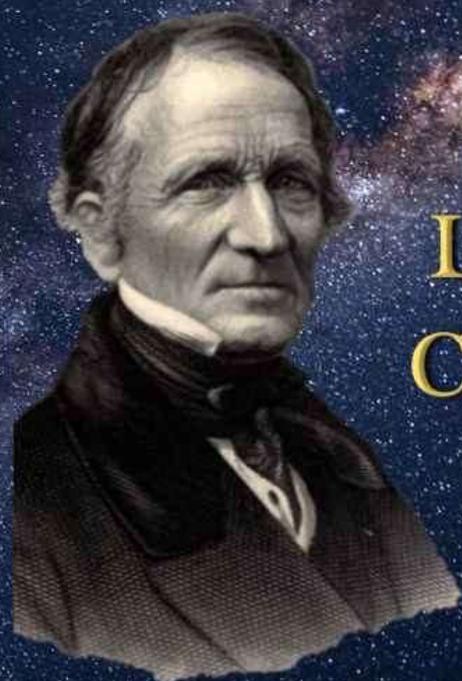


The first ever biography of one of  
19<sup>th</sup>-century America's foremost scientists



ALL THE  
LIGHT HERE  
COMES FROM  
ABOVE

The Life and Legacy of  
EDWARD HITCHCOCK

Robert T. McMaster



ALL THE LIGHT HERE  
COMES FROM ABOVE:

*The Life and Legacy of  
Edward Hitchcock*

by Robert T. McMaster

**UNQUOMONK PRESS**  
Williamsburg, Massachusetts  
U. S. A.

WORDS OF PRAISE FOR

***ALL THE LIGHT HERE COMES FROM ABOVE:  
The Life and Legacy of Edward Hitchcock***

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ISBN 978-0-9856944-9-4

Published by Unquommonk Press  
Williamsburg, Massachusetts 01096 USA



Dedicated to

*Robert L. Herbert*

*1929-2020*

Dr. Robert L. Herbert, art historian and Professor Emeritus at Mount Holyoke College, passed away just a few days before this book went to press. Dr. Herbert was the preeminent Hitchcock scholar of our time, an inspiration to me and to many other scholars and writers.



*Foot-marks on stone! how plain and yet how strange!  
A bird track truly, though of giant bulk,  
Yet of the monster every vestige else  
Has vanished. Bird, a problem thou hast solv'd  
Man never has: to leave his trace on earth  
Too deep for time and fate to wear away.*

“The Sandstone Bird”

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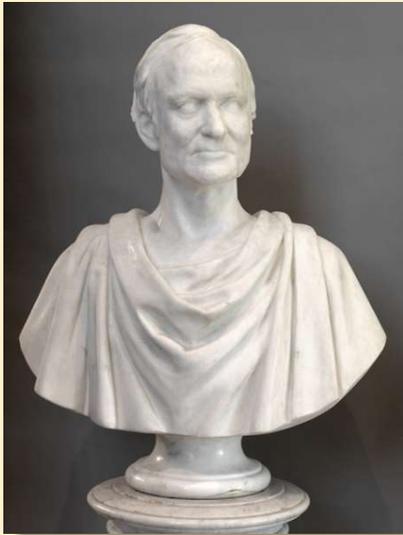
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## Introduction

I was barely ten years old when, on a winter's day, my father took me to visit the Pratt Museum of Natural History at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. We were the only visitors, and I walked about awestruck by what I saw: bones, skulls, and skeletons of all manner of creatures large and small, including an enormous mammoth and a dazzling exhibit of rocks and minerals. We then descended to the basement, groping about in the dark to find a light switch. And there we found tracks in stone—curious and enigmatic to that little boy—and capable of evoking all sorts of questions, though I do not recall either signs or docents to provide answers. Those remarkable artifacts, I learned, were the life work of someone named Edward Hitchcock. Even at that tender age, I was surprised to see such an extraordinary collection exhibited so poorly and obscurely.

Fast forward a half century. I walk into the recently opened Beneski Museum of Natural History, a handsome edifice of brick, steel, and glass. Just inside the entrance I pause, look up, and gaze on that mammoth, no doubt the same creature I had observed in the dimly lit gallery long ago. It is magnificent and cannot fail to evoke questions in the minds of every child, young or old, who enters. Thankfully, the climate and lighting are ideal in this gleaming new home, as is the signage. A docent is giving a tour to a group of school children not far from where I stand. At last, I think, Edward Hitchcock has received the

recognition he deserves. His remarkable collections are now displayed to great advantage, for all to see, to enjoy, to understand.

Since that day, I have not stopped thinking about, reading about, and studying Edward Hitchcock—poet, playwright, pastor, preacher, professor, paleontologist, president, and *pater familias*. The more I have learned of the man, the more convinced I am that there is a story yet to be told—many stories, in truth. For his legacy, one that even today in the minds of many begins and ends with those tracks in stone, actually extends far beyond them.

Edward Hitchcock was a man supremely grounded in place and time. He lived nearly his entire life—three score and ten years as he would say—within fifteen miles of that museum in Amherst, Massachusetts. He knew the countryside from Deerfield to Conway to Amherst better than any of his contemporaries, better perhaps than anyone since. Later in life he would venture farther afield—to New York, Virginia, the Midwest, and once to Europe. But even when at home his vision was not limited—he did not wear blinders like one of the horses in his barn. He traveled very widely, in a manner of speaking, thanks to books, mostly borrowed, and not idly skimmed but devoured. Nor did his geographical limitations reduce his influence, for even in his time, newspapers and periodicals—literary, scientific, and religious—were proliferating. His words in print—close to five million in all—appeared and no doubt were read by thousands around the world.

Without question Hitchcock's greatest influence was in the field of paleontology. Those tracks, bones, and skeletons came to life in his imagination and were committed to paper with equal verisimilitude. But he also made contributions of great import in the broader field of geology. No, he was not a visionary like Charles Lyell or Louis Agassiz or Charles Darwin. He was, however, an observer, a thinker, an accumulator of data, who at several important points in the nineteenth century weighed in on the grand debates about earth's past with great effect. Edward Hitchcock thirsted for contact with his fellow scientists, and was thus a key contributor in the early days of the *American Journal of Science and Arts* and a founder of the Association of American Geologists and Naturalists, soon to be renamed the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the preeminent professional organization of American scientists to this day.

Hitchcock was an educator with a lifelong desire to teach and a determination to do so in whatever way was most effective. He used demonstrations, experiments, models, posters, murals, field trips, and all manner of what might today be called “hands-on” instructional methods with his students at Amherst College. He had little technology at his command—even photography had barely developed until the last years of his life. But he knew the value of employing every means available to bring a subject to life for his students. And while he was devoted to science education, he was equally impassioned about agricultural education. He argued strenuously for the creation

of a state agricultural college in Massachusetts, and his support of that idea had a good deal to do with the establishment of Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst—known today as the University of Massachusetts—just three years after his death.

Edward Hitchcock's entire college teaching career was spent instructing young men. But he was equally committed to the education of women and played a pivotal role in the development of two female seminaries, as they were then termed, one in Amherst that did not survive, one in nearby South Hadley—Mount Holyoke College—that did survive and thrive.

In 1844 the prospects for Amherst College looked very bleak. Enrollment was declining, faculty and student morale were abysmal, the college's finances meager. When the day came that the trustees of Amherst College called on Edward Hitchcock to become the third president of that institution, he at first demurred. He was convinced that he was poorly suited to the post and the last person who could rescue the institution from almost certain demise. But he eventually accepted the position, however reluctantly, and from the very day of his inauguration, the clouds over the college parted and the sun began to shine once more on that "consecrated eminence."

As to the Reverend Edward Hitchcock, he was a deeply spiritual man who strove throughout his adult life to do what was good and right in the eyes of his Lord. He was an evangelical Christian who held the Bible to be inspired and literally true, who believed that there was no hope for any man or woman but through Jesus Christ. He was a skilled preacher who, long after giving up his one parish, was called on regularly to preach. He spoke out on many of the great moral issues of his time—slavery, war, the mistreatment of the American Indian. His faith drove him as a preacher, as a teacher, as a parent, as a man. But it caused him great consternation as a scientist, seeing the simple truths of the Bible challenged. And it caused him great spiritual malaise when he came to realize that he was himself devoted to the pursuit of worldly prizes, even as he warned his parishioners against such temptations.

Despite his many achievements in science, religion, and education, Edward Hitchcock was a troubled man. As a preacher he often employed the metaphor of a human being as a ship adrift on a vast and perilous ocean. If we apply that metaphor to the man himself, we must conclude that his was a most unseaworthy ship, tossed about by an angry sea and in peril of crashing on the rocks or sinking beneath the waves at any moment. Fortunate indeed was Edward Hitchcock to have Orra White Hitchcock as his wife and "coadjutor" for over forty years. She was his anchor, his rudder, his keel. Without her steadying hand, her constancy, her faithfulness, his career would have had a very different trajectory, his life would likely have been shortened by decades, his soul buried in self-doubt and guilt. That ship would most certainly have foundered on the rocks.

