

## I CHOOSE YOU

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I am sure that as a group the members of The Literary Club probably shun most commercial television. While some of us may invest a fair amount of time in sports - particularly college basketball at this time of year - this group is far too erudite to be drawn into the weekly fare of network television. Certainly, there are good things. I suspect most of us are viewers and contributing members of WCET, and occasionally the Discover or History Channel may offer something.

Just the other evening, I found myself drawn into a fascinating review on the History Channel of the design and development of the M-16 rifle. It even included a local reference to the role of Neil McElroy, then Secretary of Defense and his 'wiz kids' in the project. It is somehow reassuring when history as recorded by others coincides with your own reality. In the case of the M-16, I was in Viet Nam in '66 when it was introduced to replace the M-14, and heard firsthand from many Marines of the horrors of having the guns jam on them. Until the television program, I never knew that the solution had to do with modifications to the gunpowder, and chroming the inside of the barrel.

Despite what I have suggested as the membership's non-participation in commercial network television, it may be that some of you have encountered while walking through the living room - the recent onslaught of "reality" TV shows. One of the first of these a few seasons ago was "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" hosted by the indefatigable Regis Philbin. I admit that it was a favorite at our house, and my wife and I enjoyed matching wits with the contestants. In fact, it was simply the old "\$64,000 Question" brought up-to speed with set design, video enhancements, and of course, a much bigger jackpot.

Shortly after that rather harmless game show, a spate of other programs appeared led by "The Survivor" and including "Fear Factor" and "The Mole." In shows of this type, otherwise normal human beings agree to be subjected to generally unpleasant living conditions, participate in rather silly and often degrading contests guaranteed to get people wet and muddy, including especially the lovely young ladies among the participants. The show usually involves strategy that caters to the lower order of Machiavellian scheming, and culminates with an opportunity for all of the participants to say something unkind about their colleagues. At least two area people have participated in "Survivor," and it's worth noting without explanation that Cincinnati's television market area records one of the highest regular viewerships [usually first or second] of any metropolitan area in the nation. One of the key reasons for the proliferation of these reality shows is that despite the prizes and the transportation costs and the production expenses, they are substantially less expensive than conventional hour-long television shows, and command equal and in some cases higher advertising rates because of the viewership.

It is, however, in the explosion over the last two seasons of the love and romance mate-selection shows that reality television has simultaneously hit its nadir, along with very strong ratings. One of the earliest love-mate selection pieces was a tawdry FOX entry entitled, "Who Wants To Marry A Millionaire?" There, the marriage itself was performed on television, and then shortly thereafter, with great scandal it was annulled, as we learned that the millionaire was of dubious value and had allegations of spouse abuse in his past.

In the scramble to develop low-cost, high-yield shows, each network developed its own particular approach. Not surprisingly, FOX produced a program entitled "Joe Millionaire." The premise of this show was that a young man in his late 20's to mid-30's was unmarried, and a millionaire. Operating out of a gorgeous mansion, he was called upon to sort through a bevy of beauties all of whom were competing to be his final chosen one. The audience followed this exercise with baited breath as he, at the end of each show, dismissed ladies whittling the choice down to a final two. What the audience knew and the ladies presumably did not - was that there was a major deception at work. The young man was not a millionaire, but in fact, a construction worker. In the final episodes, a breathtaking combination of deception and double deception worthy of a Shakespeare comedy occurred as choices were made, a winner emerged, and the happy couple both received 1/2 million dollars as a prize for exposing themselves to the scrutiny of millions.

Other shows in the genre have pursued this combination of selection/rejection, and, in some instances, deception. Of local note, was a one-time show premise entitled "Who Wants To Marry Our Father?" In this timeless piece of television, the adult children of a Glendale resident oversaw their dad's dating, interviewed the lady candidates for his hand, and in the end, after rejecting a former Miss America [what were they thinking?] selected a true prize for him.

Other variations include "Average Joe" where an extraordinary beautiful woman picks among a number of singularly unattractive young men to see if, in fact, love is blind. One of FOX's entries in the recent February sweeps period was a three-part show entitled, "The Littlest Groom" which featured a small person selecting among a variety of possible mates of all sizes and shapes.

My favorite in the deception/ridiculous category is the recent "My Fat Obnoxious Fiancé" where a young woman tries to convince her family that she wants to marry a young man who manages to combine all of the unattractive characteristics of a sixth grade bathroom humor in the person of someone that we all knew in college and we promised never, **ever** to invite to our home.

