

## Levi and Deborah Warrin; Fornication or a Premature Birth?

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Levi Warrin and Deborah Partridge were married on March 14, 1769, and their first child, Olive, was born on October 15. As they told the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman, this was “exactly 7 Months after marriage” (Aug. 6, 1770). For many couples in colonial New England, this would have led to an admonition by the church and a confession for the sin of fornication. Indeed, in the latter part of his ministry, Parkman often decried what he perceived as the collapse of moral standards. Thus, in 1782, he preached on Jeremiah 8:6 “on Consideration of the abounding of Sin, especially Fornication.”<sup>1</sup> He was hardly alone or inaccurate in his perception. As Daniel Scott Smith and Michael Hindus demonstrate in their study of patterns of premarital pregnancy, there was a substantial increase in prenuptial conceptions: in the period 1761-1800, 16.7% births took place within six months of marriage; 27.2% with eight and a half months; and 33.0% within nine months.<sup>2</sup>

But Levi and Deborah Warrin denied that they were guilty of fornication, insisting that their child was born prematurely. And in their insistence, they relied on a tradition of a two-month grace period that recognized that there were premature births. That grace period was not automatic, and an assertion of innocence could be a mask for sin. Caleb Trowbridge of the Groton church stated the dilemma that faced him and the church, “it being *feared* by me that this Custom, has (on the one hand) Proved (with some of the less Conscientious) a Prevailing Temptation to belye their Consciences, adding Sin to Sin: and being *thought*

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<sup>1</sup>“I hearkened and heard, but they spake not aright; no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle.”

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, “Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: An Overview and Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 5, No. 4 (Spr. 1975), 561.

by *some* an Hardship (on the other hand) upon the more Consciencious (and Doubted at least whither it be Right) to Compel *them* Publickly to acknowledge, what is, (if not absolutely yet) next to Impossible to Convict them of.”<sup>3</sup>

The importance the two-month grace period is dramatically illustrated in the case of Deacon Benjamin Wood and his second wife, Sarah Johnson, who were married on November 12, 1767. According to the published vital records of Westborough, their first child, Benjamin Buckminster Wood, was born on June 12, 1768, exactly seven months after their marriage. But Parkman’s diary gives the birth date as June 25, two weeks further into the grace period. Why Deacon Wood decided to record the date as June 12 is unknown – and it did not matter, for he and his wife, after more than a year of foot-dragging, presented their confessions. Benjamin Wood continued in office as deacon.

By contrast, Levi and Deborah Warrin successfully contested the suspicions that they had committed fornication. Although their child was born on October 15, 1769, Parkman recorded nothing about this apparent early birth until the Warrins came to be examined for admission into the church. It was on this occasion that, in response to Parkman’s inquiry “into the Birth of their Child,” that they insisted the birth was exactly seven months after their marriage. In the face of their seeming intransigence, Parkman confessed, “I am full of deep Concern and Solitude. May the Lord direct me! Counsel and conduct me in these Difficultys!” (Aug. 6, 1770).

Two weeks later Levi Warrin brought a letter “concerning his Wife” from the elders of the church in Medway, the town where they had been married (Aug. 23, 1770). This was, one imagines, a testimony to her character and morals. If other members of the church saw this

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<sup>3</sup>“The Earliest Church Records in Groton, Containing the Marriages, Baptisms, and Admissions to the Church, Etc.,” Samuel Abbott Green, *Groton Historical Series: A Collection of Papers Relating to the History of the Town of Groton Massachusetts*, 1, No. 10 (1886), 41 (Feb. 29, 1740).

letter, they were not convinced. Some weeks later Daniel Forbes “came and to my sorrow took up much of the Evening in his objecting against Levi Warrins admission without an Acknowledgment” (Nov. 8, 1770). His visit was followed two days later by the appearance of Deacon Jonathan Bond who said “he thinks him guilty,” and Parkman asked him to inform Warrin that he needed to see him before propounding him for membership (Nov. 10).<sup>4</sup> Warrin came to Parkman, wanting to be propounded, but “I tell him there is great Disquietment.” Two other members of the church, Nathaniel Whitney and Joseph Harrington came to Parkman that same day to express their uneasiness “because they fear he is guilty of Fornication” (Nov. 12). Warrin returned to Parkman, insisting that he be propounded (Nov. 21).

Under the circumstances, as Parkman explained them, he had no choice: “I spoke to Mr. Daniel Forbes before I went in to Meeting in the Afternoon - acquainting him that I was obliged to propound Mr. Levi Warrin and his Wife (for there had been no Objection brought me, as he had given me Reason to Expect); and he no way opposing it, I proceeded to do it” (Nov. 25). While there had been verbal expressions of concern, no one had placed those concerns in writing; absent such a document, Parkman propounded Levi and Deborah Warrin.

