

"HOW AMIABLE ARE THY DWELLINGS"

ELIZABETH PORTER PHELPS

EARTHBOUND AND HEAVENBENT

The faithful heart does not like to ramble about without a homestead. It needs a fixed spot to return to, it wants its square house....Human beings live there, and invisible rings are created by human radiation; they enclose and invite, delimit and open gates...and into which we enter to receive the gift of its song.

I am quoting from the Norwegian architect, Christian Norberg-Schulz, his book The Concept of Dwelling.<sup>1</sup> An historic house is most often discussed--in books, in lectures--as an example of a period style, of a particular builder's achievement, as a reflection of its owner's economic and social status, or as the setting for the recreation of domestic crafts. But houses are dwelling places; they vibrate in response to the lives lived in and around them. They do sing, and most of the songs are sung by women.

In Hadley, Massachusetts, there is that rare event, particularly in America, a house built in 1752 and lived in continuously by descendants of its original occupants until 1943 when the decision was made to establish the house as a museum. Named "Forty Acres" for the adjoining plot of land, the house passed from mother to daughter for the first three generations, Elizabeth Porter to Elizabeth Phelps, Elizabeth Phelps to Elizabeth Huntington, though the property appears in town records under their spouses' names. Enhancing the value of the structure are letters, diaries, deeds, invoices, inventories. Members of the family were savers. Admonitions appear at the end of letters to burn or lock them away. The existing correspondence suggests that they locked them away. And so we have the building, its contents and we have words on paper that recreate for us specific moments in the life of the house. Together they give voice to what Joan Wallach Scott refers to as "silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies."<sup>2</sup> Access to those operations demands a new perspective, one which embraces both the public and private spheres within which women moved.

Early settlements in New England were based on a written compact, a covenant to which each church communicant signed her or his name. Copies of these early covenants exist and common to them

all is a statement proclaiming the community member's commitment to each other: for example, one from Braintree, Massachusetts, that concludes with "we give up ourselves also to one and another by the will of God", another from Blue Hill, Maine, to "covenant together in faith and love, and promise in love to watch over one another".<sup>3</sup> Both of these statements date from the eighteenth century, the latter as late as 1772. The adherence to a covenant outlasts the strict and exclusive nature of seventeenth-century Calvinism. This is particularly true in the Connecticut River Valley, the site of the Great Awakening, and of the pulpits occupied by Solomon Stoddard and his grandson, Jonathan Edwards, both powerful evangelists.<sup>4</sup> The parsons in the Valley were long-lived and held their positions for a number of decades; Samuel Hopkins was the Hadley parson for 56 years. Changes were slow to come.

Ways in which men and women responded to their covenant relationship with the community were bound to differ from each other. On the one hand, men were most often dealing with abstractions, acting according to rules established by the governing body in relation to Calvinist principles. Women, on the other hand, were dealing with individuals, responding to particular needs and demands as in the practice of "warning out" when strangers who entered a town with the purpose of settling were asked to move on, a demand motivated by economic concerns and implemented by male constables. The harshness of this act was often mitigated by the temporary offer of shelter from the female members of the household.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Phelps' diaries record many such offers of refuge.

The life of each Elizabeth tells us something of the circumstances, possibilities and problems of her generation, as well as those of her particular condition. The changing environment is reflected in the changes that take place within and around the house. The letters and diaries make audible the individual voices of the women who lived in the house. The three women each sing a different song; each one provides clues as to the life of the community, the Commonwealth and the emerging nation.

The first Elizabeth and her husband select the site and bring the house into being. The second Elizabeth and her husband expand the structure, as well as its functions, and reaffirm their covenant

relationship with the community. The third Elizabeth is forced to reduce those ties at the same time that her husband reduces the productivity of the farm. Dramatically excluded from the Hadley Meeting communion, she reaches out to a broader community and, in so doing, foreshadows the loosening of the old Calvinist hold on church members in New England.

