

Eliza or Elizabeth Beals

By Ross W. Beales, Jr.
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Twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth Beals was overwhelmed by her “lost and undone Condition by Nature,” having long lived “in a state of Sin and Enmity against God.” She was, in her mind, a “Wicked Sinner,” fearing that she deserved “the hottest place in Hell.” Nonetheless, as her relation was read to the Westborough church on March 11, 1764, she had reason to hope. Thanks to the “infinite Wisdom and Mercy of God,” there was a “wonderfull Way...for Satisfying Justice and saving Sinners by the Death of Jesus Christ.” She was now ready to “throw my guilty Soul into the Arms of a crucified Saviour.”

Elizabeth had had a desire to come to communion, but like many who had that desire, she was afraid. She found comfort in biblical passages that were quite familiar to those who presented themselves for admission – for example, Isaiah 1:18,¹ 1 Corinthians 11:28,² and Romans 10:9-11.³ She accepted Christ as her prophet, priest, and king, and she asked the Lord: “ratifie in Heaven what I would do on Earth. Let it be a sure and everlasting Covenant, which thou makest with me as well as I with Thee.” The church was satisfied by her account, and as Ebenezer Parkman noted in the church records, “Elizabth Beals was admitted into Chh Fellowship, and The Lords Supper was administered.”⁴

Elizabeth Beals was born on May 3, 1742, one of the seven children of Nathaniel and Mary Beals of Southborough.⁵ Two of her siblings, Nathaniel and Lydia, had died in 1740 from the so-called throat distemper (i.e., diphtheria) that ravaged towns throughout New England: “In Southborough Lieut. *Brigham* has bury’d three [children], and his Brother *Thomas* (of Marlborough) two. Mr. *Beal* two; and Mr. *Ephraim Ward’s* Wife and three Children; and several others have dy’d there.”⁶ Her parents were most certainly poor and apparently unable to provide for their children. On March 28, 1748, when Eliza was five years old, Thomas Brigham of Marlborough notified the selectmen of that town “of his having taken two children from Southborough into his house, both minors. John Beals came thirteen days before date, and Elizabeth came six days before date – under poor circumstances.”⁷ John Beals was then ten years old, and at the age of twenty served in a military company that was organized in

¹Isa. 1:18, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

²1 Cor. 11:28, “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.”

³Rom. 10:9-11, [9] “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” [10] “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” [11] “For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.”

⁴Westborough Church Records (Westborough Public Library, 128 [389]). For the manuscript record of her admission, see [Admission of Elizabeth Beals](#). For the Church Records: <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/3815>.

⁵*Vital Records of Southborough, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester: Franklin P. Rice, 1903), 14.

⁶*Boston News-Letter*, Aug. 21, 1740, p. [1]. Nathaniel died on July 13, 1740; Lydia on July 14; *Vital Records of Southborough*, 155.

⁷Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Marlborough, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, from its First Settlement in 1657 to 1861...* (Boston: T. R. Marvin & Son, 1862), 163.

Marlborough under Col. Abraham Williams.⁸ For her part, Eliza was probably destined for service in Thomas Brigham's household until she was 18, the age at which female children were commonly released from the terms of indentures.

The likely terms under which Eliza lived in the Brigham 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 household 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 nor 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 permission, nor "hant [that is, haunt or frequent] aile houses taverns or play houses."⁹ This was the standard language in contracts of indenture and quite likely the terms under which Eliza Beals came to live with Thomas Brigham. At the age of five, she was too young to give her consent, so the selectmen and/or overseers of the poor would have acted on her behalf. As a girl, she would have been taught to read, but there was no reason for her to learn to write. Her relation, while citing biblical passages, was written for her, and she signed with her mark.

There is no record of when or under what circumstances Eliza Beals came to Westborough, but we might imagine that she worked in local households, relying on her ability to spin and do the wide range of household work that families required. Later references suggest that there might have been a Brigham connection. That she joined the Westborough church suggests that she felt welcome or at home in Westborough, at least spiritually, despite her status as a servant who was destined to be a spinster in both meanings of the term. She joined the Westborough church at the age of 21 – quite typical for young women, single or married.

