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“So I must be contented to live a widow....”
The Revolutionary War Service of Sarah Hodgkins of Ipswich
(1775-1779)

By

Richard S. Tracey

The situation was grim. In the fall of 1776, the Continental Army was staggering in retreat after its near destruction on Long Island. In this atmosphere of defeat and doom the passionate, persuasive and perceptive Revolutionary War essayist Thomas Paine began the first installment of his series “The Crisis” with these memorable words:

These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this time of crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands with it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value.¹

The times also tried women’s souls. Sarah Hodgkins of Ipswich, Massachusetts understood and accepted the redemptive power of

¹ Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41.

sacrifice and saw the promised redemption as part of God's larger purpose. She wrote in September of 1776 to her husband Joseph Hodgkins, a lieutenant in the Continental Army:

I think things Look very dark on our side but it has been observed that mans extremity was Gods oppertunity and I think it Seems a time of grate exstremity Now and I hope God will apear for us & send Salvation and deliverance to us in due time and if you Should be called to Battle again may he be with you & cover your heads & Strenthen your hands & encorage your hearts and give you all that fortitude and resilution that is left for you and in his own time return you home in Safty and may we have the oppertunity to praise his holy name together again.²

This striking paragraph, idiosyncratic spelling notwithstanding, pulsates with the fervor and cadence of a homily delivered from an eighteenth century New England pulpit. It is part of a unique but incompletely analyzed collection of one hundred and six surviving Revolutionary War letters Sarah and Joseph Hodgkins wrote from 1775 through 1779.

Because of Sarah Hodgkins' great-great-grandson Herbert T. Wade, an avid amateur historian and genealogist, the letters were preserved and published. When Wade died, he provided money and directions to the executors of his estate to ensure completion of his work, and Dr. Robert Lively of Princeton University shaped Wade's research into a book. The completed product, "*this glorious cause*": *The Adventures of Two Company Grade Officers in Washington's Army* was published in 1958. Located at the conclusion of his work are the unedited and complete letters.³

² Herbert T. Wade and Robert Lively, "*this glorious cause*" *The Adventures of Two Company Grade Officers in Washington's Army* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 220.

³ All quotations from Sarah and Joseph's letters used in this article can be found in Wade and Lively, 165-245. Eighty-six letters from Joseph (32 in 1775, 38 in 1776, 16 in 1777-1778) and twenty letters (6 in 1775, 10 in 1776, 4 in

In large measure, Wade based his research on the wartime documents and papers of Joseph's company commander Nathaniel Wade. The Wade and Hodgkins families connected when Joseph and Sarah's daughter Hannah, their only child to survive and later have children, married the son of Nathaniel Wade in December of 1803. Through this connection Joseph's and Sarah's letters ended up in the custody of the Wade family. The letters, particularly Sarah's side of the correspondence, did not figure prominently in Wade's research and writing. Perhaps he considered the details of the letters too intimate for publication or more likely he simply believed they were not important. He was not concerned with the issues contemporary historians address and he certainly was not interested in the concerns of the current scholarship in women's history. Wade focused on the detailed reconstruction of formations and military engagements.⁴

Dr. Lively, however, recognized that the most extraordinary part of the Wade collection was what he incongruously called the "charming" wartime letters between Sarah Hodgkins and her husband Joseph. Lively wrote a work "different from the one" Wade might have completed because of the letters. However, the work falls short of contemporary standards and expectations. "*this glorious cause*" is colorful and anecdotal rather than analytical and insightful. His reference to the letters as "charming" and the title of his work clearly indicate the limitations of his approach.⁵

The letters are well known and throughout the past four decades scholars drew from the letters for color or background for broader narratives about the Revolutionary War. More recently a published

1777-1778) from Sarah survive. The author has identified from specific references in Joseph's letters 22 missing letters from Sarah.

⁴ The examples of how Wade utilized the materials can be found in the pieces he published in the *Essex Institute Historical Collections*. See Herbert T. Wade, "Nathaniel Wade and his Ipswich Minutemen", *Essex Institute Historical Collections* (July 1953), 213-252, "Colonel Wade and the Massachusetts State Troops in Rhode Island-1777-1778," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* (October 1953), 357-375, and "The Massachusetts Brigade on the Hudson, 1780: Nathaniel Wade at West Point," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, (January 1954), 84-99.

