” (Sept. 25, 1757). In December 1757, Judith Bellows came “with another Paper – but not

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<sup>6</sup>Judith Bellows may have appealed to Forbush on the basis of a family ties, as there were several Forbush-Bellows connections through marriage. In addition, Forbush had once complained to Parkman about the latter’s “strictness in Examining Candidates for Admission in to the Church” (July 21, 1752).

<sup>7</sup>Westborough Church Records, 105 (Mar. 21, 1756).

acknowledging her Offence” (Dec. 17, 1757). Parkman read her paper to the church and “left it to their Consideration” (Dec. 25, 1757).

Finally, on Wednesday, March 25, 1761 (a lecture day), five years after having been suspended by the church, Judith Bellows came to Parkman with “an Acknowledgment” that he presented to the church, and she “was restored to the Charity.”<sup>8</sup> What had changed other than the passage of time? Perhaps significant, but also unacknowledged, was the death of her husband Jonathan in late 1758 or early 1759.<sup>9</sup> They had had a sometimes contentious relationship; perhaps with his death it was easier for Judith Bellows to acknowledge her guilt.

That said, she also stated, “I would not Stand out any longer,” perhaps acknowledging the isolation she had experienced from the fellowship of the church. As Larzer Ziff suggests, “The society formed by church covenant was distinguished by three characteristics typical of a strong society: admission to it was difficult; dismissal from it (either voluntary or by way of excommunication) was difficult; and once membership in it had been enjoyed living free of its influence was difficult.”<sup>10</sup> While the church’s discipline of Judith Bellows fell short of excommunication, the process was slow if not deliberate, starting with Parkman’s visits in late 1754, the complaints against her by Ebenezer and Mary Chamberlain and Mary Bellows in the spring and summer of 1755; the “amazing scene” on July 26, 1755; the church’s admonition (“Call’d her to Repentance”) on August 25; Parkman’s unsuccessful visits over the following months; the church’s vote to suspend her from communion on March 21, 1756; and the ensuing five years before her restoration on March 25, 1761. This disciplinary process reflected, in part, the worldly demands of field and farm, perhaps also patience toward a fellow congregant whose

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<sup>8</sup>Westborough Church Records, 119 (Mar. 25, 1761)

<sup>9</sup>The Westborough *Vital Records* do not have the date of death of Jonathan Bellows. Timothy Allen was appointed executor of his estate, Feb. 23, 1759.

<sup>10</sup>Larzer Ziff, “The Social Bond of Church Covenant,” *American Quarterly* 10:4 (Winter 1958), 455-56.

fall from grace demanded compassion as well as discipline, and even a reluctance on the part of the minister to push church members toward a distasteful, albeit necessary, decision.

In the years following her restoration, Judith Bellows appeared a number of times in Parkman's diary, dining with his family between services on the Sabbath and receiving occasional visits. As a widow, life was not easy, and on one occasion she petitioned the church for a contribution; the church took up a collection of £14.8.0 old Tenor. More interestingly, when Capt. Stephen Maynard was chosen as the town's representative to the General Court, Parkman learned that "instead of a Treat, he gives 21£ Old Tenor in Boards etc. to Mrs. Judith Bellows to enable her to go on with the finishing her House. A very laudable Example!" (May 25, 1769). Parkman's last visit to Judith Bellows was on September 25, 1777. When or where she died is not known.