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Who Was Mercy (Harlow) (Doten) Robbins?

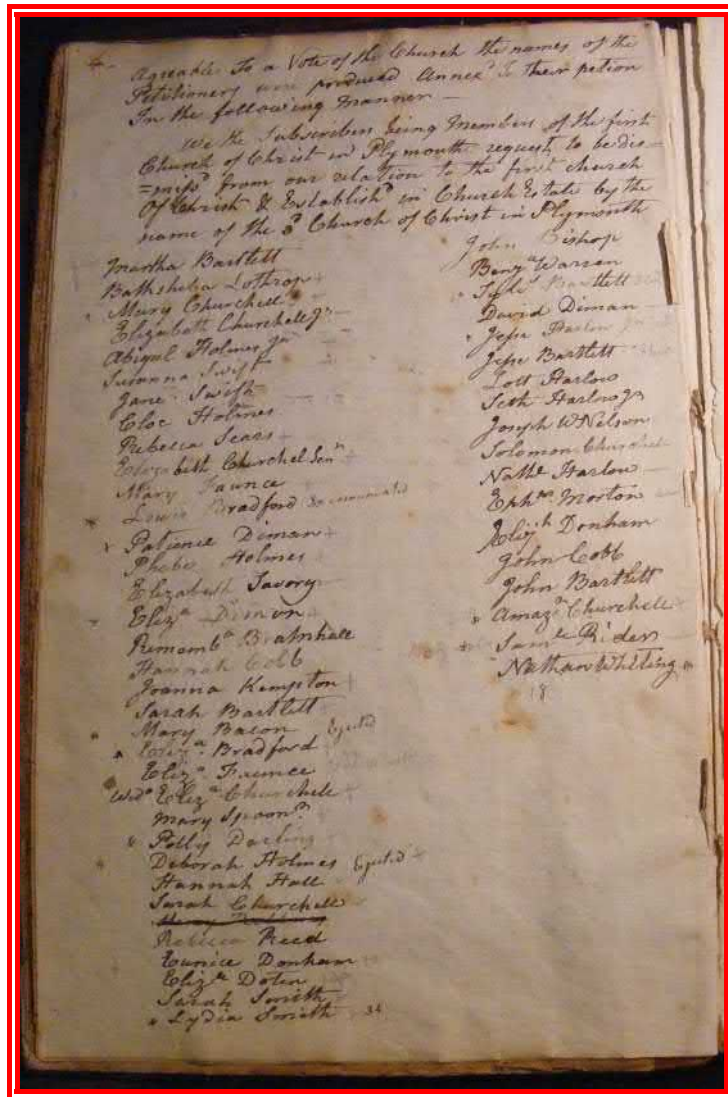
53 persons were dismissed from the First Church of Christ in Plymouth, MA on September 24, 1801, so they could gather the Third Church of Christ in Plymouth [today's The Church of the Pilgrimage] on October 1, 1801. However, only 52 of those 53 dismissed persons actually joined Third Church at its gathering. Who was that missing person? And why didn't that person follow through and join Third Church?

To the right is a picture of a page from the first Ledger of the Third Church of Christ in Plymouth (1801-1823), now deposited at Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth, MA.¹ That page shows a list of those 53 persons who were dismissed to gather the Third Church.

That list contains all the same names as the list of dismissed First Church members on page 547 of First Church records published in 1920/1923. The records of First Church and Third Church both show the names of women on the left and men on the right.

Plymouth Church Records 1620-1859, Vol. II, 547.

https://books.google.com/books?id=tFUmAQAAAJ&dq=Plymouth+church+records+vol.+II&source=gbs_navlinks_s

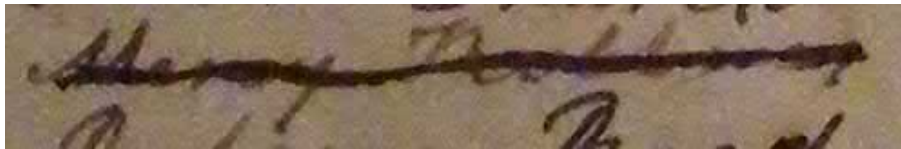


¹ With thanks to the Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth, MA which has been safeguarding the early records of The Church of the Pilgrimage since the church deposited them there in 1987.

The notable difference in the Third Church's ledger list is the name of one of those women is crossed out. She apparently did not join Third Church when it was gathered in 1801. Neither is there any indication in Third Church records that she ever became one of its members.

