

Sarah (Warrin) Morse: Mental Illness and Suicide in Eighteenth-Century Westborough

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Records from Westborough reveal nothing about Sarah (Warrin) Morse's early life other than her birth and baptism. We do know that her adult life was framed, at least in part, by mental illness and tragedy, ending in her death by suicide. Sarah Warrin was born on January 13, 1734, the daughter of Jonah and Elizabeth Warrin.¹ Early in their marriage, her parents confessed to the sin of fornication, expressing that they "desired to be at peace with God and with his people." Her father owned the covenant, while her mother became a communicant member of the church.² Sarah's baptism two weeks after her birth³ is the last record about her before age twenty, when, at her father's request, the Rev. Ebenezer Parkman visited and found her "much disorder'd in the Mind" (Nov. 15, 1754).⁴ Four days later, he returned, for Sarah "had attempted Several Times to destroy her Self." Dr. Samuel Brigham of Marlborough was there, and Parkman "pray'd with them" (Nov. 19). A month later Parkman visited Sarah; she was, he wrote, "yet out of order" (Dec. 19). Several months later, on a Sunday, her father came to Parkman "in Distress about his Daughter Sarah again" and "desir'd public prayers." That evening Parkman visited and prayed with her (Mar. 30, 1755), returning the next day and again two days later for "Fast Exercises." The Rev. Elisha Fish of Upton prayed and Parkman preached on Philippians 4:11, "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." Sarah was "in So ill a frame that before we began the Exercise I could not get it out of her that she desir'd that what we were undertaking, or concurr'd in it -- however she did tarry with us." That evening she wanted to talk with Fish, and when Parkman left "she ask'd me to remember her as being, if not under Conviction yet under Temptations" (Apr. 2). However well intentioned, the admonition in Philippians "to be content" had no effect. The nature of her temptations was clear: as Parkman learned a month later, she was "exceedingly Set to destroy herself." He prayed with her, "though against her Inclination." She "ran away into the Woods, and all hands after her" (May 1). Two months later she remained "under Disorders" (June 24).

Sarah Warrin's marriage to Seth Morse two years later (July 12, 1757) suggests that her illness was in remission. Their marriage was marked by unrelenting tragedy. Their first child, a boy whose name was not recorded, died "of the Canker" at eight months (Feb. 28, 1759). Their second child, also without a recorded name, died at a very early age: "Went to Neighbour

¹*Vital Records of Westborough, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin P. Rice, 1903), 104; hereafter cited as *WVR*.

²Westborough Church Records (Westborough Public Library), 8-9 (Oct. 15, 1727); hereafter cited as *WCR*. Elizabeth Warrin's relation is not extant.

³*WCR*, 33.

⁴"Roughly half of all lifetime mental disorders in most studies start by the mid-teens and three-fourths by the mid-20s." Ronald C. Kessler, et al., "Age of onset of mental disorders: A review of recent literature," *Curr Opin Psychiatry* 20:4 (July 2007), 359-64 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1925038/>, accessed Mar. 12, 2019). Dates in parentheses refer to Parkman's diary.

Morse's, whose Child is dead" (Oct. 30, 1760). Their third child, Elizabeth, was born in 1761;⁵ Sarah joined the church on August 8, 1762, and two weeks later Elizabeth was baptized.⁶ Seth Morse joined the church in 1763,⁷ and several months later a foster child was entrusted to their care. They requested baptism for the child, with the church asking whether they did "Solemnly engage to take Special Care of this Child, which they now presented, to bring her up (by divine grace) in the good Knowledge and Fear of the Lord?" With "each of them manifesting their Consent," the child was baptized and given the name Sarah.⁸ Another child, Aaron, born in 1764,⁹ was sick seven months later when his sister Elizabeth died just shy of three years old (Nov. 9, 1764). Aaron, like the foster child Sarah, may have died young as there is no further record of their existence. Another son, Abner Warren, born in 1767, did survive to marry,¹⁰ but Sarah and Seth Morse's last child, aptly named Submit, apparently did not survive.¹¹

The choice of the name Submit was, for many parents, hardly random or fanciful but rather quite intentional. Submit was the name of at least fourteen girls whose parents lived in Westborough or were connected to the church. The church records and Parkman's diary reveal the heartbreaking circumstances under which parents – or a surviving spouse – chose the name. When Submit Forbush was baptized, she "was held up by its grandfather Deacon Forbush, the Immediate Father being (if alive) in Captivity."¹² Mary Warrin died six days after the birth of her daughter,¹³ and the next day, at the "Urgent Request" of her husband Daniel and "upon Consideration of the illness of his Child and there being a great Congregation of people, at his House on Occasion of his wife's Funeral," Parkman "baptized the Child by the name of Submitt."¹⁴ Submit Warrin died three weeks later.¹⁵ Francis Whipple came to Parkman with the news that Submit, "his poor little Child (which was always from its Birth unlike other Children, weak, pining, unable to Speak, etc.," had died (Apr. 30, 1777). Adonijah and Hannah Rice named the last of their ten children, twin daughters, Submit and Relief.¹⁶ One imagines that no explanation was needed for those who knew them. The records are silent with respect to Sarah and Seth Morse's last child, Submit. Were the pregnancy and birth difficult? Was Submit a premature or sickly child who was thought not likely to survive? Or had Sarah Morse's mental illness returned?

