

Loyalists and the Birth of Libraries in New England: The Marriage of Martin and Abigail Howard

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Martin Howard was a Revolutionary War era Loyalist from Newport, Rhode Island, while Abigail Greenleaf was the daughter of Stephen Greenleaf, the last Suffolk County, Massachusetts sheriff to receive a royal appointment for his position. Howard's political beliefs led to a short exile in Britain in 1765 during the Stamp Act crisis and a permanent one following his second departure from North America in 1777. Abigail Greenleaf Howard shared her husband's second exile until her return to Massachusetts in 1783 following Howard's death and the end of the war. The Howards' political beliefs dominated their personal geographies but their shared cultural interests in literacy and libraries continued to root them in New England, even as their lives were turned upside down. Howard served as librarian for the newly formed Redwood Library in his native Newport, Rhode Island in the early 1750s, while Abigail Greenleaf Howard helped found the Boston Library Society in 1794, an organization which later merged with the Boston Athenaeum.

The eighteenth century was a period of ever expanding intellectual interests which is often known as the "Age of Enlightenment." Investing in libraries became a way for communities to publicly demonstrate their commitment to Enlightenment ideals, including the betterment of society, the exchange of knowledge, and the building of cultural discourses. Bob Harris notes that libraries provided "a distinct, but not uniform, body of ideas communicated primarily through published books and periodicals . . . a process linked, but not equivalent, to changing patterns of cultural transmission and the pursuit of improvement; and, finally, as a set of values and practices potentially inscribed in the changing nature of townscapes and urban society."¹ While this process began in Europe, it became particularly important in the British North American colonies as British colonists endeavored to demonstrate that they too were part of the intellectual metropole spanning out from London, a process which began long before the American Revolution but would ultimately become part of the revolutionary movement.² If Martin and Abigail Greenleaf

Howard's political beliefs placed them out of step with many of their neighbors in the 1760s and 1770s, a shared love of books and libraries brought them back to their communities. By examining the involvement of Martin Howard with the Redwood Library in the 1750s and Abigail Howard with the Boston Library Society in the 1790s, this paper considers the intertwining of British identity and intellectual pursuits both during and after the American Revolution.

Increased access to libraries was one of the more notable societal changes in the eighteenth century since library access in earlier centuries had largely been confined to individuals and institutions such as churches or universities. Wealthy collectors could create their own personal libraries and institutions. The Bodleian Library in Oxford, for example, assembled books in a single location but such collections were only ever intended to support the specific tastes and interests of the collector(s) at work, rather than the needs of a broader audience. The early eighteenth century saw the creation of subscription libraries, which charged an annual fee or required subscribing members to purchase shares in the library.³ These institutions were comparatively democratic in nature since they were created by, and for, communities of local subscribers whose goal was to create permanent collections of books and reading materials. Potential users did, however, need to be able to afford subscription fees and the collections tended to be instructional in nature. In time, increasing demands for fiction led to the rise of circulating libraries in the 1720s and 1730s. These institutions were created by booksellers and publishers on a commercial basis and focused on purchasing books which their subscribers would only read once. The circulating libraries also provided spaces where readers could gather to socialize and discuss the books they were reading, an important element in a world which provided very few respectable public places for men and women. Both subscription and circulating libraries also emphasized the creation of communities of readers who, in turn, could help to elevate the wider communities around them, and this emphasis is apparent in the activities of both Martin and Abigail Howard.

One such public space was the Redwood Library, which was established in Newport, Rhode Island in 1747.⁴ The town's residents believed that having a library would bolster their community's status as one of the most flourishing port towns in British North America. Merchant Abraham Redwood accordingly donated £500 to "be laid out in a collection of useful Books suitable for a Publick Library ... having nothing in view but the good of mankind."⁵ The resulting collection offered readers "useful Books" on subjects ranging from theology and medicine to history and law to mathematics and architecture. By contrast, poetry, the plays of Shakespeare and a single novel, Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, comprised only a fraction of the books chosen which further highlights the instructional nature of the Redwood's early role within the Newport community.⁶

The eighteenth-century town of Newport stretched down a slight hill to the waterfront where dozens of wharves reached into the harbor.⁷ A short walk up Queen Street took visitors along the Parade to Newport's Colony House which faced the Brick Market

Building on the western end. Churches dotted the Newport streets with the spire of Trinity Church gazing serenely down at the harbor from Spring Street while two Congregationalist churches, four Baptist meeting houses, a synagogue, and a Quaker meeting house formed a half circle around the Colony House.⁸ Within the community of Newport, the Redwood Library had two immediate characteristics setting it apart from Newport's other eighteenth-century institutions. It was both the first major building to face inland rather than towards the wharves and harbor and the only community institution in Newport patronized by colonists with a wide range of religious and political backgrounds.