In *All the Light Here Comes from Above—The Life and Legacy of Edward Hitchcock* I have tried to do justice to this man, to recognize the many facets of

his personality, of his career, of his legacy. I have tried to avoid reducing him to lowest terms—a scientist, for instance, who could not accept scientific truth—or a Christian at war with his religious principles—or a flawed personality that could not shake the belief that his body was on the verge of expiring at any minute. For every weakness in his body or spirit, he possessed a matching and countervailing strength. In nearly every pursuit he undertook in his long life, he excelled despite many powerful demons.

I have depended heavily on Edward Hitchcock's own words for my research. Fortunately, most of his unpublished writings—sermons, notes, letters, diaries, etc.—have been preserved in the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections in Amherst, Massachusetts, and in the collections of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association and Historic Deerfield in Deerfield, Massachusetts. He has left an enormous paper trail, considering he lived long before word processors, typewriters, even fountain pens. Spelling and grammatical variations are common in the writings of Edward Hitchcock. In most cases I have transcribed those variations exactly as they appear in the original, without the notation "*sic*" used by some authors. Thus when Edward writes of "bowlders" or "vallies" or "millenium," I have shown those words exactly as written. The only exceptions are the few occasions when a change seemed necessary to make the meaning clear.

Rather than clutter the text with hundreds of footnotes, I have listed my sources under "Notes and References" (beginning on page Error! Reference source not found.Error! Bookmark not defined.) including notes by page number followed by sources specific to each chapter. Most of the direct quotations cited may be found by searching one of the transcriptions which are accessible online (see page Error! Bookmark not defined.).

Among the most valuable of Hitchcock's unpublished manuscripts for my research have been his personal writings recorded over thirty-five years that he titled "Private Notes." They were not a diary in the strict sense. They were kept, he explained in the first entry, for the sake of his children, that they might better understand him and his life when he was gone. Entries were made very irregularly, sometimes as infrequently as two or three times a year. Over a five-year period in the 1830s he made no entries. Late in life there is a two-year gap, although in that case it appears pages were lost or intentionally removed. I will refer to these hereafter as his "notes."

At the beginning of each chapter I have allowed my imagination some license, depicting a scene, sometimes with dialogue, from the life of Edward Hitchcock and other family members. While these vignettes are to some degree fictional, they are based on real events and I believe accurately depict Edward, Orra, Justin, their families, their contemporaries, and the times in which they lived. It is my hope that they will help twenty-first century readers better to conjure up the true spirit of Edward Hitchcock.

# Prologue

*Amherst, Massachusetts, December 16, 1844*

*Darkness had already descended on the snow-covered landscape as a single figure made his way haltingly up the rutted path toward College Hill, drawing a heavy black cloak around him with one hand while grasping a bail-handled oil lamp with the other. To his right rose the brick edifice of North College, entirely dark but for candlelight flickering in the rooms of the few students who chose to remain over the vacation period between the first and second terms.*

*At the crest of the hill the figure turned into the curved pathway that led to a stately Georgian structure, the residence of the president of Amherst College. A dim glow shone through the windows of the first floor. Just as he approached the front door, it opened—he was expected. He was directed to a seat by the fireplace in the drafty vestibule.*

*In the musty, dimly lit library a few steps away, four bearded men sat around a long chestnut table, sheaves of papers stacked before them. Present were George Grennell, Alfred Foster, Samuel Williston, and Lucius Boltwood, all members of the Board of Trustees appointed to this committee. The mood was solemn, befitting the darkness of the occasion, for all four men knew too well that the fate of Amherst College was in their hands.*

*For those who had known the college throughout its nearly quarter century, the circumstances in which they found themselves must have had a surreal quality. How quickly the young institution had grown after its opening in 1821,*

*and how well it had been received by students, faculty, and the community around it. For years there had been only glowing reports of students exceling, graduating, many of them going on to the ministry or to missionary work, for the college was dedicated to educating young men "of hopeful piety" for a religious vocation. Financially the college had never been flush, but thanks to the generosity of many individuals it had managed to do reasonably well for more than a decade.*

*Then, in 1835, everything began to go wrong. Fueled by a national recession, the school's enrollment declined. At the same time gifts from its many supporters dropped as well. This two-edged sword cut to the bone of the young institution. The college's second President, Reverend Heman Humphrey, had done his best under trying circumstances, but even he had begun to despair. The social cohesion of the institution also had suffered, with conflicts erupting frequently between students and faculty, sometimes at public events. Even some of the college's own alumni spoke ill of their alma mater, spreading the alarm that the end was near.*

*President Humphrey had tendered his resignation just six months earlier, probably aware that his departure was deemed necessary by many board members. Immediately the Board of Trustees had circulated the intelligence that they were seeking applicants for the Presidency. They made at least three offers in three months, all of which were declined. No one it seemed wanted to take the helm of a sinking ship.*

*In the fall term when enrollment hit rock bottom, the message was clear. Unless the trustees took dramatic action to save it, Amherst College would soon be facing dissolution. The Board of Trustees at this time included men of wisdom and strength, men who dearly loved the college and would not allow it to fail without doing their utmost to save it. One of those men was Reverend Joseph Vaill. Vaill acted as a go-between for the board and the faculty as they sought agreement on a plan to save the college. It had been brought to the Board only days earlier and approved. It was up to this committee to work out the details, the most important of which was finding a new leader for the institution in these most trying circumstances.*

*What the college needed in a president was a man known and respected by all, students, faculty, and the larger community. He must be someone whose devotion to the college was complete, one who could instill confidence in the institution and bring old friends, students, alumni, and donors, back into the fold. In short, he must be capable of rebuilding Amherst College from the rubble it had become. All agreed, there was only one man who filled those requirements, and he was the man waiting nervously in the anteroom.*

*After some minutes of further deliberations, the men huddled in the library fell silent. Lucius Boltwood rose from his chair and walked to the door, then opened it.*

*"Professor Hitchcock, will you please come in, sir?"*

Today, nearly two centuries after that fateful December evening, the choice of Edward Hitchcock as third president of Amherst College seems like an obvious one. But without the advantage of a crystal ball to gaze into the future, it was not an easy decision, certainly not for Edward Hitchcock himself. Doubts most likely lurked in the minds and hearts of some board members as well.

Hitchcock's scientific credentials were stellar. He had undertaken the job of State Geologist in 1830, had completed two extensive geological surveys of the state, and written three lengthy, widely praised reports on those surveys. His survey and reports had become models that dozens of other states were now replicating. His research on the fossil footmarks of the Connecticut Valley was nothing short of revolutionary for paleontology, for understanding the history of life on the planet. Publishing his findings had taken courage—he had had his critics. But by 1844 nearly all those critics had been silenced. He was preeminent in the field of geology in America, and highly regarded by scientists abroad as well.

As a professor, Edward Hitchcock was well liked by his students, his teaching methods exhibiting the same devotion and unstinting energy as his research. In the chemistry laboratory he had a flair for the theatrical, one might even say the pyrotechnical. He taught botany as well, marching his charges over hill and dale in search of a rare orchid or fern. His geology lectures were informed largely by his research, and he developed a curriculum of his own design. His textbook, *Elementary Geology*, had drawn wide acclaim from his colleagues and peers. It was already in its fifth edition.

Reverend Edward Hitchcock was known far and wide as a man of deep conviction and strictly orthodox Christian views, a man of impeccable moral stature. While his career as a pastor had been short, he continued to preach and to publish in the religious press. His sermons were epic and frequently requested by ministers and parishioners near and far. As a friend and neighbor, Edward Hitchcock was admired in Amherst for his warmth, his compassion, his concern for all, students, colleagues, neighbors. He was known as a devoted husband and father as well.

With all this admiration and respect to buoy him, one might expect Edward Hitchcock would have been honored at the proposal presented to him on that day. But despite all his talents, all his honors, all the recognition he enjoyed as a teacher, a scientist, a preacher, a man, he was deeply troubled by the offer of the presidency of Amherst College. It was a post he had never sought, that he had never wished for, that he felt ill-prepared to fill.

Why was he so strongly disinclined to accept this highest of academic honors? One consideration was his lack of an earned degree. How, he asked himself, could one who had never earned a degree lead an academic institution like Amherst College? And there was his writing, his research. He would be unable to carry them on as President, of that he was certain.

But most worrisome of all was his health. The truth was that Edward Hitchcock, for the last fifteen years or more, had been convinced that he was plunging into dissolution. Every bout of illness he feared would be his last. He wrote as much again and again in his own notes, as if reminding himself. He confessed his fears repeatedly to his wife. He even told his children regularly that he would not be with them much longer.

He had also shared his worries with his colleagues, faculty, board members, and with President Humphrey. All of them were aware that this was a man whose body was fragile and whose spirit was tenuous as well. How could they not have wondered if such a wounded soul was the one Amherst College needed to revive its own spiritual malaise?

