

**Ebenezer Parkman to John Hancock, Westborough, June 28, 1736 (draft):**  
**The Fornication of Josiah and Mercy Russell**

Introduction and transcription by Prof. Ross W. Beales, Jr.

Parkman mentioned Josiah and Mercy Russell only a few times in his diary and the church records.<sup>1</sup> Josiah may have been the “Russel” who was among the men who, early in 1736, brought wood to Parkman’s home (Jan. 22). Parkman recorded nothing in his diary about the Russells’ desire to have their children baptized or how he knew that they had committed fornication. His letter to John Hancock, minister of the Lexington church, is his only reference to their prior life other than their confession<sup>2</sup> on July 11, 1736: “Josiah Russell and Mercy his wife offered Confessions of the Sin of Violating the 7th Commandment and were restored and they were likewise admitted into our Communion....” Their children Hannah and Josiah were baptized on September 5 (Westborough Church Records, 43). Mary, the daughter of Josiah and Hannah Russell, was baptized on May 15, 1737 (*ibid.*, 45); the mother’s name may have been an error on Parkman’s part.

One of the Russells’ children died two years later: “Was at the Funeral of a Child of Mr. Josiah Russell, of about 5 years old, an hopefull, desirable Child” (Jan. 3, 1738), and another was sick later that year (Apr. 6, 1738). The death – and hence the name - of the “hopefull, desirable Child” was not recorded in the town’s vital records.

The Russells moved from Westborough after 1738, but there is no record that they were dismissed to another church. Two decades later Parkman wrote, “N.B. Mrs. *Russell* who many years past dwelt at our North End, now at Plainfield, came in to See us” (Sept. 27, 1759). In the interim, they may have returned to Lexington, as three children of a Josiah Russell were baptized there.<sup>3</sup>

Parkman’s request that Hancock remember him and his children in prayer reminds us that Parkman’s wife Molly had died on January 29.

In signing his letter, “Your unworthy son and Servant,” Parkman acknowledged his older colleague’s stature. John Langdon Sibley notes that “Bishop” Hancock (1671-1752) was “the title which his age, influence, and authority gave to him in his lifetime, and by which he has been commonly known since.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>There is no record of Josiah Russell’s marriage to Mercy or the birth of their children Hannah and Josiah in the *Lexington, Mass. Record of Births, Marriages and Deaths to January 1, 1898* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1898).

<sup>2</sup>Their confession is not among the confessions in the Parkman Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society), Box 2, Folder 2.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, Mar. 25, 1739; Hannah, July 28, 1745; and Lucy, Aug. 14 1748. *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>4</sup>Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts (3 vols.; Cambridge, MA, 1885), 3:437.

Rev and Honoured Sir,

The occasion of my waiting upon you in this Manner is to acquaint you that Josiah Russell and Mercy his wife who were heretofore of Lexington <words crossed out> have in Divine Providence removed <words crossed out> desirous to Join with our Church and approach to Special Ordinances. But I am not willing to Proceed without Advice first had from you by a Line, (if you shall please to favour me,) concerning their Former Conversation: And particularly would request your Direction, Sir, respecting their Humiliation for their violating the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment whether it shall be proper, <word crossed out> and more agreeable to your Mind that it be done among us <words crossed out> or at Lexington, <words crossed out> where their offence was mae [sic] known.

Please to bear my and my Childrens Disconsolate State, and our sore Bereavement upon your Heart in your holy Devotions before God, and permit me to Subscribe my self

Westborough June 28, 1736

Honoured and Rev Sir  
Your very unworthy son  
and Servant in the Gospel  
of Christ

To the Rev. Mr. John Hancock  
A Pastor of the Church in Lex-  
ington

Source: Parkman Family Papers (American Antiquarian Society), sermon fragment, c. 1736, Box 1, folder 3.