

Introduction: Who Wrote the Soldier's Diary?

by Frances Dickinson Ackerly

In the Archives of the Longfellow National Historic Site is a diary written by a soldier who participated in the early days of the American Revolution. The diary was probably acquired by Elizabeth Ellery Dana, sister-in-law of Edith Longfellow Dana. The book itself is small (5" by 8"), pocket size; its cover and the first and last three pages are missing. The entries were made in pencil. There is no indication of the identity of the writer of the diary but there are enough clues to enable us to determine the soldier's name.

We know that the soldier kept his diary from at least from June 10, 1775 to September 7, 1776. We know that while he was in the Continental army during the Siege of Boston his unit was stationed at the large fort on Prospect Hill, then in Cambridge, now part of Somerville, that guarded against a British breakthrough from their fortifications on Bunker's Hill. We also know that after the siege ended he marched to New London, sailed to New York City, was sent to Brooklyn, escaped with the rest of the army after the defeat of the Battle of Long Island back to New York City, retreated from the lower part of New York to Harlem and then to the Bloomingdale area where the long account ends.

In the diary the soldier writes of the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Siege of Boston, the threatened bombardment from Dorchester Heights, the British evacuation of Boston, Washington's army's march to New York, the first reading of the Declaration of Independence, the Battle of Long Island, and the beginnings of Washington's long retreat from New York to Pennsylvania.

But who was he? Where did he come from? What army unit was he with? The answers to these questions are in the diary, but take some sleuthing:

The diaryist mentions other soldiers:

"Sunday A[ugust] 6...Broth Wyatt & I was a Going to see Montg and Sister Cate but turnd Back again and Stayd While the firing was over & then went up to whetherbys & Drank Coffee with Capt Lunt & Wife Lt. Montgoney & Wife...."

"Saturday February 3...Samll Wyatt and I went acrost mistick River...."

In the volumes of *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* Samuel Wyatt is listed as:

"Wyatt, Samuel, Newburyport....Private Capt. Moses Nowell's co., which marched on the alarm of April 19, 1775....Corporal, Capt. Benjamin Perkin's co. Col Moses Little's (17th) regtage, 23 yrs." (1)

Lt. Montgomery is probably:

"Montgomery, Nathaniel, Newburyport....2d Lieutenant, Capt. Ezra Lunt's co., Col. Moses Little's (17th) regt....age, 24 yrs." (2)

In John J. Currier's *History of Newburyport* Moses Little is listed as the Colonel of the 17th Regiment; (3) Ezra Lunt is listed as a Captain and Nathaniel Montgomery as a Second Lieutenant in the same Regiment. (4)

'Capt. Lunt' is mentioned four times in "*Mass. Soldiers...*" and is described thus:

"Lunt, Ezra, Newburyport.... Petition addressed to the Committee of Safety, dated Cambridge, May 25, 1775, signed by said Lunt and other captains, stating that they had chosen Capt. Moses Little as Colonel,...and asking that said officer[s] be recommended for commissions: *also*, Captain of a company stationed at Cambridge;... *also*, Captain, Col. Moses Little's regt.;...age, 32 yrs;...." (5)

Therefore, the author of the diary seems to be from Newburyport. He reports visiting Newburyport:

"Thursday Sept 28th 1775 Set out for Newbury Port Stopt at Capt Simmons all night then In the morning at 10 o Clock Set out for Newbury Port"

In December he went again went to the north, calling it "home", returning by Malden which is north of Prospect Hill:

*"Monday Dec. 4 (?) Set out for home Monday"
"Decem 18 Set out for Cambridge
Tuesday Decem 19 traviling Upon the Road Lodgd at Malden"*

The most compelling clue about the diarist's identity comes from the mention of the author's brother, John, and sister, Sarah:

*"Wednesday August the 2 this day dind with Brother John
It being his Birth Day and 21 years old this day"
Sunday September 10 1775...Brother John Listed for Cannady..."*

Newburyport was originally part of Newbury and was incorporated as a separate town in 1764. According to the *Vital Records for Newbury*, (Vol. 1, Births) the John whose birth is closest to August 2, 1754 is John Sleeper who was baptized on August 11, 1754.

