

## Counting Deaths in Eighteenth-Century Westborough, Massachusetts: The Limitations of Published Vital Records

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Ebenezer Parkman, the minister of the Westborough, Massachusetts, from 1724 to 1782, married twice and had sixteen children, seven of whom died before his own death. Two of the seven were daughters who moved with their husbands to other towns where they died.<sup>2</sup> A third child was Elizabeth, who died a few weeks after birth, and her death appears in Westborough's published vital records.<sup>3</sup> But the deaths of four other children were not officially recorded. Lydia died when she was twenty-one months old; thirty-year-old Thomas died in military service

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<sup>2</sup>Mary m. Eli Forbes, Aug. 6, 1752 (*Vital Records of Westborough, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin P. Rice, 1903), 194, hereafter cited as *WVR*), and d. in Gloucester. Susanna m. Jonathan Moore, Oct. 13, 1768 (*WVR*, 194), and died in Rochester, MA.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth b. Dec. 28, 1738; d. Jan. 14, 1739; *WVR*, 82, 250.

Early in the twentieth century, the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) initiated an ambitious project to compile and publish the vital statistics – births, marriages, and deaths – of towns in Massachusetts to 1850. (See Lynn Betlock, “Massachusetts Vital Records Debut Online at [www.NewEnglandAncestors.org](http://www.NewEnglandAncestors.org),” *New England Ancestors* 3 (Fall 2002) 4:44-46, 48. Online at: [https://www.fold3.com/pdf/NEA\\_MassVR\\_to1850.pdf](https://www.fold3.com/pdf/NEA_MassVR_to1850.pdf).)

The project was significantly supported by the Massachusetts legislature with funding to publish and distribute the volumes to libraries throughout the Commonwealth, and by 1945 the vital records of some 206 towns and cities had been published. The Genealogical Society hired “competent persons” to compile the data, but there’s no indication that there were uniform standards for the records that would be searched. At minimum, of course, the compilers used the official town records as well as church records when those were available. Some compilers went beyond these sources, scouring gravestones for information and soliciting family records such as Bibles.

In the case of Westborough, the compilers appear to have relied exclusively on the town records and, at least for the eighteenth century, the church records. “The list of Westborough Births, Marriages and Deaths comprised in this volume includes all which were entered in the Town Books during the period from the earliest date there found to the end of the year 1849. Some additions and corrections of names and dates have been made from the records of the First Church, these being indicated in each instance by proper reference.” *WVR*, [3]. While the *WVR* used the church records, some information was omitted. For example, three children of Stephen and Anna Maynard were not recorded in the vital records, and, although the children were baptized, that information does not appear in the *WVR*. For the baptisms, see the Westborough Church Records, 123 (Jeffrey-Amherst), 129 (Robert-Breck), and 135 (second Robert-Breck) on the website of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/3951>; <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/3957>; and <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/3963>, including a transcription (accessed Oct. 13, 2021). The Westborough Church Records are also available, without a transcription, at New England’s Hidden Histories. Unfortunately, there is no link to specific pages, so one must scroll through the entire document: <http://nehh-viewer.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/#/content/Westborough/viewer/Church20records2C2017241787/>. Eli, the first child of Joseph and Esther Snow, was baptized on Oct. 10, 1773 (Westborough Church Records, 159), but neither the birth nor the baptism is in the *WVR*.

at Stillwater (Oct. 23, 1759);<sup>4</sup> twenty-two-year-old John, who returned home from Lancaster where he was settling, died after a protracted illness (Sept. 10, 1775); and nineteen-year-old Hannah also died at home (Oct. 14, 1777).

The absence of any official record of the deaths of these four children raises two important questions. First, how many deaths were not reported, and, second, how might one explain the failure to report deaths?