However, the king and queen of mate selection shows are ABC's "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette." The format is the same as "Joe Millionaire" including group dates and individual dates and walks along the beach, and visits in the latter stages first to the home of the candidates, and then when we are down to two or three, the home of the selector.

Both of the shows use a very dramatic selection method where everyone is gathered in a lovely room for the "Rose Ceremony." The catch is that there are always fewer roses than there are people in the room, and as the tray on which the roses sit

empties with the picking up of the last rose for presentation, things tend to get a bit emotional.

In one of the more dramatic finales, a lovely young woman, whose name is Meredith, I am informed, who had bared her soul to both the bachelor, and in asides to the television audience at home, expressing her love for the young man, found herself rejected. There she was, all alone, except for the television camera, in a limousine speeding away from the mansion. With tears running down her beautifully made up face, choking back the sobs, she said: "He has just made a gigantic mistake. He chose the wrong person. He will be sorry when he realizes what he has done."

In what passes for television irony, Meredith was rewarded with her own show as "The Bachelorette." There in the role of 'chooser', she agonized through six weeks of eliminating the guys, until she found 'true happiness' - this despite her earlier protestations of undying love. It just shows that time heals, sometimes.

From this review of made-for-television faux reality, we shift to a time 250 years ago. In colonial times, in a small town, in the smallest colony, a real drama of love and choices played itself out. The starting point for this story is a colonial graveyard in Little Compton, Rhode Island. There among the headstones is one which reads, "Lydia, died December 26th, 1754 in her 35th year, wife of Simeon Palmer." Next to this headstone is another that bears the inscription, "Elizabeth, died August 14th, 1776, in her 64th year, who should have been a wife to Simeon Palmer."

What could this mean? A woman spurned? The lament of an embittered spinster? Why was she buried next to Lydia? Had they been sisters in pursuit of the same man? In the words of the History Detectives [another TV show], "Let's find out!"

Little Compton, Rhode Island today is in some respects a step back in time. It's not a tourist destination for a number of reasons, one of which is that it is not all that easy to reach. In New England parlance, "You can't get there from here." Not only is there no Interstate highway connection, but, Little Compton is one of only three Rhode Island townships never to have railroad service.

Built around the historic Town Commons, the old center of Little Compton might still be recognizable to 18th Century colonists. The Commons is formed in the shape of a triangle, and inside the triangle, it contains the Congregational Church and the colonial graveyard. The graveyard is surrounded by a low stone wall [quite possibly built by slaves.] Tombstones go back before King Philip's War [1675]. On the outside of The Commons, Little Compton has its town hall, school, the Episcopal Church and Catholic Church, the library, the firehouse, the post office and general store which along with a few eighteenth and nineteenth century houses, comprise the requisite components of a New England town center.

Outside of the town center are small farms but virtually no industry or commercial development. On the southern tip of Little Compton is the Sakonnet Lighthouse. The town also has one working fishing harbor, and two other natural harbors. Sakonnet Point was once a major tourist destination for steamers from Providence and Fall River, Massachusetts. A grand hotel received these guests.

However, everything was destroyed in the Hurricane of 1938, and never rebuilt. Although not an exceptionally wealthy area like its neighbor Newport, clearly it is a desirable place to be. A recent real estate listing for a three-bedroom, 2-bath house with a "two stall garage" on the waterfront has an asking price of \$995,000. The current population of Little Compton is just over 3,300 persons. This represents a rather modest increase from the first official census in 1790, when Little Compton was home to 1,499 free white persons and 22 'other' free persons as well as 23 slaves.

The town was established by a small group of colonists from the Plymouth Colony. They claimed the 21-square miles on the peninsula, sixty miles from Plymouth and named it Sakonnet after the local Indian tribe. In 1682, the town was incorporated by Plymouth Colony and renamed Little Compton. Also, as is the case throughout New England, there are place names within the larger township that are not separately incorporated. Therefore, the colonial center of Little Compton was called The Commons and it, along with Adamsville and Sakonnet, make up the township along with a considerable amount of semi-rural land.

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The central facts of our tale drawn from state records are these:

- On February 18, 1718 Lydia Dennis was born to Robert and Susanna Dennis in Little Compton.
- Simeon Palmer was born July 13, 1723 to John and Sarah Palmer.
- On August 10th of 1745, the intention of Simeon and Lydia Dennis to marry was announced, and the marriage occurred August 25, 1745, and was performed by Richard Billings, a justice.
- Simeon and Lydia had five children.
- Lydia Dennis died December 26, 1754.
- Simeon Palmer and Elizabeth Mortimer were married September 5, 1755 by the Reverend Jonathan Ellis.
- One daughter was born to Simeon and Elizabeth on September 23, 1757.
- Elizabeth died August 10, 1776.

