

Introduction

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For the last several years, Elizabeth Drinker and I have been out of touch. It was my fault. I moved on to New England and did not consult her as I had in the past; did not elicit her opinions on eighteenth-century issues as I once had. But if I was remiss, other historians were not. They have repeatedly sought her advice on any number of subjects since her unabridged diary was published in 1991. Indeed, in the ten years that the three volumes have been available, innovative scholars have plied Drinker with questions I never even thought to ask. The four essays in this special issue of *Pennsylvania History* celebrate not only a decade of publication, but also the creativity of scholars who have used the journal during that time to further our understanding of early America.

Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker had so much to say about so many things in the nearly fifty years that she put quill to paper. Born in Philadelphia in 1735 to Irish Quaker parents, she began the diary in 1758 after she and her one surviving sibling, Mary, had been orphaned and taken in by another Quaker family. In 1761, Elizabeth Sandwith married the up-and-coming merchant, Henry Drinker, forming a household that included her sister, who remained unmarried throughout her life. Of the nine children to whom Elizabeth gave birth, five survived to adulthood, and four outlived their mother. She was a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother, and there can be little doubt that the affection she lavished on her family was reciprocated. Her membership in the Society of Friends helped to shape her world view, and the majority of her friends and acquaintances were of the same persuasion. She was knowledgeable, intelligent, and witty. More to the point, she was observant.

Burdened with childcare, a household to run, and servants to manage, the young Elizabeth Drinker had little time (or even inclination, perhaps) to write more than an occasional sentence or two in her journal until the 1790s. But as she added years to her life, she added lines to her entries, composing three-fourths of the diary after her fifty-seventh birthday. Eventually, she produced nearly three dozen small manuscript

volumes filled with nothing remarkable, except that as a whole, the journal is probably the most remarkable literary work written by a woman in eighteenth-century America. Certainly it is the most extensive.

In the introduction to the 1991 edition, I suggested that there were at least four general historical areas that would profit from the diary. First, it was clear that even traditional and well-plumbed topics would be advanced by reconsideration from a female perspective. Second, it was obvious that the diary would enhance our understanding of human relationships during Drinker's lifetime: family and household, employees, and friends. Third, the diary offered ample opportunity to revisit long-standing perceptions about early American women. Finally, it had the potential to encourage brave new worlds of historical inquiry.

What is astonishing about the present essays is that they have independently responded to each of these areas, but in ways I never imagined. The history of medicine is not new; scholars have investigated aspects of it for decades. Furthermore, they have perused the Drinker diary toward that end. And yet, as Sarah Dine explains, there is so much more to retrieve from the journal. It is not only Drinker's role as caregiver that attracts Dine's attention but the choices that Drinker and other women made as consumers and how such decisions influenced the evolution of the medical profession. Drinker and others *chose* to have their children inoculated rather than let them risk taking smallpox in the "natural" way. Because of such decisions, a doctor's medical practice became more regulated: families made appointments for inoculation and vaccination. Fee schedules were developed for such procedures. Drinker and her contemporaries steered the medical profession in a particular direction because they eventually opted for vaccination instead of inoculation. They chose doctors because of an expertise, eventually creating a clientele attracted to a specialized practice.

Debra O'Neal has focused on interpersonal relationships—particularly that between maid and mistress—and she shows how decisions made by the latter in a changing economy affected female domestic workers. Older women with few skills experienced the greatest hardship once wage labor replaced indentured servitude. And as domestic labor became tied to market cycles, working women could not always count on a roof over their heads and food on their tables. Day labor was an iffy proposition and the pay for household work relatively low. Task specialization gained in popularity among workers and employers, giving an edge to those whose skill in baking or ironing made them more marketable in a competitive economy. Married women, particularly married

women with children, were among the least desirable employees. More likely to be rejected by potential employers who eschewed the divided loyalties of workers encumbered by families of their own, such women had the most difficult time finding stable employment. The choices made by mistresses left few options for maids.

If historians have clung to the idea that early American women were apolitical, Susan Branson's essay convinces us otherwise. By teasing Drinker's political preferences from the pages of her journal, Branson demonstrates that Drinker thought long and hard about politics, and that she would have answered Alcuin's opening gambit, "Pray Madam, are you a Federalist," with a resounding "yes." She may not have been able to vote or hold office, but Drinker's political consciousness was extremely acute, and her political priorities place her solidly in one camp rather than another. As an independent thinker, Elizabeth Drinker made political choices throughout her life.