For Westborough, the first question can be partly answered through the diaries of Ebenezer Parkman and his son Breck Parkman. Although incomplete, the diaries cover a significant number of years from the 1720s through 1802. The published vital records list 444 deaths; the Parkman diaries and a few other sources note 390 additional deaths. Thus, of the total of 834 deaths, 53.2% appear in the published vital records and 46.8% in the Parkman diaries and other sources.<sup>5</sup> The discrepancy between reported deaths and the total suggests a magnitude of underreporting that underscores the limitations of the published vital records.

The Parkman diaries provide two additional insights. First, while the vital records rarely note the cause of eighteenth-century deaths, the diaries provide information about the cause of death for at least some individuals, including accidents and diseases ranging from cancer to diphtheria, dysentery, and smallpox. Second, when aggregated on a year-by-year basis, the data, combined with the narrative entries in the diaries, provide evidence of the severity of, and response to, contagious diseases.

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<sup>4</sup>Dates in parenthesis refer to the diary of Ebenezer Parkman; for an online transcription: <http://www.ebenzerparkman.org>. Parkman heard the news of Thomas's death on Nov. 19, 1759. He later received a letter, dated Nov. 14, 1759, confirming that his son had died on Oct. 23, 1759.

<sup>5</sup>Some deaths were reported in the newspapers or can be inferred from probate records. In the newspapers: Josiah Tenny (or Tenney, Tinney), *Boston News-Letter*, Apr., 15, 1763, p. [2]; Mitty (Submit) Bond, *Independent Chronicle*, Dec. 20, 1792, p. [3].

Why were some deaths not recorded? How does one explain something that did not happen? This is particularly vexing in light of Parkman's failure to report the deaths of four of his own children. By any standard, he was an inveterate record-keeper, not only compiling a massive diary but also keeping detailed church records and serving as clerk, or secretary, of the Marlborough Association of ministers for much of his career. This paper will suggest reasons, some hypothetical, others more grounded in the data, for non-compliance with the laws that required reporting vital data.

As early as 1639, the Massachusetts General Court mandated that vital events be recorded.<sup>6</sup> The law was revised several times, and by the eighteenth century, when the town of Westborough was founded, the law required that births and deaths be reported to the town clerk, with the clerk receiving a fee of three pence for each event. To encourage compliance, the law provided a fine of five shillings for refusing or neglecting to report within thirty days. If the fine was not paid within four days, the sum was "to be levied by distress and sale of the offender's goods by warrant from such justice [of the peace]."<sup>7</sup> However, what the law provided and what individuals did were not necessarily in accord. For example, while the town clerk was "impowred and required to take an account of all persons that shall be born, or shall dye, within each town," the many deaths that were not recorded, at least in Westborough, suggest that town clerks took less than a proactive role in registering vital events. There's also no evidence that the fines for non-reporting were enforced. If there was no compelling family reason to report a death and no fear of an economic sanction, it would have been easy to avoid reporting, whether by intention or forgetfulness, thereby saving the small amount that was levied, at least in law if

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<sup>6</sup>Robert Gutman, "Birth and Death Registration in Massachusetts. I. The Colonial Background, 1639-1800," *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 36, No. 1 (Jan. 1958), 58-74.

<sup>7</sup>"An Act for the Registering of Births and Deaths," passed Feb. 17, 1692-3, in *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1869) 1:104-05.

not in practice, for recording a vital event. While such an explanation is hypothetical, the data show more concretely some deaths that were not officially reported.

Eight kinds of deaths rarely appear in Westborough's published vital records for the eighteenth century: miscarriages and stillbirths; suicides; and the deaths of enslaved persons, native Americans, soldiers, strangers, newcomers, and children with disabilities.

Only two stillbirths appear in the published vital records, one in 1755, the other in 1768.<sup>8</sup> The Parkman diaries add twenty-seven miscarriages and/or stillbirths in Westborough,<sup>9</sup> including Hannah Parkman's two miscarriages. Her first miscarriage, early in her first pregnancy, received little attention from her husband who had been away from home; as he wrote in his diary, "Late home and Cold. My wife had a very ill turn, and had been very ill for Two Dayes. Keeps her Chamber. Abort,<sup>10</sup> etc., etc." (Feb. 20, 1738). The next day, "My wife keeps Chamber," and a week later, "My Spouse first got down stairs after her illness" (Feb. 28, 1738).

