



# The Bradford House Women

In October 2016 I was asked by Erin McGough, Executive Director of the Duxbury (Mass.) Rural and Historical Society (DRHS), to conduct a study of the women who had lived in DRHS's 1808 Bradford House. Until recently, the site was known as the Captain Gershom Bradford House and tours had focused on Bradford's maritime career. Since 2014, the historical society's "Re-Imagining Bradford" campaign has sought to revitalize the site and lay the groundwork for highlighting the stories of the four daughters of Gershom Bradford (1774–1844) and Sarah (Hickling) Bradford (1772–1861): Maria (1803–1864), Lucia (1807–1893), Elizabeth (1809–1890), and Charlotte (1813–1893), who were among the area's leading abolitionists and social activists.

The Bradford home saw intense abolitionist activity: the family opened its doors to prominent anti-slavery agents such as Abby Kelley Foster and Charles Lenox Remond. (After visiting in March 1844, Remond was moved to note that "the kindness, goodness and

hospitality of Capt. Bradford's family will not be forgotten by us soon.")<sup>1</sup>) The Bradford sisters were driving forces in local anti-slavery circles, raising money, circulating petitions, and distributing tracts for the cause. When the Civil War broke out, Lucia and Charlotte traveled to Washington, D.C. to serve as nurses. Charlotte worked on military transport ships, trained under mental health pioneer Dorothea Dix, and eventually became the matron of the U.S. Sanitary Commission's Home for Wives and Mothers.

Sources for better understanding the Bradford women's lives were readily available: DRHS's extensive Bradford family archive encompasses thousands of letters, journals, log books, and other material dating from ca. 1770 to 1967. Since Carolyn Ravenscroft, DRHS's archivist and historian, had already extensively researched the Bradford sisters, I focused my investigation on their mother, Sarah "Sally" (Hickling) Bradford and her mother, Elizabeth (Hodson) Hickling



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Left: The Bradford House,  
Duxbury, Massachusetts.

(1745–1827); the latter spent the final months of her life at the Bradford House. I was interested in Sally’s and Elizabeth’s influence on the development of the Bradford sisters’ social activism and independence. (Only one sister married: in 1830 Maria wed her distant cousin, abolitionist minister Claudius Bradford.)

Although my research showed Sally’s mother Elizabeth to be a powerful matriarchal figure, Elizabeth herself began life without a strong maternal influence. Her mother, Mary (Lee) Hodson, died when Elizabeth was young; before Elizabeth was eight her father, Thomas Hodson, had remarried.<sup>2</sup>

In 1764, when Elizabeth was nineteen, she married fellow Bostonian William Hickling. The couple had four children, three of whom would marry Bradford siblings.<sup>3</sup> As a young mother, Elizabeth was forced to cope with the stress and turmoil of living in Boston during its eight-year (1768–1776) occupation by the British army.

I discovered through property records in the NEHGS database *Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822 (Thwing Collection)* that Elizabeth and her family likely lived near the Boston waterfront on Batterymarch Street.<sup>4</sup> A 1775 *Plan of the Town of Boston with the Intrenchments &c. of His Majesty’s Forces*, included in the Boston Public Library’s online Leventhal Map Center collection, shows Batterymarch’s proximity to many scenes of action: British encampments, the army’s arrival point at Long Wharf, and the Boston Tea Party site at Griffin’s Wharf.

A 1769 document on the Massachusetts Historical Society’s website lists William Hickling as a member of the Sons of Liberty.<sup>5</sup> (I wondered whether Elizabeth Hickling herself was a Daughter of Liberty, one

of the hundreds of Boston women who refused to use British-imported goods and signed petitions pledging not to drink tea.) Testimony taken after the Boston Massacre shows William Hickling in the area that evening; sensing trouble, he returned home before any shots were fired.<sup>6</sup> An oral tradition in the Bradford family suggests that William participated in the Boston Tea Party—his family allegedly found tea leaves in his clothing the next morning—but this story may never be proved. Since participants closely



Sarah "Sally" (Hickling) Bradford. All images courtesy of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

guarded their identities because of the high stakes involved, we still don’t know the names of many who took part.<sup>7</sup>

