

BETSEY METCALF



“NARRATIVE HISTORY” IS FABULATION, HISTORY IS CHRONOLOGY



MRS. BETSEY METCALF BAKER

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1786

March 29, Wednesday: [Betsey Metcalf](#) was born in [Providence, Rhode Island](#) to Joel Metcalf (1755-1834) and Lucy Gay Metcalf (born during 1759). Her father was by trade a tanner and currier. She would at about the age of 24 write an account of her life at 64 Benefit Street on Providence's East Side and in West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts from 1798 to 1804, a writing taking the form of a retrospective diary. Later than that, she would extrapolate from this reconstruction a document of twelve pages which we have preserved at the New England Historical Society in Providence, Rhode Island. The focus of this memoir is on her education and early experiences, including the braiding of straw bonnets similar to one she had seen in a local store.¹

[STRAW TOWNS](#)

1. Curiously, this account does not specify from what source she had been able to obtain the needed raw materials — and the use of local grasses as the raw material for such ladies' bonnets definitely did not begin until later.



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1790

During the 1790s, a Congregationalist girl of the East Side in [Providence, Rhode Island](#) named [Betsey Metcalf](#) would, with the encouragement of her aunt, be developing a process for weaving women's bonnets, from cultivated straw, similar to one she had seen in a local store. She would teach this process to neighbors. Eventually, when she was grown, she would become a schoolteacher in West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts and then get married with a local man named Obed Baker (1783-1868). Then, a whole lot later, Mrs. Baker would realize that she had accomplished something of significance, and would write an ex-post-facto "diary" made up of recollections, and lay claim to this one thing of significance that allegedly she had accomplished in her life.²

THE FUTURE CAN BE EASILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT



2. Well, that — or maybe during the British embargo of the maritime commerce of Napoleonic Europe **somebody else** performed this American act of imitation of the peasant weavers of Livorno, Italy. There's no evidence whatever, other than the belated testimony of the lady in question: no samples of the early work survive, we have only this one self-serving and uncorroborated and belated reconstruction of the events, and anyway it was admittedly a mere act of imitation of a foreign bonnet that was on display in a local store. Also, the lady in question actually had no way to know for sure after the fact that it had been she who had been the one whose childhood bonnets had sparked this local industry — rather than someone else with a similar inspiration but less of an inclination to lay a claim to importance.

The story persists because it is a nice story with a nice moral —and because it may be true —and because male historians have considered it to be woman-oriented local-history stuff and therefore unworthy of any challenge. Local histories are full of such stories of localities considered locally to be of historical significance, which may or may not be of any actual historical significance, and nobody wants to be the one to challenge the firm knowledge of a local-history tour guide who is escorting one down toney Benefit Street on the toney East Side of Providence on a sunny afternoon. It is the sort of story upon which one may build relentlessly, as one explores the absolute spirit of altruism in which the little girl teaches this foreign process which she has imitated and recreated, for free to various anonymous East Side neighbors.



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1796

Joel Metcalf, a tanner and currier of [Providence, Rhode Island](#), purchased a pew in the local Congregational Church. His deed to this pew is preserved at the Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence, along with his business's account books.



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1798

At the age of 12, [Mrs. Betsey Metcalf Baker](#) would later allege, in her family home on Benefit Street in the East Side of [Providence, Rhode Island](#), under the encouragement of an aunt, she fashioned her 1st bonnet out of split oat straw, shaping it along the lines of an expensive imported bonnet which she had seen in a local store. She used a seven-strand braid, bleached, and lined the hat with pink silk. Later she would be teaching this craft, which she termed a God-given gift, to neighbor women, and thus helping to establish a rural New England economy termed the “straw town.”

Here is an American straw bonnet dating to about the year 1800:



The primary source of such bonnets had been the Italian peninsula (headcoverings from the Livorno area were termed “Leghorns”) — but the British blockade of Napoleonic Europe had made such commerce difficult and the President of the United States of America had been encouraging American artisans to remedy this problem.



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Here is a typical “Leghorn” bonnet:

STRAW TOWNS



NOBODY COULD GUESS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT





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1804



[Betsey Metcalf](#) of [Providence, Rhode Island](#) was persuaded by the offer of a schoolteaching position to relocate to West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts.



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1807



December 6, Sunday: Obed Baker of West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts got married with local schoolteacher [Betsey Metcalf](#).

According to church records as investigated by Judy Fichtenbaum of the Concord Museum, on this day Mrs. [Sophia Lapham](#), wife of Mr [Luther Lapham](#) & daughter of the Reverend A. Dunbar, received communion as a member of the congregation of the West Church in [Boston](#).