⁵ Wade and Lively, x.

collection from the Library of America included selected Hodgkins letters and a new work, *A People's History of the American Revolution* prominently featured Sarah's side of the correspondence. No one, however, these new contributions notwithstanding, has adequately examined the letters from Sarah's perspective in order to gain understanding of the relationship between the war and families, communities and the construction of gender.⁶

The recent use of the letters in *A People's History of the American Revolution* by Ray Raphael illustrates the point. Clearly attuned to the importance of women's voices, Raphael furnishes ample space, in a chapter devoted to the experiences of women in the American Revolution, for numerous direct quotations from Sarah's side of the correspondence. Disappointingly, this chapter never advances our understanding of Sarah's life and wartime ordeal much beyond what Professor Lively presented over forty years ago. Raphael never attempts to discover in Sarah's letters the patterns of her social, kin or exchange relationships or the impact of the changing nature of the Revolutionary War. Consequently, Sarah's powerful words remain oddly suspended in time and space, disconnected from her life. Given the insights and analytical constructs provided from thirty years of innovative analysis about women in early America and the colonial economy to guide the way, the lost wartime experience of Sarah Hodgkins can be partially uncovered by analyzing the letters anew to trace the contours of social,

⁶ For examples of how the letters have been used, see the following works. Robert Middlekauf, *This Glorious Cause: The American Revolution 1763-1761* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 536-538. Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 49. Ronald N. Tagney, *The World Turned Upside Down: Essex County During America's Turbulent Years, 1763-1783* (West Newbury MA, 1989), 181-187, 262-263, 270-274, 282-284, 296, 316-318. Thomas Fleming, *Liberty: The American Revolution* (New York: Penquin Putman Inc, 1997), 181,195, 198, 202. John Rhodehamel, ed., *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2001), 109-112. Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: New Press, 2001), 52-55, 67, 70,72, 77, 101, 129, 139-43.

kin and exchange relationships that shaped her life. In turn, this analysis can contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the war.⁷

At the advent of the American Revolution, Ipswich was a stable community with an approximate population of 4,562, an agrarian based economy, a growing concentration of land and wealth in fewer hands, and continuing trade links to the sea. Founded in 1633, Ipswich was an old town, one of the original Puritan settlements of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and in the seventeenth-century, was the leading maritime and commercial center in Essex County. However, Ipswich's geography limited its potential as a commercial port since the harbor and the Ipswich River around which the early Puritan settlers had built their homes were treacherous.

Consequently, at the turn of the eighteenth century Ipswich began its gentle decline relative to the other Essex County ports. First Salem in 1776 and then Newburyport in 1790 bypassed Ipswich in taxable wealth and population. Additionally, tensions and divisions manifested themselves during the Great Awakening when the First Church in Ipswich separated into two parishes. Yet, in spite of these economic and religious stresses the town's social stability held through the eighteenth century and the American Revolution. Most citizens achieved and maintained what Daniel Vickers called a "comfortable independence, or competency" in their daily lives.⁸

The concept of a "comfortable independence" should not imply self-sufficiency or autonomy between households. It does suggest a society based on mutual obligations and reciprocal relationships that helped the patriarchal heads of families provide comfortably for their family's current needs and address the requirements of the next generation. Cultural standards regulated cooperation and competition,

⁷ For a useful overview of the scholarship on gender construction in early America, see Kathleen Brown, "Beyond the Great Debates: Gender and Race in Early America," *Reviews in American History* 26 (March 1998), 96-13. Also for a useful overview of the scholarship on early American agrarian households and markets, see Allan Kulikoff, "Households and Markets: Toward a New Synthesis of American Agrarian History" *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series 47 (April 1993), 342-355.

⁸ Susan L. Norton, "Population Growth in Colonial America: A Study of Ipswich Massachusetts," *Population Studies* 3 (1971), 433-552.

providing insurance that no family had total dependence on another family or the community.