Hannah's second miscarriage, about five months into her second pregnancy, prompted a fuller description. Not only did Parkman note that Hannah "had gone but about 5 Months" but also that she "was deliver'd of a tender, lifeless, Male Child, The Measure of which was 13 1/2 Inches long. Immature for Birth, Yet with all its parts perfect" (Dec. 25, 1739). The next day, Parkman prevailed upon Ebenezer Maynard to dig a grave "for the Stillborn, little Babe" and his brother-in-law John Hicks to make a coffin, "but did not colour it." That evening, at Parkman's request, Deacon Jonathan Forbush buried "the Infant" (Dec. 26, 1739).

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<sup>8</sup>The "Still born" of Zebulun and Abigail Rice, Sept. \_\_, 1755, and the "Still born child" of Edwards and Sarah Whipple, Sept. 17, 1768 (*WVR*, 90, 106).

<sup>9</sup>There is also information about four stillbirths outside Westborough: Mrs. William Broad; Lucy, wife of Eli Forbes (Parkman's son-in-law); Hannah Tyler, the daughter of Breck and Susanna Parkman; and Sarah and Elijah Rice, who "now live within Upon Bounds."

<sup>10</sup>Old usage for an untimely birth or miscarriage [Francis Walett's footnote].

Parkman seemed more invested in, or at least more analytical about the second miscarriage, but, like the first, he did not report it to the town clerk. Does the fact that the coffin was not painted suggest something about a parent's perception of a stillborn? Whatever the case, Parkman was typical in not reporting stillbirths.

He recorded the suicides of two individuals, both of whom had a history of mental illness. Jonas Child hung himself, with a coroner's jury ruling that his death resulted from "a Fitt of Distraction" (May 22, 1750). Sarah Morse struggled for many years with mental illness before her suicide (Apr. 23, 1774). Child's death was followed by a "great and sorrowful Burying" (May 23, 1750), and a "Great Assembly gathered" for Sarah Morse's funeral (April 25, 1774). Although known throughout the community, neither death was recorded, suggesting that the town clerk's role was passive and that neither surviving spouse cared - or was able, for whatever reason - to record the death.<sup>11</sup>

Also dying anonymously (that is, not officially recorded) were enslaved individuals, including Maro, a boy whom Parkman bought from his father in Boston (Aug. 28, 1728). The diary for most of the sixteen months that Parkman owned Maro has not survived, but Maro's death, at a time of sickness in Parkman's family, prompted Parkman to exclaim, "But Dark as it has been with us it is become much Darker at or about the Sun setting. The Sun of Maro's Life Sat. The First Death in my Family!" (Dec. 6, 1729). Maro may have been a member of Parkman's family, but the minister did not record Maro's death with the town clerk. Nor did Lt. Stephen Maynard report the death of his "little Negro Boy" who died at the "Beginning of the sore sickness" (Sept. 13, 1756).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The *WVR* report two suicides between 1803 and 1849: Bryant Brigham, s. Samuel, d. July 8, 1848, a. 53 (*WVR*, 231); and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, w. Asa B. Forbush, d. Nov. 18, 1847, a. 56 (*WVR*, 239).

<sup>12</sup>The death of Francis Downs was an exception, with his death recorded with the town clerk (*WVR*, 23, Jan. 14, 1801), although it was Breck Parkman who identified him as "a Negro" (BP, Jan. 14, 1801).

Racial intermarriage is evident in Ebenezer Parkman's reference to John Chowin, "an Indian, or rather Molatto," who asked that Parkman attend the funeral of his infant (June 10, 1772). The next day Parkman "Rode to John *Chowin's* Wigwam; prayed there and attended the burying the Child" (June 11, 1772). It's not clear whether Chowin's wigwam was in Westborough; indeed, the references to Chowin and to the deaths of five other native Americans are among the little information about indigenous people who lived on the margins of English communities. They may have been part of the remnants of the praying village of Hassanamisco, which became the town of Grafton, moving between Grafton and Westborough.