This was the perilous balance in which hung the lives of both Edward Hitchcock and Amherst College on that December evening in 1844.



***DEERFIELD 1779-1820***

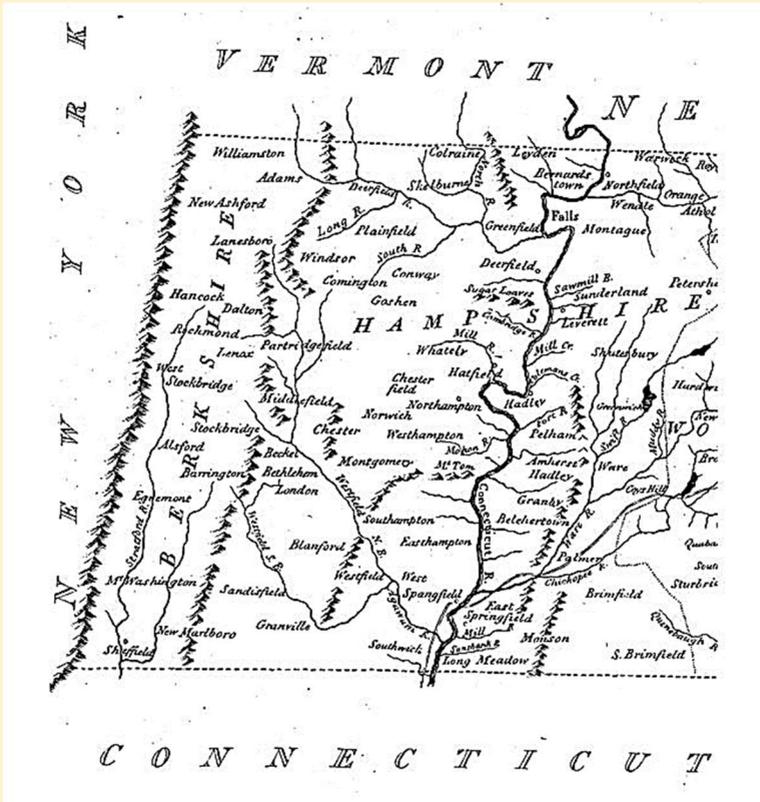


Figure 1. Western Massachusetts in Edward Hitchcock's time. The original Hampshire County incorporated in 1662 extended from the Vermont and New Hampshire borders to the Connecticut border. It was subsequently divided into three counties, with Franklin County to the north (1811) and Hampden County to the south (1812).



*View of Pocumtuck*

# 1 The Hatter of Deerfield

*“There is nothing in the history of a boy that is worth recording.”*

*November 25, 1779*

*The bells of the meetinghouse in Deerfield, Massachusetts, pealed brightly on a crisp autumn morning in 1779. The tintinnabulations could be heard the full length of “The Street,” the broad thoroughfare that bisected the village center. They could be heard in its dozens of shops—saddler, smithy, broom-maker, shoemaker—and in every shingled or clapboarded home along the way. So too could the chorus be heard in the weathered barns beyond the shops and residences, barns where workers labored, stacking hay to feed cows, horses, sheep, and oxen—and in low, dark sheds where the meat of freshly slaughtered hogs was being salted, then stored away in oaken barrels against the long, cold winter to come.*

*Still farther did that clanging chorus carry across the broad valley where the season's wheat, rye, and corn crops had been reduced now to mere stubble, where farmers busy dressing their gardens or tending their livestock paused from their labors for a moment to listen. To the east the clangor echoed off the steep shoulders of the Sugarloafs— Wequamps as the native peoples called them—their stunted, wind-wizened oaks already cloaked in early winter snow. To the west the chiming carried across the river once called Pocumtuck, rolling to the base of the Sunsick Hills more than a mile distant.*

*The occasion of all that bell ringing was a marriage ceremony in the white clapboarded meetinghouse. When at last the bells fell silent, a small wedding party stood at the church doors. As the bride spoke with some family members, the groom turned and approached the Reverend Jonathan Ashley who stood apart, grim-faced, his dark, sunken eyes cast downward.*

*“Mr. Ashley.”*

*The old pastor nodded, his gaze rising to meet the groom's but briefly. “Sir.”*

*There was an awkward pause. Finally the groom spoke again. “Thank you, Mr. Ashley, for your kindness, to myself and to Miss Hoyt...er...Mrs. Hitchcock.”*

*After another pause, the old minister spoke. “Godspeed to you, sir, and to Mrs. Hitchcock,” he said glumly.*

*The groom acknowledged the well-wishes with a bow, then turned away and without another word rejoined his bride, leaving the Reverend Ashley standing apart, alone.*

*For the Reverend Jonathan Ashley, now seventy years of age, this would be the last wedding performed in his nearly half a century at Deerfield. His constancy as a minister had earned him the admiration of most of the townspeople. But the Reverend Ashley was a Tory, a supporter of the King of England. His political views had carved a deep rift between him and many of his parishioners who were Whigs and bitterly opposed to the King. It was a rift that would never be mended. Reverend Ashley would die a few months later, a lonely, embittered old man, a lesson on mixing religion and politics that his successors would be wise to take to heart.*

**B**oth bride and groom on that November day were well known to nearly all Deerfield's residents. Miss Mercy Hoyt, the twenty-four-year-old bride, was the daughter of David and Silence Hoyt, a member of one of Deerfield's most prominent families. The first Hoyt arrived in Deerfield from Windsor, Connecticut, in 1682. Mercy's great-grandfather, David Hoit, and her grandfather, Jonathan Hoit, both were captured in the infamous raid of February

1704, when several hundred soldiers from Canada, both French and native American, crept into the sleeping village, killed dozens of townspeople, captured over one hundred others, then transported them north toward Canada. Jonathan Hoyt was eventually released; his father died en route. Seven decades later, the Hoyt family still occupied the “Old Indian House” in the center of town, the same dwelling in which seven of their forebears were living on that fateful night. Three were killed, the others taken to Canada. Mercy’s father, who fought bravely in the French and Indian War, was now keeper of one of the village’s public houses and a “maker of wigs and foretops.”

Of the personal qualities of the bride we know very little. One reference published decades after her death described her as “a woman of active mind and marked character,” another as “...a high-bred New England woman, one of those perfect creations of divine skill by which the development of our race is guaranteed, a woman of quick intelligence, pure heart, and exquisite sensibility.” Genealogies of that period often rambled on and on about fathers and sons, their physical attributes, moral character, education, career, accomplishments, honors. Mothers and daughters, on the other hand, received little mention beyond the husband’s name, unmarried daughters still less. In *Reminiscences*, Mercy’s son Edward had much to say about his father, yet made only one mention of his mother, suggesting that his health problems were “...hereditary on my mother’s side...” Based on what we do know about her younger brothers, David, Epaphras, and Elihu, we may assume that Mercy was intelligent and received some basic education.

The twenty-seven-year-old groom, Justin Hitchcock—hatter, fifer, sing-master—was less familiar to many of the town’s residents, for he had only recently arrived in Deerfield. Nevertheless, he had quickly gained the respect and admiration of nearly all. We know a great deal of the life of Justin Hitchcock thanks to an extraordinary memoir, “Remarks and Observations by Justin Hitchcock,” subtitled with typical self-effacement, “A Sort of Autobiography.” Here he recorded the events of his life, his memories, and reflections from 1780 to 1799.

Early in his musings Justin warns his reader not to expect much of interest: “There is nothing in the history of a boy that is worth recording.” And yet what follows is an illuminating account of daily life in eighteenth century New England—from clothing to farming, from politics to religion—as well as a family genealogy, a history of the early years of the nation, and an almanac of all manner of natural phenomena from canker worms to hurricanes, from eclipses to meteors.

We learn that Justin was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1752. In 1756 his parents, Luke and Lucy Hitchcock, removed from Springfield to Granville, a tiny farming community in the Berkshire foothills where they managed to eke out a living on their 100-acre farm, raising cattle, growing wheat

and rye, and maple sugaring. Life was not all hard work for the Hitchcocks of Granville. "Our family were fond of music," Justin recalled.

My Father and Mother could sing, my brother Charles played well on a violin. I was very fond of Music when young tho I made awkward work of it at first and never got my insight of the rules before I went from my Fathers. Being fond of singing I picked off a book of Music in square or diamond notes...

Neither of Justin's parents had much formal schooling and so they were determined that their children should have the benefit of the best education available in Granville, a single room schoolhouse just a mile from their home. Justin described two of his teachers:

One, Mr. Doer Smith, kept the school, and he was a proper tyrant. He kept a stick by him, long enough to reach every boy in the school. Although he improved his advantage, so that we all feared him, few if any felt any affection for him, and the consequence was that we learned slowly.

Justin much preferred the methods of Mr. Smith's successor, Mr. Harvey, who "...used a very different method with us, and instead of going to school as a task, we now went as a pleasure." But Justin was not satisfied with following his father's chosen work:

Our business was husbandry and we had a great deal of driving plough to be don. This was a business I never liked. My Brother Merick showed more ambition as a good plough boy than I and I was willing to have him praised up as a teamster if I could thereby be freed from my turn of driving. I had an inclination to learn a trade.