Whitney and Harrington again came to Parkman with their concerns, to which the minister replied, “if they would have a Church Meeting they must write the Request and Sign it. I must also have it Seasonably” (Nov. 30). That was on a Friday, and on Monday Deacon Wood came with the request of Daniel Forbes “etc.” (presumably others) that Parkman “draw up something for them to sign for Church meeting relative to Levi Warrin” (Dec. 3). Parkman refused, declining, one supposes, to put words in the mouths of others and thus giving the appearance of prejudging the case.

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<sup>4</sup>One wonders whether church members had long memories. Levi Warrin’s parents, Jonah and Elizabeth Warrin, confessed fornication on Oct. 15, 1727; Westborough Church Records, 8 (Oct. 15, 1727).

While Parkman was unwilling to write something for those who objected, three days later, after the thanksgiving services on Thursday, he stopped the church and announced that “so considerable a Number of the Church were uneasy with the Persons who now stood propounded...that it would be likely to cause too great Disturbance, if it be let alone to the usual Time of Admission, which would be the next Lord’s Day, and the Day of Communion.” He asked the church to “consider what was best to be done,” and the following vote was passed: “that the Admission of Levi Warrin and his Wife be deferred for a Short Space.”

The following week Parkman visited Deborah Warrin “to talk with her alone.” She was quite adamant, talking “in much the Same strain that her Husband does.” She asserted that she could bring “Suitable proof that She was not with Child a month before She was married.” Indeed, “if she must say whether She was innocent, She would have every body else examined as well as them, etc. etc.” (Dec. 11). The next day her husband, accompanied by Daniel Hardy and Deacon Bond, came to Parkman: “The Effect was a Paper requesting a Church meeting”; the paper was “headed and subscribed by those two” (Dec. 12).

On the following Sunday a meeting was appointed for Tuesday and when the church met, Warrin “offered a paper which was signed by hims. and his Wife, and a Certificate from Dt. Steph. Ball.” The paper that Levi and Deborah Warrin wrote acknowledged that it was the “duty of every person ouver taken in a fault to give Glory to God by Confessing it,” but they could not confess that they were guilty of the sin of fornication “with out [roning? i.e., ruining?] our Selves.” And while some of the women who attended the birth said it was “their Judgment that the Chld was Ripe for Birth and that the mother went her <full>time with the Child,” they have obtained a “Certification” from Stephen Ball, the doctor who had delivered the baby. If they were denied, they could “Do no more but must Set Down Easey and can ancer it before God and

man no more.”<sup>5</sup> After debate, the question of the Warrins’ admission was put to a vote, and only nine of the twenty-eight male members present voted for admission.<sup>6</sup>

And there the matter rested for nearly five months until Levi Warrin approached Parkman, asking that something he had written on April 30 “be laid before the Church.” Parkman recommended some changes, and Warrin took the paper “to consider it” (May 18, 1771). The next day, Sunday, May 19, Warrin gave the paper to Parkman, “expecting it should be laid before the church.” Parkman did so after the afternoon service and asked “Whether the Church was satisfied with those persons, and were willing they Should enjoy special Privileges?” The church voted its acceptance.<sup>7</sup> Two weeks later Levi Warrin came to Parkman with his and his wife’s relations (June 1, 1771), and the next day, “Admitted Levi Warrin and his wife – was obliged to have the Vote by rising up, it being in the Congregation: and I baptized their Child.”

What, if anything, had changed? In their letter of April 30, the Warrins asked that they might be received into full communion but also acknowledged that “by Reason of Some Suspicions in the Minds of Some in this Chh with respect to our Chastity before marriage we ware not Charitably Recd.” At the same time, they had “no Reason to think that our Child was Begotten before our marriage,” and if this was satisfactory to Parkman and to the church, they intended “to proceed fur ther in order to Come up to our duty.”<sup>8</sup> Whether they had revised the letter, as Parkman suggested, is not apparent from the manuscript. Neither they nor Parkman mentioned any new evidence or testimony, and Parkman did not mention any meetings or conversations with those church members who had opposed the Warrins’ admission in mid-

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<sup>5</sup>Levi Warrin and Deborah Warrin to Ebenezer Parkman, Dec. 18, 1770 (Parkman Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Box 3, Folder 3).

<sup>6</sup>Westborough Church Records, 149 (Dec. 16, 18, 1770).

<sup>7</sup>Westborough Church Records, 152 (May 19, 1771).

<sup>8</sup>Levi and Deborah Warrin to Ebenezer Parkman, Apr. 30, 1771 (Parkman Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 3).

1770. The best we can say is that perhaps the passage of time and, presumably, the Warrins' deportment during that period allayed suspicions about their pre-marital conduct.