SOPHIA DUNBAR

ASA DUNBAR

Friend [Stephen Wanton Gould](#) wrote in his journal:

*1 day 6 of 12 M / Our meetings were silent & to me favor'd
opportunitys, feeling the sweet springing up of life & a little
reneweal of my spiritual strength may I be duly thankful
therefor – Spent the eveng as usual on first days*

RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS



BETSEY METCALF

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1810



In about this year [Mrs. Betsey Metcalf Baker](#) of West Dedham (now Westwood), Massachusetts wrote, in the form of a retrospective diary, an account of her life on [Providence, Rhode Island](#)'s East Side from 1798 to 1804. We do not have this writing, but she would later extrapolate from this writing a memoir of twelve pages, mostly about her education and her experience as a 12-year-old in the braiding of straw bonnets, which we do have now at the New England Historical Society. Here are some extracts:

I was then old enough to write, therefore I was sent to a Men's School, But not having patience enough to be very particular about writing, I was too neglectful and by that means never attained that art.... I do not consider that I understand cyphering, for in my opinion a person might do a thousand sums, and yet be ignorant of the first rules of arithmetic.... I never should have persevered [in the making of straw bonnets] had it not been for her [an aunt living in the home], for my mother and sisters thought I was spending my time in a useless manner, though they did not say much about it.... My sister [her sisters were Katy, born during 1780, Sophia, born during 1784, Lucy, born during 1788, and Ruth, born during 1794] then learned and we had considerable of a manufactory ... for 2 or 3 years it was very profitable business. I could frequently make 1 dollar per day....³ ...instead of being dressed in the apparel of their own making, they have purchased the vanities of Europe and have brought dress more in fashion when it was quite enough so before. ... The consequences I fear have been more of an injury than otherwise to the New England states, for girls forsook all other employments such as spinning, weaving and the care of a family, and because they could get more by it continued to persevere, by which means they have neglected a necessary part of a females employment.... Gentlemen say that it is almost impossible to get a girl to do housework in the country, they are so engaged in braiding straw. ... It is very injurious to the health, especially to work very steady. We used to do a great deal of business and was always hurried making bonnets. ... My father (who was one of the town council) was always anxious to have public schools. There was great exertions made by some of the opulent citizens of the town to prevent their being established.... I continued going to school until I was 17.... I then began to see the value in learning and my parents were not willing I should let work take my attention from the studies of the school. ... My father willing to give us the means, bought a right in the town library. I then began to read History and have read a number of good books. Ancient history was particularly pleasing, but they gave me strange ideas of mankind. ... I always went to meeting if I was well enough and was learned to sit still, though I think now I did not pay much attention to the preaching or I should not be so ignorant.... I

3. The record production of which we are aware is a nimble-fingered anonymous individual who was able to produce 300 such bonnets per year.



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used to sit with the singers in the [Congregationalist] meeting house, which made me more fond of going to public worship. [She relates how she was recruited as a school teacher in 1804 while visiting cousins in Dedham, Massachusetts:] ...they being in want of a school mistress persuaded me to stay and teach 4 months. I told them at first I would not undertake, as I was unacquainted with the business, but they insisted on my trying and I finally told them I would stay if my parents were willing.... I had about 70 different scholars, though about 40 at a time.

STRAW TOWNS



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1858

In the TRANSACTIONS OF THE RHODE ISLAND SOCIETY FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF DOMESTIC INDUSTRY FOR 1858, a letter was published from a Mrs. Betsy Baker whose maiden name had been [Betsey Metcalf](#). She confessed that it had been her (rather than Miss Hannah Metcalf or Mrs. Naomi Whipple as had been reported a generation earlier, in 1825) who had developed the art of making straw bonnets — that it had been her who had taught neighbors, so that the industry of making these bonnets had begun to spread through neighboring towns. The original of this letter is stored at the Rhode Island Historical Society in [Providence, Rhode Island](#).⁴

[STRAW TOWNS](#)

**WHAT I'M WRITING IS TRUE BUT NEVER MIND
YOU CAN ALWAYS LIE TO YOURSELF**

Mrs. Betsey Metcalf Baker

“Stack of the Artist of Kouroo” Project

4. Is this story true? We have no reason to doubt it, and also, we have no reason to believe it.



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BETSEY METCALF

1867

February 24, Sunday: [Betsey Metcalf Baker](#) died in Dedham, Massachusetts.

STRAW TOWNS

**“NARRATIVE HISTORY” AMOUNTS TO FABULATION,
THE REAL STUFF BEING MERE CHRONOLOGY**



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: January 13, 2014



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ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.



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Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>. Arrgh.