Sundays sent most Newport residents scattering to their individual churches, while the Jewish community made its way to the synagogue on Saturday.⁹ The Stamp Act crisis in 1765 would nearly tear the community in two, but detractors and supporters of the Stamp Act alike were often found among the Newport residents attending the Redwood on Thursday afternoons when the library was open to its members and their guests.¹⁰ Various Redwood members took turns serving as Librarian for the Redwood where they catalogued the library's collection and monitored the distribution of books into the community. One prominent early librarian at the Redwood was Congregationalist minister Ezra Stiles whose "Stamp Act Notebook" both chronicled and celebrated the colonial fight to have the Stamp Act repealed in 1766.¹¹ Other supporters of the Redwood Library who opposed the Stamp Act and later founded Newport's Sons of Liberty chapter included members of the Vernon and Ellery families who, like Redwood, also played an active role in Newport's mercantile economy.¹²

Martin Howard helped to form a group known as the Newport Junto in 1764 which advocated in favor of Rhode Island becoming a royal colony, investing in home textile production in Rhode Island, and supporting the Sugar Act, all causes opposed by many of their neighbors.¹³ Nevertheless, many of the members of the Newport Junto were also active participants in the Redwood Library. Thomas Moffatt served as Librarian for the Redwood in 1750 and was replaced by Howard in 1752 who remained in this position until 1755.¹⁴ Fellow Newport Junto member Peter Harrison was hired to design the library in 1748. His resulting building modeled on a Roman Doric temple with portico and wings but constructed from wood carefully shaped to resemble stone so that it could be made from materials readily available in Rhode Island provided a visual connection between Newport and the Palladian style popular in England at that time.¹⁵ In addition, Harrison arranged for family friend John Thomlinson to purchase the 751 titles in London which formed the nucleus of the Redwood's collection.

The founding years of the Redwood Library in the 1750s and early 1760s would probably have found Martin Howard envisioning that his life would continue in Newport much as it always had. Then his first wife, Ann Howard, died of a fever in October of 1764 leaving Howard alone with their ten year old daughter, Annie, in the house on Broad Street that he and Ann had purchased and restored.¹⁶ The Newport Junto's campaigns for Rhode Island to become a royal colony and to establish its own textile industry had angered many

of his neighbors in 1764 but not completely alienated them. Howard served as Moderator for the Newport town meeting for a number of years as well as one of several overseers of the poor in 1764 and early in 1765.¹⁷ But the publication of Howard's *A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax his Friend in Rhode Island* pamphlet on January 20, 1765 supporting Parliament's right to tax the British North American colonies marked a turning point as anger against the Stamp Act surged throughout the British North American colonies.¹⁸ Shortly after the Boston Stamp Act riots on August 14, Howard and two other members of the Newport Junto were hanged in effigy on the Newport Parade and their houses attacked. Howard and his ten-year-old daughter Annie then traveled to London where Howard testified before Parliament about the events of the Stamp Act crisis in Rhode Island.¹⁹ Following his testimony, Charles Lennox, the third Duke of Richmond, recommended to King George III that Howard become the Chief Justice of North Carolina and he took up this post in the winter of 1767.²⁰

A few months later, Martin and Annie Howard traveled to Boston where he commissioned John Singleton Copley to paint him wearing his newly issued Chief Justice's robes.²¹ While in Boston, Howard also made formal arrangements to marry his second wife, twenty-four-year-old Abigail Greenleaf Howard.²² Two decades earlier, Newport Junto member Peter Harrison had arranged for the 751 books purchased for the Redwood Library to be conveyed across the Atlantic Ocean by Abigail's father, Stephen Greenleaf, whom the Redwood Library Directors promptly made an honorary member of the institution to thank him for his efforts.²³ By the time of the Stamp Act crisis, Greenleaf's support for the British Parliament and Crown, had, like Howard's support in Newport, alienated him from many of his neighbors.²⁴ While it is unknown precisely when or how Martin and Abigail Howard became acquainted, it seems likely the marriage was rooted in mutual political interests and a shared love of books.²⁵

