

NEW LONDON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2012

“Yankey Torpedo” Adventures (Part Two) by Andrew German

At the end of Part One we heard of the capture of Joshua Penny by Captain Hardy, of the British 74-gun ship-of-the-line Ramillies. Hardy then sent Penny to Halifax to be imprisoned for nine months.

Another man with a grudge was Captain Berrien of New York, whose small coaster was seized by Hardy’s squadron in June 1813. It cost him \$500 to ransom his vessel. On August 24 a semisubmersible torpedo boat came down the Sound from New York, but was chased off by British barges, which pursued the boat for nine miles. This was almost certainly the first appearance of Berrien’s *Turtle*, a vessel that could earn Berrien many times the value of his coaster if he could sink the *Ramillies*. The *Turtle* would reappear in 1814.¹²

Like Joshua Penny, Jeremiah Holmes had been impressed by the Royal Navy. He escaped after three years, settled in Mystic, and continued as a mariner until the war. In 1813 he had served on the Mystic privateer *Hero*, used his Royal Navy artillery training to man the guns defending Mystic, and served in the private armed boat *True Blooded Yankee*. Early in 1814, Holmes took command of a 16-oar boat owned by Mott & Williams of New York, which he named

Young Hornet. “Mr. Riker”—possibly Captain Riker of the *Eagle* scheme—provided the torpedo. Riker’s torpedo design was a 30-foot tube just seven inches in diameter, with buoys to keep it horizontal at the water’s surface. Filled with 75 pounds of “superfine” gunpowder, it would lie along a vessel’s waterline and blow a long hole in its hull. The torpedo had a 12-foot crossbar with hooked ends that passed through it at one end. When a crossbar hook snagged a ship’s anchor cable or curve of its bow, the crossbar would pivot, causing a spring to trigger its flintlock firing mechanism. It was not easy to handle this awkward weapon. Holmes planned to choose a dark night with the right combination of wind and tide, place his

boat in a suitable spot, and then let the torpedo drift down on an enemy ship, adjusting its path with a long line attached to it.¹³

Holmes brought the *Young Hornet* and its torpedo up the Thames River to Gales Ferry, where he gathered his crew of Mystic men and discussed his plan with Captain Decatur. After a couple of nighttime reconnaissance trips downriver, Holmes picked an early March evening to attack a frigate—probably HMS *Endymion*—anchored off the Dumplings on the north side of Fishers Island. His crew got into position a little too late, and as the torpedo drifted slowly toward

(Continued on page 5)

Louisa May Alcott’s “Little Women” Returns to the Shaw Mansion for December ~ Tickets Available Now

The story of Jo March, her sisters and family will come alive as Flock Theatre returns to the long parlor for three weekends in December. Opening on Friday 7 December and continuing all the way to the 23rd, there will be shows at 7pm on each Friday and Saturday, and at 2pm each Saturday and Sunday. Tickets are \$35 for adults, \$30 for students and seniors and veterans. To reserve tickets call the Flock box office number: 860.443.3119.

How the March family celebrates Christmas during the Civil War is a large part of our introduction to the girls, but of course the story continues as Jo “comes of age” attempting to be a writer in a “man’s world.” This adaptation for the Shaw Mansion was written by Julie Rattey (who portrays Jo). Don’t miss it.

“Ye Towne’s Antientest Buriall Place”

More Prentises: Children of Stephen, Wives of Thomas

In the last newsletter we looked at Justice of the Peace Jonathan Prentis and a few of his family. This time we will cover some family members of two of his younger brothers. Neither brother has a stone in the burying ground, but Capt. Stephen Prentis has three grown children there, and two of Thomas Prentis’s three wives have stones there.

