

RESEARCHING THE LIVES OF SARAH EMERY GILMAN AND ELIZABETH DENNETT HALE, THE WOMEN WHO WERE MARRIED TO THE ACADEMY'S FOUNDER, JOHN PHILLIPS.

*During the course of writing In a Man's World: Faculty Wives and Daughters at Phillips Exeter Academy, 1781–1981, Connie Brown interviewed close to 100 women who called Exeter home at a time when the Academy was still a largely all-male institution. Her research made Brown curious about the lives of two Exeter women in particular: Sarah Emery Gilman (1701–1765) and Elizabeth Dennett Hale (1721–1797), the women who were married to the Academy's founder, John Phillips (1719–1795). "There is little or no personal correspondence and no diaries to substantiate how John and these women came to matrimony," says Brown, herself a former faculty wife (her husband is emeritus mathematics instructor Richard Brown). So she turned to colonial laws and probate records pertaining to women and their financial status as widows. Such documents, she says, "may give us some clues as to why John Phillips chose them to share his life and his life's work."*

Phillips and his wives were born into a world of Puritan ideals whose strictness is legendary. Men and women married not necessarily because they loved one another, but because over time they might *come* to do so. Couples were exhorted to treat one another with respect, forming partnerships in which the husband was the head of the wife, and the wife the head of the household. It was the wife's responsibility to guide the household, but never her husband. She owed him an obedience founded on reverence; but at the same time, she was not his slave or servant.

Why Sarah and Elizabeth chose to marry not once, but twice, may have been a result of the educational practice of the time. Women were considered able to read scripture for their own edification and that of their children, and to balance the family budgets. However, they were deemed lacking the "strength of mind" for more serious intellectual pursuits. Few women successfully entered the role of *femme sole*, that is, a women living on her own. Most women chose to be married, *femme covert*, a woman "covered," under the protection of a man.

When Phillips' cousin Nathanael Gilman died in 1741, his widow, Sarah Emery Gilman, who was then in her 40s, asked John, then in his 20s, to come board in her home and take care of the accounts. He had worked for her for two years when they were married in 1743. Both would know her dowry to be sizable, and that John, who had already established his business skills, would be responsible for the management of it.

When Sarah died in October 1765, she and John had been married for 22 years. She was 18 years older than John, a fact that seemed to matter little to them. In a letter preserved in the Academy Archives, John responded to a note from his step-granddaughter, Mrs. Josiah Gilman, in which he remembers Sarah in a way consistent with the Puritan ideal of a marriage partner—as some-

one he *came* to love.

In 1767, two years after Sarah's death, John, now in his 40s, married Elizabeth Dennett Hale, widow of Dr. Eliphalet Hale. Elizabeth's estate remained unsettled for five years after Eliphalet's death and three years after John and Elizabeth married. In the end much of it was used to satisfy creditors. Contrary to some accounts, Elizabeth was not a wealthy widow when John courted her.

John Phillips ran his merchant business, saw to the affairs of state, town and church, and, in 1781, formulated a constitution, similar to Andover's, to guide those who served his new school, Phillips Exeter Academy. While Phillips was busy with the outside world, his wives were in charge of the household, the servants, entertaining and housewifely chores. Elizabeth would have had the responsibility of creating a pious but gracious atmosphere for those who came to call. In Charles H. Bell's *Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire: A Historical Sketch*, Elizabeth is described as a "prudent, helpful and devoted wife to Mr. Phillips."

When Phillips died in 1795, Elizabeth, who apparently had not seen her husband's will, appeared to be surprised by its provisions. He gave minor bequests to her and to his nephews. Of the remaining portion, two-thirds was left to Phillips Exeter Academy and one-third Phillips Andover Academy, where he was also a founder as well as a trustee. Elizabeth wrote a letter to the trustees of both schools within a month after Phillips died, protesting the provisions. The trustees apparently offered her some additions to her inheritance, which she, in a letter of May 22, accepted.

Elizabeth supplemented her income in much the same way faculty wives did in the 1800s. Soon after Phillips' death, Elizabeth submitted a bill for two students who boarded with her; subsequently, she also submitted a bill for catering a function for 28. The Academy Archives contain a bill from January 1797, the year of Elizabeth's death, for dinner and tea, costing £3.15. This was perhaps only one of many functions for which she received remuneration and which helped her live in a fashion she could tolerate.

The histories of Phillips Exeter Academy, early and late, make it clear that John Phillips was a frugal, stern and demanding Puritan on the one hand, and a generous, visionary philanthropist on the other. Behind him were two devoted women, Sarah and Elizabeth, who assisted him in his vision. One provided the inheritance upon which he built his empire. The other, though likely without goods, gave him a peaceful and well-run home, enabling him to be the merchant, philanthropist, politician and educator he was called to be. While we know little of Sarah and Elizabeth's lives, we are coming to understand and appreciate their legacy to the Academy.



*No portraits survive of either Sarah or Elizabeth Phillips, and historical documents (including Elizabeth's signature on the Deed of Gift) are few. "But while we know little of their lives," says author Connie Brown, "we are coming to understand and appreciate their legacy to the Academy."*