Sam John, who had been baptized in Grafton but died in Westborough,<sup>13</sup> "was found dead in Esquire Bakers field" (BP, Dec. [blank], 1782).<sup>14</sup> Christian Misco, "the Widow of Old George Misco" (Oct. 10, 1746), "was bury'd in a very decent manner by Captain Maynard, from his house" and then "carry'd to our South Burying Place" (Oct. 12, 1746). A man named "Abimaleck (Indian)" asked Parkman to come to his wigwam, his daughter Deborah "having a Child Dead." Parkman prayed with them at the wigwam, went to the grave, and, since the child was apparently born out of wedlock, "gave them Severe Admonitions and Earnest Exhortations" (Dec. 29, 1746). When Esther David (or Bimeleck) died, her body was brought to the home of the widow Lydia Gale before the burial (Jan. 16, 1776). At a later date, Parkman learned that "Sue Bimeleck was lately frozen to Death," but he recorded nothing about where Bimeleck died and was buried (Jan. 31, 1780).

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<sup>13</sup>Samuell John, bapt. Dec. 27, 1741 (Grafton VR, 75).

<sup>14</sup>The *Massachusetts Spy* attributed John's death to "intoxication, together with the severity of the season." *Massachusetts Spy*, December 5, 1782, p. [3]

Soldiers from Westborough who died during their service were also among those who, with one exception, were not officially recorded.<sup>15</sup> In this, the death of Parkman's son Thomas was probably typical. Phinehas Forbush died either in Indian captivity or at Fort Massachusetts (Sept. 15, 1746; Aug. 19, 1747). Amos Whitney died at Fort Edward (Nov. 19, 1757). Jonas Twitchell was apparently serving in the army when he wrote his will in early June 1758; Parkman visited his widow two months later (Aug. 31, 1758). During the Revolution, Edmund Rice died "in his Way home to his Family" (July 19, 1775); Abel Woods died at Lechmere Point in Cambridge (Dec. 24, 1775); Timothy Warrin succumbed to "a putrid, pleuretic Fever" (Jan. 10, 1776); Amsden Gale died "in the Army" (Oct. 3, 1776); Jacob Gale died at Ticonderoga (Feb. 24, 1777); and Samuel Andrews died at Valley Forge (Aug. 22, 1778). The fact that these men did not die in Westborough may have been why their deaths were not officially recorded. Another man, John Bowker, died at his father's house in Sudbury, and his death was not recorded (Feb. 8, 1765).

The deaths of strangers constitute another category of deaths that were not reported to the town clerk but were noted in the Parkman diaries. Twenty-nine-year-old Samuel March of Sutton was killed in a cart accident in Westborough (Aug. 7, 1744). When a soldier, Arthur Brown, died at the home of Joseph Rice, Parkman "ordered the Grave-digger to digg within my Ground, that no exception might be made (as heretofore in the Case of Mr. Alexander Kelly) against burying in the burying Ground" (Nov. 27, 1758). The reference to Alexander Kelly suggests that Kelly, whose death is not in the vital records, was another stranger who died in Westborough. Another soldier, Daniel Barber of Simsbury, who was "attempting to go home

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<sup>15</sup>The death of Joseph How appears in the *WVR*, 244, with the death on July 12, 1758. Parkman learned about the death on July 23: "Sad News that *Joseph How*, Son of Mr. Benjamin How, who went out under Capt. Maynard, has dyed by Sickness in the Army."

from the Army,” fell ill and died at the home of George Andrews (Oct. 7, 10, 1775). On another occasion, “one Loring” died of small pox in the “hospital” (i.e., smallpox hospital), having been inoculated (BP, May 10, 1778). A soldier named Wilber or Webber died of “bilious Fever and Camp-Distemper” at the workhouse (July 15, 1779; BP, July 18, 1779). On another occasion, “a Certain Mr. Walker of Charlton” and his wife stopped at the home of Barnabas Newton. She was “very low in a Consumption” (BP, Sept. 17, 1786) and died the following week. William Hadan, a “poor young stranger” who was “Sick of a fever and Flux,” also died in Westborough (Dec. 5, 8, 1777).

