

The Exceptional Mary Bradish  
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Mary Bradish was exceptional for her time and place: she joined the Westborough church as the age of twelve; was highly literate; never married; owned her own home; and taught school. Born on May 25, 1715, she one of the twelve children of James and Damaris (Rice) Bradish of Marlborough. James was among the first inhabitants of Westborough and was among the twelve men, in addition to the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman, who signed the covenant of the Westborough church on October 28, 1724.

When Mary Bradish joined the church at age twelve on December 3, 1727, Parkman recorded her admission, noting, as he did for no other person, her birth date: “Mary Bradish (born May 25 1715) was admitted into our Communion.”<sup>1</sup> Her admission, for which no relation survives, came in the aftermath of the great earthquake of October 29, 1727, which resulted in an influx of admissions to New England churches. The Westborough church was no exception, adding 11 new members in 1727 and another 24 in 1728 – substantially larger numbers than during the Great Awakening of the 1740s.<sup>2</sup>

Not yet a teenager when she joined the church, Mary Bradish was twenty when she offered a confession “for having composed a paper of Verses of a Scandalous and Calumniating Nature respecting the Committee appointed by the Town (some time since) to Search out who it was Cut the pulpit Cusheon, and tending to defame others also.”<sup>3</sup> Parkman’s diary for 1735 is

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<sup>1</sup>Westborough Church Records, 9 (Dec, 3, 1727).

<sup>2</sup>The Westborough church added 4 new members in 1740; 10 in 1741; and 9 in 1742. On the effects of the earthquake, see Kenneth P. Minkema, ed., “The Lynn End ‘Earthquake’ Relations of 1727,” *New England Quarterly* 69:3 (Sept. 1996), 473-99; Cedric B. Cowing, “Sex and Preaching in the Great Awakening,” *American Quarterly* 20:3 (Autumn 1968), 626-27; Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 149-54; William T. Youngs, Jr., *God’s Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700-1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 110-12

<sup>3</sup>Westborough Church Records, 38 (Nov. 23, 1735).

not extant, so he is otherwise silent on the details of her offense. One might imagine a seemingly intrusive, overbearing committee searching for the culprit(s), with Mary Bradish composing satirical verses (which, unfortunately, do not survive). But at least one other individual, Samuel Hardy, thought the verses worth sharing, and he, too, was brought to repentance for “writing and uttering certain defaming verses of which *Mary Bradish* was the Authoress” (May 4, 1736).<sup>4</sup>

Mary Bradish next appeared in Parkman’s diary six years later when, after he catechized some thirty young women, she was “in some Spiritual Difficultys” (Apr. 20, 1742), and later came to Parkman “on account of her Spiritual Troubles” (May 7, 1742). It is likely that she was the “M.B.” whose letter Parkman transcribed into his commonplace book “after her passing through Some Singular Spiritual Conflicts and Trials.” This nearly 1,500-word letter has some of the characteristics of a church “relation” that prospective communicants prepared for presentation to the church after they were propounded for membership. But, of course, Mary Bradish was already a member of the church. Nearly twenty-seven years old, she was caught up in the soul-searching that, for many, was prompted by the Great Awakening. Her account of her spiritual state sets forth the highs and lows of her search “to know whether or no I were really regenerated.” On the one hand, she did not want to “delude and deceive my Self with vain hopes, or on the other hand deny what is the work of God.” She had been “illuminated” as to her “own Vileness and Impotency and Miserable Condition by Nature,” and she was “deeply humbled on that Account.” But she had also come, at least “in some Measure to understand the Scriptures” and how Christ was “in every Way Qualified and Suitable to reconcile God and

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<sup>4</sup>Hardy’s confession was read and accepted on June 6: “Brother Samuel Hardy offered a Confession for his writing and so being instrumental in uttering forth, divers *Verses* to the Defamation and Reproach of the Committee which the Town had improved to search out who Cut the Pulpit Cusheon, and to the Reproach of divers other persons”; Westborough Church Records, 41 (June 6, 1736)

Man.” She hoped that she had “Saving Faith,” that her “Repentance is unto Life,” that she was “Reconciled to God,” and that she loved God and had “Communion with him.” Yet she found “my Communion is very imperfect which makes me long to be in a state of perfection.” Her “greatest Delight and Happiness” was “in the internal Communion... between God and my Soul.”

