

Mehetabel Chandler Coit: Finding “Her Book”



When I first began researching early New England diaries, I was dismayed to discover how very few women's diaries were available for study. This scarcity is due partly to the ravages of time and partly to historical circumstances. Because the Puritans believed it was important for everyone to be able to read scripture, most free white women in colonial New England could read. Writing, in contrast, was considered a specialized, job-related skill required by men to conduct business and unnecessary for women. Few of those women who could write had the time or ability to maintain any type of personal record; thus, the archives are commonly believed to contain no female-authored diaries dating before 1700. So when I eventually came across a volume of extracts from a Connecticut woman's diary—in which some entries dated as early as the 1680s—I was immediately intrigued. I also began to wonder whether the original manuscript might still exist.

Titled *Mehetabel Chandler Coit: Her Book, 1714*, the volume of extracts had been published in 1895 by three sisters: Maria Perit Gilman, Emily Serena Gilman, and Louisa Gilman Lane, who I later learned were Mehетabel Chandler Coit's great-great-granddaughters. According to these family editors, Coit—or Mehетabel, as I came to know her—was born in 1673 in Roxbury, Massachusetts, near Boston, and began her diary in 1688, around the time her family moved to Woodstock, in northeastern Connecticut. She eventually married New London, Connecticut, shipbuilder John Coit (1670-1744) and had six children, maintaining her diary, albeit irregularly, until she was in her mid-seventies.

According to the Gilman sisters, more than a century after Mehетabel's death there remained in New London a “traditional remembrance” of her as “a person of unusual energy and power, physically and mentally.” And, indeed, the diary entries—and two letters included in the volume—evidenced a vibrant and complex personality. In keeping with conventions of the day, the entries were brief and unemotional, but they also touched upon an impressive range of subjects—from

A photograph of a small, rectangular, brown leather pouch or wallet, likely made of ostrich skin, showing a flap closure and a central latch mechanism. The leather has a distinct pebbled texture and shows signs of wear and aging. The pouch is oriented horizontally with the flap closed.

[illegible]

Nov: 30th Elizabeth Coit
Born in 1724
April 23, 1725 Elizabeth
Coit dyed March 10
My Aunt Thomas Coit died
before the 10th
my daughter Elizabeth
Gardner died at
East London

May 31 1689 my father
left his family went to
live all near Foxbury stone
Coit was back
and I was Hannah Gory
born the first Child that
was born in Woodstock
April 18 1689 the Revolution
all broken
Nov: 21 1692 I came to
New London with my brother
John a Clerk & his wife
aged 160 & was taken very
sick at Country

3. Some of Mehetabel's earliest diary entries. Photograph courtesy of Robert and Elizabeth Hughes.

Since the volume of extracts noted that the original "small leather covered book" remained in family hands in 1895, I reasoned that, another hundred years later, it might *still* be held by Mehetabel's heirs. I began compiling a Coit genealogy to try to identify possible lines of descent. At the same time I contacted a number of museums and libraries to ask whether the diary might be in their collections, early on making the fortunate decision to get in touch with Yale University. Although Yale did not have the diary, it did own the two letters that had appeared in the volume of extracts, along with a treasure trove of more than twenty letters written between 1688 and 1743 by Mehetabel's mother, Elizabeth Douglas Chandler (1641-1705); sister, Sarah Chandler Coit Gardiner (1676-1711); daughter, Martha Coit Hubbard Greene (1706-1784); mother-in-law, Martha Harris Coit (1642?-1713); and friend, Elisabeth Bradstreet Slaughter Wass Adams (b. 1694). (A selection of Martha Greene's letters and one by Elisabeth Adams were featured in a second volume published by the family editors in 1895, *Martha, Daughter of Mehetabel Chandler Coit, 1706-1784*, but had not appeared in print since.) This extraordinary collection of early women's writings contained a degree of detail that greatly enhanced my understanding of Mehetabel's experiences, as well as offering insights into numerous aspects of early American life (fig. 1).