"Sleeper, John, s. Henry, bp. Aug. 11, 1754, C. R. 9" (6)

John Sleeper is listed in *Mass. Soldiers...* as follows:

"Sleeper, John, Newburyport....Capt. Ezra Lunt's co., Col. Moses Little's (17th) regt....;...age, 21 yrs.; the word "Quebeck" appears after name." (7)

When the author of our diary was serving in New York after the troops moved there following the end of the siege of Boston, there is a diary entry for May 6, 1776:

*"Monday, May th 6 Lieut Ward Got In to th Camps
Brought the News of Sister Sarahs Death"*

Newbury Birth Records (V.R. Vol. 1) list:

Sleeper, Sarah, d. Henry, bp. Mar. 7, 1757. C. R. 9 (8)

Newburyport Death Records list:

Sleeper, Sarah, Ap. - , 1776 a 18 y. C.R. 3 (9)

John and Sarah Sleeper had a brother listed in the Vital Records:

Sleeper, Moses, s. Henry, bp. Oct. 1, 1752. C. R. 9 (10)

The only man, other than John, from Newburyport named "Sleeper" who is listed as a soldier is:

Sleeper, Moses, Newbury (also given Newburyport).
Corporal, Capt. Benjamin Perkin's co., Col. Moses Little's
(17th) regt.; muster roll dated Aug. 1, 1775; enlisted
May 9, 1775; service 12 weeks;...age 22 yrs.;.... (11)

In Currier's *History of Newburyport*, Moses Sleeper is listed as a Corporal in the Company of Capt. Benjamin Perkins. (12) Therefore, there is compelling evidence that the author of our diary is **Moses Sleeper** of Newburyport.

When did our author enter the militia and travel to Cambridge? Currier writes in his *History of Newburyport* that Capt. Ezra Lunt's company left Newburyport on May 10th and "Another company was organized and mustered into service a few days later." One of the Corporals in this 2nd company was Moses Sleeper.(13) In our diary Sleeper wrote on September 24th, 1775, "up to Mifs Daviss all day Drank some Tory the first that I have drank this 5 months."

Where was Col. Moses Little's 17th Regiment during the first year of the war? During the Siege of Boston it was based on Prospect Hill. According to Cutler the regiment was engaged in the Battle of Bunker Hill. (14) M. M. Boatner writes that during the Battle of Long Island on August 27-28,

"...at the Flatbush Pass, were about 1,000 troops;...
Units involved here were...and Moses Little's Mass.
Cont.I Regts,...."(15)

Moses Sleeper describes marching "*for flatt Bush'* on August 23rd and going "*...on Guard at flatt Bush.*" He tells of fleeing to New York after the battle. On Saturday, September

7, 1776 at Bloomingdale, N.Y. Sleeper writes, "Verry Rainy. Some firing." and the diary ends abruptly.

The last listing of a Moses Sleeper in the Newbury/Newburyport Vital Records is in the Volume of Marriages:

Sleeper, Moses & Hannah Newman May 6, 1777(16)

We do not know if the Moses who married Hannah was the author of our diary.

NOTES

1. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War. A Compilation From the Archives, Prepared and Published by the Secretary of the Commonwealth In Accordance with Chapter 100, Resolves of 1891*, Vol XVII (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1899), pp. 968-69.
2. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors*, Vol. X, p. 889
3. Currier, John J., *History of Newburyport, Mass 1764-1909* (Published by the Author, Newburyport, 1906) pp 548-549.
3. Currier (1906), p 546.
5. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors*, Vol. X, p. 46.
6. *Vital records of Newbury, Massachusetts, to the end of the year 1849* (The Essex Institute, Salem, Mass., 1911) , Vol. 1, p. 476.
7. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors*, Vol. XIV, p. 295. "Quebec" signifies that he volunteered for Benedict Arnold's expedition which left Cambridge on September 13, 1775. The small force sailed to Maine and made a grueling march over the mountains into Quebec in the hopes of making a surprise attack on British-held Quebec .
8. *Newbury Vital Records*, Vol. 1, p. 476.
9. *Vital records of Newburyport, Massachusetts, to the end of the year 1849*, (The Essex Institute, Salem, Mass., 1911), Vol. 2, Marriages & Deaths p. 786 C.R.9 is the Church Record of the First Presbyterian Church, Old South, of Newburyport.
10. *Newbury Vital Records*, Vol. 1, p. 476.
11. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors*, Vol. p. 295.
12. Currier, p. 547.
13. Currier, p. 547.

14. Currier, p. 549.

15. Boatner, Mark Mayo III, *Encyclopedia of rthe American Revolution* (New York: David McKay Company, 1994), p. 646.

16. *Newburyport Vital Records*, Vol. 2.