So, one wonders. Who was that woman? Why didn't she join Third Church on October 1, 1801 or at any point afterwards? It was just a week before that date, on September 24, 1801, that she was dismissed from First Church along with the others to gather Third Church. The "why" of this situation may always remain a mystery. Even so, there are some assertions about this woman that we can become aware of.

Here is an expanded image of the crossed out name in the previous pictured list from Third Church's first ledger.



The woman's name was **Mercy Robbins**. She is said to have been born in Plymouth in 1752. Her parents were Samuel Harlow and Mercy Bradford. Apparently, Mercy Harlow's name was sometimes spelled as Marcy, though it always appears as Mercy in Plymouth Church Records. Mercy Harlow first married Elisha Doten. Together they had two daughters. After his death she married Ebenezer Robbins. First Church records indicate that Mercy and her second husband Ebenezer had six children who were baptized at First Church. However, based on later court records, it appears tht only four of those children were remembered by later descendants of Mercy Robbins.

Plymouth Church Records indicate:

- ~ **Mercy Harlow** married Elisha Doten on November 24, 1768 at First Church. [PCR, Vol. II, 495]
- ~ Elisha Doten died May 17, 1778 in Plymouth. [PCR, Vol. I, 408]
- ~ **Mercy Doten** [then a widow] was Baptized and became a member of First Church on August 12, 1781. [PCR, Vol. I, 464]
- ~ **Mercy Doten** married Ebenezer Robbins on October 4, 1781 at First Church. Both were from Plymouth. [PCR, Vol. II, 500]
- ~ **Mercy's** two children [both daughters] from her first husband Elisha Doten, now deceased, were Baptized at First Church on December 9, 1781. [PCR, Vol. I, 464]
- ~ **Mercy Robbins** and her husband Ebenezer had six children who were Baptized at First Church between July 7, 1782 and June 29. 1794. Their names in order of Baptism were: Ebenezer, George Harlow and Elizabeth [twins], Levi, Andrew, and Benjamin. [PCR, Vol I, 465-467; Vol. II, 478, 482]

Information on Mercy Robbins has been preserved because she was mentioned repeatedly

in the 1868 murder trial of a great grandson of hers. His name was **Samuel M. Andrews**. That trial, held before the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, captured considerable publicity and public attention at that time, including from members of the medical community.

That interest was generated, in part, because this trial raised the question of whether or not individuals with insane ancestors were more likely to be mentally disturbed themselves. It also raised the question of whether or not Samuel Andrews was, himself, suffering from “Mania Transitoria” [transitory insanity] at the time he killed his victim, Cornelius Holmes, in Kingston, Massachusetts.

The basic facts of the case seem to have been as follows, gathered in part from the testimony of Samuel Andrews himself. Andrews was considered an upstanding and well liked citizen of Kingston, MA. He served as a Deacon, Treasurer, and Sunday School teacher at the orthodox Congregational Church in Kingston. Samuel was married. His wife was a “confirmed invalid.” Samuel worked at a small cotton thread mill in Kingston. Samuel and his wife supplemented their income by taking in boarders at their Kingston home.

Samuel and Cornelius Holmes were close friends in Kingston. At one point, Cornelius boarded in the house of Samuel and his wife. But then, Cornelius moved into his own house. Cornelius made his friend Samuel a beneficiary in his will. He also gave Samuel various gifts. When Cornelius needed to go to Boston or Plymouth he often asked Samuel to go with him, which Samuel often did. As Samuel said, on several occasions Cornelius tried to have sexual contact with him, which Samuel rejected and was repulsed by.

On the day of the murder, May 26, 1868, at Cornelius’s request, Samuel arranged to meet with him in the evening, regarding some matter Cornelius wanted to discuss before Cornelius went off to Boston. The two men met and while on a path beyond Kingston’s cemetery, Cornelius unexpectedly led Samuel into a thicket and pushed him to the ground. Cornelius held Samuel there on the ground by clutching his long beard and neck. He then pulled Samuel’s “pantaloons” down with the apparent intention of having sexual contact. Cornelius was larger and stronger than Samuel. Samuel struggled to get away, but couldn’t. What he did while lying on the ground was reach for nearby rocks. He then bashed Cornelius once or twice with those rocks. That’s all Samuel could remember of those moments, as he believed he then lost consciousness. His next memory was that of himself standing with his pantaloons down and open. His hands were bloody and he was holding a rock in each hand, which he then threw at Cornelius, who was then dead on the ground.