⁵Nov. 19, 1761; *WVR*, 76.

⁶Aug. 22, 1762; *WCR*, 123. Sarah (Warrin) Morse's relation is not extant.

⁷Mar. 13, 1763; *ibid.*, 124. Seth Morse's relation is not extant.

⁸June 12, 1763; *ibid.*, 124.

⁹May 6, 1764; *WVR*, 76.

¹⁰Abner, b. July 29, 1767 (*ibid.*, 76), mar. Lydia White of Watertown, Feb. 7, 1790 (*ibid.*, 186).

¹¹Submit, b. Nov. 20, 1769 (*WVR*, 77); bapt. Nov. 26 (*WCR*, 148). There is no record of her marriage or death. When Seth Morse wrote his will in 1823, he left a token amount to his "only Son," Ebenezer Belknap Morse, the only child from his second marriage.

¹²Oct. 12, 1746; *WCR*, 78.

¹³Jan. 18, 1739; *WVR*, 256.

¹⁴Jan. 20, 1739; *ibid.*, 54

¹⁵Feb. 7, 1739; *ibid.*, 256.

¹⁶Oct. 5, 1771; *ibid.*, 89-90.

Five years after the birth of Submit Morse, Parkman and Dr. James Hawes of Westborough were called to the Morse home: forty-year-old Sarah Morse was “in a despairing condition and had taken some Coperas,” a chemical used in dyeing, tanning, and making ink.¹⁷ She told Parkman that what he had “delivered in the sermon yesterday, was directly to her. She had now no Business to stay here any longer – no Desires of Good etc.” (Mar. 14, 1774). Parkman’s sermon had been on Acts 26:20: “repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.” After delivering the sermon, he exclaimed, “And may it please God to grant a Blessing to accompany what has been delivered! Especially to Me that I may be excited by the Holy Spirit to a true sense of *Sin* -- what an Evil and what a Bitter Thing it is!” Sarah Morse’s attempted suicide could hardly have been what he expected.

Parkman visited Morse several times over the next two weeks, on one occasion bringing her a sermon by Increase Mather on Genesis 4:13 (“And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear”), but she would not take it: “It would do no good,” she said (Mar. 22, 1774). On another visit, he noted that “Her Doctor from *Andover*, Mr. *Daniel How*, was there” (Mar. 29). Five days later, Parkman and two doctors were called: she had cut her throat with a razor, inflicting a two-inch wound to her windpipe. Dr. Hawes and Dr. Stephen Ball of Northborough managed to stitch up the gap. When Seth Morse asked Parkman to pray, Sarah responded that “she was not against it ‘with respect to Mr. *Morse* and the Children, but it could do her no good’” (Apr. 3).

Parkman visited her on an almost daily basis, offering prayers for her and her family. Seth Morse asked that a fast be kept on her account, fearing that she would “live but a little longer” (Apr. 11). Four ministers gathered the next day at the Morse home, with Parkman praying and Joseph Sumner of Shrewsbury preaching in the morning,¹⁸ and Elijah Fitch of Hopkinton praying and Elisha Fish of Upton preaching in the afternoon.¹⁹ As Parkman exclaimed, “May the Lord bless the word and accept the prayers, especially for this Miserable Object!” (Apr. 12). Sarah Morse’s health did not improve, and ten days later Parkman was asked to her home, “She *her self* having wanted to see me.” He “found no great alteration as to the State of her mind, except that she is thought Somewhat more insane. Her Body is more emaciated and she grows weaker.” Her wound had pretty much healed, “the Hole not bigger apparently, than a Hazelnut might be put into.” Swallowing was difficult and she spoke “but in Whisper and to be understood but difficultly.” Parkman prayed with her – “not so much

¹⁷“A name given from early times to the protosulphates of copper, iron, and zinc (distinguished as *blue*, *green*, and *white* copperas respectively); etymologically it belonged properly to the copper salt; but in English use, when undistinguished by attribute or context, it has always been most commonly, and is now exclusively, applied to *greencopperas*, the proto-sulphate of iron or ferrous sulphate (Fe SO₄), also called *green vitriol*, used in dyeing, tanning, and making ink.” *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://www.oed.com.holycross.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/41206?rskey=RIHZUG&result=1#eid>); accessed Mar. 13, 2019).

