

TALES FROM THE COURTHOUSE

Waiting for Ichabod: A Revolutionary War Wife's Tale

by Diane Rapaport

Recently a handwritten manuscript dated 1783 was donated to the New England Historic Genealogical Society.^[1] When archivists Timothy Salls and Judy Lucey discovered that the manuscript was an unusual legal document, they suggested that it might make a good topic for this column. Subsequent research indicated that we were not the first to learn of the manuscript's existence. Versions of the document, and the poignant dilemma that it revealed, have circulated over the years in local lore and published sources,^[2] yet this true story — about a man who went to war and the wife he left behind — is not widely known and is worth retelling.



Diane Rapaport

THE MARRIAGE OF SARAH WYMAN AND ICHABOD Richardson, on June 6, 1770,^[3] joined two of the oldest (and most numerous) families in Woburn, Massachusetts. Sarah was twenty-one years old when she began married life with Ichabod. He was a twenty-three-year-old carpenter,^[4] and they probably set up housekeeping with one of their many Wyman or Richardson relatives, perhaps his widowed mother, Hannah. Seven months after the wedding, on January 17, 1771, Sarah and Ichabod welcomed a son, Ichabod Jr.^[5]

Nearby was another Richardson family (tax records suggest that they may have lived next door) — a young blacksmith, Josiah, and his wife, Mary, who married in 1769 and had their first child, Josiah Jr., only a month before Ichabod Jr.'s birth. Ichabod and Josiah were third cousins (undoubtedly all Richardsons in Woburn claimed some degree of kinship), and their sons, so close in age, likely became playmates.

The little boys, only four years old when the first shots of Revolution rang out at the neighboring town of Lexington in April 1775, might have watched their fathers march off to answer the alarm. For their moth-

ers, no doubt, the days passed slowly. The extent of Josiah's service is unclear. Ichabod signed on for eight more months in the Continental Army, as a sergeant in the company of Captain Jonas Richardson (probably his brother). When that tour of duty ended, Ichabod came home, but not for long. He enlisted as a sailor on the privateer *Warren*, bid Sarah and his son goodbye yet again, and set out to sea for a dangerous adventure. Ichabod would serve the Revolution by intercepting enemy ships, with the opportunity, if he survived, of gaining a fortune in plunder, far beyond anything he could hope to provide his family as a Woburn carpenter.

Sarah had no choice but to wait. The Richardsons next door, and other friends and family, must have done their best to help, but weeks stretched into months, then years. The war continued. Some Woburn men returned from battle, some wives became widows, and still Sarah waited, with no letter from Ichabod and no word about the fate of his ship. Finally, after six years of waiting for Ichabod — more than half of her marriage — Sarah had to acknowledge that Ichabod surely was dead. She would never see him again.

But Sarah did not have to raise her son alone. The blacksmith Josiah Richardson, recently widowed, proposed marriage. Sarah accepted this second chance at happiness, probably moving into Josiah's house after their wedding on March 19, 1782,^[6] glad to give her son a father and a brother, grateful for the love and support that her new husband offered. They had less than a year to settle in as a family, however, before life abruptly changed. It was early 1783 when Ichabod showed up on their doorstep.

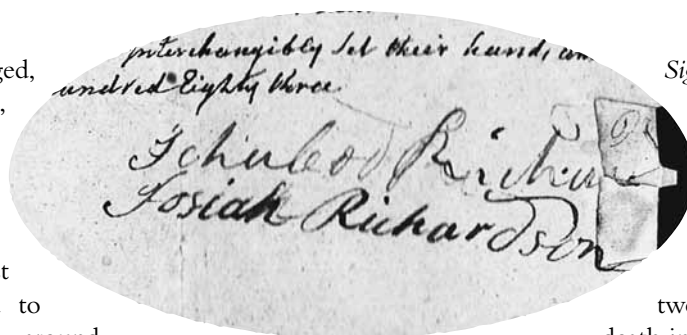
Sarah and Josiah may have thought, at first, that Ichabod was a ghost. Ichabod Jr., by now twelve years old, probably had no clear memories of his father and would not have recognized the man who stood there. But Ichabod was indeed alive, with a remarkable story to tell. The British had captured his ship off the European coast in November 1776, taking the American crewmen prisoner. Ichabod sailed for months as a British captive, finally arriving in June 1777 at Forton Prison in Portsmouth, England. But determined not to die in pris-

on, Ichabod managed, somehow, to escape, making his way to France, where he found employment as a sailor on a ship heading for the East Indies. Ichabod had to journey more years, around the world, before finally returning to Massachusetts. And he wanted his family back.