The Parkman diaries record six deaths among newcomers. An infant of John Underwood, who was “newly come into Town,” died, with Parkman attending the funeral (Sept. 10, 1778). Benjamin Lull, similarly a newcomer, also lost a child (July 22, 1739). Elizabeth, the wife of Joshua Harrington, whose family had been in town for only three weeks, died when a gun was accidentally discharged (Nov. 17, 1737).<sup>16</sup> Parkman’s cousin Winchester, whose daughter had married Ebenezer Maynard, a Westborough resident, was living in Westborough at the time of her death at age seventy-eight (Oct. 22, Dec. 3, 1779). Breck Parkman’s description of another death suggests a newcomer, or certainly someone with whom he was not acquainted: “Mrs. Pierce an old Woman at Ben Balcheldors buried” (BP, Apr. 16, 1794). Benjamin Woods’s parents were apparently living in Westborough when he was born and died, but both his birth and death were recorded in the Brookfield vital records.<sup>17</sup>

Another category is that of disabilities. Twenty-one-year-old Mary Tomlin died in 1727, having, as Parkman wrote, “lain confin’d ever since I had been in Town” (Aug. 3, 1727).

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<sup>16</sup>For a fuller account, see the *Boston Gazette*, Nov. 28-Dec. 5, 1737 (Issue 934), [3].

<sup>17</sup>Benjamin, s. Matthew and Abigail Woods, b. June 10, 1791, at Westborough (Brookfield VR 238); d. Aug. 7, 1791, a. 1 m. 18 d. (*ibid.*, 548).



Parkman recorded the death of one of Samuel Fay's children who was "a poor, weakly Child, distorted, and though 3 Years old, could not stand etc." (Nov. 28, 1766). Neither the birth nor the death of this child was recorded. Priscilla Whipple gave birth to a daughter whose disabilities must have been immediately evident as she was named Submit. Six years later, her father informed Parkman that "his poor little Child (which was always from its Birth unlike other Children, weak, pining, unable to Speak etc., yet well nigh 6 years old) dyed this morning" (Apr. 30, 1777), but the death was not reported to the town clerk.

These eight categories of unrecorded deaths, while important, constitute only 65 of the nearly 400 unrecorded deaths. Other types of unrecorded deaths are less clear-cut. The Parkman diaries report the deaths of many infants, often without noting the infant's name or gender. That said, many parents did in fact name and report the death of an infant. The diaries also note the passing of elderly persons whose deaths were not reported, but the deaths of other aged individuals were reported. In these kinds of cases, there seems to have been no rhyme or reason. Perhaps, then, we should return to the fact that Ebenezer Parkman neglected to report the deaths of four of his children. He was hardly unaffected by their deaths, yet recorded the deaths only in his diary, not with the town clerk. If Parkman ignored his legal obligation to report deaths, we should not be surprised that others did the same.

The Parkman diaries, as noted at the beginning of this paper, also provide valuable information about the cause of death, and, when all the deaths are aggregated on a year-by-year basis, we can see more clearly the impact of contagious diseases.

Accidents caused the death of several children and adolescents, although causes were rarely mentioned in the published vital records for eighteenth-century deaths.<sup>18</sup> Five children

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<sup>18</sup>Two exceptions were the deaths of David Childs and Samuel Warrin who, as the *WVR* note, "Drowned" (*WVR*, 234, 255). Childs was nineteen months old, Warrin less than two years.