Stephen Prentis was born in 1666, the sixth child of John and Hester Prentis of New London. He married Elizabeth Rogers, and they had nine children. Stephen was very active in New London affairs, being several times a delegate to the General Assembly and a selectman. He was appointed lieutenant of the fourth trainband in 1714 and its captain in 1727. Stephen himself lived a long life. Joshua Hempstead notes on March 3, 1758, “Capt. Stephen Prentiss Died yesterd aged 91 years & 2 months. [March 4th] in the aftern I Rid out the funeral of Capt Stephen Prenttis &c. he was not sick nor in pain. had Something of a purging a day or two & his Reason but not aprehensive of being So near his End.” Capt. Prentis had been blind for about eight years before his death. He lived on the farm at Millstone Point which he inherited from his father.

The Stephen Prentis who has a stone in the burying ground was the fourth child of Capt. Stephen. He was born in 1699, and married the widow Phebe (Harris) Crank in May of 1723. Phebe’s husband John Crank had died in January of that year. She and John had been “published” (announced their intention of being married) in May of 1719, but

not married until November 29, 1720, according to the Congregational Church records. There is no record of any children from that marriage.

Stephen and Phebe, on the other hand, had three children, all of whom lived to adulthood and married. Elizabeth, the oldest, was baptized July 12, 1724. The information about this group of Prentises in the Prentis family genealogy is not always accurate; I have used Hempstead’s diary. The genealogy mentions a daughter Mary being baptized May 24, 1726, which was not a Sunday. Hempstead does not record her baptism, but notes on May 4, 1746, “Wm Caulking & Mary Prentiss publisht.”

Stephen died before his third child was baptized. Hempstead records his death in December of 1728, “the 7th Stephen Prentts Junr died aged about 30. a hopeful young man . . .” On December 29 he says “a Son of the Widow Phebe Prentis Baptized Stephen.” This Stephen and his wife Anna had ten children, of whom one son and several daughters married and had children. That son, also Stephen, and his wife Abigail had thirteen children. He, like his great-grandfather, lived to at least 90.

The widow Phebe Prentis was published to John Edgerton of Norwich on April 18, 1731, married May 11 of that year, and moved to Norwich. She and John had seven children to add to the five he had with his first wife Ruth, and her three. Elizabeth Prentis, Stephen and Phebe’s daughter, married her step-brother John. Phebe and her husband are buried in Norwich.

Capt. Stephen had two other children die in their 20s. In June of 1731 Hempstead recorded, “Wed. 9 fair. I was at the funeral of Benjamin Prenttis Son of Capt Stephn Prenttis who died with a Choaking distemper most like the Quinsey [what we call diphtheria]. he was taken Ill Last Fryday & by use of means Seemed to be in a mending way& to outward appearance the danger past & in a few minuts time the distemper carryed him off the 3d fitt as he was walking about the house.” The 1771 *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes it in part: “It begins with a fever, which is followed with a pain and inflammation of the fauces, causing the uvula, tonsils and larynx to swell; whence great difficulty of breathing and swallowing ensues.” The further description, and especially the various treatments, occupy four and a half

(Continued on page 4)

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Incorporated 1870

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Starting off ...

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Starting anything can be a challenge: starting as the incoming president of the New London County Historical Society, or even starting the president's message for the newsletter. Nevertheless, this is an easy message to write. I'm delighted to lead the New London County Historical Society on to the new challenges that we face. I'm first and foremost a "history buff," and being president of the NLCHS will give me ample opportunities to be an active part of bringing the history of New London County to light and to life.

First I have to thank Deborah Donovan for five years of stellar service as president. She led the NLCHS through some challenging times, and during her tenure, the Society made some notable gains. In the past five years the Society made several upgrades to the Shaw Mansion; has published a number of new books, (including Pat Schaefer's award-winning *A Useful Friend: A Companion to the Joshua Hempstead Diary*); and we can be proud of our role in creating the wonderful exhibit currently at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum: "The Rockets' Red Glare: The War of 1812 in Connecticut," for which we published the companion book. We have gained some remarkable acquisitions to our collections, from the New London police court records of the 1850s, to the "lost" sections of the Joshua Hempstead diary, to our newest find, a circa 1946 Templetone radio, made in Mystic.

