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Porter-Phelps-Huntington Project
REPORT

I would like to begin by saying that the Porter-Phelps-Huntington Foundation has a very precious set of resources that deserve wider scholarly attention. I am pleased at having had the opportunity to see the house and examine the papers, and I have already begun to "spread the word" among my best graduate students. The collections are important because:

1. They encompass both material and documentary sources. In fact this is one of the best "fits" between a house and a set of papers that I know of.
2. They extend over many generations, allowing both long term study of selected themes and focused study of particular periods.
3. They are especially rich in women's material.

I admit to having very mixed feelings about the current interpretation of the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House. On the one hand I am impressed with its authenticity as a remnant of twentieth-century history. On the other hand, as a specialist in women's history, I am dismayed at its sexism. The present tour is an intriguing portrayal of the late "colonial revival" and a telling example of what an urban physician found of value in the lives of his eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rural ancestors. At the same time, it is an antiquated vision that perpetuates some of the most damaging myths about the past. The continual references to "Charles Phelps' house" perpetuate the documentary coverture of the past, present women as mere adjuncts to their husbands, and deny them a history. This is especially disturbing when there is so much in the Porter-Phelps-Huntington papers to contradict that interpretation.

I don't think it is possible to reinterpret the house without coming to terms with twentieth-century attitudes toward women. As I was talking with one of the former patients of Dr. Huntington after the symposium, a new area of research occurred to me. I don't think Huntington's interpretation of the Porter-Phelps women is unrelated to his occupation. Here was a man whose life work was to care for women. I would love to see someone interview those who knew him as a physician as well as a neighbor. The woman I spoke with obviously respected Dr. Huntington but she could see that some of his most

cherished ideas about childbearing were a bit dated today. She told me that he insisted that "modern women" weren't like those in the past [she may have said 'savages'] who could give birth in a field, that they required pampering (a long period in bed, anesthesia and such). In terms of women's history, it would be wonderful to know how his own views of what was refined and civilized and "feminine" might have affected his interpretation of the house.

I think it is very important to preserve Dr. Huntington's legacy, even if it assaults our own sensibilities at many points. At the same time, I am excited by the possibility of the Foundation making its own contribution to history by adding a new interpretation that does justice to the rich sources you have. My first priority would be to bring Elizabeth Porter Phelps back to the house. For the first period of the house, the part I am best qualified to speak to, her diaries and letters are essential.

Listen to this passage from a letter of November 4, 1797:

Lydia went off last night. Silence Furganson came last night to tarry. . . & this day we have been hard at it I can tell you. made a cheese-churned—got dinner for between .20 & .30. persons. made .20. & .30. mince pies. . . but we shall all be rested by the morning I hope.

There are several themes in that single brief quote—the immense amount of kitchen work required to sustain field work, the difficulties genteel women had keeping "helps" in a region that had no real servant class, the continual flow of people in and out of the house.

But overlaying those themes is another—the good housewife as record keeper and writer. There is a wonderful tension in Phelps' diary and letters between the contemplative woman whose diary began as a record of sermon texts and the energetic household manager whose diary also functioned as an accounting of labor and exchange. On March 16, 1801, she wrote to her daughter Eliza, "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 write as work. I've had a deal to do & never get done." I once suggested to Colonial Deerfield that they recreate a scene from one of Elizabeth Porter Phelps' letters in which she describing writing a letter while churning! I am quite sure Colonial Deerfield dropped that idea into their reject file. I offer it to you.

Phelps' diary is a wonderfully rich source for understanding the love/hate relationship between a woman and her "duty." Here is the passage I quoted in my oral presentation. It is from a letter to Eliza, June 13, 1801:

I must tell you of last Satt:- about .3. in the morning I wak'd with the sick headach grew worse puk'd a number of time—but knew I must get up, which I do towards .6.-skim'd my milk being oblidg'd to stop, go to the door & puke a number of times—but at last got my cheese set could do not more, took to my bed. . . I fell asleep; when I awak'd, felt better, slept more, by ten or before, got up- drank a cup of green-tea, eat a piece of bread- went on moderately, had a comfortable day - how great the goodness of our God- surely I have had a wrong temper of late- what is it material whether our time be spent in making cheese or making shirts,—it is apparently the dictate of providence I should do the business which is allotted for me, & may I not find as much communion with my saviour, think of heaven as freely, exercise as much love & benevolence to my fellow mortals (perhaps more kindness & pity) as when sitting in my parlour.

That passage not only takes us through the house, from bedchamber to dairy to back step to parlour, it takes us on a psychological and spiritual journey from "puking" to piety.

