

# Reading *Between* the Lines

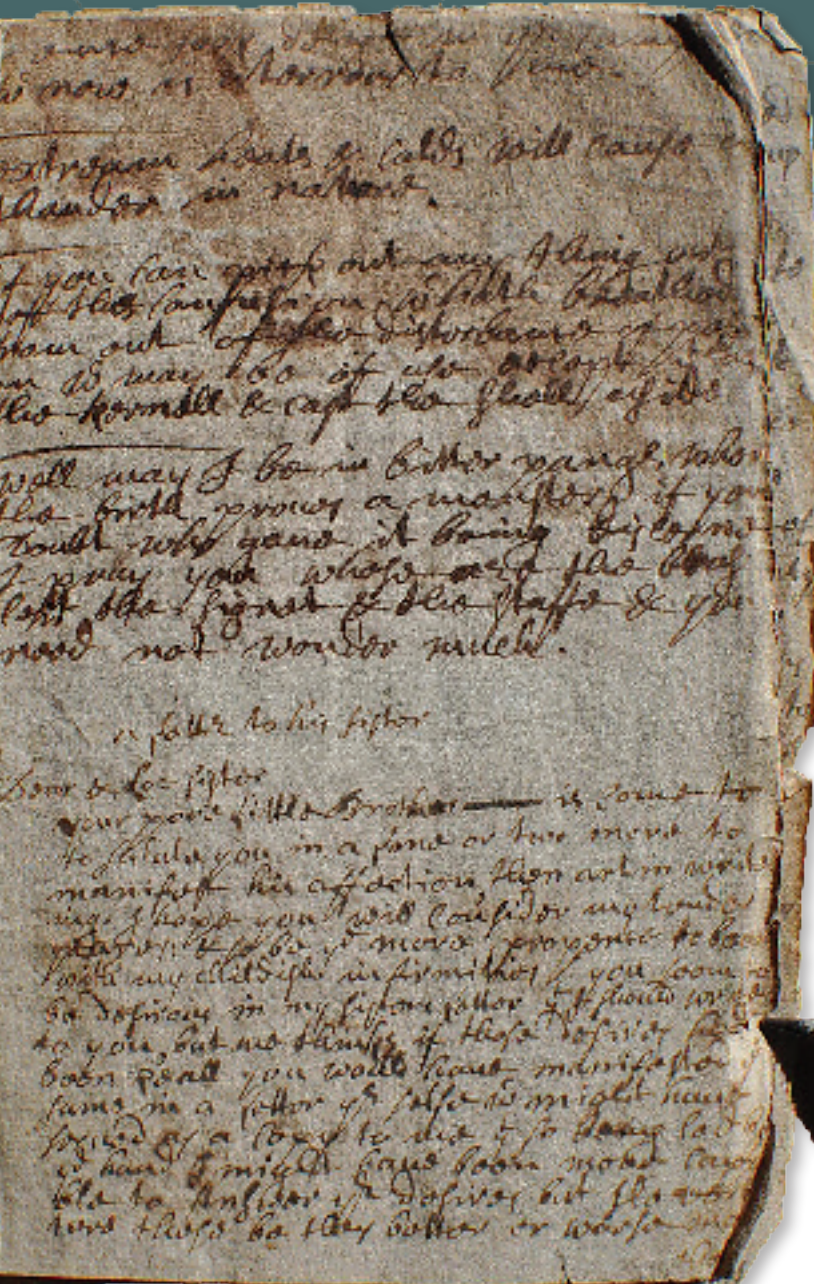
Interpreting the Writings of  
Mehetabel (Chandler) Coit  
and Her Mother,  
Elizabeth (Douglas) Chandler

One of the great pleasures I have experienced since the late 2012 publication of my book, *One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit*, has been the connections I have made with Mehetabel Coit's descendants.

People from across the country have contacted me to tell me about their relationships to Mehetabel and shared their own research stories. And one descendant has revealed the existence of a fascinating document that has prompted me to think about Mehetabel and her family in new ways.

Born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1673, Mehetabel moved to Woodstock, Connecticut, with her family when she was about 14. She later settled in New London, Connecticut, where she married shipbuilder John Coit and had six children. From the time she moved to Woodstock until she was in her seventies, Mehetabel kept a diary; its early date may qualify it as the oldest surviving diary by an American woman. Although the diary's entries are much briefer, more sporadic, and less emotional than what we typically see today, these accounts evidently held special meaning for Mehetabel—as did the poems, recipes, medical remedies, and even some humor she interspersed among the diary's pages.