Thanks to the four Board members who are leaving the NLCHS Board, all of whom have made positive contributions to our mission and our goals: Pamela Adams, Kevin Doyle, Barbara Lipsche, and Richard Sigal. Without dedicated Board members it would not have been possible to achieve all that we have in the past five years. This is also the time to welcome five new members to the Board: Karen Beasley, Christopher Donohue, Patty Oat, Rob Pero, and Jose Ulloa. All bring great energy and varied talents, and I look forward to working with them to make the Society even more vibrant in the future.

We certainly can't "rest on our oars," waiting for the next gentle breeze to send good fortune our way. Following up on the successful publishing ventures of the past few years, we have several new publishing ideas: *The Diary of Joshua Hempstead*, with corrections from the newly-acquired sections; a book on the State Pier; and a small but accessible book on the history of New London that uses our collection to tell our story for visitors.

My first request to all of you is that you continue to support the New London County Historical Society with your interest, your attendance at our varied events, your volunteer efforts, and your generous financial support. History buffs love history, but we know it takes more than interest alone to keep a wonderful institution such as the NLCHS going. Please visit the Mansion to remind yourselves of what a treasure we have, and please bring your family, friends, and visitors!

The Shaw Mansion is a magical place. I was there one recent Friday, and I watched our librarian Tricia Royston helping a local college student with a primary research request. I watched this somewhat disinterested student "come alive" as he realized he was looking at a newspaper that documented the impact of the Fugitive Slave Act here in Connecticut. Tricia then took the young man in to the "Washington bedroom" for a short tour. I heard him say that his knees got weak and he felt "shivery" being that close to history. Please be part of making our history available (even "shivery") to all.

~Nancy H. Steenburg

New and Renewed Members

Sustaining

Claire & Bill Peterson North Stonington

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Jeffrey Nelson Groton
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Ruth E. Sweet Lebanon
Helen Wadsworth Waterloo, NY
Oliver & Priscilla Porter Noank

(Continued on page 6)

Prentis (continued)

(Continued from page 2)

pages. To modern eyes, Benjamin was as likely to have died from the treatments as the disease, although diphtheria was a major killer, especially of young children, into the twentieth century.

Benjamin had been born December 3, 1707, and baptized February 1, 1708. His gravestone says he died “in his 24th year.” There does not seem to be any record of his marrying.

On October 20, 1734, a Sunday, Hempstead notes, “Mercy the youngest Daughter of Capt Stephen Prenttis died Sick near 20 days a hopefull young woman 20 yr old.” He attended the funeral the following afternoon. According to her gravestone, Mercy was also “in the 24th year of her age.” She was born December 6, 1710, and baptized March 4, 1711. Her first name is unclear on the stone.

Capt. Stephen’s younger brother Thomas was a twin, born in 1675. He was, as Hempstead described him at his death in 1741, “an old Commander many voyages to the . . . & Newfoundland &c for near about the Space of 20 years & hath left ye Seas near as Long & been a Steady Diligent Gentleman in his Husbandry affairs & in the public . . . as a Justice of Peace about 7 or 8 years & died Lamented in the 66th year of his age . . . Never had a Child Tho 3 wives.” He was also frequently a member of the “committee” with Hempstead to survey the commons. Thomas’s first two wives have stones in the burying ground.

Thomas married Mary Rogers January 30, 1705. According to her gravestone, she died “December ye 28th, 1720, in ye 42d year of her age.” Hempstead’s diary,

however, says on December 31st that “Thomas Prentts’s Wife Mary died this day.” He attended the funeral on January 2nd. It raises the question of how long after her death the stone was carved.

On May 9, 1725, Thomas was “published” to Elizabeth (Gray), the widow of Andrew Palmes, who had died in June of 1721. On November 9, 1733, Hempstead notes, “Ms Eliza Prenttis the 2d wife of Mr Thos Prenttis Died of a Consumption Last night. She was the wife of Mr Andrew Palmes decd. he died of a Consumption . . . year Last June. She was 48 years of age.” The following day Hempstead attended her funeral and was “one of the Bearers with Mr Adms Mr Christophers & Mr Miller, Mr Jno Richard & Dea[con] Green. Gloves & Scarves.”