The rest of the story of the tombstones and the people involved may have gone something like this.

John Palmer was born May 18, 1665 in the township of Little Compton in Plymouth Colony. His wife-to-be, Elizabeth, was born December 6, 1666. Both families were farmers, carving fields out of the forest while keeping an eye out for the Indians, some of whom were friends, but not all. This period was the most violent in Rhode Island's history. Roger Williams had founded the colony on the tenets of religious freedom and fairness of dealing with the natives. In fact, when Williams and his small band of followers left Plymouth Colony, they were able to survive only through the

kindness of Cannonicus, Chief of the Narragansett's. He purchased the land on which Providence now sits from the Indians, and began what was to be decades of peace until the beginnings of the Indian Wars. The son of his friend, Chief Cannonicus, had died in 1661, and shortly thereafter was succeeded by Metacomet known to the settlers as King Philip. King Philip recognized the disastrous direction affairs were going from the Indian's standpoint. As recorded by a settler who attempted to talk King Phillip out of his desperate plan to drive the English from his land, we have these words, *"The English when they first came were but a handful of people, forlorn, poor and distressed. My father was then Sachem. He relieved their distress in the most kind and hospitable manner. He gave them land... others... came and joined them... Their numbers rapidly increased... My fathers counselors... advised him to destroy them before they became too strong... By various means they got possession of a great part of his territory... I am determined not to live until I have no country. "*

Somehow, John and Elizabeth survived the perils of early colonial life, and were married in 1686. By this time, King Philip's War was over, and the rebellious Indian Chief had been vanquished in 1676 by a local hero, Benjamin Church of Little Compton. John Palmer's father was among the colonists recruited by Benjamin Church for the final assault. Although the narratives vary, it appears that Benjamin Church was the leader of a group of colonists who snuck up on the Indian encampment. However, when King Philip grabbed his gun and started to flee, Benjamin Church's weapon misfired, and his Indian companion fired the fatal shot. Indians who had become Christians were referred to as "praying Indians." They sided with the colonists usually because of monetary considerations rather than religious fervor.

In addition to beginning work at farming while claiming and clearing more and more land, John and Elizabeth began having children. For the next twenty-two years, they had a total of eleven children almost like clockwork, one child every two years. All eleven of the children survived the perilous early years, although two daughters died in their eighteenth year.

February 9, 1717, Elizabeth died leaving John with three children aged eight to fourteen still at home. All of the other children had grown up, and begun families of their own, and set up their own farms with help from their father. A year later, at the age of 53, John Palmer married Sarah Blood, a widow. Thomas Church, a descendant of the famous Benjamin Church, presided as Justice of the Peace. Sarah was thirty-six at the time.

Less than two years later, their first child, Gideon was born. Two more boys followed him; Moses in 1721 and on July 13, 1723, Simeon Palmer was born. Simeon's father, John, was fifty-eight years old at the time. Shortly before Simeon's birth, his half-sister Esther had died at the age of 17. Therefore, he came into a household containing his two older brothers and his half brother Henry, who was fourteen years old, and would soon follow his other siblings from the first marriage and move on. Simeon was a handsome child, and quickly became the favorite son.

The Palmers and the good people of Little Compton had survived the King William's War and Queen Anne's War. They had escaped without too much discomfort the turmoil in England and in the colonies during the later part of the 17th Century. The

population of Little Compton in 1693 was six hundred persons and had climbed by the time of Simeon's birth to almost eight hundred. The Commons was the sight of the Congregational Church and the graveyard. Visits to the cemetery for courting [or for whatever other reasons] would have included discovery of the tomb of Benjamin Church and his wife as well as that of Elizabeth Peabodie. Elizabeth was the child of John Alden and Priscilla Mullin. She was the first white child born in Plymouth Colony. The tombstone indicated that she died May 31, 1717 at the age of ninety-four.

While farming was and remains the major economic activity in Little Compton, the shoreline contains three small harbors where merchantmen have landed over the colonial period. This brought dry goods, money and excitement to the isolated community. Most of Rhode Island's status as the second largest slave shipping colony in the United States centered around Newport just across the Sakonnet River. It was said that twenty of the twenty-six distilleries in Rhode Island that specialized in converting molasses to rum were located in Newport. However, despite all of this, Little Compton was - as it is today - largely isolated.

