

Biography of Major Richard Montague 1729-1794

MAJOR RICHARD MONTAGUE, son of Deacon Samuel, born May 7, 1729, on the homestead of his father. He married, May 23, 1750, Lucy, daughter of Simon and Elizabeth [Gunn] Cooley of Sunderland, Massachusetts. His home-lot was No. 13, west side of the street, next to his father's on the north. The house is not standing. It stood where now stands the house occupied by William Gaylord, which is the fifth house south of the church. He moved, probably in 1765, to that part of the town since incorporated as North Leverett, Massachusetts, where he afterward resided, and where he died. His homestead stood in sight of the little cemetery, where he was buried, and was located on the road which extends from the village of North Leverett to the Long Plain road to Montague, uniting with the Long Plain road near Mount Toby. The house stood just beyond the cemetery and upon the same side of the road.

He was a farmer and also the owner (as were his father and brothers) of a considerable estate. He taught the town school, but just how long is not known. He was also for a number of years town clerk, and his records were very clearly and distinctly written. He was a man of strong and independent convictions. What influence the Separatists from the Sunderland church had upon him is not known; his wife had become a member of the Sunderland church in 1760. He was one of the thirteen original members of the Baptist church of Montague and Leverett. As he was the strongest character of the little band, he was their natural leader. The church often met at his house, and their first pastor was ordained in his barn.

The following with regard to him is copied from the address of his great-grandson, Rev. Richard Montague, at the meeting at Hadley, Massachusetts on August 2, 1882: "The church was often without a preacher, and Richard, who was leader, clerk, deacon, and man of affairs, would frequently exhort in a preacher's stead. The church and her teachings were much on his heart. We can scarcely appreciate, in these days of broad charity, the contempt with which the dissenting movement was viewed. Though laws had been passed exempting such Separatists from paying taxes to support public worship, the Leverett church was unable, by reason of technical evasions, to obtain her rights. Richard refused to pay, was carried to prison by the constable, released the coming morning, and mulcted of a fine hog. Tradition says that, as the officer drove the animal away, his owner said: "Your claim to that animal MAY be good, for your master took possession of many such years ago in Gadara."

Early in life he was in the army, and there is still preserved a powder horn (from the horn of a cow), most elaborately carved by himself with a pen knife while he was a private soldier. He was a member of Rogers' expedition to St. Francis, and was finished, as the inscription shows, at Charlestown, N. H., where the expedition halted and encamped a short time on retreat from Canada in 1759.

(Major Richard states in his old account book, in his own hand-writing, that he was at Crown Point in 1759.) The horn was worn by him, or other members of the family, in the battle of Bunker Hill, and in the other principle battles of the northern division of the Revolutionary army. At this present time the strap attached to it is the original one worn with the horn, and bears the regimental colors of the Continental army. When the news of Concord and Lexington reached him, he renounced all allegiance to the Crown of Great Britain, and became a zealous patriot for the independence of his country. Marching at the head of a company which he had raised chiefly from his own spiritual flock and friends, and saying to his wife, that "if the Lord would forgive him for fighting seven years for the King, he would light against him for the rest of his life," he joined the patriot army near Boston, and fought at the head of his men in the battle of Bunker Hill.

He was with the army at Cambridge when Washington took command. General Washington soon discovered in him traits of character that made him desire to have him near his person: and so added more men to his command, raised him to the rank of major (he received his commission as major from General Washington), and attached him, it is said, to his staff. A diary, still perfect, from Aug. 1 to Dec. 1, 1775, was kept by the major while at Cambridge, and is filled with interesting military details. Major Montague was often sent to Western Massachusetts as a recruiting officer; and the people were wont to mark his fine martial bearing, "How well he managed his men, and how elegantly he rode his horse."

A story is told illustrating both his force and tenderness. The Hessians were regarded by the country people as the very incarnation of evil, and women and children expected them to be more savage and cruel even than Indians. "Major Montague," said one good mother in Israel to her guest, "don't you think it cruel in King George to send those awful Hessians to pillage and murder us?" "Hessians" the Major answered. "I don't care whom he sends, if he doesn't send angels or derils or something that we can't kill with powder or ball!" The good woman was shocked at what she judged so irreverent and harsh a speech: and not until that evening, when the Major led the family devotions and poured out his soul in touching entreaties for all classes of men, did she learn that beneath a rough exterior there dwelt the sympathy and tenderness of a woman.

Major Richard Montague was one of the principal founders of the town of Leverett, Massachusetts and was prominent as a good and useful man. His natural talents were superior, and in his life he exhibited many of the elements of true greatness. He was a kind husband and father, a reliable friend, a brave soldier in both Indian and Revolutionary wars. He died Feb. 21, 1794. His wife died May 23, 1795, in the 65th year of her age. Both are buried, side by side, in the small burial ground near and joining his farm in North Leverett. The quaint old inscription upon his tomb reads: "Traveller, behold as you pass by, As you are now, so once was I: As I am now, so must you be, Prepare for death, and follow me." While upon her tombstone there is inscribed: "By glimmering hope, and gloomy fear, I walk the dangerous road; But found in death my Savior Near, according to His word." Soon after his death "An Elegy on the Death of Major Richard Montague" was printed by William Butler in Northampton, 1794. There is room here for only one stanza: "He loved the cause of Christ above his own, And has thereto most bountifully sown; He loved his country, and has served it well, In which he suffered what no tongue can tell." (from pages 311-313, History and Genealogy of the Montague Family of America)

One interesting note here is that Richard Montague is the 2nd great grandfather of Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, the noted author who lived from 1830-1886. Emily Dickinson's lineage is as follows: Richard had daughter Hannah Montague (born 1752) who had daughter Lucretia Gunn (born 1775) who had son Edward Dickinson (born 1803) who had daughter Emily Dickinson (born 1830). Thus, Emily Dickinson's 2nd great-grandparents are also the 5th great-grandparents of Pamela Jean Pohly. Pamela Pohly is a descendent of Richard's son Nathaniel.