To that end, Justin took an apprenticeship with a family friend and expert hatmaker, Moses Church, of Springfield. The terms of that arrangement were spelled out in detail in a document of indenture dated May 5, 1766. In his memoir Justin describes with remarkable frankness his life during the seven years of his apprenticeship in Springfield. His pastimes included hunting and fishing, as well as a few other less admirable pursuits common to young men of that time, partying, cardplaying, gambling, imbibing, inhaling snuff, and playing pranks on friends and unwitting citizens in the streets and back alleys. "...I was so much with parties especially in the evenings," he wrote, "that I could scarcely find the money enough to bear the expense..." Much to his credit, young Justin also found time to read.

My Father recomended to me to spend my leisure time in reading and I following his advice in some measure and I read the history of England and other books but particularly dramatic pieces and some novels notwithstanding

the great arg[ument] maid against the latter yet I think my reading them has never don me harm but that if I know anything of what is proper in the stile of writing I am partly indebted to this kind of reading as the language of these books is generally good.

Justin's love of music led him to join a singing group when he was nineteen, but the choirmaster, a Mr. J. Stickney, offered little encouragement to him or his fellow choristers: "The Master told us we could not learn and it was best not to try..." Nevertheless, Justin began composing music during those years. Singing and songwriting would play an important role in his later life, even in his military career.

In June of 1773 Justin completed his seven-year apprenticeship, the only apprentice of Mr. Church ever to do so. He served a few months as a journeyman for his mentor, but soon was ready for more independence. He wrote, "Now began a new era in my existence [when I] launched forth into the world and must take care of myself." He decided he would practice his trade in a promising new venue:

I went to Deerfield in May this year notwithstanding my attachment to Springfield. I found it to be more for my interest to live at Deerfield for here I kept but little company but at Springfield it cost me to much.

Deerfield, Massachusetts, lay at the confluence of two of New England's great rivers, the Connecticut and the Deerfield, and it was that very position that made this place fertile ground for agriculture. At regular intervals the waters rose and flooded the adjacent lowlands, depositing a new layer of minerals with each inundation, yielding some of the richest soils in all of New England. The Pocumtucks, a tribe of the Abenaki nation, first inhabited that land, perhaps arriving shortly after the retreat of the last glacier. They were generally a peaceful people who cleared the land, grew crops, hunted and fished for several thousands of years. But in the 1660s, faced with incursions by larger tribes from the north and west, they went to war against the intruders, a war they lost. The survivors integrated into the conquering forces and in a matter of a few years, the Pocumtucks were no more. The rich farmlands they once occupied were visited briefly by other tribes, but for the most part were abandoned.

Enter the English. In 1664 the General Court of the Bay Colony in Boston, to compensate the people of the town of Dedham for lands that had been misappropriated, awarded the town the rights to settle a large tract of land in the Connecticut Valley. That tract included the former home of the Pocumtucks. Most of the beneficiaries never settled their land; probably few even visited to view their property. Parcel by parcel, the land was divided and sold, mostly to

farmers from towns farther south along the river, Hatfield, Hadley, Northampton, men who likely had more of an appreciation for the potential value of the land.

But the position of the new settlement of Deerfield, on the westernmost frontier and relatively isolated from neighboring villages, made it a frequent target of attack by natives who feared the incursion of the English here and elsewhere in western and northern New England. Deerfield thus became a site of hostilities in 1675, 1689, 1704, 1722, and 1756. In the notorious raid of 1704, forty-four residents were killed and over one hundred carried away.

Despite the uncertainties and the bloodshed of the “Indian Wars,” the town thrived. Its wealth was founded mainly on agriculture, with the rich soils proving ideal for cultivation of wheat, rye, corn, and tobacco. So successful was farming in the community that many landowners became very wealthy.

Deerfield was a small community, and Justin likely came to know Mercy Hoyt before long. They spent sufficient time as a couple among other young folk of Deerfield to feel the pressure of social expectations, as suggested by this undated note:

In my last hours of reflection I often think of the says of people, that it is not good for us to keep company so long together. So often in my own mind [I] resolve that whenever I am going to spend an evening with you that I will lay a restraint on some passions by not allowing myself to urge some things which might have a tendency to lead on to \_\_\_\_\_. [The handwritten text here is obscured, perhaps by the writer, the recipient, or another family member at a later time.] I am sensible I am naturely inclined to every thing that is bad full of lust and passion. But hope I have some power to govern them—I have thought that if we shall disappoint some people by not fulfilling their prophecy consequent on so long keeping company. It might be some satisfaction to us if not cause of Pride. [At this point he must have realized he was rambling] It is well the paper is just wrote out for tis hard to make any more nonsensical folly.

If the idea of a permanent affiliation had already been contemplated by the young couple, circumstances of a different sort soon would intervene. Barely seventy-five miles to the east, trouble was brewing, the long-endured strictures imposed by “our Sovereign Lord George ye third” on his American colonies, had finally become unbearable. A town meeting was held in Deerfield on the evening of April 20, 1775, to appropriate funds for a small force of men to be organized under the leadership of Lieutenant Joseph Stebbins in the event that war should erupt with England. Sheldon recounts the occasion dramatically:

It is evident from the record of this meeting that the report of the “shot heard round the world,” fired the day before, had not yet reached Deerfield. Our fathers were faithfully providing for a contingency which had already occurred. At the very moment these wise precautions were being taken, the resounding

hoof-beats of the galloping horse, and the hoarse call “To arms!” of the excited rider, were rapidly moving westward. The people could hardly have left the schoolhouse on the common, where they met, before the foaming steed with bloody flanks, bearing the dusty courier, was in their midst. “Gage has fired upon the people! Minute men to the rescue! Now is the time, Cambridge the place!” and the twain are off again like a meteor. Then there was hurrying to and fro, and arming in hot haste, and before the hours of the day were numbered fifty minute men were on their way to the scene of bloodshed, to join the band of patriots already encircling Gage in its toils. In their haste they were badly supplied for the service. One of them writes, “after I had got from home I found myself destitute of so necessary an article as a blanket.”

That ill-prepared soldier was none other than Justin Hitchcock. “I went with Minutemen from Deerfield as a fifer—I also carried a gun,” he wrote. “When we marched into Cambridge Common I beheld more men than I have ever seen together before...” But Justin’s first military adventure would be brief. While tensions remained high in Boston, his unit saw no action.

After we had been there a week or more it was said that a lot had been cast to see who should return home and who should be enlisted for eight months. I was told that my lot was to stay. I then hired on Smith of Sudbury to take my place for ten Dollar.

Back in Deerfield, the young hatter’s trade was faltering. He moved briefly to Wethersfield, Connecticut, in 1775, setting up shop with a man named Smith. But the partnership apparently did not go well. By 1776 he had returned to Deerfield for good and restarted his trade—and his courtship of Miss Mercy Hoyt.



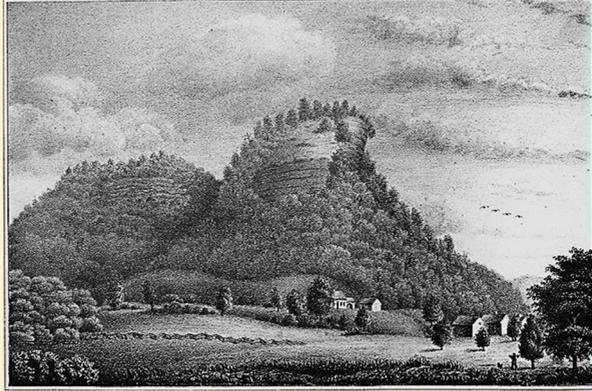
Figure 2. The Hitchcock House, Deerfield, Mass., birthplace of Edward Hitchcock, today

In summer of 1777, Lieutenant Stebbins's militia was mobilized again, this time to join Colonial forces fighting General Burgoyne's army near Saratoga, Justin Hitchcock among them. Barely a day on their way, Justin learned of the death of his father. The fifty-four-year-old man had contracted smallpox and died in New Lebanon, New York, reportedly on his way home from Crown Point where he fought with other volunteers from his hometown against General Burgoyne. A few days later the Deerfield contingent fought with others to defeat Burgoyne. Justin makes no further mention of his role, if any, at the Battle of Saratoga. He may have been attending to his father's affairs.

With his military obligations behind him, Justin made a series of decisions aimed at securing himself a favorable position in Deerfield and with his young lady friend. His hatmaking business was on the upswing. He had in 1775 established a singing school, much to the delight of many townspeople. "I was rather bashful and diffident but I succeeded so as to get the singing considerably revived which had almost run out before." Soon Justin and Mercy began thinking seriously about their future. On April 3, 1778, he composed a letter to David and Silence Hoyt asking their consent to marry their daughter. The following spring he began construction of a house on a one-acre parcel on the Albany road near the center of Deerfield.

