Martha Ballard: A Midwife of Maine, 1778–1812

by Jane Beal

At 43 years of age and pregnant with her ninth and last child, Martha Ballard attended her first of 816 births as a midwife in Hallowell (later Augusta) and neighboring areas in Maine. It was a hot July in 1778, just two years after leaders of the Continental Congress—including John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson—had issued the Declaration of Independence and begun the Revolutionary War. Martha and her husband, Ephraim, suspected of Tory sympathies, had left their home in Massachusetts and thus escaped the full fury of the British army that was unleashed first in that state at Boston, Lexington and Concord. As the new nation of the United States of America was slowly emerging on a tide of blood, Martha was emerging as a skilled midwife who kept women safe in childbirth and helped to bring new life into the world in peace.

In 1785, two years after America signed a treaty with Britain and seven years after beginning her midwifery practice in Maine, Martha Ballard began to keep a diary recording the activities of her daily life, making notes on the weather, gardening, washing, weaving, visitors, visits, family, patients, payments owed and received and, perhaps most importantly, the many births she attended, women she served and babies she welcomed. Martha was certainly a practicing and recognized midwife in her town, but she also took on other responsibilities, which included trading goods and services in her role as a small business woman, attending her neighbors in their illnesses and laying out the dead in preparation for their burial.

Martha began her journal on January 1, 1785, at the age of 50. She kept writing it until a few weeks before her death at the age of 77. At a time when fewer than 50% of women were literate, she preserved a personal, familial and medical history that makes an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of the lives of women and midwives in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England.

While there are many similarities between the practices of modern midwives and Martha Ballard—traveling considerable distances to attend homebirths, providing herbal remedies for discomforts and illnesses and balancing the demands of midwifery and family—what may strike readers of the diary are the differences. For example, rarely in the diary are there any notes on prenatal or postpartum care. The independent-minded frontier women of Maine at the turn of the nineteenth century expected to take care of themselves; the midwife's role in the childbearing year was generally limited to the birth itself (though her involvement with the family was extensive in other ways). The midwife already knew the women she was serving in her small, tightly-knit community very well, so prenatal care was not necessary to establish relationships. During the postpartum period, extended families cared for mothers during their "lying in."

Martha Ballard writes virtually nothing about the details of the birth process or her role in handling any complications that may have arisen—nothing about birth positions, facilitating labor progress or comfort measures. Her most frequent comments on births are phrased very similarly: on November 25, 1793, the wife of Esquire Howard "was delivered of a daughter at 8 hours 10 minutes evening. I tarried all night"; on December 7, 1793, "At White's. His wife delivered at 12 o'clock of a daughter and I was called back to Mr. Parker's. His lady was delivered at 9 hour 30 minutes of a daughter. I am somewhat fatigued" (Ulrich 1991, 164–65). She identifies the woman as a man's wife, the child by sex and the time of the birth. Only occasionally does she give a word or two about the effect of the birth on her own feelings.

She likes to leave her patients "cleverly" (meaning "quite well in bed with their babies"), but sometimes must leave them "as well as could be expected." She does not say she does cervical exams on women; she says she "inquires into their case." She uses language like "pains" to describe labor, "delivered" to describe birth and "my patient" to describe the mothers she serves. Her language is careful, circumspect and polite. She is a Puritan woman, and her manners reflect her stoic Christian heritage.

In a few extraordinary cases, she gives more detail. On August 20, 1787, she writes that Mrs. Clayton's child "departed this life yesterday," and then "she [Mrs. Clayton] was thought expiring… She departed this life about 1 pm. I assisted to lay her out. Her infant lay in her arms. The first such instance I ever saw and the first woman that died in childbed which I delivered. I came home at dusk." The next day, she writes only, "A rainy day. I have been at home knitting." On August 22, she attends the funeral of both mother and child. As her biographer Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has noted, however, comparatively few babies and even fewer mothers in Martha's care died in childbirth or in the postpartum period; generally, they thrived.