The Howards settled in New Bern, then North Carolina's capital city, located on the state's mid-coast between Edenton and Wilmington.²⁶ They purchased a house located only a few blocks away from the governor's mansion which provided them with easy access to all official events in New Bern but there is no evidence suggesting Martin or Abigail Howard was able to find or create a community of library supporters during this period of their lives. Unfortunately for the Howard family, the coming American Revolution caught up with them for the second time in 1775 when a group of North Carolina residents drew up the Mecklenburg Resolves on May 31 which declared that the colony would no longer recognize royally appointed governmental positions, including Howard's position as North Carolina's Chief Justice.²⁷ Howard then negotiated a compromise with the North Carolina Provincial Congress in 1775 which allowed him to step back from public life, sell his house in New Bern, and enter a self-imposed house arrest at the family plantation on the banks of the Neuse River. The Howards later joined a mass Loyalist exodus north to New York in 1777 and traveled on to London where Howard died four years later in November 1781, a few weeks after General Cornwallis's surrender

at Yorktown on October 19.²⁸ Abigail and Annie Howard returned to New England in 1783 where they lived for a number of years with Abigail's parents, Stephen and Mary Greenleaf.²⁹

Records from the final two decades of Abigail Howard's life demonstrate that Howard, who was popularly known as "Madame Howard" during this period, was as closely integrated into Boston's intellectual communities as Martin Howard had been in Newport four decades earlier. Following Annie Howard's marriage to Boston merchant Andrew Spooner in 1787 and the death of her father in 1795, Howard purchased a house of her own in 1796 on neighboring Franklin Place.³⁰ Designed by Greenleaf family friend, Charles Bulfinch, Franklin Place was one of the first planned urban communities in the United States and was modeled on similar buildings that Bulfinch had seen in Europe. It included a row of sixteen three-story brick townhouses that extended in a 480-foot curve, a small garden, and four double houses.³¹ Paintings by Henry Sargent in 1821 and 1824 which portray gatherings at his home at 10 Franklin Place provide a sense of the social and intellectual opportunities promised to the residents of the new experiment in urban living at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Just as the Redwood Library became the center of Newport's intellectual life in the eighteenth century, the Boston Library Society was a central part of urban life on Franklin Place. The development of urban life and intellectual activities suited the interests and needs of Anglo-Americans in North America. It also provided evidence that even "provincials" living three thousand miles away from London could develop lifestyles far beyond the scattered farms and trading posts of the early colonial period, which remained an ongoing concern even after the American Revolution.³² Located above the arch on Tontine Crescent, it was described as occupying a room some "40 feet long, 25 feet wide, and 20 feet high."³³ Abigail Howard was one of six women who helped found the library in 1794, though none of them was ever allowed to serve as trustees for the institution. The Boston Social Library appears to have been modeled on a blend of the subscription and circulating libraries as it was run like a subscription library but welcomed both men and women as patrons, which probably reflected the influence of Howard and the other female founders. Early records for the Boston Library Society note literary discussions, social gatherings, and meetings for other institutions taking place in their room on Franklin Place. After Howard died in 1801, her will gave "all my Books ... provided the Trustees Will allow my aunt Mrs. Hannah Richards the use of such as she shall wish to Read at any time during her natural life" to the Boston Library Society.

On the eve of the Newport Stamp Act riots, Martin Howard published a letter in the *Newport Mercury* describing himself as "a Native of the Colonies" who had published his beliefs "with that freedom, which is the privilege & ought to be the Boast of every Englishman."³⁴ Howard's belief that English colonists were graced with the same personal freedoms as their counterparts in England was not shared by many of his neighbors but the Howards' dual commitment to the intellectual heritage provided by their Anglo-American

identity would eventually help her to take up life again in the community of her childhood. Massachusetts colonist James Otis had infamously derided the Newport Junto in 1764 as a “little, dirty, drinking, drabbing, contaminated knot of beggars and transports.”³⁵ Yet Michael Wentworth notes that Howard’s books, many of which had come from Martin Howard’s collection, “were considered important enough to be given a bookcase of their own crowned with an inscription attesting to her generosity.”³⁶ William Price writes of Maurice Moore, who both ardently opposed the Stamp Act and amicably served as Martin Howard’s Associate Justice in North Carolina, that “Howard and Moore shared a fundamental conservatism. They loved order and dreaded any assault on it.”³⁷ The Howards believed that the collecting of books and the transmission of the information contained on their pages created a sense of order and organization in the world which, in turn, needed to be shared with the communities which grow up around libraries and their collections. Both Martin and Abigail Howard disagreed with many of their neighbors about the political role of the colonies within the wider British Empire, but they shared a common faith in the role their communities had to play in the intellectual life of the Anglo-American Atlantic world. Abigail Howard’s bequest to the Boston Library Society provided a living memorial to her marriage, a further ordering of a turbulent universe, and, finally, gave her husband the last word any time one of their books was read in Boston.