Yale's records noted that the letters had been donated over a period of time beginning in the 1940s by Elizabeth L. Anderson (née Gilman) of New York. They also indicated that Elizabeth Anderson was the owner of Mehetabel's diary (although they misattributed it to Mehetabel's daughter Martha). Since Yale's records stated that Elizabeth Anderson had died in 1950, I turned my attention to looking for her obituary so as to learn the names of her heirs and possibly identify the current owners of the diary. Although I came across a 1950 obituary for Elizabeth's cousin, Baltimore political activist Elisabeth Gilman, I was unable to locate any death record for Elizabeth Gilman Anderson. By this time I had determined where she fit on the Coit family tree—she was the great-granddaughter of the diary volume editors' brother, Edward Gilman—so I decided to check her parents' obituaries for possible leads. Since her father, Lawrence Gilman, a well-known music critic, had died in 1939, his obituary was not particularly helpful, but the 1964 death notice for her mother, Elizabeth Wright Walter Gilman, contained the revelation that Elizabeth Gilman Anderson was still living at that time. Evidently, Yale had misidentified Elisabeth Gilman of Baltimore as the donor of the manuscripts in its collection.

The obituary noted that Elizabeth lived in a small town in upstate New York. On a whim, I decided to call the town assessor's office to ask how I might find out when Elizabeth's house had sold, figuring that this information could bring me closer to her real date of death. Incredibly, the clerk in the assessor's office was able to tell me right away that the home had sold in the 1980s; she was also able to provide the name and phone number of the buyer, a local realtor who happened to have been a friend of Elizabeth's. I then called the buyer, who told me that Elizabeth had moved to Pennsylvania and that he had maintained contact with her until about four years previously. He suggested I speak with his wife, who might know more. Although his wife hadn't heard from

Elizabeth in a while, she put me in touch with Elizabeth's former handyman, who in turn offered the reassuring report that her cemetery plot remained unfilled. He also supplied me with the name and number of Elizabeth's former housekeeper. The housekeeper had communicated with Elizabeth as recently as a year before, and she was able to confirm the name of the Pennsylvania assisted-living facility where Elizabeth had become a resident. I immediately called the facility and was informed, much to my delight, that Elizabeth, at ninety-five, was alive and well.

Since Elizabeth's hearing was impaired, the social worker at the facility suggested I write her a letter rather than trying to speak with her on the phone. My first impulse was to jump on a plane and go see her, but I was ultimately glad I heeded the social worker's advice. Elizabeth ended up being not quite sure what she had done with the diary and believed she might have donated it to Yale along with the other family papers. This was a discouraging development, but events took a turn for the better when the social worker put me in contact with Elizabeth's closest relative, a cousin living on Long Island. I phoned the cousin's home, explained to his wife why I was calling—and received the wonderful news that the diary was in their possession!

The couple soon sent me a copy of the fifty-page manuscript, which I was thrilled to discover contained an amazing assortment of material not included in the published extracts. Interspersed among the entries were poems ("for the few Hours of Life/Alotted me/Grant me great god/but bread and liberty"); recipes ("to make ba[l]som wine"); herbal and folk remedies ("powder of earthworms will make an Akeing tooth fall fall [sic] out of itt selfe"); financial accounts (Hannah mannorwing to [1?] yd of Scotch Cloath att 0 – 5 – 0 [?] to a quart of Rum"); religious meditations ("the patience of god to [sic] towards sinners is the greatest miracle in the world"); and even some humor ("Deliverd in a Dull and lifeles strain, the best Discourses, no attention gain, for if the orater be half a sleep, he[']ll scarce his auditors from snoring keep"). These features add immeasurably to the diary's larger historical significance as well as to the telling of Mehetabel's individual story (fig. 2).

Another way the diary differed from the volume of extracts was that its entries did not appear chronologically but were organized thematically in many cases, with some pages carrying entries relating to Mehetabel's or her family's journeys, for example, and others chronicling the births of her children or the launchings of her husband's ships. The specificity of the entry dates point to their first being recorded at or near the time of the actual event ("feb^{br} 6 1688/9 Hannah Gary born the first Child that was born in Woodstock"; "may 2 1696 Wait Mayhew came to live here"). However, I took the diary's inscription, "Mehetabel Coit Her Book 1714," to mean that Mehetabel acquired this particular journal in 1714 and then copied into it entries from an earlier notebook or collection of scraps of paper (fig. 3).