For over a year between 1777 and 1778 William served in the Continental Army; he was stationed in New York while Elizabeth presumably remained in Boston with their four young children. By this time the British had left the city, but conditions were bleak: Bostonians faced a smallpox epidemic, food shortages, and

economic uncertainty. After William returned from New York, he became a gunner on Governor’s and Castle Islands in Boston Harbor, serving from March 1780 through January 1785.<sup>8</sup>

Learning how the Revolutionary War had cast its shadow over not only Elizabeth Hickling’s life but over Sally (Hickling) Bradford’s childhood—she was born in 1772—was a turning point in my research. I recognized that enduring the war’s hardships no doubt influenced both women to develop their noted fortitude. In Sally’s case, her wartime experiences likely led her to become a “Republican Mother,” investing in the values of the new Republic by encouraging education and civic virtue in her children.

Although Sally’s own schooling had likely been rudimentary, she ensured that her daughters received the best available education.<sup>9</sup> She also supported—and participated in—her daughters’ efforts to promote the public good through social causes, particularly abolitionism. After Sally’s death in 1861, the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* described her and her family as among the “earliest to embrace, and the most steadfast to hold, and the most diligent to diffuse the truths taught by the pioneers of abolitionism.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1790, William Hickling died at age 48, leaving Elizabeth a 45-year-old widow with children in their late teens and early twenties. William’s 1783 will (which I accessed in the Suffolk Probate Court microfilm records at NEHGS) left Elizabeth all his real and personal estate for her use during her lifetime while she remained unmarried. Although William did not name an executor, the court appointed Elizabeth—evidence that she was capable of overseeing his financial affairs and property.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than remarrying—perhaps a more attractive choice for many women—Elizabeth chose to earn a living and set up shop. (Boston city directories from 1796 and 1798 list



*Clockwise, from top left: The Bradford sisters: Maria, Lucia, Charlotte, and Elizabeth.*

her as a “retailer, commerces.”<sup>12</sup>). Despite a story preserved at DRHS that Elizabeth took over William’s store following his death, every document I found listing William’s occupation described him as a distiller—suggesting that Elizabeth’s business was a new one. The location of her store was 77 Broad Street in Boston.<sup>13</sup> Nearby was the Hickling home on Batterymarch Street, where, according to city directories, Elizabeth lived with her grown children until they married: Elizabeth in 1792, William in 1796, and Sally and Charlotte in 1802. According to a letter written by Sally’s daughter Maria in 1832, Elizabeth also occasionally took in lodgers to supplement her income.<sup>14</sup>

Long after her children had grown, Elizabeth continued to shoulder family responsibilities. By the early 1800s, she was helping to care for her adult son William, who in 1807 was declared to be “a person non compos mentis” and placed under guardianship by the Suffolk Probate Court.<sup>15</sup> Family letters began referring to William’s “illness” at least as early as 1803, and that year the Boston city directory lists Elizabeth as living with William and his family.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth evidently moved in to help William’s wife Sarah care for him and their children. William remained under guardianship for almost two decades; he died in 1825.

In the end, Elizabeth (Hodson) Hickling outlived not only her son, but

two of her remaining three children. Her daughter Elizabeth (Hickling) Bradford died of tuberculosis in 1817. During a single month in 1820, “spotted fever” (likely typhus) claimed the lives of another daughter, Charlotte (Hickling) Ellison, as well as Charlotte’s husband James, and two of their six children. Two of the surviving children—William and Edward Ellison—came to live with Sally and Gershom Bradford, their aunt and uncle, in Duxbury.<sup>17</sup> Remarkably, Elizabeth, then 75, assumed responsibility for the cost of room, board, and education for her Ellison grandsons. She also stood bond for \$1,500 each for the guardianships of William, Edward, and their siblings, and served as surety for the administration of her late son-in-law’s estate.<sup>18</sup>

Before she died in 1827, Elizabeth Hickling came to live with Sally and Gershom at the Bradford House. Elizabeth brought some treasured possessions, including her trunk and writing desk and her husband’s Revolutionary War sword. Most of these items were passed to Sally and her daughters and remain part of the Bradford House collection. Elizabeth’s “easy chair” became Sally’s favorite resting spot during her own old age and was later adapted into a wheelchair for her daughter Elizabeth in the latter’s own later years.