Thomas married Bethiah (Dart) Chapel in 1739. After his 1741 death she married Zebediah Comstock.

These two gravestones are not as close to the other Prentis gravestones, which are pretty much in a line either side of Jonathan’s table stone. Mary’s stone is several paces behind the table stone next to Jonathan’s, from which the inscription is completely worn away (and appears to have already been gone when Edward Prentis did his description of the burying ground in 1899). This stone may very well have been Thomas’s, but there is no way of telling. Elizabeth’s stone is more toward the left and at the back of the burying ground. She is near her first husband, Andrew Palmes, but her stone is almost completely hidden by the later stone of Lucretia Palmes. The lettering appears to be legible, but you would need to

kneel down and maybe shine a flashlight on the stone to see properly. Mercy and Stephen’s stones are also behind the blank table stone, but much closer.

~Patricia M. Schaefer

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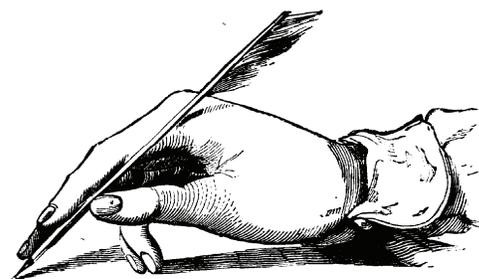
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Torpedoes (continued)

(Continued from page 1)

the frigate, the heavy, stiff control line sank and got fouled on the bottom, pulling the torpedo down. Unable to salvage it, Holmes cut the line and left.

Returning to New York, Holmes had Riker build two more torpedoes and then brought the *Young Hornet* back up the Thames. On the night of March 24, they headed out to attack the 74-gun HMS *La Hogue*, anchored off New London. Circling the ship as they gauged the wind and tide, they anchored several hundred yards to the northwest and let the torpedo drift downwind. When it seemed to be in position, they tried to move eastward to make it strike the ship, but drifted too close in the dark. When they tried to haul in the torpedo for another try, the crossbar caught on *La Hogue's* anchor cable. Riker's torpedo exploded in a geyser of water nearly 100 feet high, but *La Hogue* escaped injury. Her marines instantly lined the rails and fired their muskets into the darkness, lantern signals were exchanged between ships, and *La Hogue* fired cannons. Even the American militiaman on guard at Eastern Point in Groton fired on the *Young Hornet* as she retired up the Thames.

With the British ships off New London all on high alert for torpedo attacks, Holmes decided to take his last torpedo east to Vineyard Sound, another center of British activity. He and his crew spent a week stalking a British frigate but never got close enough to deploy their torpedo. After the *Young Hornet* headed home to Mystic, Jeremiah Holmes hid the torpedo under his house until he finally returned it to New York. He would get his chance to

damage British warships at the Battle of Stonington in August 1814. But perhaps these torpedo adventures were actually more damaging to Connecticut, because torpedoes became the justification for the attacks on Pettipauge in April and on Stonington in August.¹⁴

In June 1814, Berrien's semisubmersible *Turtle* reappeared in Long Island Sound. *Turtle* was an apt name for this vessel. It was 23 feet long and fully 10 feet wide, with a six-foot depth but only a foot of hull exposed above the waterline. Her very strong arched deck was covered with half-inch iron plates and painted a dirty white for camouflage. In operation, her deck was nearly awash, like a turtle. Inside, 12 men operated a crank mechanism to drive her paddle or propeller wheel. Behind her she towed five torpedoes on separate tethers, an arrangement reminiscent of one of Fulton's designs. The *Turtle* was laboring to round Horton's Point on the north shore of Long Island on June 26 when she was sighted by HMS *Maidstone* and *Sylph*, which sent barges after her. As the *Turtle* stranded, one man drowned when he tried to swim ashore. The others washed up with their vessel, then joined the local militia in trying to drive off the barges. They salvaged her propulsion device before the British forced their way ashore and studied the *Turtle* before blowing her up.¹⁵