Sarah was born on April 28, 1750, the daughter of Jeremiah (1701-1790) and Joanna Perkins (1711-1782). Jeremiah was a cooper, or barrel maker, by trade, a descendent of one of the original settlers of Ipswich and a Deacon in the First Church in Ipswich. Sarah, the seventh of eight children born to Joanna between 1733 and 1753, lived in the large home her father shared with his brother Joseph near the Meeting House Green at the center of crowded Ipswich.⁹

Jeremiah Perkins' economic situation was typical of a family with a "comfortable independence." Estimated subsistence in Ipswich was fifteen to thirty bushels of grain, 150-300 pounds of meat, two cows, two barrels of cider, and anywhere from two to eight cords of wood. The 1771 Massachusetts Tax Valuation List shows Jeremiah owning one cow, one swine, four acres of pasture, and one and a half acres of tillage capable of producing thirty bushels of grain per year. Even if the estimate of minimum subsistence was a bit high, the Perkins family was not self-sufficient based on land holdings. This situation was not unique to Ipswich or Massachusetts, for very few farm households achieved genuine self-sufficiency. Families such as the Perkins flourished in an interdependent web of social, kin, and exchange relationships.¹⁰

At the time of Sarah's birth the Perkins' home was full of healthy children: Joanna (1741-?), Aaron (1744-1801), Martha (1746-?) and of course Sarah (1750-1803). For fifteen years Joanna Perkins had a daughter at her side who could lighten the workload and free up time for other economic activities that contributed to the "comfortable independence" of the Perkins family. The economic activities of

⁹ George A. Perkins M.D., *The Family of John Perkins of Ipswich in Three Parts* (Salem, Massachusetts: printed for the author in 1889), 42. This volume is located at the Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts. Thomas Franklin Waters, *Ipswich in the Massachusetts Bay Colony 1633-1700* (Ipswich, Massachusetts: 1905), 436.

¹⁰ Arlin Ginsburg, *Ipswich, Massachusetts During the American Revolution, 1763-1791* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1972), 1-16 and 41-66. *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* Betty Hobb Pruitt, ed. (Boston, 1978), 71-72. Betty Hobb Pruitt, "Self-sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series 41 (July 1984), 338-341.

mothers and daughters extended beyond the home into the community. They participated in a diverse network of shared labor and production in which items such as soap, candles, bread, vegetables, textiles, and sausages were produced, shared and exchanged. In addition, Jeremiah's only surviving son Aaron, who later became a cooper, probably contributed to his family's productive capacity while learning the trade at his father's side. In a world where economic activity was home-centered and tasks were delineated by gender, the Perkins home was blessed.¹¹

With Sarah's marriage to her neighbor, the recently widowed cordwainer (shoemaker), Joseph Hodgkins on December 2, 1772, she undoubtedly expected to live the life she learned at her mother's side and contribute to the maintenance of her family's "comfortable independence." Unfortunately, at the same time, the escalating confrontation with the British over political rights threatened the continuity and stability of her life. With access to the sea and sitting astride the main north-south roads running from Boston to Portsmouth, Ipswich was not isolated from political events. Ironically, in the short run, the impending military confrontation helped the town overcome the fissures caused by stagnant economic conditions and the Great Awakening's lingering disputes. Responding to the perceived threat of British tyranny, the community healed old wounds and drew on traditional values to meet the impending challenge. In the long run, as political confrontation gave way to a protracted war, the community's ability and desire to support the war diminished considerably.¹²

The Ipswich Town Meeting signaled the transformation of the political dispute with British colonial authorities into a military confrontation with two key decisions. The Town Meeting authorized the

¹¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary 1785-1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1990) 219-223. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Housewife and Gadder: Themes of Self-Sufficiency and Community in Eighteenth Century New England," *To Toil the Live Long Day: America's Women at Work 1780-1980* ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21-34.

¹² See Robert Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976). Gross' work about Concord, Massachusetts, provides a detailed examination of an old Puritan town. Concord, like Ipswich, when faced with the external threat of a perceived British tyranny, healed old wounds and drew on traditional community values to meet the challenge.

construction of a drill shed for the militia near the center of town in November 1774, and, at the urging of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, a special Minuteman Company was organized on January 24, 1775. The new company elected Nathaniel Wade the commander, and as second in command, Sarah's husband. Thus began the Revolutionary War service of Sarah Hodgkins, which paralleled the Continental Army's evolution from community-based militia units to a professional army organized around three year enlistments.¹³

Joseph's choices defined Sarah's war, which can be divided into four distinct periods, each punctuated by a decision to continue in the Army. The first period running from January 1775 through May 1775 began with Lieutenant Hodgkins' membership in the Minuteman Company, included the alert for Concord and Lexington, and ended with the establishment of the siege of Boston. Next, Joseph continued his service in the same company under the authority of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress during the Battle of Bunker Hill and the adoption of the New England Army by the Continental Congress. In January 1776, he committed himself for another year, as did many of his neighbors and marched away from Massachusetts in the spring of 1776 to fight at Long Island and Trenton. Finally, when the original Ipswich company disbanded in January 1777, Joseph, remaining as one of the few Ipswich men who continued to serve, received a promotion to captain and command of his own company, which he led during the American victory at Saratoga in October. Captain Hodgkins did not return home until June of 1779.