Following Mehetabel's death in 1758, her descendants carefully preserved what she had labeled "Her Book," and in 1895 three of Mehetabel's great-great-granddaughters published a collection of her diary entries, along with two of



**Michelle Marchetti Coughlin** is an independent scholar specializing in early American women's history. She lives in the Boston area and maintains a website at [onecolonialwomansworld.com](http://onecolonialwomansworld.com). She would like to express her gratitude to all of Mehetabel's descendants who have reached out to her, and she sends special thanks to the family of the late William Hubbard, with whom she formed a connection early in the process of writing *One Colonial Woman's World*.

her letters, titled *Mehetabel Chandler Coit: Her Book, 1714*. I first encountered Mehetabel's writings through this work, and my interest in early American women's history drove me to try to locate her original manuscripts. I discovered that Mehetabel's letters—along with a collection of about two dozen others written by her mother, mother-in-law, sister, daughter, and friend—had been donated to the Yale University Library by a descendant in the 1940s. Extensive genealogical research disclosed that the diary was still in family hands, where it remains to this day.

Given this tradition of dedicated family stewardship, I perhaps should not have been so stunned when one of Mehetabel's descendants—a great-great-great-great-granddaughter named Eleanor Hoague—recently contacted me to say she had a seventeenth-century letter-book thought to have belonged to Mehetabel's mother, Elizabeth (Douglas) Chandler (1641–1705). Containing copies of both incoming and outgoing correspondence, the eighteen-page letter-book was part of an extensive collection of family manuscripts, most dating from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, of which Eleanor had become the caretaker. I was thrilled by the prospect of the book's existence, not only because it promised the possibility of a further glimpse into the lives of Mehetabel and her family, but because the letter-book would be a rare example of such a record kept by a seventeenth-century American woman.

Eleanor, with the aid of her husband Marc, sent me a copy of the letter-book, which, at 3½" x 5½," is the same size as Mehetabel's diary. Although the letter-book does not include Elizabeth Chandler's signature or a statement of ownership like Mehetabel's diary, one page carries an early-nineteenth-century attribution of authorship: *This book was written by M<sup>rs</sup> Elisabeth Chandler great grand-mother to Daniel L Coit, probably written one hundred and twenty years ago—1812. E. Coit.* ("E. Coit" was likely Eliza Coit, a granddaughter of Mehetabel's son Joseph, from whom

Eleanor also descends, and the mother of the three women who published the extracts from Mehetabel's diary in 1895.) Also supporting the theory of Elizabeth's ownership is the handwriting's close similarity to the handwriting in Elizabeth's surviving letters at Yale, and the fact that one of the letters in the book is signed "E. C." Elizabeth appears to have been the author of two additional unsigned letters, and the recipient of four letters addressed to either *Madam* or *a Friend*.

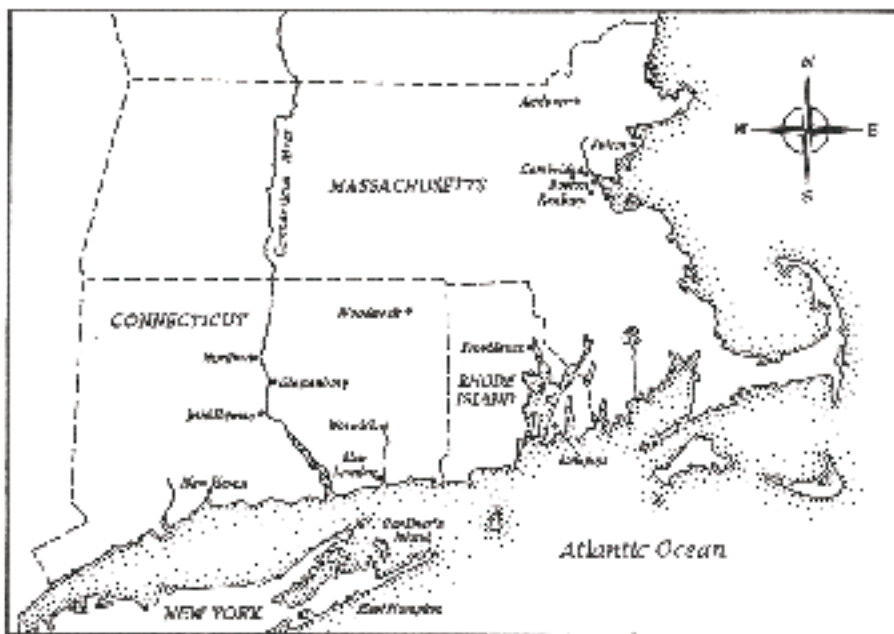
That only some of the eleven letters, most of them undated, seem to have been originally written by, or sent to, Elizabeth is one of this book's puzzles and differentiates it from most other letter-books of the time. Further ambiguity arises from the fact that some of the authors and recipients of the remaining correspondence are identified only by their initials and others are not identified at all. One of the letters, serendipitously, may have been written by Mehetabel herself. Signed "M C" and dated 1691, this letter conveys belated thanks to a friend and her mother, who had been *a tender nurse . . . During [M.C.'s] abode with her*. (By chance, an entry in Mehetabel's diary notes that in August 1690 she was *taken very sick at Cambridg, Massachusetts*, probably