Occasionally, Martha Ballard worked with doctors because this was the time period when they began to attend women in childbirth in greater numbers. She notes the mistakes they make. She is not really fond of a Dr. Page at first when he seeks to attend births at the age of 24 as an unmarried man and overdoses at least one of her patients on laudanum (a tincture of opium and alcohol) and so prolongs her labor considerably before the baby is finally delivered (Ulrich 1991). Yet later, on February 4, 1801, she attends the dissection of the body of the infant, John Davis, performed by Doctors Coleman and Page—until she is called from the operation "to see the wife of SJ Foster who was in labor and was safe delivered at 7 hour evening of her second son as a child. I tarried all night. The patient is as well as could be expected" (Ibid 236). Apparently learning

from experience and from others, Dr. Page begins to attend more births in Hallowell when Martha enters her seventies. In general, however, Martha is the primary midwife at the births she attends—as well as the foremost midwife and childbirth caregiver in her town. She is often assisted by "goodwives," the friends of the laboring woman who fulfill the role frequently fulfilled today by doulas. Martha does not mention training any apprentices per se.

While Martha may have disliked "man-midwives" or obstetricians (as they began to be called between 1810 and 1828), perhaps because they sought to usurp her role and might bring laudanum with them to births, her own work occasionally overlapped with theirs when she prescribed pills, herbs and homeopathic remedies to her patients. She was a devoted herbalist, and she refers to over 50 plants she used medicinally for her patients as well as about 25 medicines she purchased (usually from Dr. Coleman or Dr. Cony) and another 20 or so miscellaneous ingredients used for healing purposes (Ulrich 1991); she was not only a midwife, but an herbalist-healer. Although she did not attend medical school and mentions reading no other books than the Bible and Walter Marshall's *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification*, her uncle and two brothers-in-law were physicians, and by the time her diary begins, Martha Ballard clearly knows some of their craft.

In the course of her diary, Martha not only shares about midwifery and medicine, but also about some of the troubles in her community, her family and her own heart. For a period of four years, she did not attend church after her pastor was driven out of his pulpit by men who disagreed with his beliefs and after his wife, Mrs. Foster, testified that she had been raped by men of the town, including Judge North, who was acquitted in a trial but whom Martha and her family generally avoided thereafter. Martha's own husband, Ephraim, in his work as a surveyor, was attacked; later he changed jobs to work as a tax collector, but was held personally responsible for taxes he was unable to collect and so was placed in debtors' prison. During this time, Martha lived with her son, Jonathan, who was an alcoholic, and his wife, who intended to be the mistress of the house even if her mother-in-law was living in it. When Ephraim was finally released from prison, Martha and her husband established a separate household once again.

Martha struggled mightily against the illnesses that struck her family and friends in Hallowell, including scarlet fever. Before coming to Maine, she had lost three of her own young daughters, Triphena, Dorothy and Martha, to diphtheria. She remembered the day each one had died in her journal on an annual basis: every June 17, July 1 and July 5. She knew from personal experience how to comfort those who were sick and those who were sorrowing after their loved ones passed away.

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Perhaps the most evil of Martha's troubles was the day on which her neighbor, Captain Parrington, murdered almost his entire family: six children, his wife and himself. Only his son James, who fled his father in just his shirt after being wounded by his ax, escaped with his life. It was July 9, 1806. Martha went to the Parrington home herself where she saw the bodies laid out in the barn; later, she attended the funeral. Captain Parrington, as it turned out, was a Universalist who believed that everyone would be saved regardless of their deeds. Martha recorded this prayer in her journal: "May an infinitely good God grant that we may all take a suitable notice of this horrid deed—learn wisdom therefrom" (Ulrich 1991, 291–92). The day after the funeral, Martha baked bread.

Over the next week, Martha recorded caring for members of the Parrington extended family in her home, feeding them meals and looking after their well-being. She recorded feeling "feeble," but carrying on the work of watering her garden anyway. On July 22, just eleven days after the funeral, she was called to Mr. Stilson's wife, who gave birth to her first child, a daughter.

Martha Ballard was an extraordinary midwife who served her community in times of birth and death in Maine for 27 years. Her granddaughter became one of the first women in America to graduate from medical school and become a medical doctor. Her grandniece, Clara Barton, founded the American Red Cross. Her legacy lives on not only in the life-story she preserved so carefully in her diary and the women in her family who achieved so much, but in all midwives who dedicate their lives to healing and service in their communities.

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