Witnessing her mother’s resilience in the face of adversity undoubtedly served as a life lesson for Sally, who faced her own personal trials. Soon after she married Gershom in 1802 he left on a series of months-long sea voyages, leaving Sally alone for the first several years of their marriage and for most of her pregnancies and deliveries. In 1808 with preparations underway to build the Bradford House, Gershom was temporarily taken captive by French privateers. Sally was left to oversee the drawing up of architectural plans, the clearing of land, and the securing of finances. Gershom was absent, too, when their infant son died in 1812. Until he retired from the sea in 1826, Sally was primarily

## A note on resources

The Duxbury Rural and Historical Society's Bradford House is located at 931 Tremont Street, Duxbury, Mass. Please check [duxburyhistory.org](http://duxburyhistory.org) for details regarding open hours.

The Bradford Family Collection (ca. 1770–1967) is housed at the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society's Drew Archival Library, 147 George Street. For more information or to make an appointment, visit [drewarchives.org](http://drewarchives.org).

The Boston Athenaeum's online collection of Boston City Directories 1789–1900 is at [cdm.bostonathenaeum.org/cdm/search/searchterm/Boston%20\(Mass.\)--Directories./mode/exact](http://cdm.bostonathenaeum.org/cdm/search/searchterm/Boston%20(Mass.)--Directories./mode/exact).

The Boston Public Library Norman B. Leventhal Map Center online collection is at [leventhalmap.org/](http://leventhalmap.org/).

Online databases accessed through the NEHGS website, [AmericanAncestors.org](http://AmericanAncestors.org):

- Direct Tax list of 1798 for Massachusetts and Maine
- Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822 (Thwing Collection)
- Massachusetts Vital Records to 1850
- Suffolk County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1636–1893

responsible for running the household, raising their children, and handling Gershom's business affairs. Here she was able to put to good use the accounting and business skills likely learned from her mother during the dozen years between her father's death and Sally's own marriage.

Gershom's letters to his wife and children are deeply affectionate and demonstrate his love for them and his support of their goals and interests. His passing in 1844 left a large hole in the lives of his wife and daughters; yet they continued to flourish. Sally's surviving account book (reflecting a frugal New England sensibility with accounts kept to the nearest cent) suggests that she maintained a money-lending business. She made loans to nearby Partridge Academy, and several local men were listed as her "debtors." A neighbor, Rev. Josiah Moore, owed Sally \$590—over \$16,000 in contemporary dollars—at the time of her death in 1861.<sup>19</sup>

Maria, Charlotte, Lucia, and Elizabeth absorbed the lessons of their mother and grandmother. Well before their father died, the sisters undertook various types of work in order

to contribute to the family income. At different times each sister taught school; some also took in sewing. An archaeological excavation conducted in 2015 by the Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project found evidence in the Bradford House cellar of dairying, perhaps butter or cheese-making, on a large scale.<sup>20</sup>

Elizabeth and Sally's examples undoubtedly helped the Bradford sisters persevere as they faced health issues, family separations, and financial challenges. Their letters reveal that they assisted each other with furthering formal education, finding teaching jobs, providing a sounding board for ideas, and tending to each other when ill and elderly. Their family network shaped their lives, inspired them, and empowered their social activism. These women who so valued, in Sally Bradford's words, "The union of such a family such as ours that always love each other in joy and sorrow," recognized how much stronger they were individually when they worked together.<sup>21</sup>

The Bradford sisters never had to sell their home. After the last two sisters,

Charlotte and Lucia, died within weeks of each other in 1893, the Bradford House passed to their sister Maria's children, who used it primarily as a summer retreat. The house was later inherited by Maria's grandchildren, Gershom and Edward Bradford (sons of her son Laurence Bradford and his wife Hattie [Phipps]), who donated it to DRHS in 1968. The Bradford House then became a museum and is now considered an architectural treasure, close to its original condition and still on its ten-acre site.