When Cornelius’ body was found, it was discovered that his skull had been broken and his brain exuded from it. At the trial a professor of surgery found 11 detached pieces from Cornelius’ skull. Also, one person counted 27 rocks with blood on them around Cornelius’ body. Initially, Samuel lied and said he knew nothing about Cornelius’ disappearance or then his death. But then, Samuel gave his confession, as noted in part above. Apparently the law at that time would allow a man in self defense to hurt his attacker only as much as was needed in order to

escape, but not more. And, the great amount of damage done to Cornelius' body was then viewed as far exceeding that limit for self-defense.

Given this situation, Samuel's defense attorney, Charles Gideon Davis, focused in on the theory that although Samuel had always seemed like a normal person and nonviolent, the fact that he had many insane ancestors going back to his great grandmother **Mercy Robbins**, led to Samuel himself having suffered from **transitory insanity** in those moments he could no longer remember [moments he thought he had been unconscious], when he apparently had bashed Cornelius with many more than just one or two rocks in self-defense in order to escape.

Here is a list of Samuel's descent from his great grandmother **Mercy Robbins**, with her and her direct descendants shown in **bold** print:

Great-grandparents: **Mercy Robbins** (1752-May 25, 1829) and husband Elisha Doten
Grandparents: **Jerusha Doten** and husband Ichabod Bearce
Parents: **Jerusha Bearce** and husband ----- Andrews
Son: **Samuel M. Andrews** (b. 1830)

What follows is part of the opening argument which the attorney for the defense, Charles Gideon Davis, presented to the court and jury on behalf of his client Samuel Andrews on December 4, 1868 [**emphasis mine**] :

"May it please the Court: Gentlemen of the Jury: — Amid the earliest recollections of my childhood I recall the person of an old lady, then more than seventy years of age, who was well known to all the children, and a frequenter of the kitchens of our most worthy citizens. I remember well her snuff colored tippet, her black dress and cloak, her dark hood, her black twinkling eyes, and munching mouth, as well as the deep pockets stored with nuts, apples, and choice morsels for the children, among whom she was a welcome guest. Possessing the remnants of early beauty, with features which you will see in one of her descendants who will be a witness before you, her long and acceptable visits in my mother's kitchen have impressed her upon my memory.

Her name was **Marcy Robbins**, known as "Aunt Marcy Robbins;" and her maiden name was Marcy Harlow. She was kind; she was gentle; she was God-stricken: she was **insane**.

Born in 1752 in Plymouth, Samuel Harlow, her father, Marcy Bradford, her mother; in 1768, when sixteen years of age, she married Elisha Doten, by whom she had two daughters, who grew to womanhood; **one of whom became insane, and died insane**.

She lost her husband, and in 1781, at the age of twentynine, married Ebenezer Robbins, a widower, who had several children by his first marriage. By Ebenezer Robbins she had four children, at three births; first twins, a son George, and a daughter Betsey, **both of whom were insane, and one died insane**. Betsey married a Perry, removed to Wareham,

and committed suicide. Marcy Robbins had two other sons, at separate births; Ebenezer, remembered by many here as a **maniac, and who died a maniac** in yonder poor-house; and Benjamin who **died insane**. George did business in Portland, was often well, but **at times a lunatic**.

[Mercy/Marcy Robbins] died between the years 1826 and 1830. She did not become insane until after the birth of some, and, probably, of all her children. She **must have been insane before she was forty years of age**, as she was not known as otherwise to any persons now living. You will remember, then, that she had six children, all but one of whom were insane, and all but one of these died insane.

The sane daughter by the first husband was named Jerusha, and married Ichabod Bearce, or Bass, as the name was vulgarly called in former days. Jerusha Bearce was **the only one not insane of all her mother's children**, and brought up quite a family of children — Ichabod Bearce, an old man now living, and so much superannuated that he has little remembrance of his family connections, or circumstances; Hannah Bearce, a maiden lady, whom you will have the pleasure of seeing upon the witness stand; and Thomas and Calvin Bearce, fine, honest, and hearty men, whom you will also see. But there was another daughter besides Hannah Bearce, the youngest child, named for her mother, Jerusha Bearce. In early life, before her marriage, she resided with Madam Warren, the mother of a gentleman who has adorned the judicial bench of the Commonwealth, — Hon. Charles H. Warren. She afterwards married a seafaring man by the name of Andrews, and **Jerusha Andrews became insane when about forty years of age**. She had a daughter, Eleanor Robbins, a widow, residing in this town with her only child; a daughter Hannah, who married an American mechanic, by the name of McDaniels, and now resides at Newmarket, N. H., both of whom will appear before you, and both of whom are extremely nervous and sensitive; a son Calvin, who went to California between 1848 and 1850, and was found dead in the woods, apparently uninjured. Information reached the family that **he died of insanity**, wandering in the woods. Before Mrs. McDaniels was born, **her mother had been insane at intervals**.