In just four years, Justin Hitchcock, a farmer's son from a hardscrabble hill town, a man with limited formal education, had made a home among the well-heeled, well-educated patricians of Deerfield. His status seemed to be secured once and for all when in March 1779, he was chosen Town Clerk by the Tories: "I was now 27 years old and as I attended public worship and led in the singing there I thought the Tories might have some hope of gaining me to their party by this mark of distinction." They soon learned that the earnest young man's political inclinations were not fungible.

Eight months later Justin Hitchcock and Mercy Hoyt were joined in holy matrimony. Inauspicious would not be too strong a word to describe the time chosen by the young couple to consecrate their vows. In his letter to Mercy's parents Justin described it as a period when "our public affairs are in so unhappy a situation." He was referring, of course, to the progress—or lack thereof—in the war with England. Presiding over the ceremony was the church pastor, the Reverend Jonathan Ashley. It would be Reverend Ashley's last wedding, possibly one of the last official acts of his nearly half-century ecclesiastical career. His demise was symptomatic of the political crosscurrents that were tearing at the fabric of American society. It remained to be seen how those tides would turn. On them was borne the fate of an incipient nation and of a young couple setting out on a new life together.



*Sugarloaf Mountain by Orra White Hitchcock*

## 2 Justin and Mercy

*“There was time sufficient afterwards to regret this hasty foolish bargain.”*

*Deerfield, May 15, 1780*

*“Gentlemen, if you please,” shouted Eliphalet Dickinson, rapping the gavel heavily on the table in the meetinghouse. Dickinson was Deerfield’s town moderator and thus responsible for presiding over town meetings.*

*“The ballots having been counted, the results are as follows: Mr. Lyman, 21 votes...” A buzz spread through the audience. “Mr. Dickinson, 43 votes.” Again a murmur rose among the townspeople. “And thirdly, Mr. Hitchcock, 85 votes.” Silence. “Mr. Hitchcock, sir, you are hereby declared to be the clerk of the town of Deerfield in this, the one-thousand-seven-hundred-eightieth year of Our Lord.”*

*Justin Hitchcock, seated in the front row, nodded to the moderator. His brother-in-law, David Hoyt, seated next to him, smiled and patted his back in congratulations.*

*The moderator continued. "If there be no other matters before the meeting, let us proceed to the final order of business, the first reading of the proposed constitution of the state of Massachusetts." Dickinson gestured to a tall stack of loosely bound printed pages placed in the middle of the table before him. "Mr. Hitchcock."*

*"Sir?" replied the newly elected town clerk.*

*"Mr. Hitchcock, I believe you have been chosen by this body as the new town clerk, have you not?"*

*Justin nodded.*

*"Mr. Hitchcock, your first duty in that post is the reading of the proposed constitution. Pray proceed."*

*Justin got to his feet and stepped forward to a position behind the moderator's table. He looked up at the townspeople who seemed to be waiting patiently for him to begin.*

*"Commence, sir, with the first reading."*

*"The first reading, sir?"*

*"Yes, Mr. Hitchcock, the first reading. The General Court requires that the document be read, three times, at three meetings...by the clerk." He nodded to the sheaf of papers on the table.*

*Justin Hitchcock smiled weakly, looked up at his fellow townspeople, then to his brother-in-law, before picking up the first page. Slowly he began:*

*"We, the people of Massachusetts, acknowledging, with grateful hearts, the goodness of the great Legislator of the universe..."*

**I**mmediately after the wedding, the bride and groom moved into the first floor of the newly constructed house on the Albany road in Deerfield. "We lived for some time without any other in the family," wrote Justin, adding that their first winter together was "extremely severe and a vast quantity of snow lay on the ground."

Fortunately, the Hitchcock home was well situated for the young couple, within sight of the Hoyt homestead and the Deerfield meetinghouse, and but a few minutes' walk from most of the town's shops and other places of business. Mercy's services were no doubt called on daily by her family. She had five younger siblings ranging in age from eight to twenty-two, all still living with their parents a short distance away. In addition she had two half-siblings by her father's first marriage, Persis and Jonathan, each with little ones who likely benefited from her services as well. Justin worked hard at his trade out of a shop next door to their home while also carrying out his duties as Town Clerk.

Despite the long, cold winter, a spirit of optimism pervaded Deerfield, and the entire Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the first half of 1780. Only a few

months earlier, a constitutional convention led by Samuel and John Adams had met in Cambridge to formulate a state constitution. That document was remarkable for its declaration of individual rights, establishment of three branches of government, separation of powers, and system of checks and balances. It became a model for many other state constitutions as well as the federal constitution that was adopted in Philadelphia seven years later.

In Deerfield as in every other city and town in the Massachusetts Bay colony, the proposed state constitution had to be presented and read aloud to the citizens at Town Meeting, and read not just once or twice, but three times, before a vote could be taken. Young Justin Hitchcock had just been elected Town Clerk for the second year, and so the task fell to him to do the reading. This must have been no mean feat; the document ran to fifty-five pages and more than 12,000 words.

The war, on the other hand, had taken a turn for the worse. After a series of victories for the Continental Army between 1775 and 1777, British forces seemed to be gaining the upper hand. In early 1779 the British occupied Georgia. The severity of that winter hampered the war effort as well. Wrote Justin, "...the American Army were in danger of perishing for want on account of the difficulty of transporting provisions to them. The roads were so blocked up with snow." Then the summer of 1780 saw a series of humiliating losses for the colonies, including the British capture of Charleston, South Carolina, the defeat of General Gates's force at Camden, South Carolina, the defection of General Benedict Arnold, and numerous mutinies from the Continental Army.

Almost from the start, the Hitchcocks struggled financially. Justin was a craftsman who specialized in hats—fine hats, elegant hats, hats of castor (beaver), musquash (muskrat), and felt, hats decorated with looping ribbons, with buckles, with ruffles or feathers. His felt hats usually sold for about sixty pence, fur hats for a pound. Nearly all transactions were recorded in pounds, shillings, and pence, although after 1790 dollars appear in a few instances in his account book. Most of the hatter's customers were from Deerfield or surrounding towns although he shipped one hat by coach to Putney, Vermont, and sold a hat to a man from Longmeadow, Massachusetts. He also provided related services such as repairing or altering hats and gloves, coloring fabric and yarn, and smithing belt buckles. Payment was sometimes made in cash, but more often involved barter for various goods or services needed by his trade or in his home: ashes, tallow, wood, "a barrel of early cyder," or "keeping a heifer nine weeks." In payment for a felt hat in August 1793, Justin noted that a Mr. Edward Upham had agreed to "schooling one of my boys."

While Justin's trade was successful as far as it went, it is also clear from his account book that hatmaking was not in itself a sufficient livelihood. Besides making and selling hats, he also provided a range of other services to his



Figure 3. Winter in Deerfield

customers: chopping wood, mowing gardens, gathering corn, picking apples, or “a half days work making hay.” For several years Justin worked with a partner, but he was “...a very talkative unstable man and some of his proceedings gave me uneasiness,” wrote Justin. They soon parted company. Justin then purchased a small building with two rooms not far from his house with the intention of moving it to his land for a shop. But he rushed headlong into the transaction without proper consideration and paid far too high a price. He admitted, “There was time sufficient afterwards to regret this hasty foolish bargain.” This would prove only one factor in his accumulating financial troubles. A few years later he agreed to rent some farmland from a neighbor, land he intended to work for additional income. But he fell into arrears on the rent and eventually was sued by the owner. To pay his debt, he found it necessary to sell a cow, no small sacrifice in those times.

The couple’s financial woes in that period were due in part to their own errors, but in equal measure to factors beyond their control. The currency then authorized by the Continental Congress was being used to finance the war, yet it had no intrinsic value, no legal standing. As the war dragged on, many citizens saw their cash devalued. Some had to give up their homes and land to pay their debts. Tradesmen and shopkeepers like Justin became middlemen in a chain of debt, owing some, owed by others. He would have been humiliated to read the words of his youngest son, Edward, written some seventy years later, referring to the “...comparative poverty of my early condition.” Debts incurred early in the couples’ marriage,” wrote Edward, “hung like an incubus upon him nearly all his life...”

By 1781 the fortunes of the colonies began to improve. With the defeat of British General Cornwallis and his army, Britain began to seek a way out of the war. Wrote Justin, “...petitions were presented to the King to allow us our independence and the House of Commons had a majority in favour of peace with us which was agreed to the next winter, although the definitive Treaty was not

signed till the year after.” The war naturally enough was a life changing experience for the young hatter:

Thus indeed this long and arduous struggle which continued almost eight years. I was at an age when the whole conflict was likely to interest me and was impressed with it so much as to have the events as they took place fixed in my memory and it is not likely that the like or those of vastly greater importance will ever engage my attention to such a degree again.

