

ANECDOTES OF WOMEN ON THE RICHARDSON FARMS

By Ellen Knight¹

The village of South Woburn began when Edward Converse built a house and mill along the Aberjona River by today's Converse Bridge. In 1773, much of the Converse farm, including the mill and the land near it (from today's parkway up to Judkins Pond), was purchased by Abel Richardson. Meanwhile, other Richardsons settled along the road to Woburn now called Washington Street but early known as Richardson Row.



*Anonymous
painting of a
Richardson farm*

Stories have been handed down about various members of the Richardson clan, some of which give glimpses into the lives of the women on the farms.

Goodwife Susanna Brooks was known for her skill as a nurse. The widow of Ezekial Richardson, she next married Henry Brooks and lived on a farm, much of which lay within present-day Winchester boundaries, though the house was near the corner of Lake and Main Streets in Woburn. In 1670, after one band of natives set upon another, a young girl was left for dead, her skull crushed by a tomahawk and her scalp removed. She was brought to Goodwife Brooks, who removed some pieces of bone imbedded in the girl's brain and tended her devotedly for about two years while she gradually mended.²

A difficult wife was recalled in another anecdote. In 1826, the story says, Mary Richardson baked several loaves of bread. Although some had gone sour, she insisted that her husband Tufts must eat them before she baked any more. He refused. Rather than eat the bread he threw himself into the Aberjona River and drowned.³

ABEL, MARY & MOLLY RICHARDSON

Abel Richardson was regarded as something of a character. Born in Stoneham in 1736, he took part in the French and Indian Wars, returned, and married Mary Thompson. They had eight children, with good biblical names like Isaac, Reuben, and Enoch, born between 1762 and 1779.

Mary participated in the work of the farm under her husband's rule, as revealed in a story told by Nathaniel Richardson in 1891. "Abel married May Thompson, a good woman, who had not a few trials to contend with. Her husband going away one day, told her to take a bag, go to the mill, get some meal, and feed the hogs. This she forgot to do; when he came home he said he would not horsewhip her, but would whip her with the rod of God. He took down the Bible, put it into the mealbag, and laid it on to his wife's back until she fled the house."⁴

As Abel and Mary both lived into their 90s, it may be hoped that this story was remembered for being extraordinary and not typical of their life together. However, it is a demonstration of how men's rights over their wives were regarded through most of history.

One of the Richardson children, known as Molly Abel, never married but stayed with her parents in South Woburn through the end of their lives. The Richardson House was located on Main Street (about where today's CVS is located). The pigpen stood under the window of the best room. One day Molly threw a half dozen good sized cheeses into the pigpen to be devoured by the pigs, Nathaniel Richardson related, "in revenge for her father locking up her best dress to keep her from going to a dance in the old Black Horse Tavern."

Molly was reportedly a familiar figure in the village. She was known as a good nurse, providing a much needed service in an era when there was no resident physician in town. Like her father, Molly had some odd ways. "She had a hatred for paper money, but kept a little silver on hand which she stowed away in a bowl of molasses, so that it could not be found if the house was broken into; when she had occasion to use money, she would pick it out with her fingers, lick the molasses off, and pay it away," Richardson wrote.

After Molly's parents died in 1831 and 1832, she herself lived on to 1864, dying at the age of 99. She did not live out her days on the family farm but ironically (considering the value of the former farmland today) in the Woburn poorhouse.⁵ Reportedly, she owned a wood lot located in the rear of Mt. Vernon Street that Woburn took for her support.

The Richardson mill figures in another story told by Nathaniel Richardson, though the principal figure is from a different Richardson family, in fact his own line. By 1891, Winchester was a changing community. Many of the old farms were broken up into housing developments. As the majority of the townsfolk were no longer farmers, women's lives had changed. Richardson, who admired his ancestress' equal ability to cope with the rigors of farm life, apparently believed the changes were not always for the better.



"In 1785 the grandmother of the writer, Submit Brown Richardson, living at the junction of Washington and Forest street, went to the Abel Richardson mill leading her husband's horse, with four bushels of corn on the horse's back, taking with her the writer's father, then three years old. She left the corn to be ground, took the horse with her son and went to her brother, Capt. Joseph Brown, a blacksmith, to spend the day and have the horse shod. At night she went back to the mill, got her ground corn and led the horse home. She was a very

The village of South Woburn, once site of the Abel Richardson farm, painted by Dr. Richard Piper in 1845. The house to the left of the yellow building was built on the site of the Converse house. The last surviving member of the family which owned this prime real estate, Molly Richardson, died in Woburn's poorhouse.

stout muscular woman and many times has taken a barrel of cider weighing 300 pounds from the tail of a car, rolled it into the cellar and placed it in position. Such were the women of revolutionary days; they did not go tilting around in 'dogcarts' hugging pug dogs."

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Mar. 29, 2013. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Henry Chapman, *History of Winchester*, p. 39.

³ Nathaniel Richardson, *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 8, 1900.

⁴ Nathaniel Richardson in 1891.

⁵ The 1850 and 1860 Woburn censuses enumerate her at ages 86 and 96 living in a poor house or alms house. In 1850 14 people were living in the poor house; in 1860 there were 18.