The next and youngest child, born two years after, in the year 1830, was **Samuel M. Andrews**, the prisoner at the bar. **He was conceived in insanity, born of insanity, and nursed upon insane milk**. When the prisoner was four years of age, in consequence of threats of deadly violence on her part, she was torn from him, and **sent to an insane asylum**, where she remained, until her death, a few years ago.

We are not able, gentlemen, to trace back the blood of **Marcy Robbins** before the date of her birth. Her father had several other children, and it will, I think, appear, in addition to the insanity of this daughter, that the descendants of other children of her parents were insane. The only difficulty is in tracing the genealogy of the descendants of her brothers and sisters. **It will appear, notwithstanding, that the great-grandmother of the prisoner, Marcy Robbins, had the insane taint**, as none of the children of her husband

by a prior marriage were insane, whilst her children by both marriages were thus afflicted; that she was a woman of remarkably mild disposition, agreeable, kind, cheerful, happy; that such was the case with her granddaughter, Mrs. Andrews, and with the prisoner; and that **both the great-grandmother and the daughter became insane* at about the age of the prisoner at this bar, who is now thirty-eight years of age.** . .

The facts, gentlemen, are these. As counsel, **we do not know**, we cannot say he is insane, or was insane. That is a scientific question. He does not know, he cannot say; but we do say that man **cannot be guilty.**”

The above text comes from the following 287 page book on that trial and situation, which Samuel Andrews’ attorney Charles Davis had published:

Charles Gideon Davis (1820-1903), Of Counsel for the Prisoner, “*Report of the trial of Samuel M. Andrews, indicted for the murder of Cornelius Holmes, before the Supreme judicial court of Massachusetts, December 11, 1868. Including the rulings of the court upon many questions of law, and a full statement of authorities upon the subject of transitory insanity.*” New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1869, 97-100.

https://books.google.com/books?id=i4KQlrmNjF8C&dq=Report+of+the+trial+of+Samuel+M.+Andrews,+indicted+for+the+murder+of+Cornelius+Holmes&source=gbs_navlinks_s

During this trial two medical experts were called to testify, Dr. Edward Jarvis for the defense and Dr. George H. Choate for the prosecution. The following year, 1869, Dr. Jarvis had an article, based in part on his experience with Andrews’ case, published in The American Journal of Insanity. “*Mania Transitoria*” was its title [picture at right]. Apparently, defense attorney Charles Davis helped with its preparation.

Edward Jarvis, “*Mania Transitoria*,” The American Journal of Insanity, July 1869, Utica State Hospital Press, 1-32.

https://books.google.com/books?id=itw1AQAAMAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s

As Chief Justice Chapman told the jury before they were sequestered to reach their verdict in Samuel Andrews’ trial:

“I have spoken of the opinion of Dr. Jarvis that there might have been a sudden attack of insanity that came on without any premonition, led to the murder, and departed as soon

AMERICAN
JOURNAL OF INSANITY,
FOR JULY, 1869.

MANIA TRANSITORIA.

BY EDWARD JARVIS, M. D.*

This is a form of mental disorder which suddenly appears in persons previously sound, or not supposed to be unsound, in mind: it has a short duration and suddenly disappears.

This is not exclusively a new or an old doctrine; but it has been taught in France and Germany for many years, by the managers of the insane, and by writers on these topics. It is recognized by psychological authorities in Great Britain. It is admitted and established by jurists and courts in Europe, in their management of persons who have committed acts which would otherwise have been considered as crimes, and for which they would have otherwise been doomed to death on the scaffold.

The case of Andrews, who was tried at Plymouth in December last, for homicide, has brought this subject prominently before the public here. As there is a difference of opinion in regard to this doctrine, especially in its application to the case of Andrews, it may be well to present the views of those who have written upon it,

as the murder was committed, leaving no trace behind. The opinion of Dr. Choate is the contrary. He regards such a kind of insanity as unheard of and impossible. As insanity arises from bodily disease, he thinks it could not come on so suddenly, rage so violently, and then totally disappear. You are to judge of these opinions.”

Charles Gideon Davis, "*Report of the trial of Samuel M. Andrews. . .*", 256.