Elizabeth Pitkin Porter, the first woman to occupy Forty Acres, grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. The Pitkins were among the earliest settlers of Hartford and from their arrival were prosperous, prominent leaders in that settlement. Connections with the Porters had been established by an earlier marriage. Elizabeth Pitkin was married to Moses Porter in 1742. A dress believed to be her wedding dress testifies to the Pitkin prosperity. The fabric is imported, either Dutch or English and bears a close resemblance to fabric and designs by prominent English artisans in the English silk industry.<sup>6</sup>

It is probable that the young couple first resided with Moses Porter's parents in a house then opposite to the Meeting House in the center of Hadley. Between the years 1745 and 1754, Moses Porter acquired nearly 600 acres of land comprisingouselots, meadowlands and woodlots, as well as part ownership in a sawmill. A number of the land purchases are clustered together in the vicinity of Forty Acres, an area lying approximately three miles north of Hadley and outside the original stockade. This consolidation of a large number of his holdings is in itself a radical departure from the early system in which separate strips of plowlands, meadows, swamp and woodlands were portioned out according to each settlers' existing wealth.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1800s, Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale College, waxes eloquent on the subject of Forty Acres:

"This estate lies on the eastern bank of Connecticut River...about one hundred and fifty [acres] are interval....The rest consists partly of a rich plain, and partly of the sides and summit of Mount Warner, a beautiful hill in the neighborhood....It is intersected by two great roads leading to Boston and to Hartford....The scenery, both near and distant, is

eminently delightful.... In a word, this estate is the most desirable possession of the same kind and extent within my knowledge."<sup>8</sup>

Not only the location, but the structure itself represented a radical change. The central chimney plan was the norm in the Connecticut Valley. It was an architecture of defense, a haven from the wilderness that first surrounded these colonial settlements. Moses Porter's new house, on the other hand, opens out to the surrounding land. The entrance hall sweeps through the center of the house from front to back, from the road that ran before the house through to the rear, overlooking the great river.

This center hall plan defines domestic space in ways different from that of the earlier plan.<sup>9</sup> It makes possible clear divisions between public and private space and provides separate access to each of the rooms on either side. Certain rooms were be designated as places to entertain guests or to hold public meetings; even court was occasionally held in Forty Acres. Others are reserved for more intimate living; they encourage and legitimize withdrawal and reflection, a possibility difficult to imagine in the central chimney plan. The broad central hall suggests the atria of ancient Mediterranean houses, providing a well-lit open gathering place in the center of the house, an avenue between both exterior doors.

The move away from the encircling security of the settled village to untamed territory must have demanded courage on the part of the first Elizabeth. We do not have a diary from her hand and very few letters, but what we can glean from those and from references made by family members, she was not physically strong nor adventurous. "You must not expect masculine from feminine," she writes to her husband in response to his wish that there were "a little more of the Hero" in her letter while he is away fighting in the French and Indian War.<sup>10</sup> Their wartime correspondence is a woeful tale of failed communication, her letters not reaching him, his expressing anger and hurt at being apparently forgotten, its dénouement a knock on the shutter of the downstairs chamber where she is putting her small daughter to bed.<sup>11</sup> She opens the shutter and is handed her husband's sword by his Indian servant, and in this

way learns that he has been killed, taken prisoner and executed on September 8, 1755, at the age of 33, barely three years after the construction of the new house.<sup>12</sup>

From this time forward, references to Elizabeth Porter are to her constant visits to the doctor, to her distressed state of mind, her journeys on horseback to various spas in pursuit of a cure. She becomes addicted to opium, probably as a result of a doctor's prescription. The therapeutic use of opium was a common form of treatment for a variety of ills: insomnia, pain, depression, insanity and various communicable diseases to name a few.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Porter's affliction is frequently described in her daughter's diary as one of mental distress. "O that God would grant her a calm mind," she prays. Still Elizabeth Porter managed to watch at the bedside of the sick and dying, to go to Sabbath meetings, to receive guests, and to visit Connecticut relatives. Her daughter's diary tells us that her mother took pity on a young pregnant woman, ousted from her parents' home, offering to "set her spinning...for a week or two." When she gives birth prematurely to a stillborn child, Mrs. Porter houses her for several weeks until she finds a place to live. The first Elizabeth is thus sustained by the strength of the covenant that gives structure to a life that seemed destined to fall apart. It is surprising that from that fragile tendril grew a sturdy family tree.