I am intrigued with the quite different pattern of writing in Eliza's diary. I didn't spend as much time with Eliza's journal as with Elizabeth's, but even a superficial examination shows the dramatic difference between the two. Despite the cursory nature of Elizabeth's entries and the continual recital of sermon texts, her diary is about action. It documents an external life. Eliza's is a journal rather than a diary. It seems to be almost entirely concerned with the state of her soul. I hoped to find overlapping passages in the two diaries, but didn't succeed in doing so. The closest I came were these entries, a day apart:

Elizabeth: January 5, 1817 Lords day Mr Gray Romans 10 & 14.15 Spoke upon the duty of contributing how then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed &c all day from the same preach'd upon the contribution of this day the New Years anniversary meeting at Dr Fosters, Daughter & I could not go for want of a horse.

Eliza: January 4, 1817 Saturday evening Hadley Another year is gone, forever gone; let me ask myself how I have improved it? whether in the service of the world and sin or in the blessed service of Christ. If I ask my heart, what are its desires and prevailing inclinations surely I must

say religion is preferable to every thing [] but the fruits which appear in my life are not worthy of a christian. . .

Each woman sees her life in religious terms, but where Elizabeth is content with a summary of the sermon text which probably helps her recall its content and perhaps even its impact on her own thinking and feeling, Eliza feels compelled to record her religious reflections to the exclusion of the passing world of cheese, sermon texts, and missing horses.

I must admit to preferring Elizabeth's mode. Her matter-of-factness, like that of Martha Ballard, helps me construct the social world in which she lived. Other scholars, of course, might feel differently. One area in which Elizabeth's records are indispensable is sketching the social landscape of Hadley and of "Forty Acres." Dr. Huntington focused on family and on big events, like the seven years war, but in the eighteenth century "family" had a more expansive and less sentimental meaning than in later period, and even New England was less English than we might suppose. Listen to these entries from the year 1783:

May 4, 1783 Wednesday about 2 in the afternoon our Little Negro Girl Phillis expired--she was a very pretty Child, I hope she sleeps in Jesus.

June 8, 1783 Paul Wright very sick--this is the second year he has lived here

June 29, 1783 I rode down to Major Porters and brought up Mrs. Edwards two Daughters, Polly 10 last month, Jerushah 8 next January. Oh how dear they are to me for their Mothers sake

November 1783 George Andries and Mary his wife (Dutch people) moved from here to Live in their own house my Husband has built for them.

I hope that the Foundation can find some way to work more of this complexity into their interpretation of the house. This is not just a shelter for a family. In the eighteenth-century it was a "big" house, that is, a consumer of labor and a source of charity. Elizabeth's concern for Phillis' "soul" as well as her casual reference to the child as "our" girl, suggest the complexity of eighteenth-century patriarchy. A "good wife," to use Anne Bradstreet's

language was both "pitiful to poor" and "wisely awful" to her servants and other dependents. In some settings the benevolence of the mistress is a way of compensating for and softening the harshness of the master. Was it so in Hadley? How did two labor systems quite uncharacteristic of rural New England—chattel slavery and tenant farming—fit into the Connecticut River Valley?

I concur with those who argue that the reinterpretation must go beyond the house tour. In fact, while research is underway, much of the house tour might well be preserved as it is, though I would hope you can find a way to add a critical overlay that will allow visitors to see the tour as another layer of history and not an objective truth. I think it is important not to rush to judgment on this project and above all not to rush into a new interpretation of the eighteenth-century (or later periods) that is based on loose association with secondary literature and not with focused research on the house and its inhabitants. To that end, I encourage the Foundation to find ways to encourage and perhaps even to support new scholarship, perhaps through making living space available for graduate students doing research. There are dozens of dissertations in the Porter-Phelps-Huntington papers. It would be wonderful if those dissertations could incorporate material culture and well as documentary research, something that would happen more easily if scholars could work on site as well as with microfilm.

Some scholarship is already underway. Marla Miller's M.A. thesis on Rebecca Dickinson has much that is of interest to your project. Her dissertation on Connecticut River Valley dressmaking promises to be even richer. She is not a scholar who focuses narrowly on objects, but she is in tune with material sources in the way many documentary historians are not. Beth Weston's paper, "Earthly Blessings", though an undergraduate paper, goes further than anything else I have seen in integrating entries from Elizabeth's diary into a broader history of the family. Weston's emphasis on seasonal work, on the importance of household helpers, and on the economic significance importance of marriage provides material that could help you begin to redress the imbalances in the existing interpretation. I also liked her effort to place Elizabeth's presence at births in the larger context of social obligation and neighborliness. I find no evidence in the diary that she was a midwife, though it is quite clear that she was a "good neighbor," and that on many occasions she did attend births and watch with the sick. The birth

record she kept, however, is quite separate from these activities. She includes records of births she did not attend, raising the interesting possibility that she became, at some point, an unofficial keeper of vital records for her town or neighborhood. That, too, is a subject for further research.

My message is straightforward: put Elizabeth Porter Phelps back in the house she lived in from birth until death.