¹⁸Sumner preached on Luke 15:17, “And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!”

¹⁹Fish’s text was Matt. 9:12, “But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.”

against her Will, as heretofore: but she was not rational enough to discourse much. Tis feared she can't continue long" (Apr. 22).

Seth Morse sent an urgent message to Parkman the next morning: "It was feared she was dying." Parkman visited and prayed. As a minister, he was naturally concerned about her spiritual condition, but "Her real Frame could not be known." She died later that morning. The next day, a Sunday, Parkman read Romans 11:33, and although he had prepared his afternoon sermon on another subject, he continued on the theme from Romans "as the solemn Occasion (Mrs. Morse's awfull Departure) engaged all our minds" (Apr. 24). The scripture reads, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

In an era when "self-murder" was a crime, the question of a deceased's burial was very much at issue. According to the Massachusetts statute on "Self-Murther," adopted in 1660,

if any person Inhabitant or Stranger, shall at any time be found by any Jury to lay violent hands on themselves, or be willfully guilty of their own Death, every such person shall be denied the priviledge of being Buried in the Common Burying place of Christians, but shall be Buried in some Common High-way where the Select-men of the Town where such person did inhabit shall appoint, and a Cart-load of Stones laid upon the Grave as a Brand of Infamy, and as a warning to others to beware of the like Damnable practices.²⁰

There is no record that a coroner's jury was convened to determine the cause of Sarah Morse's death. Perhaps, to the many people who knew her, there was no doubt that her death resulted from her mental illness; in other words, she was not "willfully guilty" of her own death. On Monday, April 25, "a Great Assembly" gathered for Sarah Morse's funeral. Seth Morse recorded her death with the town clerk.²¹ He remarried ten years later.²²

The tragedy of Sarah Morse's mental illness and suicide was not unique. Over his long ministry, Parkman encountered dozens of individuals with mental illnesses, and he noted six other suicides, including one in Westborough, as well as six attempted suicides, two in Westborough. Prayer, preaching, and fasting appear to have had no effect, and local physicians, while addressing the physical manifestations of Sarah Morse's illness by sewing the self-inflicted wound to her throat, offered no remedies.

Even her doctor, Daniel How of Andover, was ultimately unsuccessful. Andover was about forty-five miles from Westborough, not a likely distance for most persons to travel for medical attention. But Daniel How had a reputation for treating persons with mental illnesses,

²⁰*The Colonial Laws of Massachusetts. Reprinted from the Edition of 1672, with the Supplements Through 1686* (Boston, 1887), 137.

²¹In the *WVR*, 248, the date of her death is given as Apr. 19, 1764.

²²Seth Morse married Lydia Belknap, Dec. 15, 1774; *ibid.*, 187.

and somehow Sarah Morse had heard about him and sought treatment. In 1762 he treated the Rev. John Wiswall of Falmouth who was described as “taken distracted.” The treatment method is not clear, although one reference to Wiswall states that he was “confined in a dark cabinet.”²³ According to a resolution of a committee of the Provincial Congress in 1775, How was “prepared to receive [insane patients] and is well skilled in such disorders.”²⁴ Another reference to his practice states that he was a “Famous Dr. for Crazy People.”²⁵ Whatever How’s treatment of other patients, Sarah Morse’s death by suicide is sad testimony to the limits of medical knowledge in the eighteenth century.

²³W. M. Ellis, ed., *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith, and the Rev. Samuel Deane, Pastors of the First Church in Portland: with Notes and Biographical Notices: and a Summary of the History of Portland* (Portland, ME: Joseph S. Bailey, 1849), 194 (July 17, 1762). Robert Treat Paine wrote that “the greatest and most experienced physicians agree that strict regimen, a total confinement from all company – sometimes in a dark room, severe discipline and subjection to the degree of fear and some medicine are the most effective ways of treating such a person”; “Letter of Robert Treat Paine to Joseph Palmer about Mr. Leonard’s Mental Illness,” Sept. 1762 (Massachusetts Historical Society), as quoted in Mary Ann Jimenez, *Changing Faces of Madness: Early American Attitudes and Treatment of the Insane* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987), 45.

²⁴*The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston, 1838), 566 (June 14, 1775).

²⁵*Vital Records of Andover, Massachusetts, to End of the Year 1849* (Topsfield, MA: Topsfield Historical Society, 1912), 2:472. How died on Nov. 1, 1797.