Justin then expounded at length on the possible reasons for the success of the colonies in the war. The British, he argued, had a low opinion of the will of the colonies to fight a war or of their means to do so. Furthermore, they believed they could choke off the colonies economically. What they did not weigh seriously enough was the immense cost of maintaining their forces from a distance of 3000 miles. And then there was the brutality of the British forces:

...[N]o savages ever treated prisoners of war with more cool determined cruelty than they treated our prisoners confined in New York in the winter of 1777, besides their burning so many of our populous towns, Casco Bay, Norfolk in Virginia, Esopus, Fairfield, Danbury, New London, served to inflame the minds of our people and was a wanton and very impolitic mode of warfare...

Finally, Justin added one more cause for the victory of the Americans over the British forces: “I may add as one cause why we did not sink under our difficulties and become subdued was the prudence perseverance and skill of our worthy commander in chief in the years 1776 and 1777.” His entry in “Remarks,” made in 1799 on the news of the death of General Washington, is clearly a measure of the importance of that man in the life of the hatter of Deerfield:

On the 14th of December this year Genl Washington died...He came the nearest to perfection in my opinion of any man I ever heard of. The loss of such a Man was deeply lamented throughout the United States such was my respect and attachment to him (tho I never saw him) that the sound of his name excited emotions that I cannot describe. It sounds like that of a Father and friend. Historians will do justice to his character which I cannot.

Adulation for George Washington was nearly universal in Massachusetts then and continued long after the general’s death. Over the next decade, the citizens of Deerfield, like those of many other Massachusetts cities and towns, formed a Washington Benevolence Society, dedicated to remembering and commemorating the esteemed general and President. Deerfield’s chapter sponsored a celebration each summer in Washington’s honor, an event that

became an opportunity for expressing one's Federalist political sentiments and raising not a few tankards of ale for decades to come.

As the nation's prospects improved toward the war's end, so did those of the Hitchcocks of Deerfield. Their first child, a girl, was born in January 1781. They named her Charissa after one of Mercy's sisters who had died of dysentery at the age of fifteen months. Over the next dozen years, they were blessed with four more children. Justin's memoir documents the births of the first four:

On the 13th of January 1781 born and was baptized by Mr Reed of Warwick occasionally preaching here. We called her name Charissa...

This year I had a son born whom we called Henry. He was born on the 6th day of November 1783. He was baptized the next sabbath by Mr Newton of Greenfield.

On the 3rd day of November this year [1785] I had another son born and was baptized the next sabbath by Mr Newton of Greenfield. We called his name Charles.

On the 16th of January this year [1789] I had a Daughter born and on the eighteenth she was baptized by Rev. Mr Newton of Greenfield. We called her Emilia.

As to why the baptisms of Henry, Charles, and Emilia were not performed by the minister of the Deerfield church, it may have been due in part to the lack of a permanent pastor in Deerfield in those years. It may also have had to do with family connections; by 1783 Justin's brother, Merrick, had moved to Greenfield with his wife, children, their sister Lucy, and the widow of another Hitchcock brother, Charles. The "Rev. Mr. Newton" was pastor of the First Church of Greenfield, the church that Merrick and his family attended. There



Figure 4. George Washington at Valley Forge

may also have been certain issues of a theological nature that others thought unimportant, but that Justin Hitchcock could not overlook.

Justin's parents had not been particularly devout. True, they attended Sunday services regularly. Justin's father took careful notes of the sermons each week so that his mother, who was deaf, could read them later. But it fell on young Justin to nudge his family into more regular devotions and practices: "I always attended public worship and a pious woman living in the family persuaded me to ask a blessing at the table and afterward to pray in the family."

During the years of his apprenticeship, Justin's interest in matters of faith flagged. He admits to reading "but little of religious books before I came of age." But a few years later, when he was in his early twenties, he had become "...more seriously impressed upon religious subjects..." Around the age of twenty-four he underwent something of a spiritual renewal, publicly confessing his faith. A few months later he took another important step, joining the church.

I was induced to do it in a great measure from a serious consideration of the words of Christ Mark 8<sup>th</sup> 38. If Christ had a cause in the world and I pretended to hope for salvation through him I felt satisfied that I ought to make it known by obeying his command. I therefore Joined the Church in November the last year 1778.

He would continue as an active member of that congregation for the remainder of his life, serving as deacon from 1798 until his death in 1822.

While Justin Hitchcock and Reverend Ashley were poles apart politically, they were in accord on matters spiritual. Following Ashley's death in 1780, the Deerfield church was led for six years by interim pastors. Some of the difficulty of that period may have stemmed from a growing divide between parishioners like Justin who were strict Calvinists and those harboring new and unorthodox views. Some called themselves Unitarians, causing their orthodox brethren to hurl epithets such as "infidel" or "atheist" at them like darts at a dartboard in Mr. Hoyt's tavern.

Unitarianism was already well established in Europe, particularly in eastern Europe and in Britain, when it was introduced in America. It was in Boston that the first American Unitarian Societies were established in the 1770s and 1780s. Deerfield may have been especially ripe for the spread of Unitarianism. According to town historian George Sheldon, it was the French and Indian War and the American Revolution that forged in Deerfield's hardy residents a spirit of independence and self-reliance.

And if they made the wilderness blossom as the rose, they also set free thought in the high places among them, and set adrift on the sunless sea of oblivion, barks freighted with the enfeebling superstitions and harassing fears which had been their heritage; and the eternal backward set of the current carried these away forever.

Perhaps of equal importance in the rise of liberal theologies in Deerfield was a reaction to the “The Great Awakening” of the mid-eighteenth century that had its epicenter only fifteen miles away in Northampton. Some believers were dubious of the revivals that were so common in those times and the motives of the evangelical preachers such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and David Brainerd. Even some orthodox Christians found certain elements of that brand of Calvinism troublesome, particularly original sin, election, and perseverance of the saints. Increasingly, Justin Hitchcock found himself at odds with his fellow parishioners in Deerfield.

As to Mercy Hitchcock’s religious inclinations, her parents were members in good standing of the Deerfield church as were her siblings. But regarding their personal beliefs, there is little evidence to be found. Two brothers, Epaphras and Elihu, became well-known as authors and public figures, but not in the realm of religion. One measure of a family’s spiritual credentials in those times was the appointment of the men of the family as deacons. During the nineteenth century,

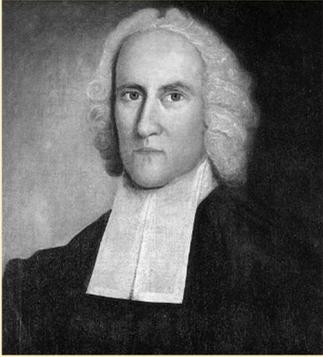


Figure 5. Reverend Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

at least four Hitchcocks held the post of deacon for decades, including Justin, his sons Charles and Henry, and Henry’s son Nathaniel. By contrast, no Hoyt ever held the position of deacon in Deerfield in that century. But the religious beliefs of Mercy’s husband were very well known, and they were entirely antithetical to those of the Unitarians in his midst. Late in life, when the overthrow of the Deerfield church by Unitarian notions was complete, Justin would pen a heartfelt missive on Christian doctrine, taking issue with the liberalism of Reverend Willard and most of the citizenry of Deerfield.

While Justin Hitchcock may have been at odds spiritually in Deerfield, his political sentiments were shared with virtually every man in the town—women, of course, having no vote and few opinions on such matters, at least not that their husbands and fathers paid any heed to. During the war Justin had been an avowed Whig, but now foremost among the sentiments of him and most of his fellow townspeople was support for a strong central government for the new nation. This was the era before the adoption of the U. S. Constitution, when the states were only loosely united under the Articles of Confederation. The central government under those articles was weak, and its weakness had a good deal to do with the economic woes of Deerfield, of Massachusetts, and of the nation.

Justin Hitchcock and many of his neighbors were quick to answer the call to defend the government of Massachusetts when, in August 1786, “The coals of discontent tho partially buried kindled afresh this year and burst into a flame.” An angry mob of some 1200 men attempted to prevent the sitting of the state Supreme Court in Springfield. They were led by a farmer from Pelham named Daniel Shays. Justin and some forty other men from Deerfield traveled to Springfield where they joined other forces and faced down the mob. That winter another insurrection was fomented by the same group and promptly quelled. Justin Hitchcock and his fellow townsmen were firm believers in the new government, the government that many had fought for just a decade earlier.

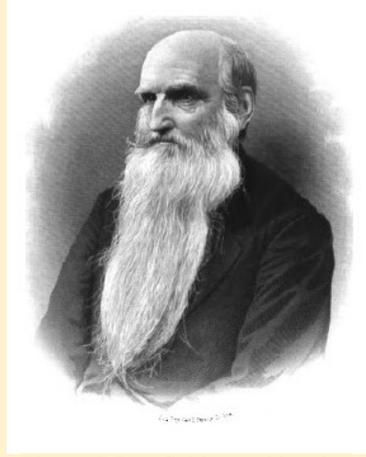


Figure 6. Deerfield town historian George Sheldon, (1818-1916)

On May 24, 1793, Mercy bore another child, a boy. They named him Edward. Curiously, Justin makes no mention of Edward, their last child, in his memoir. The five Hitchcock children grew up in the same house on the Albany road that their parents had occupied from the day they were married, fourteen years earlier. It was a small house for such a large family and money was scarce: “As to myself I had sometimes dark prospects as to obtaining a support for my growing family,” wrote Justin in 1789, “...And sometimes I found it very difficult to get grain and wood.”