Endnotes

¹ Bob Harris, “The Enlightenment, Towns and Urban Society in Scotland, c.1760-1820,” *The English Historical Review* 126, No. 522 (2011), 1098.

² See Ned Landsman, “Provincial Enlightenments,” in Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture 1680–1760* (Ithaca: University of Cornell Press, 1997), 57-91.

³ See Michael Harris, *History of Libraries of the Western World* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press), 150-155 for more information on the emergence of subscription and circulating libraries in the early eighteenth century.

⁴ The Redwood Library was the third library constructed in the British North American colonies, following Benjamin Franklin’s Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731 and the Library Company of Darby, Pennsylvania in 1743. Wilmarth Lewis, “Preface,” *The 1764 Catalogue of the Redwood Library Company at Newport, Rhode Island* (Hartford: Connecticut Printers, 1965), ix.

⁵ Abraham Redwood, *The 1764 Catalogue of the Redwood Library Company*, ix.

⁶ See George Champlin Mason, *Annals of the Redwood Library*, 11-12 for more information about the Redwood Library’s initial collection.

⁷ See Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985, 49-52 for more information about the layout of Newport’s streets and neighborhoods in the mid-eighteenth century.

⁸ See Benjamin Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 100-114 for more information about Newport’s many religious communities.

⁹ Church and state were undoubtedly separate in Rhode Island but political differences in Newport were often informed by religious differences and vice versa. Benjamin Carp writes “Newport had developed an attitude of latitudinarianism, or the toleration of other beliefs, yet the variety of religious groups also led to disagreements about various issues, doctrinal or otherwise. The crowded urban landscape forced these groups to articulate their differences in close quarters, often with acrimonious results.” Carp, *Rebels Rising*, 99.

¹⁰ Lewis, “Preface,” *The 1764 Catalogue of the Redwood Library Company*, xiii.

¹¹ See Stiles, Ezra. "Stamp Act Notebook." MS Vault film 1523, Reel 16, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut and Edmund Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962).

¹² See Harrison Ellery, "The Vernon Family and Arms," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (1879): 316.

¹³ See Daniel Snyder, "The Remarkable Career of Martin Howard," *Newport History* 61, No. 1 (1988): 2-17 and Abby Chandler, "Reexamining the Remarkable Career of Martin Howard," *Newport History*, 74, No. 2 (2019): 1-30 for more information about Martin Howard's personal life and political activities in Rhode Island.

¹⁴ See Mason, *Annals of the Redwood Library*, 20 and 40-42 for more information about Moffat. Martin Howard's interest in libraries at this time may also have stemmed from his contact with Benjamin Franklin, the founder of the Philadelphia Library Company, at the 1754 Albany Congress. See Timothy Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ See Bridenbaugh, *Peter Harrison, American Architect* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 7-20 for more information about Harrison. The Redwood Library believes that Peter Harrison's plan for the library "was probably derived from the headpiece of Book IV of Edward Hoppus' 1735 edition of Andrea Palladio's architecture." Redwood Library, "Our Building," <https://redwoodlibrary.org/our-building#overlay-context=user>, Accessed October 12, 2019.

¹⁶ Martin Howard wrote to Benjamin Franklin "that I have lost a Valuable and affectionate Wife, she is gone to that undiscovered Country, from whose Bourn, No Traveller returns." November 16, 1764 letter from Martin Howard to Benjamin Franklin, "The Papers of Benjamin Franklin," Accessed August 6, 2018, <http://franklinpapers.org/framedNames.jsp>

¹⁷ See "Council held at Newport," *The Newport Mercury* (Number 334, January 28, 1765) as an example of one of the many announcements regarding Martin Howard's civic activities within the town of Newport in *The Newport Mercury*.