The second Elizabeth grew into a vigorous woman, intensely engaged with the world around her. She was married in 1770 to Charles Phelps. Seven years before she had begun to keep a Sabbath journal, faithfully recording the sermon texts for morning and afternoon. For several years the texts were the sole purpose of her journal, but dramatic events began to find their way onto the pages: the parson's house burning to the ground, a friend dying in childbirth and a week later the public confession of fornication by the friend's husband. (A touching footnote to this event is the young woman's name, Submit Dickinson.) Once the strict recording of sermon texts alone is gone, the diary becomes a repository for community events that involves her family. Literally thousands of people-invited guests, waifs and strays, hired spinners, weavers and tailors-crossed the welcoming threshold of Forty Acres during Elizabeth

Porter Phelps lifetime, the recorded numbers increasing as she grew into adulthood, at least 150 in the year before her marriage and more than 200 several years later. "This great cathedral of a house," she exclaims in her diary, a choice of words that gives to the roof over her head a sacramental function. "Sam'll Snel and wife here to supper and two old country men who have no home" (December 11, 1774). "One Mr. Bent here and lodged" (the adjective one suggesting that he was a stranger to the Phelps, January 20, 1782). "Wednesday Mr. Eber Church here-one man and two women, one 88 years old all lodged here" (ibid.). "Monday at night a traveling Woman came here going on foot from Oinion (sic) River to Coventry in Connecticut--her husband killed about 9 weeks ago by a fall tree, named Haukkins--stayed Tuesday rainy she did not go on" (date).

Elizabeth and Charles expand the house several times. In the first year of their marriage they construct a new kitchen behind the old, which then becomes a dining room, a testimony to the numerous guests they entertain at meals. They purchase chairs by the dozen: (Aug. 28, 1791) "Thursday Judge Porter and wife, Capt. Norton and wife, Capt. Hills and wife, Dr. Porter and wife and Eleazer Porter's wife all here. Mr. Norton and Hills and wives tarried." Long lists of names often close with "All drank tea here." (May 13, 1781) "Monday the officers of the Light Horse here to dine". (Oct. 19, 1788) "Dined here,, 15 besides our own."

Not all visitors are transient; a number come to stay for a matter of months: a widowed sister-in-law, Charles Phelps' manic-depressive brother who eventually commits suicide, young women engaged to do outwork for several families who make Forty Acres their home for a matter of months, and Thankful who arrives at the age of two weeks, one of twins brought by her father, his wife having died in childbirth, three weeks after the death of the Phelps' infant son and second child. The Phelps adopt her and she remains until she marries. When she moves 35 miles away to Brimfield, Massachusetts, Elizabeth Phelps frequently rides her horse to see her and help with the birth of her children.

Although women could not play a direct role in the governing of the church, in matters spiritual they were on equal footing with men.<sup>14</sup> That Elizabeth Phelps was held in high esteem is born out in the constant demand for her company at the bedside of the dying, but also in one interesting incident where she appears to be required for the role of mediator. Cotton Mather describes a procedure designed to restore the all-important consensus essential for a covenanted community. First the offender is confronted by a witness to the offense. If the offender refuses to admit to the offense, one or two others are brought to a meeting.<sup>15</sup> If that fails the pastor is summoned. This procedure appears to be what lies behind a sequence of Elizabeth Phelps' diary entries: (Aug. 18, 1793) "When I came home found Mrs. Shipman here, she stayed & lodged with me. Thursday she and I rode up to Sunderland upon a very extraordinary errand" (sic). (Aug. 25, 1793) "Tuesday I at Mr. Shipmans. Mr. Hop [the Hadley parson] & Mr. Lyman [the Hatfield parson] there to take account of some facts relative to Mr. Lyon Minister of Sunderland." (Sept. 22, 1793) "Tuesday Morn Mr. Hop came here I went with him to Sunderland respecting Mr. Lyons cause--home at night. Had a very sick night, violent pain in my head and back." At the end of that week she notes, "Mr. Lyon is silenced."

The building of a tanning house, a woodhouse, an additional barn and well, and in 1799, a large kitchen with adjoining pantries all testify to the farm's ever-increasing productivity. The house also acquires a Federal facade, which brings it into the post-Revolution era. The farm has reached plantation proportions. At the time of the harvest, Elizabeth Phelps reports the numbers there for reaping, sometime 30 for whom she cooks dinner. They slaughter 14 hogs in one day and it is then her task to make sausages and meat pies by the dozen. She dips candles by the hundreds.

"Cheese, cheese, hay, hay, cooking, cooking... churning every other day sometimes--I have had two days now, that I have indulged myself in bed till near 5, but tomorrow morning it must be a little after 3 that the butter may be worked in the cool air...I do not have the time for thots and reflection, that I think I should have...."