But what the Hitchcock children lacked in luxuries they made up for in other riches. On the Hoyt side in 1795 they had twelve aunts and uncles and over twenty cousins living right in Deerfield, ranging in age from one to thirty-three. On the Hitchcock side they had several aunts and uncles and another six or more cousins living in nearby Greenfield. Besides enjoying the many benefits of a large extended family, the Hitchcock children were spiritually well-endowed. Having been raised in a family that was not particularly devout, Justin was determined to do better by his own children:

It will be proper to observe that when I began to live in a family of my own I began to put in practice a resolution I had formed before and that was to attend to morning and evening prayers in the family. And if my advice is worth nothing I can freely advise all young men to do the same. They will find less

difficulty in performing this duty at the commencement of their family state than they will ever after...

Despite Justin's devoutness, life in the Hitchcock household was far from dour or cheerless. Justin was a musician and he and Mercy raised their children to love and appreciate music. Their eldest son Charles followed in his father's footsteps musically, serving as choirmaster of the church and leading singing groups in Deerfield throughout his life.

The Hitchcock's last child seems to have presented particular disciplinary challenges for Justin and Mercy. George Sheldon writes of Mercy Hitchcock, "[Edward] was the torment of her life." That he was temperamental and prone to tirades as a boy is confirmed by Edward himself. Late in life he described himself as a boy possessed of "unusual obstinacy and self will." Edward related one example: "...I remember crying so loud one night on being put to bed the people in the street came in to see what the matter was. This did me good because it made me ashamed of myself." He attributed these traits to his father: "I do not think [he] held the reins quite tight enough over me." But he then relates two incidents in his boyhood when his transgressions were dealt with severely, one by his father, one by his uncle:

I had wandered away one sabbath into the meadows. [My father] followed me and I recollect to this day how sharply the switches of a stick in his hand were laid upon me and though it roused my wrath it opened my eyes and in a measure broke my will. I recollect also on another occasion when I was ugly towards my mother her brother chased me through the snow and when I was tumbled into a drift he pelted it into my face till I thought I should not be able to breathe again. But it subdued me and made me see my vileness.

It is not clear whether Mercy shared her husband's views on discipline or spiritual training of their flock. But education was a subject on which the couple were in full agreement, as were the citizens of Deerfield as a whole. In 1787 the town adopted a new plan for schools, designating six districts, and opening a new school in the center of town. It was a small, simple building with one room accommodating about thirty students. The first teacher was a Mr. Freegrace Reynolds, a graduate of Yale and a licensed minister. In addition to his salary he was to be provided a room in the village and firewood. It was in that school that the formal education of the Hitchcock children began. But a system of one room schoolhouses, while admirable, would not long suffice for the scholars of Deerfield. Within a decade a new and ambitious project would be undertaken that would forever mark the town and its citizenry as forward-thinking exemplars for public education in the young nation.



*The original Deerfield Academy building*

### 3 A New Academy

*“Thou shalt be commended according to thy wisdom.”*

*Deerfield, January 7, 1804*

*The rumble of heavy boots on the wooden floors of the Academy’s second floor resounded down the narrow hallway as some forty scholars, all boys, burst into the recitation room. Preceptor John Hubbard stood, his back to the class, examining with some satisfaction a series of algebra problems he had inscribed on the chalk board.*

*“Gentlemen,” he began as the students settled into their narrow wooden benches, “your attention is directed to a few numerical challenges from yesterday’s lesson. Pray begin...in silence.” He was possessed of a self-congratulatory smile, a certainty that these would prove sufficiently challenging to guarantee the maintenance of good order among the sometimes boisterous entourage, at least for a few minutes.*

*All the Light Here Comes from Above*

*At a desk near the back of the room he spotted an unfamiliar face, a boy with black hair and intense dark eyes, peering into a book. The preceptor stepped slowly along the aisle until he stood towering above the lad.*

*“And you would be...” he said sternly.*

*The boy looked up briefly. “Edward Hitchcock.” Then his eye returned to his book.*

*“Sir,” replied Hubbard. The boy nodded. “Sir,” the preceptor repeated.*

*The boy looked up again, confused. “Sir.”*

*“Edward—Hitchcock—Sir,” spoke the preceptor, sounding each word distinctly.*

*“Edward Hitchcock, Sir,” replied the boy at last.*

*The preceptor looked sternly on the boy. “Master Hitchcock, you seem to have misunderstood the instructions.” He placed one finger on the small slate on the desk, then nodded toward the problems on the board. “You are instructed to solve the equations...for  $x$ . I trust you understand.” The boy looked up at the distant blackboard but did not reply, still clutching the book in his hand.*

*Hubbard reached down and lifted the book from the boy’s hand, opened it, and gazed at the title page. “Spherical Trigonometry,” he read with a frown. “Hmmm...unlikely reading for a boy of your age. Please explain why you are in possession of such an advanced work.”*

*“To determine the orbits of the planets...and the moon...and comets,” answered the boy. Hubbard fixed a stern gaze on the boy until he added, “Sir.”*

*“Hmmm...I see. Well, perhaps it would help if you were to learn algebra first, I doubt not.”*

*“Oh, I learned algebra...when I was eight...Sir.”*

*“When you were eight? Well, perhaps it is time for you to refresh your learning.” And he tapped the slate loudly.*

*The boy picked up the slate and a piece of chalk and, without looking up, replied, “Yes...Sir.”*

**E**arly in the life of the new nation, public education became a rallying cry. It was, asserted many of the leading figures in America at the time, a “pillar of republican society.” National figures including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush argued that only by providing free education for all could a free nation sustain itself. Jefferson proposed a three-tier system of public education: free elementary schools in every town, regional academies for older students, and state colleges for the most promising students. Despite their efforts, public education was slow to spread through the states.

Massachusetts was a leader in this trend. In Deerfield at least six district schoolhouses were established in 1787. But the citizens of Deerfield were not

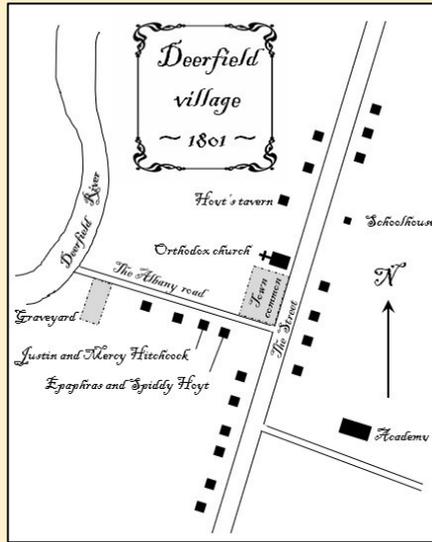


Figure 7. Map of Deerfield village circa 1801

content with this system of district schools. In 1797 a group of men gathered for the purpose of establishing an academy of higher learning in the town. They petitioned Governor Samuel Adams who, on March 1 of that year, approved the petition and passed it on to the state legislature. Shortly thereafter the Academy received its charter, permitting the trustees to raise funds, "...for the sole trust & purpose of supporting an Academy in said Town of Deerfield, for the promotion of Piety, Religion & Morality, & for the Education of Youth in the liberal Arts & Sciences, & all other useful Learning..." With those words the state legislature in 1797 gave official sanction to the new school at Deerfield. Vigorous fundraising could now begin, and within a year a new edifice had risen that would become Deerfield Academy.

The first of January, 1799, was a day of double celebration in Deerfield. Not only was it the first day of the new year, it also marked the official opening of Deerfield Academy. The proceedings began with a sermon in the meetinghouse by Reverend Joseph Lyman who gave eloquent expression to the lofty goals of the new institution in a sermon, *The Advantages and Praises of Wisdom*, citing Proverbs 12:8: "A man shall be commended according to his wisdom." He then expounded on the subject of wisdom:

Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee; she shall bring thee to honour when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace; a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. Thou shalt be commended according to thy wisdom.

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Reverend Lyman concluded with a charge to his audience:

...[M]ay this respectable assembly, who now worship God in this house of prayer, and honor the cause of literature, by their presence, at the consecration of the Academy, to the purposes of knowledge and virtue, duly, appreciate their privileges, in this land of liberty, of light, and of christian knowledge. May they cultivate their own minds with wisdom and virtue.