Church-based activities provided the social core of the community, and it was at church that Simeon first met Lydia Dennis. The Dennis farm was about three miles from the Palmer farm, and both were within an hour's walk of The Commons. By the standards of the time, the Palmers were more well-to-do than the Dennis family. This was based upon the amount of land [almost five hundred acres] that the Palmers had, and the fact that they had a few Negro slaves. The keeping of slaves in Rhode Island at this time was very common. In addition, Rhode Island farmers would hire crews of slaves with overseers for major projects, such as clearing the fields of rocks, and building the picturesque stonewalls which provide the boundaries for New England farms and properties. The families, of course, knew one another, but since they were not related, tended to encounter one another only at church or town meetings.

Although Lydia was almost five years older than Simeon, the two were drawn together. Simeon had grown into a handsome young man, rather vain, owing in part to the fawning attention of his parents - particularly his mother. Sarah Palmer was convinced that her son could do no wrong, and regularly extolled his virtues to all who would listen - particularly his father. Lydia was also the baby of her family. Whereas the Palmer family - now fourteen children - was overwhelmingly boys, Lydia's family of nine was made up of three sons and six daughters. The sisters were very bright and quite competitive, particularly when it came to courting boys. But Lydia apparently was also very picky in her choice, so it was not until August of 1745, in her twenty-seventh year that she and Simeon were joined in wedlock. Simeon had just celebrated his twenty-second birthday.

Simeon's protective mother, Sarah, was not certain that she entirely approved of her baby boy getting married that young and to an older woman. However, the decision by the newlyweds to move into the family home and live with Simeon's parents mollified her somewhat.

However, her fears that her boy had been entrapped rose shortly, when it became clear that Lydia was great with child. Susannah Palmer, presumably named after Lydia's mother, was born just after the New Year in January 1746.

It was in 1746 that Little Compton moved from Massachusetts to Rhode Island. At an earlier time, the King of England had dissolved the Plymouth Colony and had incorporated it into the Massachusetts Colony. As was the case throughout the colonies, boundary areas were often imprecise and in dispute. After Roger Williams was awarded the Royal Charter for the Providence Plantations in 1644, the next century was filled with constant disagreements with Connecticut and the Plymouth Colony, and then later Massachusetts. Finally in 1746, the General Assembly of Rhode Island accepted the boundaries as established by Royal Decree following the work of a board of arbitrators in England. The new line added the towns of Bristol, Warren, Cumberland, Tiverton and Little Compton to Rhode Island. The latter two became a part of the Newport County by an act of the General Assembly. The discussions at that time must have been interesting since Tiverton and Little Compton are separated from the rest of Newport by the Sakonnet River, and are larger in land area than Newport. In the case of Bristol, the General Assembly had established a new separate county. Another point of interest in trying to understand these designations is that local government in New England accords very little responsibility to counties.

The new Palmer family prospered, and a son, Gideon, was born less than a year and a half after Susannah. Gideon, however, was a very sickly child, and in less than a year after his Brother Humphrey's birth in 1748, he died. During the first eight years of her marriage, Lydia was on balance pregnant nine out of every fifteen months as six children were born to the young couple.

Simeon's father, John, died in October of 1753 two months after the birth of his granddaughter, Patience. His father's will left the house and all of the land except for "forty acres across the road" to Simeon. The forty acres were given to Simeon's half-brother, Henry. The will also deeded two Negro people to his wife, Sarah, and made it clear that Sarah should remain at the house for the balance of her life.

Then in 1754, once again pregnant, Lydia and her stillborn child died. Simeon was terribly distraught with the loss of his wife. This was particularly so following as it did so closely to the death of his father. This period reinforced his dependence upon his mother. The need to care for five young children between the ages of eight and one and a half would have been overwhelming except for the presence of his mother with the two Negro house slaves.

Simeon was now a landed property owner, a man of substance and position in the community and a widower. He went looking for a new wife. Just past thirty, Simeon cut a handsome figure as he made trips to The Commons to buy supplies and sell grain. He sat in the family pew at church, and surveyed the unattached local ladies. He also traveled up to nearby Tiverton and even up to Providence, and across the Sakonnet River to Newport.

It was on one such trip to Newport when he first encountered Elizabeth Mortimer. She was a widow, and worked in the office of her late husband and his brother. There she did accounts for their business that included the buying and selling of ship cargoes, as well as meat and food products from farmers such as Simeon. When they met, she was in her early forties, and had resigned herself to a life as a widow. However, Simeon Palmer saw things differently, and found more reasons to visit Newport and the office. Finally,

she was persuaded by his determination and accepted his proposal of marriage after months of courtship.