4. Mehetabel's gravestone, New London Burial Ground, New London, Connecticut. Photograph courtesy of the author.

I made plans with the owners to see the diary in person, and on the way to Long Island stopped in Mehetabel's hometown of New London. Unfortunately, very little remained from her time. Much of early New London had been destroyed in Benedict Arnold's 1781 burning of the town, and although Mehetabel's home had survived the raid, it was ultimately torn down in the late nineteenth century after being sold for the site of an armory. The seventeenth-century house of Mehetabel's near neighbor and distant kinsman, Joshua Hempstead, remained, as did Hempstead's published 1711-1758 diary, which proved an invaluable resource, frequently mentioning Mehetabel's family. (By strange coincidence, the final line in Hempstead's forty-seven-year account concerns Mehetabel's death: "old Ms Mehitabel Coit the widow of Mr Jno Coit decd Died ys morning." Hempstead himself died not long afterwards.) The most personal relic relating to Mehetabel that I encountered in New London was her gravestone, which, by chance, I stumbled upon almost as soon as I entered the burial ground (fig. 4).

My search for Mehetabel's diary had entailed a good six months of concentrated—and at times seemingly futile—effort. When I finally held it in my hands, however, every moment of that search seemed worthwhile. In Mehetabel's words I felt I had found a key to not only one colonial woman's life, but also to a better appreciation of the experiences of countless of her female contemporaries, the majority of whom had left no written record.

I decided to write a biography of Mehetabel based on her diary and the family letters, an undertaking that required a great deal of additional research and that eventually consumed more than a decade. Because I believed that providing a sense of the material realities of Mehetabel's daily life was an integral part of reconstructing her story, I tried to supplement the use of written sources with a material culture-based approach, drawing upon wills, probate inventories, and family artifacts. None of Mehetabel's personal possessions appear to have survived (nor do any of her husband's belongings or writings),

but I was able to locate a portrait of Mehetabel's daughter Martha, painted by John Singleton Copley in 1758, and a circa 1640 piece of embroidery created by Elizabeth Gore Gager that may have been used by Martha as a model for providing needlework lessons. Like Mehetabel's diary, this needlework had been preserved in family hands until it was donated to the Connecticut Historical Society as recently as 2003 (fig. 5).

My research was marked by many small discoveries, but also several mysteries. Where, for example, are the silver porringer and wedding fan that, according to the diary volume editors, continued to be passed down through the family as late as 1895? And what did Mehetabel's daughter Martha mean when she remarked that Mehetabel had recently received a visit from the local Mohegan sachem? Finally, why did Mehetabel conclude her entry about her family's acquisition of a young female slave—"nell Cam to live here in the year 1717 in September she [then?] being twenty years of age[.] nell ____"—so strangely? It seems she wanted to add something more about Nell, but found herself unable to articulate her thoughts (fig. 6). I would love to know what Mehetabel wanted to say about Nell—not to mention what Nell would have said about her.

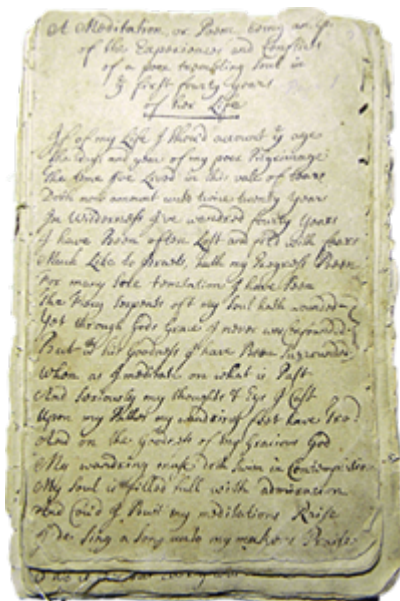


5. Portrait of Martha Coit Hubbard Greene, (1706-1784), John Singleton Copley (ca. 1758). Courtesy of the Dietrich American Foundation, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photograph by Will Brown, Philadelphia.