This lamentation is not simply a response to back-breaking labor, for she loves to write. Her letters to her married daughter are punctuated with remarks such as: "The more I write, the more I want too (sic);" "Once more, the delightful employment of writing;" "I don't believe you take half the pleasure in writing to me, as I did in writing to you--for I had quite as live (sic) write as work." There is perhaps a wistful note in the following: "I have got all my writing apparatus into the long room, my letters & papers make the table & room look like a writing office almost."

There is a Mary/Martha dichotomy that surfaces in Elizabeth Phelps' letters and diaries. On the one hand she confesses to her daughter that she possesses "a heart...which has been shamefully rising (sic) against my occupation & business in life;" And in a diary entry of 1790 she prays: "O may I find communion with God in all his providences--always quiet and submissive--always doing my duty to all in the station I am in." From time to time, Elizabeth Phelps' habit of introspection, fostered by her religion, holds up to question that station so clearly declared to the community-at-large by the house itself. Yet she remains a strict Calvinist to the end of her life.

That propensity to self-scrutiny finds greater play in her daughter Elizabeth Whiting's diaries, begun when she joins the church at the age of 19. Her letters, however, reveal a quite different side of her character. Her girlhood, along with that of her adopted sister Thankful, seems relatively carefree--dancing and singing lessons, sleigh rides, berrying expeditions and trips to Boston are recounted in their mother's diaries and in the letters that go back and forth when one of them is away on a visit. There are even signs of frivolity in some of the youngest Elizabeth's requests to her more worldly brother who lives in Boston: "I wish you would send me a miniature chain (not more than two dollars) and a little india ink," and to Charles' bride: "I should like a purple and white plaid ribbon for my bonnet...If you know of any new way to make gowns, be so kind as to describe it to me." In a letter to her mother from Boston, she writes: "I want those silk stockings my brother left at home for me--they are very much

worn now by the ladies." While there she buys a guitar and writes to her parents somewhat apologetically justifying her purchase. This same letter gives us a vivid vignette of the family at home:

Now I fancy you are eating dinner assembled round that jovial table--partaking of a wholesome repast--it makes my mouth water--as the saying is, to think of it--good fatt meat--with green sauce is too delicious--and do mind and have the desert--a fine water melon...do only look at Mitty [the child of a former servant being raised by Elizabeth Phelps]--the water streaming from her chin.

Elizabeth Whiting marries a clergyman, Dan Huntington, in 1801.

They have eleven children. One might predict an even greater absorption into domesticity and the community for a clergyman's wife; yet her diaries are even more introspective and elaborated than her mother's. Whereas Elizabeth Phelps' diaries give the reader a sense of time stolen from household chores--she abbreviates, elides, omits words, Elizabeth Huntington's entries have a literary ring:

I am about undertaking an arduous and difficult task; I must no longer seek to please myself, but endeavor to please a friend who is to be better and more interesting to me, than all the world beside--added to this, I must bear to have all my conduct examined and commented upon, by a whole town--I am entering upon an untried state, it is a situation which requires all the prudence & discretion, which ever a woman possessed....

Elizabeth and Dan Huntington live first in Litchfield and then in Middletown, Connecticut. They live in a more cosmopolitan world than that of Hadley. Dan graduated from Yale and was a protege of Timothy Dwight, president of the college. Elizabeth's brother Charles had graduated from Harvard and there acquired views that disturbed his mother who writes to her daughter expressing first her concern for his finances, then for his theology: "What dreadful thing to make a fatal error in religious matters--will these liberal sentiments carry people to heaven?" When the Huntingtons return to Forty Acres after the death of Charles Phelps, Elizabeth's reading and reflection has brought her to the rationalism of the

Unitarian church. As she was still nominally a member of the Meeting at Hadley, she continued to be subject to the covenant that placed her under the watch of the community. Her admission to one of the church deacons that she no longer believed in the Trinity resulted, after much cross examination, in her excommunication and a negative response to her family's request for the status of communicants. This exclusion from the community was endorsed by some of her Porter relatives, one of whom, Colonel Porter, was responsible for the unusual levying of tolls over the bridge to Northampton on the Sabbath, thus adding an obstacle to their church attendance in that town. The house that had become a vital center of all that it meant to commit oneself to a covenant was now consigned to the periphery. With meager resources at the Huntingtons' disposal, the farm no longer expanded and the house seemed to turn in on itself. In a letter to her son Frederick, Elizabeth Huntington wrote:

Shall I tell you how very still and lonely we were after you left us?....Then I will tell you that your sister and I...have been trying to brighten and enlighten our little parlour, and by removing some of the causes of darkness, have endeavored to prepare for ourselves a comfortable and decent apartment for the winter.