In March 2017 DRHS sponsored a symposium, "Reclaiming a House's History," which featured my research as well as presentations by others involved in the "Re-Imagining Bradford" project: DRHS's archivist and historian, Carolyn Ravenscroft; architect Frank Shirley, who oversaw the building's restoration; archaeologist Craig Chartier, who conducted a dig in the basement; and scholars Jayne Gordon and Nicole Belolan, who explored other aspects of the Bradford family history. In the summer of 2017 DRHS unveiled a new exhibit which drew on this work, "Four Bradford Daughters: Lives Well Lived." The exhibit has drawn large audiences, indicating that the stories of the Bradford women continue to resonate and have relevance today. ♦

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Lenox Remond, quoted in Carolyn Ravenscroft, "A Home for Abolition," Drew Archival Library website, [drewarchives.org/a-home-for-abolition/](http://drewarchives.org/a-home-for-abolition/).
- <sup>2</sup> In 1771, Thomas Hodson bought property from, and mortgaged property to, painter John Singleton Copley. Entries for Thomas Hodson begin on pages 10692 and 11013, *Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822 (Thwing Collection)*. (Online database: [AmericanAncestors.org](http://AmericanAncestors.org), NEHGS, 2014.)
- <sup>3</sup> Sally's sister Elizabeth married Gershom's brother Gamaliel, and Sally's brother William married Gershom's sister Sarah.
- <sup>4</sup> Entry for William Hickling on page 10548, *Inhabitants and Estates of the Town of Boston, 1630–1822*.
- <sup>5</sup> "An Alphabetical Listing of the Sons of Liberty Who Din'd at Liberty Tree, Dorchester, August 14th, 1769," [masshist.org/objects/cabinet/august2001/sonsoflibertyfull.htm](http://masshist.org/objects/cabinet/august2001/sonsoflibertyfull.htm).

- <sup>6</sup> Neil L. York, *The Boston Massacre: A History with Documents* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 178 (deposition of Richard Palmes).
- <sup>7</sup> William Hickling is not on the list of Tea Party participants compiled by historian Benjamin Carp for *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (Yale University Press, 2011) but, as noted, the identity of many participants remains a mystery. Carp's list appears on the website of the Old South Meeting House, [osmh.org/history/boston-tea-party/list-participants](http://osmh.org/history/boston-tea-party/list-participants).
- <sup>8</sup> *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1900), 7:820. [archive.org/stream/massachusettsolhixmass#page/820/mode/2up/search/Hickling](http://archive.org/stream/massachusettsolhixmass#page/820/mode/2up/search/Hickling).
- <sup>9</sup> Sally (Hickling) and Maria, Lucia, and Elizabeth Bradford to Gershom Bradford, December 3, 1817, Drew Archival Library, Duxbury Rural and Historical Society (DRHS). For a discussion of the concept of Republican Motherhood, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), Chapter 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Obituary of Sally (Hickling) Bradford, *The Liberator*, October 18, 1861, 167.
- <sup>11</sup> William Hickling Estate Papers, 1790, Suffolk County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1636–1893, 19632.89: 74–76.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Boston Directory* (Boston: John West, 1796), 56; *The Boston Directory* (Boston: John West, 1798), 62.
- <sup>13</sup> The store was at 77 Broad Street in 1827. Elizabeth (Hodson) Hickling Estate Papers, 1828, Plymouth County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1686–1881, 10060:12.
- <sup>14</sup> Maria (Bradford) Bradford to Sarah (Hickling) Bradford, November 1, 1832; copy at Drew Archival Library, DRHS; original in William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.
- <sup>15</sup> William Hickling, Jr. Guardianship Petition, 1807, Suffolk County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1636–1893, 22628.105: 68.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Boston Directory* (Boston: John West, 1803), 66.
- <sup>17</sup> "Spotted fever" quotation from Gamaliel Bradford letter quoted in Joan Goodman, *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley: The Life of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2011), 94.
- <sup>18</sup> Guardianship papers for William, James, Edward, and Sarah Ellison in 1821, Suffolk County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1636–1893, 26317.398: 272–75; James Ellison Estate, 1821, Suffolk County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1636–1893, 26312.206: 129.
- <sup>19</sup> Sarah (Hickling) Bradford Account Book, Drew Archival Library, DRHS; Sarah (Hickling) Bradford Estate, 1861, Plymouth County (Mass.) Probate Records, 1686–1881, 2609: 10. According to [measuringworth.com](http://measuringworth.com), \$590 is equivalent to approximately \$16,000 in 2017 values.
- <sup>20</sup> Craig S. Chartier, *Report on Archaeological Testing at the Bradford House, Duxbury, Mass.*, Plymouth Archaeological Rediscovery Project, December 2015, 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Sarah (Hickling) Bradford to Maria (Bradford) Bradford, August 4, ca. 1838–1839, Drew Archival Library, DRHS.