with smallpox.) Another letter may have been written to Mehetabel by her younger brother Joseph after her move to New London; it is signed "J C" and described as *a Lette[r] to his sister*.

While finding additional correspondence possibly linked to Mehetabel was exciting, I was most intrigued by the letter-book's six love letters. Three of these seem to have been exchanged between Elizabeth and a suitor identified only as "J C." In a letter apparently authored by Elizabeth, she advises the recipient, whom she addresses as "Sir," to save himself the *Labour of coming any more*, because she *cannot see any Reason to venture upon such a design without y<sup>e</sup> chief thing, to witt Love*. She closes by wishing this individual to become *happy in some other* and bidding him *fare well*. In the first of what seem to be "J C's" two responses—both addressed "Madam"—he refers to her *Resolution to give [him] a hearty fare well*, but reaffirms his wish to win her love and fidelity and notes that he will *wait upon [her] pleasure[,] either To*

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*Opposite page:* The first page of Elizabeth Douglas Chandler's letter-book. Courtesy of Eleanor Hoague. *Below:* Map of Mehetabel's New England by Margaret McWethy. From *One Colonial Woman's World*.



cut y<sup>e</sup> string & let [him] fly[,] Or give y<sup>e</sup> [string] a stronger ty[,] & shall Remane [hers] to Listen for a good answer[.] He ends, provocatively, *you know when & where.*

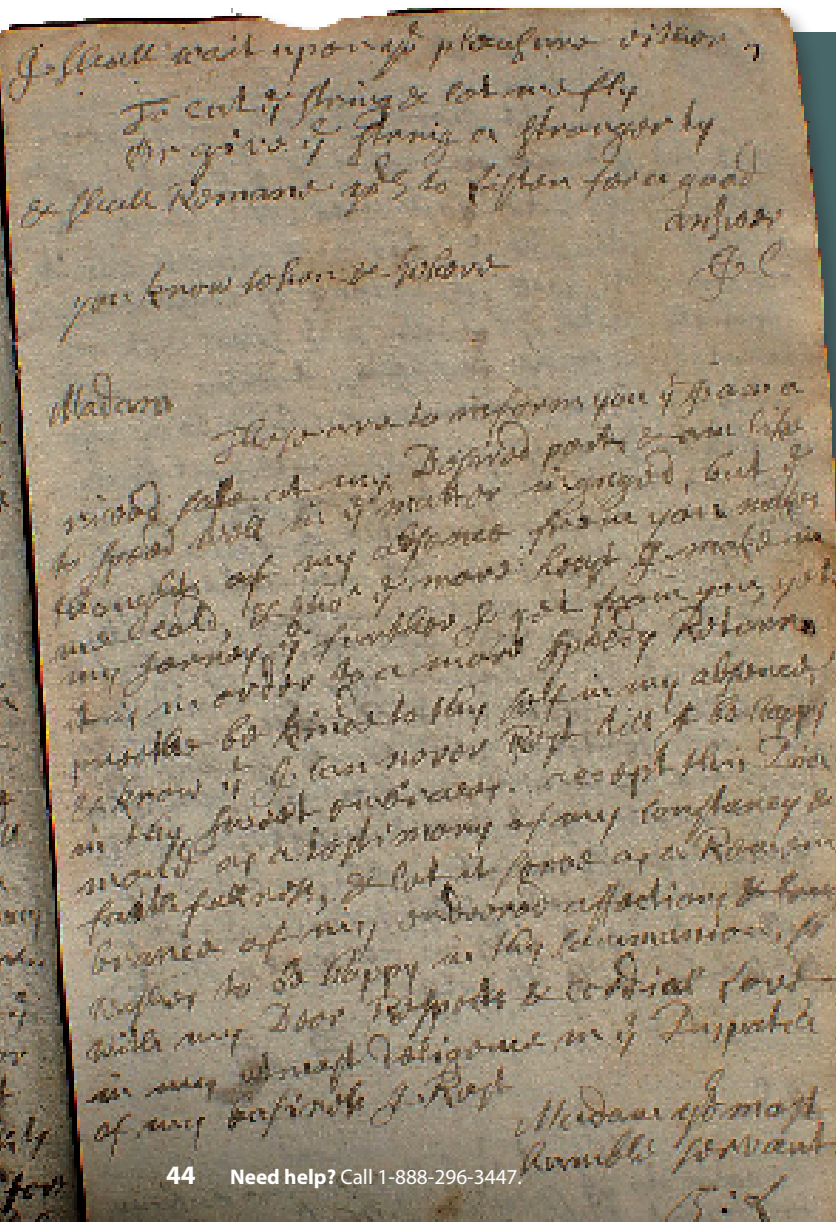
My first thought upon reading this letter was that it was written by John Chandler before he and Elizabeth married in 1659. But then I saw the second letter from “J C;” which asks, *why my Dearest Dust thou thus Linger & hinder o’ sweetest mutual enjoyment in a conugal Relation* and requests that she *wink at faults* and (in another rhyme) *Resolve me whether thy affections be Real & cordial towards me, or if not let me know my Destiny.* This second letter was sent from Mud[d]y River, or Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1681, when Elizabeth and John would have been married for more than twenty years and living