Sarah had a difficult choice to make, regardless of her feelings for Ichabod and Josiah. The legal implications could have meant complicated litigation (perhaps even the risk of an adultery prosecution against Sarah) if anyone in this unfortunate triangle decided to fight. Ultimately, Sarah chose what she thought best for her son, and the men consulted a Woburn official, Josiah Johnson (probably the local justice of the peace), for a quiet way to handle the legalities. Johnson took up his quill pen, and drafted a contract:

Whereas Ichabod Richardson of Wobourn in the County of Middlesex, Common Wealth of the Massachussetts Shopjoynr about six or seven years sinse, (during the unhappy Difference between Great Brittain and American the Collones) Inlisted him on board one of the American Privettears leaving behind his wife Sarah by which he had Issue one son in which unlucky voige he was take Prisoner by the Brittians and was carried to great Brittain and from thence to the East Indies which occasioned him six or seven years absence without any the least notice to his said wife Sarah of his being in the land of the living. During this uncertain Interim the said Sarah in a dessolate state Josiah Richardson of said Wobourn blacksmith being left a widower married the said Sarah. But it so happens at this present time the said Ichabod is now returned and puttes in his claim to the said wife Sarah which by reason of their said Issue she chuses to cohabit with her former husband the said Ichabod as she hath [not] had nor is like to have any by the said Josiah and they the said Ichabod and Josiah for the amicable settlement of the unhappy affair between them stipulate as follows . . .

The contract specified return of property, as if the marriage between Sarah and Josiah had never occurred, with penalties if either man violated the agreement. Both men signed, and Ichabod resumed his role as Sarah's husband. Undoubtedly everyone tried to move on through these awkward and bittersweet times. Possibly Ichabod attempted a fresh start for his family in another town (tax records suggest that they lived elsewhere for at least another year), but the family was back in Woburn later in 1784. By then, Josiah had remarried, to another woman named Mary,^[7] with



Signatures of Ichabod Richardson and Josiah Richardson on the 1783 document designed "for the amicable settlement of the unhappy affair between them."

whom he lived for nearly two more decades, until his death in 1801.

For Sarah and Ichabod, however, there was little time left, and no more children. She died June 19, 1786, only 37 years old.^[8] Ichabod lived long enough to attend his son's wedding to Ruth Baldwin, also of Woburn, on September 21, 1791,^[9] and to wave goodbye as the newlyweds left Woburn to settle in New Hampshire. Alone at the age of fifty, Ichabod died a few months later, on February 5, 1792.^[10] ♦

Notes

¹ NEHGS, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, Mss A 8240. Possibly the NEHGS manuscript is a copy of the original (or one of the "duplicate originals" undoubtedly created when it was signed). Other published versions of the document (see note 2) include variations in the language.

² See, e.g., J. L. Bell, <http://boston1775.blogspot.com/2010/04/marriage-of-josiah-richardson.html> and <http://boston1775.blogspot.com/2010/04/sarah-richardson-she-prefers-to-live.html> (2010); William C. Campbell, "'Til Death Do Us Part," *Woburn: Forgotten Tales & Untold Stories* (Woburn, Mass.: Sonrel Press, 2004), 106–115; Abram English Brown, "A Romance of War," *Beneath Old Roof Trees* (Boston: Lee & Shepard Publishers, 1896), 327–337; Duane Hamilton Hurd, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts: With Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia, J. W. Lewis & Co., 1890), 394. There were errors and omissions in the previous publications, which I attempted to correct in this column but did not have space to explain in detailed endnotes. See "Selected Additional Sources," below, for further resources.

³ Edward F. Johnson, *Woburn Records of Births, Deaths, and Marriages from 1640 to 1873* (Woburn, Mass.: Andrews Cutler & Co., 1890), 3:231.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1:216. "s. of Asa and Hannah, March 3, 1747."

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1:218.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3:232.

⁷ *Woburn Records of Births, Deaths, Marriages: Part X: Marriage Intentions*, arranged by Edward F. Johnson (Woburn, Mass., 1919), p. 145: "Mr Josiah Richardson and Miss Mary Richardson, both of Woburn, Aug 2, 1783."

⁸ Edward F. Johnson, *Woburn Records of Births, Deaths, and Marriages from 1640 to 1873* (Woburn, Mass.: Andrews Cutler & Co., 1890), 2:159.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:233.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:160.

(continued on page 54)