And so, on September 5, 1755, Simeon and Elizabeth were married by the Reverend Jonathan Ellis in the Congregational Church in Little Compton, Rhode Island less than a year after his first wife's death. From the quiet single life that she had grown accustomed to, Elizabeth found herself in the farmhouse of the Palmers with her mother-in-law, Sarah, the two Negro slaves and five young children from Simeon's first marriage. The old saw about two women and one kitchen was never truer.

Simeon's mother, Sarah, had molded the first wife Lydia to her ways. Between the constant pregnancies and child bearing and the steel will of her mother-in law, Lydia had been a docile, dutiful daughter-in-law. Elizabeth Mortimer proved to be far different. She was older than Lydia, arrived with the experience of a previous marriage, and the confidence she had gained during her widowhood. In addition, she had a small estate and income of her own. Further, she had no experience of child rearing, and all the pressures involved in becoming an instant mother of five. The two women clashed repeatedly. The unfortunate son and bridegroom, Simeon, was in the middle and was of no help to either woman. It was said that he spent more time in the barn and in the fields than he had for years.

Elizabeth, for her part, badgered Simeon to build a separate house either for them or for his mother. Simeon balked at this, partly because of the upset that leaving his mother would cause, but primarily because of the expense. Simeon Palmer was, in fact, a stereotypical, extraordinarily frugal New Englander. Some whispered that one of the reasons that he had pursued Elizabeth was to gain control of her estate. Elizabeth, having been warned by her brother-in-law in Newport and being a cautious lady herself, was determined not to turn over her funds to her new husband.

Then, after a little more than a year of marriage, early in 1757, Elizabeth became pregnant. Entering her first pregnancy at the age of forty-five filled Elizabeth with trepidation. Neither Simeon nor his mother, Sarah, was quite sure how to respond to this most surprising event. On September 23 of that year, a healthy baby girl was born into the Palmer household. At the insistence of Simeon and his mother, the pretty baby girl was named Lydia after Simeon's first wife. Whether it was the naming of the baby, Simeon's parsimonious ways, Sarah's overbearing manner or post-partum blues followed immediately by menopause, the atmosphere in the Palmer house reached grand storm proportions.

Finally, Elizabeth gathered up her possessions and the infant child and left Simeon Palmer's house. She made arrangements to move to a small house on the edge of The Commons. While there was quiet in the Palmer household, the tongues of the gossips wagged unceasingly. In the middle of the 18th Century in colonial America, women did not live apart from their husbands. Simeon became the object of community scorn and derision. He had already been marked by some in the community for his closeness with money and his unusual ways. In later years, it was rumored that he frequently made his dinner from stray cats that hung around the barn. Elizabeth, in contrast, flourished in her new setting. She managed the accounts for one or two local merchants while taking care of her beautiful daughter. In fact, it is reported in journals of

the time, that, "...mindful of her wifely obligations, Elizabeth continued to mend Simeon's clothes and darned his hosiery." We can assume that these tasks were carried out after the death of Simeon's mother, Sarah, in 1766. We can also assume that she did not fulfill her wifely obligations in terms of Simeon's conjugal rights.

When his mother died, Simeon still had five children at home. Susanna, the oldest now twenty, watched over her siblings including Patience who was thirteen at the time. Humphrey, then eighteen, had been assuming more and more of the responsibility for the farm, as his father did less and less. In 1774, Humphrey married Sarah Wilcox, a ceremony also performed at the Congregational Church by the Reverend Jonathan Ellis. Humphrey moved his bride, Sarah, into the Palmer household.

Two years later in February of 1776, Lydia Palmer, at the age of nineteen married, John Pearce. The date may have been advanced by her mother's failing health. Her father walked her down the aisle of the Congregational Church but spoke not a word in public to his wife. Three months later on May 4 of 1776, Rhode Island was the first colony to declare its independence from England. For the purposes of our story, the final event in 1776 was the death of Elizabeth Mortimer Palmer. She was buried in the Congregational Church's cemetery on The Commons in the Palmer plot next to Lydia. The inscription on her tombstone, "Elizabeth... **who should have been a wife to Simeon Palmer**" is a classic case of getting in the last word. Simeon's small victory was bittersweet. He was shunned in the community, and shortly thereafter left Little Compton. His son, Humphrey, took over the farm, and no further word was heard of Simeon although some said that he had made his way to Swansea, Massachusetts.

What Simeon had learned to his great dismay was that, while it was possible for him to say, "I choose you", it was also possible for Elizabeth to say. "I reject you."

Indians, Privateers and High Society, Bertram Lippincott, 1961

Rhode Island Vital Records, James Newell Arnold, 1894

History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, Thomas William Bicknell, 1874

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