The men who marched to Cambridge with Wade and Hodgkins in Moses Little's Essex County Regiment reflected this close-knit community's commitment to the revolutionary cause. They were the husbands and sons of Sarah's neighbors, and in many cases were related by blood or marriage. They knew each other and each other's families. The company rolls contained two Appletons, two Furleys, two Fowlers, three Goodhues, three Lakemans, three Lords, three Rosses and three Stanwoods. Isaac Stanwood the son of Joseph's half-brother Ebenezer was in the company. Young Issac would later marry Eunice Hodgkins, the daughter of Joseph's uncle John. Joseph Hodgkins' nephew Thomas, the sixteen year old son of Joseph's older brother John, was in the

¹³ Waters, 293-318.

company, as was Sarah's older brother Aaron Perkins, who was a junior officer.¹⁴

Joseph's wrote his first surviving letter from the Cambridge siege lines outside of Boston on May 7, 1775. He opened this letter, as he often did, with a comment about his health and a question about their family's health: "I hope these lines will find you as well as they me at Present." He then acknowledges the receipt of Sarah's last missive and any supplies that she sent to him. Joseph regularly provided some general company news such as "the company is well" or more specific observations about the health of an individual member of the company. If he had time, Joseph often provided details on military engagements which ranged from his terse announcement to Sarah after Bunker Hill that "I would just inform you that we had a verry hot ingagement yester Day But God Preserved all of us" to his detailed accounts of the retreat across Long Island and New York.

Sarah was an important conduit of information to the community about the health and welfare of the Ipswich soldiers. When Joseph's "Cosen Abrim Hodgkins" died of illness in August 1776, Joseph enclosed a letter, in effect a death notification, for Sarah to deliver. A week later Joseph informed Sarah "Willm Goodhue is dead" and asked her "to let his farther know as soon as you can." Later, in November 1776, Lieutenant Hodgkins asked his wife tell the father of Eben "Staniford," the mother of "Arkelas Pulisfer" and "Joseph Wises wife" that they were all well and recovering from illness and battle wounds. He concluded his November letter by enclosing "four dollars in Gold... for Joseph Wises wife."

Sarah's letters also followed a consistent pattern. Sarah opened her letters as did Joseph with health-related remarks such as "we are all well and I hope these Lines will find you the Same" or "I am well through the goodness of God & I hope these Lines will find you posest of the Same Blessing." Sarah always acknowledged her receipt of Joseph's last correspondence and commented on his letters or answered his questions about the children, the family or the community. In general, she signed her letters "I remain your Loving wife till Death" or sometimes she

¹⁴ Waters, 317. Ethel Stanwood Bolton, *A History of the Stanwood Family in America* (Boston, 1889). Frank A. Gardner, M.D., "Colonel Moses Little's Regiment," *The Massachusetts Magazine* Volume IX (January 1916), 18-41.

concluded more intimately with “your tender & affectionate Companion till Death Sarah Hodgkins.”

Sarah produced six children, which was a fairly typical reproductive pattern for eighteenth century women. At the time of the Lexington alarm, Joseph and Sarah had three young children to care for. The oldest child in April 1775 was nine-year old Joanna (1765-1855), Joseph's surviving child from his first marriage. Their first baby was Sarah (1773-1795) and their second child, Joseph (1775-1776) was only a month and a half old when Joseph Hodgkins marched away from home. Martha (1777-?), their third child, was born during the war, though no record of her death or marriage exists. After the war came three more daughters: Hannah (1780-1820), Mary (1782-1794) and Elisabeth (1788-1806). Only Hannah, as already noted, survived to marry and start her own family.¹⁵

Letter writing was difficult in a home full of children. “the Children are crying So I must Leave of for the present” Sarah abruptly interrupted a letter in October 1775. Sitting down on “thanksgiving day night” in November 1775 Sarah wrote to Joseph, “it Seems to be very lonesome and dull I did not know any better way to deverte myself than by writing to You.” Often done in the evening, Sarah's letter writing was a quiet reward at the day's end, a way of collecting her thoughts and recounting the day's activities. When Sarah told Joseph in February 1776 “haveing an oppertunity this evening to write a line or two to you I gladly embrace it” she signaled the end of another busy day and the beginning of the short time that belonged to her.