In an earlier letter she laments the fact that two invitations to tea arrive for the same day: "What a pity, as calls of this kind are so rare...." When she describes gatherings at Forty Acres, they are family gatherings:

Your father is reading the Gazette in the sitting room, where Bethia is employed with her needle....Elizabeth sits by the fire and may possibly be drawing at this time. Susan and Ben are paring apples, and Mother is in her room writing to Frederic....

These changes in the relation of the family to the community sound the final knell for what Michael Zuckerman refers to as "consensual communalism" in the Valley.<sup>16</sup> The Huntingtons are citizens of a larger community. Elizabeth travels to Kingston, Ontario, where she visits Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. Her letters to her children reflect her interest in the Abolitionist

movement, in national politics, and always in the spiritual health of her children, whichever creed they espouse.

The lives of the three Elizabeths were shaped by their dwelling place, but it is they who generated the day-to-day life resonating within its walls and vibrating into the surrounding community. Without access to those lives, the house remains mute. And the house? Elizabeth Huntington inherits Forty Acres from her mother, which eventually passes to her youngest son Frederick, an Episcopal clergyman, and eventually the Bishop of Central New York. The house became a summer retreat for his children and grandchildren. "A fixed spot to return to," it is still singing its song.

1. The Concept of Dwelling: on the Way to Figurative Architecture (New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1985), 12.
2. Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 27. Scott prefaces this remark by saying "Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women...."
3. Page Smith discusses these covenants in As a City Upon A Hill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 6-16. The covenant from Braintree appears in Charles Francis Adams' Three Episodes of Massachusetts History (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1893), II, 749, and from Blue Hill in Mary Ellen Chase's Jonathan Fisher, Maine Parson, 1768-1847 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 74.
4. See Edwin Scott Gaustad, The Great Awakening in New England (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), 16-25, for his discussion of both Stoddard and Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts.
5. See Josiah Henry Benton, Warning Out in New England (Boston: W.B. Clarke Co., 1911).
6. Peter Lekeux (1716-1768) was an English weaver often using the designs of Anna Maria Garthwaite (1690-1763), also English (Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin: Fall, 1987) 16. The fabric of Elizabeth Porter's dress is made of brocaded silk; flowers and foliage of various shades of pink, blue and yellow are woven onto a green and white damask ground, Gerald W. R. Ward and William N. Hosley, Jr., eds. The Great River: Art and Society of the Connecticut Valley, 1635-1820 (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1985), 385.
7. See Richard I. Melvain, New England Outpost (New York: W.E. Norton & Co., 1989), 53-63, for a discussion of this system.

8. Timothy Dwight, Travels in New England and New York (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969, first published in 1821), 259-60.
9. See Kevin M. Sweeney, "Mansion People: Kinship, Class, and Architecture in Western Massachusetts in the Mid Eighteenth Century" Winterthur Portfolio XIX(Winter 1984), 244-47, and Table IV, 240.
10. Elizabeth Pitkin Porter, Letters, Porter-Phelps-Huntington House, Hadley, Massachusetts. All the letters and diaries of the three Elizabeths referred to in this paper are presently housed in Special Collections of the Frost Library, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts.
11. Up until the Revolution, Massachusetts possessed only one post office, making it necessary to take one's chances with passers-by that were going in the general direction of the addressee. Richard D. Brown, "The Emergence of Urban Society in Rural Massachusetts, 1760-1820," The Journal of American History, LXI(June 1974), 44.
12. James Lincoln Huntington, Forty Acres (New York: Hastings House, 1949),5.
13. See David T. Courtwright, Dark Paradise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 43-50, for a discussion of the uses of opium in medicine in early America.
14. See Mary Sumner Benson's Women in 18th Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 105ff. for her discussion of attitudes of the clergy towards women.
15. (Boston: 1726), 148-49. Michael Zuckerman paraphrases Mather's description from Ratio Disciplinae Fratrum Nov-Anglorum (Boston, 1726) in Peaceable Kingdoms (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1970), 61.
16. *Ibid.*, 4.