

Mehetable Coddington, Maid Servant
By Ross W. Beales, Jr.

On July 13, 1757, widow Anna Hammond of Newton completed her last will and testament, leaving monetary bequests, jewelry (including mourning rings), clothing, a silver spoon, and her "Great Bible" to eighteen individuals. Among her beneficiaries, none received more attention than Mehetable Coddington: she was to have the use of the Bible during her lifetime; more than six pounds; half of Hammond's wearing apparel (except one gown that was designated for Hammond's daughter-in-law); and half of whatever remained in the estate after the other bequests and funeral charges had been satisfied.

Coddington was neither a relative nor a member of the families with whom Hammond was connected by friendship, position, and piety. Rather, as Hammond explained, "I brought up Mehetable Coddington from an Infant which was attended with Considerable Charge and Trouble." Coddington had "gon from me many years and very lately has returned to live with me again, in my advanced years." The bequests to Coddington were conditional: if she continued to live with Hammond, she would receive her board and the sum of six pounds, thirteen shillings, and four pence "for what Care and Trouble, She Shall take of me." The bequests of clothing and the remainder of the estate were similarly conditioned on Coddington's care for Hammond. Coddington did not have long to wait before receiving her bequests, as Anna Hammond died eight months later.¹

How had Coddington become a member of the Hammond household? In all likelihood, she was an orphan or the daughter of a poor family that could not maintain her. Under such circumstances, the Overseers of the Poor in her town of origin would have placed her with a family like the Hammonds under an indenture. The likely terms under which Mehetable lived in the Hammond household can be found in the indenture, dated June 15, 1772, of fifteen-year-old Anna Rice of Westborough. Born on November 8, 1756, Anna was the daughter of Adonijah Rice, a "Labourer," and his wife Hannah (Crosby). With the consent of her father and the Overseers of the Poor, Anna "put her Self...an apprentice" to Moses and Lydea Wheelock of Westborough for two years, four months, and twenty-three days, that is, until her eighteenth birthday. During that time (or until her marriage), she would learn the "arte traid or mistree of a Spinster & to do houshold work" and be provided with "Suffishent" food, clothes, washing, and lodging "fiting for an apprentice." She would also be taught to read and, at the end of her term, would receive "two Sets of apparel for all parts of her body."

For her part, Anna agreed to serve her master and mistress faithfully; keep their secrets; obey their lawful commands; do no damage or cause it to be done by others; not waste their goods or lend them to others; and neither absent herself, day or night, without their

¹Anna Hammond, wid. Thomas, d. Mar. 12, 1758, a. 81; *Vital Records of Newton, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston: New-England Historic Genealogical Society, 1905), 456. Her husband Thomas d. Mar. 15, 1753, a. 66; *ibid.*, 457. Anna Hammond's will, #10,217 in the Middlesex Probate records, was accessed through a subscription to Ancestry.com. The probate docket does not contain receipts that the executor might have received when distributing Hammond's estate among her heirs.

permission, nor “hant [that is, haunt or frequent] aile houses taverns or play houses.”² This was the standard language in contracts of indenture and quite likely the terms under which Mehetable Coddington came to live in the Hammond household.

Where had Coddington “gon” before returning to care for Anna Hammond? Ebenezer Parkman’s diary provides some clues. After Molly Parkman’s death on January 29, 1736, Parkman was dependent on a servant, Deborah Ward, for the management of his household. Ward became ill in April, and other women took her place for a day or two – Parkman’s niece Rebecca Hicks (June 17, 1736) and Deborah’s sister Sarah (July 25-26). With Ward’s “Indispositions continuig,” Parkman rode to Ebenezer Chamberlain’s “to get 'Hittey Coddington to come and keep my House in Case Deborah Shall go away to the Doctors” (July 28, 1736). He did not succeed – not surprisingly, perhaps, since the circumstance of the Chamberlain family suggest that they needed a maid just as much as Parkman. Ebenezer and Mary Chamberlain had two children, the first born on January 13, 1735, and the second on July 1, 1736 – four weeks before Parkman approached Chamberlain about obtaining Coddington’s services.³

How had Parkman learned about Coddington? His first reference to her was on July 20: “Mehetable Coddington waited upon Mrs. Molly Potter to see Me this Afternoon” (July 20, 1736). His wording suggests that he already knew who Coddington was. He probably saw her the next day when he rode to Ebenezer Chamberlain’s home, noting “where Mrs. Molly Cotton was, and whom I had purposed to wait on, with Mrs. Hammond from Newton.” This entry establishes a crucial link between the Chamberlains, Mary (or Molly) Cotton, the wife of the Rev. John Cotton of Newton, and Anna Hammond. Chamberlain had moved to Westborough from Newton where he had been a member of John Cotton’s church.⁴

Two weeks later Parkman visited the Cottons in Newton and “discoursed with Madam about Hittey Coddingtons living at my House a while -- but in vain” (Aug. 10, 1736). Why did Parkman ask Mary Cotton whether Coddington could keep his house? After all, Coddington was already in Westborough, living with Ebenezer and Mary Chamberlain. Perhaps Coddington was contracted to serve in the Cotton household, but had been given permission, or sent, to serve in the Chamberlain household in the weeks before and after the birth of their second child.

Parkman’s diary has four additional references to Coddington. She and Ebenezer Chamberlain were among those who dined at Parkman’s home between services (Aug. 15, 1736), and a few days later Coddington brought “presents” from Chamberlain to Parkman (Aug.

²[Indenture of Anna Rice](#) (accessed Jan. 28, 2020).

³Ebenezer Chamberlain mar. Mary Trowbridge, Nov. 28, 1733; *Vital Records of Newton, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston: New-England Historic Genealogical Society, 1905), 253. Anna Chamberlain was b. Jan. 13, 1735, Nathaniel Longly, July 1, 1736; *Vital Records of Westborough, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin P. Rice, 1903), 32.

⁴Chamberlain was admitted to the Westborough church by dismissal from Cotton’s church, June 3, 1736; Westborough Church Records (Westborough Public Library), 41.

19, 1736). Four years later, Coddington was also among Parkman's guests on two Sabbaths (Feb. 24, Mar. 2, 1740). Her whereabouts between 1736 and 1740 is unknown, nor is there a record of where she was before 1757 when Anna Hammond wrote her will.

The few facts about Mehetable Coddington suggest the fluidity with which servants moved from household to household (in this case, the Hammond-Cotton-Chamberlain connection), perhaps also their own lack of control over those movements, and a lifelong connection between a servant and her mistress, reuniting them through need and opportunity.