Dr. Edward Jarvis then wrote the following article on the trial of Samuel Andrews and it was published in the April 1870 edition of *The American Journal for Insanity*. It gives what appears to be a good summary of the overall trial:

Edward Jarvis, "*Trial of Samuel M. Andrews for the Murder of Cornelius Holmes*"
<https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/ext/dw/101190534/PDF/101190534.pdf>

Another source on this trial was the following:

"*Full Report of The Trial of Samuel M. Andrews, For the Murder of Cornelius Holmes,*"
Plymouth: Memorial and Rock Press, 1868
<http://lawcollections.library.cornell.edu/trial/catalog/sat:2713>

On page 51, the above source gives the following information in three sections on the conclusion of that trial: The Verdict, The Sentence, and The Jury's Positions.

THE VERDICT!

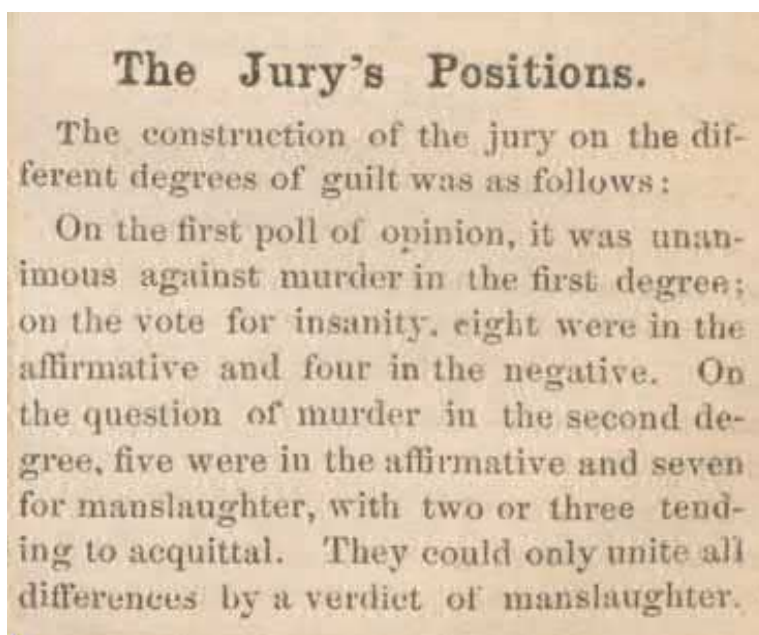
At fifteen minutes before one o'clock, the unseasonable ringing of the Court House bell announced the re-assembling of the Court to receive the verdict. Many hurried to the Court House to witness the closing scene. The prisoner sat in the dock with Messrs. Somerby and Davis—his counsel—on either side. He was sensibly affected, trembling and rubbing his hands. When the foreman looked upon him he nearly fainted. In quiet, measured tone the verdict: MANSLAUGHTER, was announced. His counsel seized him by either hand, and he seemed electrified with courage.

With unbroken silence, mingled with surprise by some and satisfaction with others, the announcement was received. Others congratulated the prisoner, but the Court looked ominous. It retired ten minutes and returned to announce the sentence.

THE SENTENCE.

Of one day's solitary confinement and twenty years imprisonment was then pronounced. The prisoner returned to the custody of the officer, and the Court adjourned. The verdict was in accordance with general expectation, after the plea of Mr. Somerby on the defence, which was of masterly vigor and searching analysis, and severely taxing the jury's mind against a verdict of murder in the 1st degree. The Judge's charge also indicated the same result.

The plea of the Attorney General was of marked ability, and though brief, yet it cleared away the untenable points established by the defence with an effective rapidity that shook the opinions of all. But there was the initial cause of the immediate struggle enveloped in a pall of mystery which no testimony could penetrate or disturb, no evidence save the prisoner's story, with no human eye or speech to rebut. Over this possible, if not probable, primary element, determining guilt, no jurymen could step without grave responsibility and anxious uncertainty to the death penalty. Insanity nor circumstances raised no doubts, but the mystery of that abomination and lack of any weapons save uncertain stones saved him.



And, what of **Mercy Robbins** who apparently intended to join the new Third Church in 1801, but who didn't join it, ever? Why?

Well, I now know some more about her. As defense attorney Charles Davis said in 1868, "She must have been insane before she was forty years of age, as she was not known as otherwise to any persons now living." Mercy would have been about forty years of age in 1792, about 9 years before the Third Church was gathered.

So, that is some new information. but still, the answer to that question of "Why?" remains a mystery. And, there are also many more questions now. For example:

~ What did it really mean to assert that Mercy was "insane" back then? What was her behavior?

~ And, exactly what was her health condition, if it would be diagnosed today?

~ And, did she really pass insanity down to many of her descendants in the generations soon after her?

Rev. Dr. Douglas K. Shavette

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