All of this said, God of late “seemed to hide his Face from my Soul, which was a Sore Trial to see.” But she dared not “deny but that there were signs of Grace in my Soul,” and she strove “to cast off all despairing Thoughts and followed hard after God.” She understood God’s wisdom, subduing “the Spiritual Pride which abounds in me,” quickening her “to exercise Humility and Repentance,” and instructing her “to walk humbly with my God.” Sometimes she “seemed to see Several Graces in my Soul more clearly than ever I did before,” but at other times she seemed “to be hedged about so that I could not get out.” And sometimes she “felt great Joy and peace in my Soul by which the Spirit of Bondage has been cast out.” At such times, when she read the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms, “I have as it were heard the same Language in my Soul.” And when she read the experience of “the Saints in latter ages they have not appeared to me like Strange Historys, but have Seemed to be a lively description of my own Heart.”

Mary Bradish hoped for a life in which she was “always denying my Self” and “hiding my guilty soul under my Redeemers Wings for shelter from the wrath of God” and “yielding a perfect Resignation to the will of God in all Things; freely consenting to do or be any Thing that He pleases; So that I may be glorified with him.” There was more that she could write – but “not at present.” She concluded, “But Still I have remaining Fears lest after all I should prove but an Hypocrite.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>“A Letter of a young woman after her passing through Some Singular Spiritual Conflicts and Trials,” 1742, signed M.B., Ebenezer Parkman, *Commonplace Book* (Massachusetts Historical Society), 92-95.

Parkman recorded nothing further about Mary Bradish's spiritual life, and not for another five years did she appear in his diary, pulling flax (July 13, 1747) and then coming to Parkman "about having a Sermon at her House when she first goes into it" (Oct. 26, 1747). She was apparently setting up in a house separate from her parents. Parkman persuaded her that a private meeting that was planned at her father's house might be at her house "to avoid Superstition and Ostentation" (Oct. 26, 1747). His concern is not clear, but it may have had something to do with the fact that Mary Bradish was now 32 years old and probably destined to remain a spinster. When the private meeting was held, Parkman noted that "She had newly got into her House." He preached on Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Not many people attended the meeting, but Parkman noted the presence of several leading figures: "Justice Baker, Deacon Forbush and Deacon Newton, Captain Warrin, Lieutenant Tainter," as well as several women and "young people of both sexes" (Nov. 5, 1747).

How Mary Bradish could afford a separate house is not clear. Pulling flax was hardly enough (July 22, 1751), but perhaps there was support from her parents. A new avenue of work, perhaps begun earlier, first appeared in Parkman's diary in 1756 when she was 41: "Mrs. *Mary Bradish* keeps school at Mr. Tinny's; and is greatly successful and admired in her Teaching" (Dec. 29). On a visit to the southeast corner of town, Parkman "Particularly observed Mrs. Mary Bradish's manner of teaching Children to read" (Aug. 2, 1757). Later that year Parkman's 6-year-old son Samuel attended her school "and boards there" (Dec. 12, 1757). As late as 1773, when she was 58, Mary Bradish opened a school at the home of Barnabas Newton, and Parkman sent Benjamin Clark, an 11-year-old hired boy, and his 4-year-old granddaughter, Sukey Moore, to that school.

Mary Bradish's father died in 1763 and Parkman preached on the occasion of his death. She asked Parkman to transcribe the sermon for her, and although he "demanded nothing," she insisted on paying him. "I give way," he wrote, and let "her do as She pleases" (Mar. 12, 1766). Her means may have been quite limited and insufficient for her needs, as there was a "Vendue [i.e., auction] of Miss *Mary Bradish's* House yesterday at Deacon Woods..." (Jan. 4, 1774). What happened to her after the vendue is unclear. She dined twice at Parkman's home on the Sabbath (Jan. 23, Mar. 13, 1774), and last appeared in his diary in 1780 when she was 65 years old. As in the case of many elderly persons, particularly women, there is no record of where and when she died.