The fourth essay, by Alison Hirsch, speaks to the subtleties of race, language, and their intersection at the frontier of historical exploration. By letting "whiteness" and "blackness" dominate scholarly conversation in the past, historians have only recently bent their efforts toward a more nuanced discussion of biracial or multiracial people. Hirsch draws such distinctions from Drinker's entries, and shows how Drinker's attention to the mulattos in Philadelphia's population waxes and wanes according to existing social tensions. Drinker's choice of language, suggests Hirsch, paralleled her perception of Philadelphia's changing ethnicity, and contributed to the formation of racial identities. Moreover, the characteristics that Drinker attributes to various people of color are occasionally fraught with paradox. If Drinker understood blacks to be immune to yellow fever, she still held that mulattos spread the disease.

While these essays are unintentionally linked by their attention to choices made by Drinker and her contemporaries, they are also drawn together by subject matter. This is not to say that the essays are repetitive or even similar in tone. Instead, the authors have analyzed like topics from alternative perspectives, creating now one image of Elizabeth Drinker's world, and now another—almost as if the reader were peering into a kaleidoscope.

The consumer revolution of the eighteenth century is an underlying thread in several of the essays. Philadelphians chose medical practitioners not only for reasons related to skill, but because of other personal characteristics as well. Dine demonstrates how potential patrons looked to a doctor's morality, decorum, and sociability. As consumers, they

made their choice of physicians based on a variety of attributes, only one of which was expertise. Similarly, O'Neal points out that consumer behavior was exhibited in Drinker's choice of servants and the characteristics she sought when hiring a worker. A desirable employee was able to live in. A consumer-conscious employer chose a servant that had no husband or children to draw her away from round-the-clock duty.

Hirsch's essay, too, raises the specter of consumer behavior. It is conceivable that Drinker and other Philadelphians preferred servants with lighter skin because they, rather than their darker skinned brethren, were status symbols. As consumers, therefore, their choice of servants in terms of color would have promoted and reinforced the prestige of lighter skin just as consumer preference for a certain bedside manner shaped expectations of how doctors should behave. Taken together, the articles are a reminder that consumerism was not limited to inanimate objects. Consumers chose people with particular characteristics from the marketplace as well as material goods. Such decision-making implies that women were well positioned to shape the future of consumption on several fronts.

The essays are also connected by their attention to Drinker's judicious use of words. Although Drinker's construction of racial categories is central to Hirsch's argument, Drinker's language is no less important to Susan Branson as she interprets Drinker's politics. Branson shows how Drinker's choice of words corresponds to her partisan principles through positive and negative expressions. Any gathering Drinker favored might be described neutrally as "an unusual concourse of people," while her distaste for Democratic Republicans prompted the use of "mob" to indicate group activity in which they were involved. An assemblage of Federalists, conversely, became "young men of this city."

As a reporter chronicling the yellow fever epidemics of the 1790s, Drinker exhibited less drama and more moderation as she described the public trauma caused by the disease. The rich detail with which she portrayed events during the crisis, however, has enabled the authors of these articles to focus on different aspects of the outbreaks. Dine concentrates on Drinker's attention to numeracy; the mortality statistics she compiled on a regular basis. Hirsch relies on the same information to analyze the epidemics in racial terms as Philadelphians continued to associate the influx of Haitian refugees with the disease.

Women are rescued from the margins of history in all these essays, forcing redefinition of words on one hand, and creating para-

doxes on the other. Surely the life and death decisions made by women in their role as primary caregivers gives words such as power and authority a more gender-neutral context. Branson's essay challenges the reader to rethink political identity in terms of gender. What does it mean for a woman to be politically active? How does a woman express political preferences if she cannot vote or hold office? How does language (either written or oral) become an avenue of political inclusion? O'Neal convincingly shows how the economic subtext of the early Republic had gendered implications. For women, institutional change wrought changes in personal fortune, much of which precipitated downward mobility. Women who had eked out a modest subsistence in their youth and middle age found themselves on the cusp of poverty as they reached their final decades. As O'Neal demonstrates through her analysis of the diary, America's independence was gender specific.

The emphasis on gender in these essays reveals paradoxes as well. As women became more "feminized" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as ideology and culture created stereotypes and attributes that were distinctively female, women gravitated toward male physicians. More "feminine" by nature, women abandoned female midwives, choosing to let male obstetricians examine, probe, and control their bodies.

As satisfying as these essays are, they leave us with a taste for more. I have little doubt that historians will continue to confer with Drinker about a variety of topics such as the natural world, the urbanization process, or the grandparent/grandchild relationship. And given its scope, her diary might very well supply them with answers, an outcome that would probably take its author by surprise. As a record of events, Drinker considered her jottings no more than "trifles" designed to prod her memory at some future moment in time. Yet Drinker's trifles are the conduits by which we connect the past to the present. The essays in this issue of *Pennsylvania History* are only overtly about the eighteenth century, since each subject resonates very powerfully in our own time. Racial dynamics, the feminization of poverty, the political gender gap, and the health care system still command our attention, and because they do, they belie Drinker's conviction that her journal entries were merely "trifles." As Dickens assures us, trifles make the sum of life.