“I should Be Very glad to have you Come hear to see me But I know your sircumstances will not Admit of it at Present” Joseph wrote to Sarah in September of 1775. In the summer and fall of 1775, soldiers and citizens regularly traveled back and forth from Ipswich to Cambridge helping to maintain a steady flow of information, community support and needed supplies to the soldiers deployed outside of Boston. Sarah's “Oncel Emphm Smith & Cuson Saml Smith and his wife Coson Wellington...” traveled from Sudbury to the Cambridge siege lines in late September, “Ant Suse” sent Joseph a “Cheese”, Mrs. Perkins, the wife of a company commander in Joseph's regiment and Captain Parker's wife

¹⁵ Norton, 71-73. Susan L. Norton, 244.

and mother visited camp in October. “Capt Wade & Cosson Thomas” sick and “Very Poorley” returned to Ipswich to recuperate.¹⁶

With travel so free, easy and routine, what were the “circumstances” that prevented Sarah from visiting her husband at camp? In all likelihood Sarah was nursing her young son Joseph. The most restrictive stage in the reproductive cycle -- other than the last two months of pregnancy -- was lactation. Travel was therefore difficult with children. It is hard to imagine Sarah traveling with Joanna, Sarah and Joseph in tow. She could have considered leaving Joanna and Sarah at home with someone, however Joseph was another story. In late September, he was seven months old. Travel with an active nursing seven-month-old was prohibitively arduous, so Sarah stayed home.¹⁷

Shortly after baby Joseph’s death Sarah’s attitude toward travel suddenly changed. Sarah wrote to Joseph, who was now unfortunately hundreds of miles away on Long Island, “I want to See you very much if you was one hundred miles of I...I should come & See you before long but the distance is So grate I know I cant.” In October, Sarah reported to Joseph, “I have been abroad today up to uncle Smiths.” Paradoxically her husband’s absence and son’s early death produced a unique period of freedom in Sarah’s life, as she was free from the restrictions and demands of pregnancy and lactation.

The correspondence consistently contains questions and information about their family’s health, development and well-being. Although he missed his new son’s infancy, Joseph referred to him affectionately as the “Littel Roog.” His infant daughter Martha was “Little Matty.” Joseph, during the course of the letters, switched without a discernible pattern from the phrases “our Children” to “my children.” Sarah was initially consistent in how she used language. Sarah used the phrase “your family” only once, purposely choosing phrases such as “our children” and “me and the rest of the family,” or simply “children.” When she wrote in June 1776 “to Let you know that I & my family are well” and in February 1778 “I would inform you that I and my children

¹⁶ Letter from the Rev. John Cleavland to his wife, dated October 20, 1775, [Rev] John Cleavland Papers, Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts. Rev. John Cleavland was the Chaplain in Moses Little’s Regiment. Cleavland figured prominently in the Great Awakening in Chebacco Parish.

¹⁷ Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 138-145.

are in good health,” the effect was startling. Was Sarah’s use of the language an insignificant slip, or a small act of conscious self-assertion in the face of her husband’s prolonged abandonment?

Bound together not only by their children but by their extended and interconnected web of parents, parents-in-law, brothers, brothers-in-law, sisters, sisters-in-law, uncles, aunts and cousins, Sarah and Joseph often blurred the distinctions between blood and marriage. John Heard, when he married Sarah’s sister Martha in 1767 became “Brother Heard” and when Sarah’s oldest sister Joanna married John Chapman in 1769, she became “Sister Chapman.” Aaron Perkins was “Brother Perkins” and his wife, Hannah Treadwell, whom he had married in 1767 was either “Sister Perkins” or “Sister Hannah.” Joseph referred to his own father Thomas, and Sarah’s parents as “all my Parentence.” Old ties remained intact. The brother of Joseph’s deceased wife Joanna Webber of Methuen remained “Brother John Webber.”