### (The Curious Story of George H. Osborne, continued from page 35)

The label pasted into the flyleaf includes a memorial to the Countess's son, "Who spent many quiet hours in the Richmond Library." The second was the muzzle-loading rifle my great-grandfather received in exchange for the one he bought from George. The rifle bears a brass plaque inscribed with the words: "Presented By The Earl of Aberdeen to M. O. Randall Richmond Maine 1871."

During our visit to Haddo House, we viewed portraits of the Gordon Earls—beginning with the 1st Earl of Aberdeen, who was granted the title in 1682—displayed proudly in the drawing room. Curiously, George Hamilton Gordon, 6th Earl of Aberdeen, was not pictured; his portrait should have hung between those of 5th and 7th Earls. It saddened us to think that this

independent-minded young man is not celebrated in his own home. Our family cherishes the stories of George "Osborne" and takes pride in his friendship with our ancestor. My mother always felt that when he stopped by for dinner, Archie reunited the 6th Earl's family with the friends he left behind in Maine more than a century ago. ♦

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John M. Bulloch, *The Gay Gordons* (London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1908), 276; Archibald Gordon, *The Wild Flight of the Gordons* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), 168; and "Lord Aberdeen," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 31 (June 24, 1871), 805–6.
- <sup>2</sup> Gordon, *The Wild Flight of the Gordons* [note 1], 152.
- <sup>3</sup> "Lord Aberdeen," *Saturday Review* [note 1], 805–6.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 155; James Taylor, *The Great Historic Families of Scotland*, vol. 1 (London: J. S. Virtue & Company, 1889), 357.
- <sup>5</sup> Bernard Burke, *The Rise of Great Families* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1873), 177.
- <sup>6</sup> Gordon, *The Wild Flight of the Gordons* [note 1], 175.
- <sup>7</sup> Fannie S. Chase, "Earl of Aberdeen Rifle Story," *Wiscasset in Pownalborough* (Portland, Maine: 1941), 444–46.
- <sup>8</sup> Haddo House is now managed by the National Trust for Scotland. For more information, visit [nts.org.uk/Visit/Haddo-House/](http://nts.org.uk/Visit/Haddo-House/).
- <sup>9</sup> "Lord Aberdeen," *Saturday Review* [note 1], 805.
- <sup>10</sup> Gordon, *The Wild Flight of the Gordons* [note 1], 156.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.
- <sup>13</sup> "Lord Aberdeen," *Saturday Review* [note 1], 805–6.
- <sup>14</sup> Bulloch, *The Gay Gordons* [note 1], 268–81; Gordon, *The Wild Flight of the Gordons* [note 1], 121–78.
- <sup>15</sup> E. B. Elliott, ed., "Notice of the Sixth Earl of Aberdeen," appendix VII in *Memoir of Lord Haddo in his Later Years*, 6th ed. (London: Sheeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1873), 316.
- <sup>16</sup> Gordon, *The Wild Flight of the Gordons* [note 1], 190–91.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.
- <sup>18</sup> The text is reproduced in Elliott, "Notice of the Sixth Earl of Aberdeen," 315–28.