whose ages ranged from one day old to two years died from burns, scalding, and drowning. Hepzibath Bond was “Sadly Scald by hot water [torn] from a Kittle at the Fire” (Aug. 30, 1776). Two-year-old Joel Maynard died after falling into “a Kittle of boiling water” (Oct. 28, 1758). Fifteen-month-old Robert Breck Maynard drowned after he “fell into a Kittle of Wort (not hot)” (July 30, 1765). Martha Snow was only one day old when she was fatally burned by a warming pan (Apr. 26, 1756). Sixteen-month-old Francis Whipple “fell into a Tub of hot wort, and dy’d at Evening (Aug. 24, 1776). Joel Forbush died after being “thrown by an antick Horse” (BP, Jan. 15, 1798). Twelve-year-old Joseph Brigham jumped from the scaffold of a barn and died after striking his head on the sill (Feb. 13-14, 1760). Boston newspapers reported the particularly grisly deaths of ten-year-old Adam Holloway who “received a mortal wound by the kick of a Colt,”<sup>19</sup> and Josiah Tenny who was crushed in the crank pit of a saw mill.<sup>20</sup>

We learn that six people died from cancer;<sup>21</sup> two from smallpox (BP, May 10, 1778), with a third “by means of the Dysentery setting in with the Small Pox” (BP, Mar. 16, 1777); two others from an illness that Parkman explicitly called “dysentery,”<sup>22</sup> although there were probably many more; twenty people died from consumption, with the cause often described as “of a consumption;”<sup>23</sup> and scores of children died from the “throat distemper” or diphtheria.

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<sup>19</sup>*New-England Weekly Journal*, Jan. 8, 1733, p. [2].

<sup>20</sup>*Boston News-Letter*, Apr. 15, 1763, Issue 309, p. [2].

<sup>21</sup>John Oake (Feb. 4, 1752); Ebenezer Brigham (Feb. 19, 24, 1876); Vashti Hardy (Apr. 21, 1771); Abijah Bruce (July 27, Dec. 2, 1774); Sarah Forbush (Oct. 3, 1776); Abigail Fessenden (BP, Apr. 19, 1788).

<sup>22</sup>Lydia Bellows (BP, Oct. 23, 1797); Zerviah Nurse (Sept. 26, 1775).

<sup>23</sup>Consumption took Jonathan Tainter (May 7, Aug. 1, 1744); Daniel Miller (Aug. 24, 1768); Joanna Fay (Sept. 25, Oct. 24, 1775); Elisha Gale (Apr. 26, 1776); Parkman’s daughter Anna Sophia Brigham (BP, Nov. 26, 1783); the stranger Prudence Walker (BP, Sept. 17, 1786); Sally Brigham (BP, Mar. 21, 1787); Josiah Brigham (BP, Jan. 9, 1788); Nancy Brigham (BP, June 3, 1790); Levinia Warren (BP, July 4, 1790); Dinah Bond (BP, Sept. 7, 1790); Joseph Rice (BP, Nov. 24, 1790); Mary Godfrey (Nov., 24, 1790); Jonathan Maynard (BP, Aug. 7, 1791); David Tainter (BP, Aug. 20, 1791); Bernice Warren (BP, July 31, 1793); Deborah Butler (BP, Mar. 4, 1794); Deborah Adams (BP, Dec. 27, 1794); Elizabeth Mellen (BP, Dec. 27, 1794); Phinehas Brigham (BP, Deaths 1802)

While annual deaths were frequently in single or low double digits, epidemics brought sharp increases: 26 deaths in 1740; 51 deaths in 1745-46; 38 deaths in 1749-50; 54 deaths in 1756; 64 deaths in 1775-76. The numbers are dramatic, but it's only the Parkman diaries that provide some evidence of what was happening. In 1740, it was the throat distemper; dysentery in 1745-46; possibly dysentery in 1756; "common distemper" and "camp distemper" in 1775-76.

The Parkman diaries thus provide important evidence about the incidence and sometimes the cause of deaths in Westborough. The published vital records clearly fall short of revealing the extent of mortality in that eighteenth-century community. While the Parkman diaries are unusual in their scope and detail, diaries from other communities, along with newspapers and probate records, will undoubtedly help historians expand on the count of deaths in eighteenth-century New England.