In her ground-breaking and comprehensive work *Liberty’s Daughters*, Mary Beth Norton offered a broad interpretation of colonial women’s status at the advent of the American Revolution and made three points. First, colonial society undervalued women. Second, women themselves internalized and accepted this negative characterization. Third, the revolutionary period caused a sharp break in the traditional “impenetrable” boundaries that separated men and women.¹⁸

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in her work *Good Wives*, offered a contrasting interpretation, arguing that gender restrictions were structural, not psychological or ideological, and neatly summarized this proposition in the concept of the “deputy husband.” Without diminishing or discounting the patriarchal nature of the New England family -- women were unquestionably dependent -- she argues for the existence of fluidity within the patriarchal system that “allowed for varied behavior without really challenging the patriarchal nature of society.” The “deputy husband” embodies this fluidity. To support their husbands and further the interests of their families, communities allowed and expected wives fulfil the role of “deputy husband” and assume additional duties and responsibilities during crisis or hardship.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1980), 225.

¹⁹ Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 38.

Norton and Ulrich agree that women like Sarah Hodgkins managed farms and businesses in increasing numbers but while the former interpreted this activity as the crossing of a well-defined gender boundary the latter viewed the assumption of increased responsibility as the natural performance of the traditional role of “deputy husband.” The tenor of the Hodgkins correspondence suggests, that Ulrich was correct. Accomplishing tasks that were permissible, routine and expected in a time of family crisis, Sarah acted as Joseph’s surrogate, or “deputy husband,” to support the household economy.

Reflecting a period of transition in the Hodgkins household, Joseph’s early letters furnished precise instructions on very specific topics. So, in the case of these early letters, what was not written is as revealing as what was written. No reason existed to provide instructions about the routine tasks Sarah accomplished in support of the household economy prior to and during the war. As a result, these letters sharply delineate the contours of the gendered division of labor in the Hodgkins’ household economy.

Shortly after arriving in Cambridge Joseph asked his wife if she “have got a paster for the Cows” and later informed Sarah of her cousin Ephraim Perkins arrival into the harbor with a load of corn, “I hope he got some Corn for me...and tell him he must assist in gitting the corn home to you.” Joseph was home on furlough July through mid-September. Beginning in October 1775, Joseph resumed his advice, “I feall concerned about you on account of your having no money” and he added “I would have you send to Capt Charles Smith for som beaff.” As the winter approached Joseph anxiously reminded his wife, “I hear that wood is very scarce I would have you Bye some while the Carting lasts.”

No record exists of Joseph’s land holdings or taxable wealth. Evidently, as was the case in the Perkins’ household, the Hodgkins family was not self-sufficient and sought to maintain a “comfortable independence” in their lives. Sarah, as did her mother, participated in the diverse community network of shared labor and production. Responsible for resources outside of the capability of a household economy with limited landholding to produce, Joseph’s early instructions to Sarah referred specifically to the requirements for pasture, corn, beef, and

wood. Purchased or bartered for on the local economy these raw materials sustained the household.²⁰

Confidently sustaining her family in the summer of 1776, Sarah nonchalantly dismissed her husband's anxiety "as to your Sending me Some mony dont be uneasy about it." When Joseph was able to mail some of his Army pay, Sarah casually replied "I hope you have not Straitend yourself for I was not in Present want." Curiously, Sarah never asked for advice about economic matters, except for a specific instance when she asks Joseph about his gun and if he had "amind to Sell it." Moreover, in the four years of his absence, Sarah never asked a specific question about how to get wood, pasture, beef, corn or any other matters relating to the household economy.

Women and men intersected regularly, not in the public domain of church, politics and court, but in the private world of home, family and community. Buying corn from her cousin Ephraim, selling Joseph's gun to her sister Martha's husband John Heard or purchasing beef from her brother-in-law John Chapman, Sarah was not dealing with strangers in a faceless market economy. Operating freely as Joseph's "deputy husband" within the wide boundaries of her extended family, Sarah's participation in the economy went beyond the simple barter of labor or home-produced items. (Mrs. Hodgkins) understood the market value of commodities and her extended family connected her to an economic network beyond Ipswich.

"but I must conclude," Sarah abruptly interrupted, "for I am always in a hurry." Indeed, Sarah was often a woman in a hurry and her household economy was a busy place. In June 1776 she wrote Joseph "I begun to write you a Letter Last night but it was So Late before I begun I could not write much." Why was Sarah up so late? She had been "busy all day a making" Joseph a shirt. This marvelous letter gives one the sense of a complex social and economic process in motion, with Sarah at the center. Sarah described, as her sister-in-law Hannah Treadwell Perkins was "a ironing" the shirt, the acquisition of the necessary cloth, completion of the shirt, and coordination for the delivery to Joseph,

²⁰ "Revolutionary War Support for Soldier's Families 1780", Ipswich Historical Commission. This ledger from the town of Ipswich, which listed the distribution of supplies to the families of enlisted soldiers in 1780, reinforces the point. The town provided the same raw materials Joseph addressed in his early letters to Sarah: grain, meat and wood.

while noting matter-of-factly that baby Sarah met “with a mishap Last monday She Scolt her arm prity bad.” This letter captures the essence of the purposeful but hectic pace of a home economy.