Even before the Academy opened its doors, the Board of Trustees adopted a lengthy set of rules to guide them, the preceptor, and their students. Among those rules was a declaration of the Academy's admissions policy: "Youth, of both sexes, provided they are found, in a degree, capable of reading and writing, may be admitted into the Academy." Instruction would be provided for all in "reading, writing, and English grammar"; an extra fee would be levied for instruction in "other branches of Literature" that included Latin, Greek, and the Ornamental Arts. Tuition was low, but students were also expected to bring firewood to heat the Academy building. One preceptor wrote to a friend about the new school in 1799:

The Academy is an elegant Edifice, having, on the lower floor, four rooms, one for the English school, one for the Latin and Greek School, the Preceptor's room, and a room for the Museum and Library. The upper room, being all in one, is used for examinations, and exhibitions.

The assemblage then adjourned to the new Academy building where Mr. Enos Bronson, a recent graduate of Yale, was inducted as the first preceptor. The following day, the first quarter began. While many of the students were from Deerfield and surrounding towns, many others came from farther afield including several dozen from Connecticut, Vermont, and New York State. Among the students who attended that first year were Charissa and Henry Hitchcock. Charles began the following year, Edward in 1804, Emilia in 1805. So far as the early records indicate, the four older children attended for only one or two terms. Edward, on the other hand, attended six winter terms varying in length from two to five months, from January 1804 to May 1809.

Why were the tenures of Edward's siblings at the Academy so brief? Charissa was already eighteen when the Academy opened. She married a classmate, Jonathan Swett, in 1803. No explanation is found as to why Emilia's schooling at the Academy ended after only two quarters. It is clear, however, that financial considerations played a role in cutting short the education of Edward's two older brothers. Both left school at age sixteen or so after just one or two quarters to work on a neighbor's farm to help their father pay off his debts. In a letter to Edward late in life, Charles Hitchcock wrote in a reflective moment, "... my going out when 16 years old to work by the season more or

less till I was 19 years old to pay our good Father's debts is not a service of regret to me but I think of it to this hour with satisfaction."

Both Charles and Henry would devote their lives to farming. But what about Edward? Why did he not follow a similar path? He worked alongside his brothers for a time over several summers, but as he recalled late in life,

I had acquired a strong relish for scientific pursuits, and I seized upon every moment I could secure—especially rainy days and evenings—for those studies. I was treated very leniently by my father and brother, who probably did not know what to do with me, but saw plainly that I should not become distinguished as a farmer.

At the Academy, Edward clearly thrived. Not only did he excel in his regular studies, he also found time for extracurricular involvements as well, as noted in *Reminiscences*:

My literary taste was also greatly encouraged by a few companions in Deerfield with whom I united in a society, whose weekly meetings we kept up for years, which had a department for debate, and another for philosophical discussion. I always regarded this as one of the most important means of mental discipline that I ever enjoyed.

Edward's notes suggest that as a young man he possessed a strong vein of independence.

I think that my earliest history exhibited a good deal of peculiarity and not a little of idiosyncrasy of character. I was never content to follow in the beaten track but was always seeking out some side path. After I got interested in the study of science this trait of character was more fully developed and it had not a little to do with my success.

He admitted to having little use for "ordinary amusement and recreations": "I never learned how to dance or to play cards and never I think attended a ball or more than once or twice till I got into a profession sat down to dinner or supper at a public house." Besides his precocious intellectual abilities, young Edward had a particularly strong mechanical aptitude. His father had a shop full of tools that Edward put to frequent use:

...I early attempted to set up some machines such as saw mills and planetariums—a whirling table—wooden quadrants—an annular sphere—a globe etc. etc. They were poorly made and must have been so with such tools. For years I had a strong passion for such occupations and spent much time upon them. I do not think that I ever excelled in delicate mechanical work. But in coarse work I did something. It was while yet little more than a boy that I superintended the framing of two buildings of considerable size although I had

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never worked with a carpenter a day. But working by the square rule I had complete success.

Edward well may have possessed a “strong relish” for science from an early age, but the earliest of his writings that survive reveal a literary appetite of a different sort. At sixteen he penned a poem, “A Poetical Sketch of Democracy in the County of Hampshire 1809,” that mocked many of the political elders of Hampshire County. Although the cover of the handwritten manuscript is inscribed, “Probably the first intellectual effort of President Edward Hitchcock which was made public,” there is no record of its publication. Perhaps he recited it at an exhibition at the Academy.

The poem contains thirty-eight stanzas varying in length from four to twenty lines each. The poet even provides footnotes explaining some references or providing verification of several accusations included in the poem. In the opening stanza Edward states the object of his “humble rhyme”:

He undertakes a tedious task  
Who would democracy unmask  
To dark designs find out a clue  
And turn them inside out to view  
Yet as the world is growing older  
Their Demagogues grow somewhat bolder  
Their Conduct which we've seen of late  
Affords a rule to calculate  
Then let us sketch in humble rhyme  
Some of the evils of the time  
None need to fear our doggerel Ditty  
Will much provoke their rage or pity.

Hitchcock proceeds to skewer dozens of Hampshire County politicians. Of Solomon Smead, Chief Justice of the Hampshire Sessions Court, he writes,

Some years ago he turn'd his coat  
The reason why we don't find out  
T'is likely tho, the real cause  
Was thirst for popular applause...

A Col. Burt, comes in for a different sort of taunt:

Of Col. Burt not much is said  
That's very good or very bad  
He after all appears so slender  
As to remain of doubtful gender

Of a legislator from nearby Pelham he writes,

Pelham that virtuous society  
So full of Democratic Piety  
Have sent we did not say a Monkey  
No that were rong his name is Conkey.

He attributes some political skullduggery of the times to intemperance:

Midst many a cause we mention some  
But none have equal force with rum  
Unless what equally makes frisky  
As Cyder Brandy gin and Whiskey

Near the end of the poem he issues a warning to those who have escaped his vitriolic verse:

The legislators which we knew  
We've tried to paint in colors true  
If there is some not mentioned here  
When known—we'll Touch they need not fear.

Although he promised to spare no one, all Edward's barbs were directed toward members of the Democratic-Republicans, the party of President Jefferson; not a single Federalist candidate was similarly skewered. The Federalist party had its origin during Washington's presidency. Its guiding principle was the value of a strong central government. The Democratic-Republicans, on the other hand, were skeptical of the central government and favored retaining power in the states and local communities.

Why this apparent political bias in a sixteen-year-old? Strong family, community, as well as regional influences were no doubt all at play. His father was a Federalist, an ardent supporter of George Washington who had answered the call to defend the state court in Springfield during Shays's Rebellion. Justin's brother-in-law, Epaphras Hoyt, was also a Federalist. In fact the town of Deerfield was overwhelmingly Federalist: according to the *Greenfield Gazette*, Deerfield voted for the Federalist candidate for governor in 1809 by a margin of 272 to 9. Hampshire County as a whole leaned Federalist as well, although some of its small outlying communities were staunchly Democratic-Republican. Two of the county's largest newspapers at the time, the *Greenfield Gazette* and the *Hampshire Gazette*, were both unapologetically Federalist.

In the last few stanzas of "A Poetical Sketch" Edward gives voice to the deep worries in the nation regarding Napoleon's advances in Europe. Since 1795, Napoleon had dispatched his armies across the continent, rolling over one independent nation after another with both speed and brutality. In the eyes of

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some American politicians of that time, President Jefferson and his supporters, the Democratic-Republicans, were attempting to appease the tyrant, an allegation that young Edward seems to take to heart:

Yet now like any tame spectator  
We see them view the great Dictator  
Whom heav'n in wrath on earth has sent  
T'inflict its heavy punishment  
Who strongly to such power has crept  
And from the Earth all freedom swept  
And when the nation is distressed  
By arbitrary laws oppress'd  
Their fears receive a full dismissal  
Are passive now and all submission.

It would be several years before Edward's next political missives would appear in print, but they would address many of the same themes: admiration for George Washington and the Federalist party, doubts about the motives of the Democratic-Republicans, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and fear that Napoleon's next target of conquest might be the young American nation.

The society that so influenced Edward's intellectual development in Deerfield was known as the Literary Adelphi. Few records of the group have survived, but its early members likely included Edward, several of his cousins, and his close friend Jackson Dickinson. The Greek word "adelphi" means brothers, and the membership of the society was exclusively male, perhaps in deference to the Academy's rules about mingling of the sexes. They met weekly for discussions and debates. Distinguished guests were often invited to deliver orations. Edward was called on to deliver addresses to the Adelphi, one in August 1813. Another a year later he entitled "An introductory address delivered before the 'Society of literary Adelphi,' at their seventh anniversary, August 8<sup>th</sup> 1814." These were long, rambling orations on politics, philosophy, and religion.

That summer Edward also presented to the group a "dramatic production." The Adelphi were impressed with the work and determined to offer a public performance. But several of the key roles in the play were women. Fortunately, in 1813 a parallel organization had been formed, the Young Ladies' Literary Society. We know more about this organization than about its male counterpart; a lengthy constitution was drawn up and signed by several dozen young women of Deerfield. Among the signatories was Edward's sister, Emilia Hitchcock. Another was a young woman who through a combination of charm, intellect, and religious zeal, would come to play a vital role both in Edward's play and in his life. Her name was Orra White.