Parkman first mentioned Eliza Beals in his diary two years later: "N.B. Eliza Beals desires her Relation, and I lent it to her" (June 26, 1766).¹⁰ Did she want the relation as a guide, a reminder, or a support for her faith? Was she going to share the relation with someone else? We can only speculate. More interesting, perhaps, is the fact that Parkman kept her relation (along with others that have descended to us) and only loaned it to her on the implicit, or perhaps expressed, condition that she return it to him – which, of course, she did.

Parkman's next reference to Eliza Beals was nearly eleven years later: "Miss *Elizabeth Beals* dined here" (Jan. 1, 1777). Now thirty-five years old, her fate as a spinster was sealed. Some two years later she came to the minister to "consult upon her Spiritual State – mentions

⁸Ibid., 137.

⁹[Indenture of Anna Rice](#) (accessed Mar. 23, 2019).

¹⁰There is a gap in the extant portions of Parkman's diary from June 1, 1764 through June 13, 1764.

several Scriptures She would have me preach upon, but which I have already. As to her bodily State, she is grown exceedingly dropsical” (May 24, 1779). Later that year, Parkman’s son Breck wrote in his own diary, “At evening I go, being a member of a Committee to wait on Elizabeth Beale who is in Low state with the Dropsy.”¹¹ Had Eliza Beals become a charge of the town, with thirty-year-old Breck Parkman part of a committee that was concerned with her welfare?

The next year Ebenezer Parkman noted that Josiah Brigham went to Medway “in order to Miss Eliz. Beal’s Return to Westborough *again*” (emphasis added; Aug. 15, 1780).¹² Josiah Brigham’s brother Elijah was courting Parkman’s daughter Anna Sophia; they were married the next month (Sept. 21, 1780). Perhaps Eliza Beals was part of the household of Josiah and Elijah’s parents, Col. Levi and Susannah Brigham. The reference to Medway is suggestive: Eliza had been there before. Her sister Deborah may have been the Deborah Beals who married John Adams, Jr., of Medway in 1769.¹³ While there are no other references to Deborah and John Adams in the Medway vital records, they may have had a young and growing family for which assistance was needed, and why not turn to a spinster sister for that help?¹⁴

Parkman’s last reference to Eliza Beals, two years later, adds to the Medway connection: “Miss Eliza *Beales* here, at *Breakfast*. N.B. Our Discourse was of Mr. *Sanford*” (Sept. 18, 1782). This was also Parkman’s last reference to David Sanford, the minister of Medway.¹⁵ Parkman had refused to invite Sanford to preach, believing that his doctrines were unsound. One parishioner reportedly criticized Parkman “in a long and bitter Invective charging me with Tyranny in that I would not suffer the people to hear Mr. Sanford” (Nov. 12, 1781). There is no record of Eliza Beals’s opinion on the matter, although she was clearly interested. And there, but for an account of her death, her story ends. Unlike many women, especially those who were poor, for whom there is no record of death, the circumstances of Eliza Beals’s death were sufficiently unusual to warrant notice in the news: “At Westborough, Mrs. Elizabeth Beals, aged 46 — she laboured under a dropsy, — had been tapped for that disorder seven times, within 15 months, and 421 weight of water drawn from her.”¹⁶

¹¹Breck Parkman Diary (Parkman Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society), Nov. 4, 1779.

¹²Ibid., Aug. 14-15, 1780.

¹³Jan. 5, 1769; *Vital Records of Medway, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Boston: New-England Historic Genealogical Society, 1905), 153.

¹⁴Several of Ebenezer Parkman’s sons and daughters lived with their older married siblings when they had young families, and Parkman’s spinster sister-in-law, Lydia Champney, made regular appearances in Parkman’s home.

¹⁵David Sanford (1737-1810), Yale 1755. An ecclesiastical council was called in 1777 because of the differences in Sanford’s church; see E. O. Jameson, ed., *The History of Medway, Mass., 1713 to 1885* (Medway, 1886), 125-26. Sanford’s critics charged that “(1) He denies imputative guilt; (2) He denies imputative righteousness; and (3) He makes God the author of sin.” According to Jameson, “One of the sisters was not edified by the manner in which he taught the doctrine of free-will; and the other found the alteration of the covenant a stumbling-block.”

¹⁶*Massachusetts Spy*, Mar. 5, 1789, p. [3].