Eighteenth century New England women were subordinate by law to either their fathers or husbands. When Sarah married, she traded the dependent role of daughter for that of wife but as Ulrich insightfully reminds us, “One can be dependent, however, without being either servile or helpless.” Moreover, this dependent relationship should not obscure the deep and genuine affection Joseph and Sarah felt. They eagerly anticipated receiving letters and longed for each other’s company.²¹ Sarah wrote to Joseph in February, 1776:

PS give regards to Capt Wade and tell him that I have wanted his bed fellow prety much these cold nights that we have had.

Joseph quickly replied,

PS I gave your Regards to Capt Wade But he Did not wish that you had his Bed fellow But I wish I did with all my heart.

Lamenting their separation, Sarah observed “So I must be contented to Live a widow for the present but I hope I Shant always live So.” What did Sarah mean when she said, “to Live a widow”? Indeed, Sarah’s life was really like that of a young widow, and if Joseph had died, the day to day rhythm of her life would not have changed.

Widowhood presented an interesting challenge to the patriarchal system. Society provided provisions to sustain widows economically while simultaneously maintaining their dependent status. The essential legal protection for widowed women was the one-third property requirement. Massachusetts’s law specified a third of personal estates automatically belonged to widows. Widows were also entitled to a dower right to a third of their husband’s land or income derived from the land. Consequently, three possible outcomes could result from widowhood. First, a woman might be thrown into complete destitution if her deceased husband could not even provide her the minimum one third. Second, a widow might receive her third and with it a dependent

²¹ Ulrich, 37.

connection on an older son or brother-in-law. Lastly, a husband could exceed the minimum standards and provide his widow the entire estate.²²

Sarah's situation was plainly similar to this last outcome. With Joseph gone, she controlled, within the context of the patriarchal system, the day-to-day operation of his property. In this situation of temporary widowhood, Sarah achieved as much independence as was legally and socially possible. No independent existence for women outside of the patriarchal system that shaped the contours of their lives was possible.

As already noted, Joseph's decisions defined Sarah's war and nothing more poignantly illustrates Sarah's dependent status than Joseph's continued military service. She implored her husband early in the war, "I beg you would not alter your mind about Staying all winter for if you doo it will be Such a disapointment that I cant pute up with it." Joseph did not come home. A month later, a discouraged Sarah told Lieutenant Hodgkins "I dont alow myuself to depend on any thing for I find there is nothing to be depended but troble and disapointments." Continually, Joseph was drawn to military service and the revolutionary cause despite the hardships it imposed upon himself and his family.

Sarah recognized her dependent position and appealed to Joseph's understanding of his primary duty as head of the family.

I hope if we Live to See this Campaign out we shall have the happiness of liveing together again I dont know what you think about Staying again but I think it cant be inconsistent with you duty to come home to your family it will troble me very much if you Should ingage again. I don't know but you may think I am too free in expressing my mind & that it would have been time enough when I was asked but I was afraid I Should not have that opportunity.

Joseph reassured Sarah a month later "I have no thoughts of ingaging again." However, Joseph stayed in the Army. Captain Wade's company disbanded in January of 1777. Joseph returned home for the winter of 1777,recruited soldiers for a new regiment and returned to the

²² Gloria Main, "Widows in Rural Massachusetts on the Eve of the Revolution" *Women in the Age of The American Revolution* ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (University of Virginia: University of Virginia Press). 67-90.

field that summer as the captain of his own company. Sarah was three months pregnant.

Enduring another campaign, the physical and emotional demands of a new pregnancy and the rapid decay in her economic situation, Sarah's summer of '76 pride of independence yielded to loneliness, despair and anger. By the spring of 1778, she was "very Low in Spirits." The character of the war was changing. When the Continental Congress switched to three-year enlistments, it altered the community-based nature of military service and the bonds of shared-purpose, commitment and sacrifice evaporated. Joseph, during the bitter winter at Valley Forge, bemoaned the lack of "Publick Spirit." Virtue and duty were no longer inducements for most soldiers. Only seven men from Ipswich served within his new company. New England towns used bounties to fill quotas.