Elsewhere, stationary torpedoes were deployed to protect a couple of ports, and two other active torpedo attempts were made by US Navy personnel on British warships. In July 1813, US Navy Sailing Master Elijah Mix tried to destroy the 74-gun HMS *Plantagenet* near Norfolk, Virginia. Six times he released pairs of linked Fulton torpedoes and missed the target. The seventh time the torpedoes

exploded prematurely. The final unsuccessful attempt came in November 1814, when Midshipman James McGowan on Lake Ontario attempted to destroy HMS *St. Lawrence* off Kingston, Upper Canada.¹⁶

In the end, the threat of torpedoes was real, even if the technology was so rudimentary that they failed on every occasion during the war. Nevertheless, the Torpedo Act offered another way for civilians to combine patriotism and profit in the ongoing battle against the Royal Navy, and torpedoes altered both the Royal Navy's procedures and its perception of American commitment to the war.

12. *Niles Register*, July 3, 1813, 288; *Connecticut Gazette*, September 1, 1813; it is informed speculation that Captain Berrien was the same Berrien who produced the semisubmersible *Turtle*, and that the "diving" New York torpedo vessel chased in the Sound in August 1813 was the same as the *Turtle* of June 1814; the full identity of Captain Berrien has not been determined, but he was most likely from the Queens, New York, Berrien family, which was intermarried with the Riker family.

13. Rev. Frederic Denison, "Narrative of Capt. Jeremiah Holmes of Mystic Bridge, Conn. 1859," VFM 390, G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport; Rev. Frederic Denison, "The Torpedo Adventures," *Mystic Pioneer*, June 18, 1859; the full identity of Capt./Mr. Riker has not been determined, but he was most likely from the Queens, New York, family for which Riker's Island was named.

14. Denison, "Torpedo Adventures," *Mystic Pioneer*, June 18, 1859.

15. Berrien's *Turtle* is described in detail in James Tertius de Kay, *The Battle of Stonington: Torpedoes, Submarines, and Rockets in the War of 1812* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990), and in abbreviated form in de Kay's "Battle of Long Island Sound," in Glenn S. Gordinier, *The Rockets' Red Glare: The War of 1812 and Connecticut* (New London: New London County Historical Society, 2012), 49, 53; there are conflicting claims as to who blew up the *Turtle*, as the Long Island militia reported they removed her weighty components to get her off the beach, then placed the charge that destroyed her when the British approached, *Connecticut Gazette*, July 6, 1814.

16. Robert Malcomson, *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 561-62.

Latest Acquisition: 1946 Temple Phonograph Radio Tabletop Set Made in Mystic

Operating in a section of the Rossie Mill, now the Mystic Seaport Museum Curatorial Center, The Templetone Radio Manufacturing Corporation began manufacturing phonographs (record players) in 1941 in nicely designed wooden cabinets. Throughout the war they switched to making radio components for the war effort, but in 1944 they published large advertisements in the New York Times: "Some day soon after the war is over! ... you'll be able to get a Temple radio from the Templetone Radio Company, Mystic, Conn."

Focusing on higher end cabinets, their tagline was, "Where FM will also mean Finest Made."

Donated by radio collector Bob Noiseux of Canterbury, our set was designed by well-know New York designer Gilbert Rohde who liked to combine exotic woods, like paldao and East Indian laurel. The set is a nice

compact unit with radio and record player and it does sport some lovely figured woods in the cabinet.

The 1945-1946 New London Directory lists offices and factory for the Templetone Radio Mfg Corp at the Templetone Bdg 100 Garfield, with Oscar Dane as president. Dane, born in Russia, was also a leader in the Jewish community and was one of the founders of Beth-El Synagogue in New London.

According to a newspaper interview with another antique radio collector, Bill Morse, Templetone ran into trouble in 1949 when they made their first television and shortly after that went into bankruptcy.



This item fits with an expanded collecting focus on wartime and 20th century New London County.