¹⁸ See Martin Howard, *Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax to his Friend in Rhode Island, Containing Remarks upon a Pamphlet, Entitled, The Rights of the Colonies Examined in Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776*, Volume I. Ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 499-544. Howard believed, first, that because he was a British subject, he was entitled to all the rights and privileges therein, and, second, that he was receiving those rights and privileges to which he was entitled in North America, which did not include a right to vote in Parliamentary elections. For further discussion of the Howard pamphlet, see Philip Gould, *Writing the Rebellion: Loyalists and the Literature of Politics in British America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30-57.

¹⁹ The Southern Department was responsible for governing southern England, Wales, Ireland, and the British North American colonies while the Northern Department was abolished in 1782 with the creation of the Secretary of State for the Home Department and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. See "Lists of appointments," in *Office-Holders in Modern Britain* (London: J. C. Sainty, 1973), 2: 22-58. March 31, 1766 letter from Henry Conway to Samuel Ward, in *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1861), 6: 486.

²⁰ Walter Clark, *The State Records of North Carolina* (Raleigh: Josephus Daniels, 1895), 11: 209.

²¹ Martin Howard's portrait was painted by John Singleton Copley in 1767, around the time of his marriage to Abigail Greenleaf. It is now held by the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Spain and it is unclear when it became part of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection.

²² The marriage ceremony itself was conducted on August 26, 1767 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire at the home of John Wentworth, the last royally appointed governor of New Hampshire. See "Portsmouth: Last Saturday morning was Married here, by the Rev. Arthur Brown, at the Seat of His Excellency JOHN WENTWORTH, Esq; the Honorable MARTIN HOWARD, Esq; Chief JUDGE OF NORTH CAROLINA, to Miss ABIGAL GREENLEAF, Daughter of STEPHEN GREENLEAF Esq; of Boston," for the wedding announcement. *New-Hampshire Gazette* (Number 561, August 28, 1767).

²³ See Bridenbaugh, *Peter Harrison*, 53.

²⁴ Jonathan Greenleaf, *A Genealogy of the Greenleaf Family* (New York: Edward O. Jenkins, 1854), 77. Sheriff Greenleaf remained loyal to Britain during the American Revolution but his younger brother, William Greenleaf, supported the Patriot cause and replaced his brother as Suffolk County sheriff in 1776.

²⁵ A history of the Boston Episcopal Charitable Society would later describe Abigail as “fond of reading and of a literary turn of mind.” Isaac Boyle, *An Historical Memoir of the Boston Episcopal Charitable Society* (Boston: Printed for the Society, 1840), 28.

²⁶ Alonzo Thomas Dill, *Governor Tryon and His Palace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 76-77.

²⁷ William Powell, *North Carolina Through Four Centuries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 176.

²⁸ Robert Demond, *The Loyalists in North Carolina During the Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1940), 203.

²⁹ Greenleaf, *A Genealogy of the Greenleaf Family*, 77.

³⁰ Edes, “Memoir of Martin Howard,” 395. Annie Howard and Andrew Spooner’s marriage demonstrates the close networks of Loyalist families in New England. Spooner’s maternal grandfather was Andrew Oliver, who had been assigned to be Boston’s Stamp Tax Master, while his maternal great uncle, Thomas Hutchinson, was the last royally appointed sheriff for Suffolk County. Both Howard and Spooner had also had to flee New England as children and been unable to return until they were adults. See Robert Blair St. George, *Conversing by Sign: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 258-260 and 284-286 for information on the attacks on the Howard, Oliver, and Hutchinson family homes during the Stamp Act Crisis.

³¹ Charles Bulfinch was a close friend of the Greenleaf, Howard, and Spooner families. Franklin Place was home to “families of prominent businessmen and men of lawyers.” Phebe Goodman, *The Garden Squares of Boston* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2003), 33.

³² See Goodman, “From London to North America,” in *Garden Squares of Boston*, 1-24 for more information on efforts to create urban areas in New England.

³³ *The Massachusetts Magazine*, 6, no. 2 (1794), 67.

³⁴ “The Author of the Halifax Letter,” *The Newport Mercury* (Number 364, August 26, 1765).

³⁵ James Otis, “Brief Remarks on the Defence of the Halifax Libel on the British American Colonies,” in Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 1: 549.

³⁶ Michael Wentworth, *The Boston Library Society, 1794-1994: an exhibition of portraits, views, and materials related to the foundation of the society and some of its early members* (Boston : Boston Athenaeum, 1995), 9.

³⁷ William Price, “Introductory Essay,” *Not a Conquered People: Two North Carolinians View Parliamentary Taxation*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1975), 10.