Joseph expressed his distress to Sarah in September 1777:

we hear that things are Exceedingly Dear & if you meet
with any Diffilty in gitting the Nesserys of Life Due send
me word

Life in Ipswich was "Exceedingly Dear" and Joseph could not do very much about it. Paper money ravaged the economy and prices soared. In 1777, beef sold for 4 pence a pound. By 1780 it sold for 14 shillings. Corn, the staple that Ephraim Perkins had regularly transported, rose from 4 shillings per bushel to 8 pounds. Wool leapt from 3 shillings per pound to 3 pounds. The local government attempted to control prices but failed. Enlisted soldiers did not have to pay for room, board and clothing in the field and the town provided assistance for their families. For commissioned officers, like Joseph Hodgkins, who linked their futures to worthless Continental paper, paid their expenses in the field and whose families did not receive community assistance, the future was bleak. With the income from her husband virtually worthless, Sarah must have struggled to maintain the "comfortable independence" she knew as a child.²³

Sarah's last extant letter is dated September 3, 1778. As always, she is in a hurry and interjects "I can hardly Spare time to write." She is making a winter coat for Joseph, her father "is not very well," her mother had been sick with "a terrible pain in her Side" and sister Hannah was

²³ Ginsburg, 140-141.

visiting for the week. But she found time to report that her new baby Martha “got two teeth,” and “She can Stand by things alone.”

A terse entry in Ipswich First Church Record Book, “ye 13th The Wife of Col Joseph Hodgkins age 53 Consump” recorded Sarah’s death in March of 1803. Sarah’s gravestone lies in Ipswich’s old north burial ground and is difficult to find among the jumble of old, faded and cracked gravestones. Nearby, is the common marker for her two daughters, Sarah who died April 5, 1795 at age 22 and Mary who died May 29, 1794 at age 12.²⁴ Their haunting epitaph:

Fresh in the morn, the summers rose
Hangs withering ere tis noon;
We scarce enjoy the balmy gift,
But mourn the pleasure gone.
How short’s the date of human things!
How transient are their joys!
The flower that in morning springs
The evening blast destroys.

Behind Sarah and Mary’s stone is Joseph’s monument, which commemorates his public achievements during the war and after, for he became a local hero and icon of the American Revolution. The inscription on Joseph’s memorial reads:

Erected to the memory of Colonel Joseph Hodgkins who died Sept.
25, 1829, aged 86 years.

A Soldier and a Patriot of the
REVOLUTION, he Commenced his Military Sevices
in Cpt Wades company of minute men, and fought at the
battle of BUNKER’S HILL. He was also at the
Battles of Long Island, Haerlem’s
Heights, the White Plains, and
Princeton; and at the capture of
Burgoyne and his Army. After the war of
INDEPENDENCE, he served as a Colonel in
the Militia and in some of the most

²⁴ Records of First Church of Christ in Ipswich from 1739-1805. These records are on microfilm at the Ipswich Public Library, Ipswich, Massachusetts.

important TOWN OFFICES. He was a kind
And affectionate Husband and Father: A
Faithful friend and a exemplary
Christian.

To the right of Joseph's marker is Sarah's barely visible and long forgotten stone and her brief epitaph contrasts sharply with the lengthy entry on her husband's monument. The tone of Sarah Hodgkins' epitaph suggests a fatalistic resignation to the capricious transience of life, an element of sarcasm, a tinge of bitterness and perhaps some transcendent wisdom about the fleeting nature of public accomplishments and acclaim. The similarity in tone between Sarah's epitaph and her daughters' is particularly intriguing since it is very possible Sarah had a hand in selecting each. Sarah's epitaph is,

Pass on, my friends dry up your tears
Here I must lie till Christ appears
Death is a debt to nature due
I've paid the debt and so must you.

She fought in no battles, participated in no marches, wore no military rank and in the end, unlike her husband, received no public recognition for her sacrifices and service. But as the remarkable Hodgkins correspondence makes it clear, her achievements and contributions to her family's and her community's revolutionary legacy were no less important than her husband's. The Revolutionary War was fought by men, but sustained by communities and families. Sarah and many other Revolutionary War women, who unfortunately often remain anonymous, were integral parts of communities and families and therefore an integral part of the war effort.