New and Renewed Members

(Continued from page 3)

John Geary	Uncasville
Robert M. Nye	Waterford
Bernard Balsler	Novi, MI
Marvin Berger	New London
Stewart Turner	Cape Neddick, ME
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Rosana & Robert Scott	New London
Natalie Flores	Waterford
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Jessica Thrasher	San Jose, CA
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Evelyn & Fred Commentucci	Gales Ferry
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Linda Christensen	Preston
Pamela L. Briggs	Ledyard

2012 Cruise on the Thames River a Great Success

Thanks go out to our Commodore Stephen Decatur sponsors: the Wronowski Family, Cross Sound Ferry and Scient Federal Credit Union; Our General Henry Burbeck sponsors: Tobin, Carberry, O'Malley, Riley & Selinger, Dime Bank, Gordon's Yellow Front Wines & Liquors, and an anonymous friend; Our Captain Jacob Jones sponsor: TCORS Capitol Group; Our Captain James Biddle sponsors: Aldrich, Perkins, Mulcahy & Heap, Sheffield Pharmaceuticals, and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company; and the Friends of General Williams: Allyn & Associates, Chelsea Groton Bank, Levine distributing, Valenti Auto Mall, Smith Insurance, Paul Vaida and Merrill Lynch; plus all the volunteers who helped, presented, or donated food, and everyone who purchased a ticket!!! What a lovely day.

Robert J. Doyle	Groton	Dr. Martin J. Butler	New Bedford, MA
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Carol & Wilson Veal	Quaker Hill	Gerald Stefon	Baltic

Books available from the New London County Historical Society

<i>The Amistad Incident as Reported in the New London Gazette & General Advertiser.</i> (NLCHS)	\$5
<i>The History of the Amistad Captives.</i> (NLCHS) A reproduction of a pamphlet by JW Barber, 1840.	\$10
<i>Black Roots in Southeastern Connecticut, 1650-1900</i> by Barbara Brown and Dr. James Rose. (NLCHS) This republished book is a milestone in genealogical research of African Americans and Native Americans in New London County.	\$35
<i>The Diary of Joshua Hempstead 1711-1758.</i> (NLCHS) Revised 1999. Personal journal serves as fascinating and invaluable account of Connecticut life in early 18 th century.	\$75
<i>For Oil and Buggy Whips: Whaling Captains of New London County, Connecticut</i> by Barnard Colby. Biographical sketches of local whaling captains document New London's role in this industry.	\$18
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<i>New London Goes to War - New London during World War II</i> by Clark van der Lyke. Our newest publication: drawn from the records and correspondence of the New London City Council. (NLCHS)	\$11
<i>The Colonial Burying Grounds of Eastern Connecticut</i> by James A. Slater. Fully illustrated with photographs, this book provides a description of and maps the burial grounds of eastern Connecticut.	\$40
<i>Common to this Country: Botanical Discoveries of Lewis & Clark</i> by Susan Munger. Illustrated volume exploring plants discovered by Lewis and Clark on their westward expedition.	\$23
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<i>Murder of Mayhem? - Benedict Arnold's New London, Connecticut Raid, 1781</i> by Dr. Walter L. Powell. Excellent research in a small readable format.	\$10
<i>History of New London, Connecticut: from the first survey of the coast in 1612 to 1860</i> by Frances Caulkins With a new introduction and a revised index 2007 (NLCHS).	\$60
<i>Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676</i> Excellent new history from Walter Woodward, the Connecticut State Historian.	\$45
<i>"The Rockets' Red Glare:" The War of 1812 and Connecticut,</i> by Dr. Glenn S. Gordinier. Companion to the bicentennial exhibit; excellent local history tied to national and international events (NLCHS).	\$18
<i>A USEFUL FRIEND—A Companion to the Joshua Hempstead Diary 1711-1758</i> by Patricia Schaefer (NLCHS) A truly useful resource guide, if you have the Diary, you should have this book; includes a subject index to the Diary.	\$25
<i>History of Norwich, Connecticut: from its possession by the Indians to the year 1866</i> by Frances Caulkins With a new introduction and a new index 2009 (NLCHS).	\$60

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