6. Mehetabel's diary entry about Nell. Photograph courtesy of Robert and Elizabeth Hughes.

One significant find came to light quite late in the game—even after I had completed my research and writing—when I made a check of the Yale archives to ensure that nothing relating to Mehetabel had escaped my notice. In one of the files of family papers, I found a remarkable document by Mehetabel's mother, Elizabeth Douglas Chandler. The sixty-four-page "Meditation, or Poem, being an Ep[ic?] of the Experiences and Conflicts of a Poor Trembling Soul in y^e First Forty Years of Her Life" had been mislabeled as having possibly been written by Mehetabel's son Joseph Coit (1698-1787). The archivist seems to have confused Joseph Coit with Mehetabel's brother, Joseph Chandler (1683-1750), the likely author of the elegy "Upon the Death of My Dear Mother M^{rs} Elizabeth Chandler" that directly follows the poem, and then attributed the authorship of both pieces to him. Further confusing the issue is the close similarity of the two handwriting styles. A review of the poem's lines by one familiar with her writings and background—as well as the signature "E – C"—however, reveals it to have been Elizabeth Chandler's production. There is no telling how long it took Elizabeth to compose her narrative, which was probably completed around 1681, when she was forty, but in light of her commitment to creating such an intensive personal account it is hardly surprising that Mehetabel believed her own experiences to be of consequence and worth documenting (fig. 7).



7. "A Meditation, or Poem...", page one of poem written by Elizabeth Douglas Chandler (1641-1705), ca. 1681. Courtesy of Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut. Photograph courtesy of the author.

The recovery of Mehetabel's diary and the other family manuscripts strongly suggests that additional early American women's writings that have been forgotten, misidentified, or overlooked may yet be unearthed. It is exciting to contemplate the new insights that might be gleaned from such sources, and as new online research tools, finding aids, and specialized databases become available, they should become that much easier to locate. Mehetabel and her contemporaries still have much to communicate; it is up to us to seek their words.

Further Reading

The work usually given the distinction of being the earliest extant American woman's diary is the 1704 travel journal of Madam Sarah Kemble Knight—who, ironically, was a neighbor of Mehetabel's in New London. Knight's original manuscript, however, was claimed to have been destroyed by fire in the 1840s by the editor of the first published edition, Theodore Dwight Jr., and recent scholarship suggests that Dwight altered the manuscript for publication (see Peter Benes, "Another Look at Madam Knight," in *In Our Own Words: New England Diaries, 1600 to the Present, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings, 2006/2007*, 2 vols., ed. Peter Benes [Boston, 2009]). Mary Beth Norton has notably written about inauthentic colonial women's diaries in "Getting to the Source: Hetty Shepard, Dorothy Dudley, and Other Fictional Colonial Women I Have Come to Know Altogether Too Well," *Journal of Women's History* 10: 3 (Autumn 1998).

For a classic study of an early woman's diary—and one that directly inspired my interest in this topic—see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale: The Life*

of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812 (New York, 1991).

Maria Perit Gilman, Emily Serena Gilman, and Louisa Gilman Lane's volumes, *Mehetabel Chandler Coit: Her Book, 1714*, and *Martha, Daughter of Mehetabel Chandler Coit, 1706-1784*, were both published in 1895 by Bulletin Print of Norwich, Connecticut, and are available in many university libraries. Mehetabel's diary remains in family hands, but two of her letters, as well as the other family writings, are located in the Gilman Family Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. My biography of Mehetabel, *One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit* (Amherst, Mass., 2012), contains the full text of the diary and letters, as well as a discussion of how Mehetabel's book corresponds to other diaries and journals of the time. I am currently working on an article about Elizabeth Douglas Chandler's poem and hope to expand the excerpt from her narrative included on my website, onecolonialwomansworld.com.

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