in Roxbury. So what is the story? Were John and Elizabeth temporarily living apart, or is “J C” someone else altogether?

Also raising questions about Elizabeth’s romantic life are the three other (undated) love letters. In one, a gentleman identified only as “B L” avows that he could *never Rest till [he] be happy in [her] sweet embraces*, and notes that he is sending a *Diamond as a testimony of [his] constancy & faithfullness.* Another, which Elizabeth herself may have written, admonishes with a *Worthy friend* for allowing *maloncholy* to *po[i]son [his] heart*, declaring that *altho shee[?] be gone who was yo<sup>r</sup> sole Delight[,] yet be not so cruel as to bury yo<sup>r</sup> self alive in y<sup>e</sup> same grave, Least some other w<sup>e</sup> [which] you might be as happy in, Do y<sup>e</sup> same on yo<sup>r</sup> behalf.* The letter concludes, *send*

*me word where you are & I will come & visit you for I protest y<sup>e</sup> affection y<sup>e</sup> [that] I bear to you obligeth me never to Rest till I know its well with you.* The final letter in the book perhaps represents this person’s reply; if so, circumstances seem to have prevented him from acting on his feelings. The writer professes, *tho I had Rather enjoy a substance y<sup>e</sup> [than] behold a shaddow yet know y<sup>e</sup> I bear such affection in my heart towards you never to be Rooted out, . . . but a Lass what can words do in this case? you may justly object, y<sup>e</sup> some active Demonstrations would be more significant. I grant y<sup>e</sup> truth of y<sup>e</sup>, & must now condole my case & give you sighs in stead of other manifestations & hide my head as one y<sup>e</sup> bewails an unhappy Destiny.*

In addition to correspondence, the letter-book also features a small but



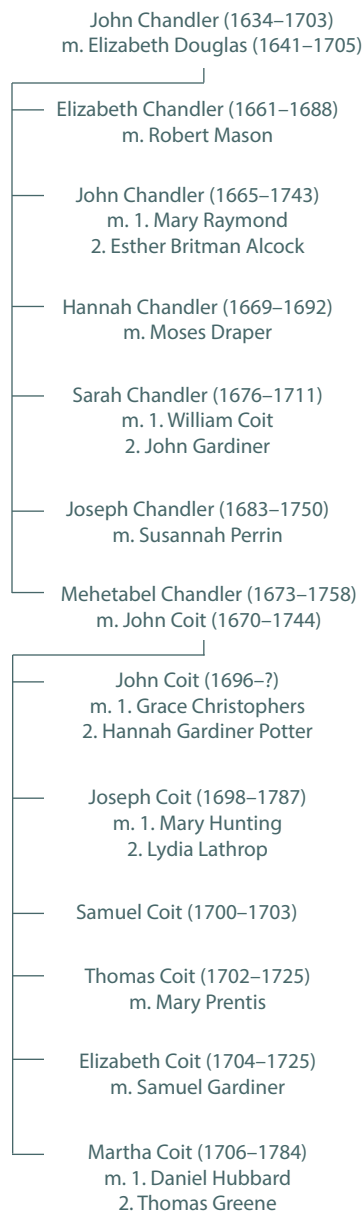
### Transcript of Elizabeth Douglas Chandler’s Letter-book, p. 11

(This page contains portions of two love letters.)  
Courtesy of Eleanor Hoague.

I shall wait upon yo<sup>r</sup> pleasure either  
To cut y<sup>e</sup> string & let me fly  
Or give y<sup>e</sup> strinig [string] a stronger ty  
& shall Remane yo<sup>r</sup> to Listen for a good answer  
you know when & where J C

Madam  
These are to inform you y<sup>e</sup> I am a  
rived safe at my Desired port & am like  
to speed well in y<sup>e</sup> matter ingaged, but y<sup>e</sup>  
thoughts of my absence from you makes  
me cold, and tho y<sup>e</sup> more heast I make in  
my jorney y<sup>e</sup> further I get from you, yet  
it is in order to a more speedy Return.  
preethe [prithree?] be kinde to thy self in my absence,  
& know y<sup>e</sup> I can never Rest till I be happy  
in thy sweet embraces. accept this Dia  
mond as a testimony of my constancy &  
faithfullness, & let it serve as a Remem  
brance of my endeared affections & [illeg. word]  
wishes to be happy in thy communion, so  
with my Dear Respects & cordial Love  
in my utmost deligence in y<sup>e</sup> Dispatch  
of my business I Rest  
Madam yo<sup>r</sup> most  
humble servant  
B : L

## The Chandler and Coit Families



compelling collection of musings and reflections. Some of these are simple observations (*extream heats & colds will cause a thunder in nature; a diget is a number not Consisting of more then 1 unit ... as 1. 2. 3 4. &c*), while others are more unusual. On the first page of the book are the lines *I once took delight in yo<sup>r</sup> Company[,] w<sup>c</sup> now is a terrour to me and well may I be in bitter pangs when the birth proves a monster[;] if you Doubt who gave it being[,] discerne[,] I pray you[,] whose are the brass[?][.] cast the signal & the staffe & you need not wonder much*. On page 5 is the equally strange *wonder not y<sup>t</sup> at y<sup>e</sup> first sight of yo<sup>r</sup> po[o]r son I do not adore you, for you appear in another form, & when I ponder, I can scarce think it to be so much as yo<sup>r</sup> shape, you are so mattomorphosed, y<sup>t</sup> I cannot but fly from you as from some Deadly ghost*.

I have been unable to find the meaning behind these bizarre (and, frankly, somewhat ominous) passages, but hope that some explanation may yet be found. With their references to terrors, monsters, and ghosts, these writings seem to evoke the supernatural (and some may refer to a “monstrous,” or abnormal, birth, an occasion that would have caused local Puritans, ever on the lookout for messages from God, to wonder at its divine portent). They also likely hold a personal symbolism. In fact, the letter-book itself appears to have been meant to serve as some type of object lesson (for Elizabeth’s

daughters, perhaps?); a line on the first page advises, *If you can pick out any thing out of this confession[,] w<sup>c</sup> hath breathed from out of the disturbance of passion[,] w<sup>c</sup> may be of use[,] accept it as the kernall & cast the shell aside*.

Although it would have been ideal to have learned of the letter-book’s existence while writing my book on Mehetabel, the timing of the discovery was still fortuitous. I had recently started work on an article about a sixty-four-page poem Elizabeth had written circa 1681, which I had stumbled across in the Yale archives while completing my research for the book. (The poem had been mislabeled by Yale as having possibly been written by Joseph Coit, Mehetabel’s son; the archivist probably meant to write “Joseph Chandler,” Mehetabel’s brother, who authored a short elegy commemorating his mother’s death in the same booklet.) Entitled *A Meditation, or Poem, Being an Ep[ic?] of the Experiences and Conflicts of a Poor Trembling Soul in Y<sup>e</sup> First Fourty Years of Her Life*, this work chronicles Elizabeth’s spiritual development. Her surviving letters at Yale likewise have a religious emphasis, as do two pages included with the letter-book that describe God’s mercies toward *poor sinners*. The essentially secular nature of the letter-book’s content, with its dark overtones and suggestions of *disturbance[s] of passion*, certainly complicates my earlier assessment of Elizabeth’s character and makes me want to delve deeper into her personal history. Many of the answers I seek may be forever lost to time, but considering the treasure trove of surviving family manuscripts that have already surfaced, one has to wonder: what else is out there? ♦



### About the book

*One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit* by Michelle Marchetti Coughlin was published in 2012 by the University of Massachusetts Press. Coit’s long life covered an eventful period in American history, and this book explores numerous—and sometimes surprising—ways in which her personal history was linked to broader social and political developments. It also provides insight into the lives of countless other colonial American women whose history remains largely untold. The book can be purchased through the NEHGS Book Store ([AmericanAncestors.org/store](http://AmericanAncestors.org/store)) or other booksellers.