



# Aunt Lucinda's Attempted History of Pomfret

*Lucinda Conant produced a manuscript history of Pomfret in the early 1850s, but upon her death in 1853 it was packed away and forgotten. Rediscovered, it addresses the history of Pomfret through the pen of a Vermont farm wife and illuminates the concerns of an antebellum woman dedicated to reform.*

BY CAMERON CLIFFORD

**L**ucinda (Chandler) Conant was a member of the Chandler family of Pomfret, Vermont, and a distant cousin of Mehetable (Chandler) Coit, whose colonial diary has been recently published. Most of the Chandlers in Lucinda's immediate family were apparently not literary minded and left no surviving diaries or writings. Lucinda, however, had literary aspirations.<sup>1</sup>

Lucinda Conant produced a manuscript history of Pomfret in the early 1850s, but upon her death in 1853 it was packed away in the unused bedroom of an old house and forgotten. Even if her manuscript had been known to later generations, it may have remained obscure. Her production was antiquarian, rough, and unfinished.

Nevertheless, since the manuscript was rediscovered in 2004, it has proven to be a unique document. It not only addresses the history of Pomfret through the pen of a Vermont farm wife, but it illuminates the contemporary concerns of an antebellum woman dedicated to reform.

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Conant had much to convey. She wanted to highlight the early years of her town. She wanted to list and describe the people who had settled Pomfret. She wanted to address private and public morality. She wanted to make the point that much had been accomplished in the development and enlightenment of the town, but much still had to be done. No doubt, she wanted to include more, but she died before finishing her manuscript. In all, she produced 101 handwritten pages.<sup>2</sup>

#### LUCINDA CONANT'S LIFE AND TIMES

Lucinda Chandler, the fifth child of Josiah and Margaret Chandler, was born on Christmas day in 1800 and grew up with her siblings in the family's small cape surrounded by farmland near the center of Pomfret. Little is known about her formative years. The one thing that is certain is that she attended one of Pomfret's local district schools. The quality of the schooling varied widely depending on the teacher hired for each term. A neighbor of Lucinda Conant later generously reminisced that when he was a child, the "teachers were as good as schools in general could find means to employ," but also added that "there was but little to call up intense thought." Even so, most got a good grounding in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Eight years of education was the standard and ideal that most families sought for their children. Further education was for the few and was even rarer for girls, and Lucinda was not one of the select few.<sup>3</sup>

Gender roles for girls during Lucinda Conant's childhood followed the familiar patterns of their mothers and grandmothers, with minor variations; but by the time Lucinda entered womanhood in the 1820s, new attitudes toward women's roles were becoming codified. Publications such as William Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* and Hannah Barnard's *Dialogues on Domestic and Rural Economy* taught that every family needed a husband as "head" and a wife as "heart" of the household. Husbands dealt with work and the larger world while providing their wives with a home where she reigned as mother and household manager. In time Americans learned and assumed that women should be the guardians of all that was good within their households, while their husbands made a living and interacted with the wider world. The resulting ideology has been termed the "Cult of Domesticity." Women became largely housebound and were not to concern themselves with things outside their own home. Those who did not accept the new order could simply stay single.<sup>4</sup>

Reaching maturity with a possible predisposition to value her single state may have formed in Lucinda Chandler an aversion to the idea of marriage. For throughout her twenties and most of her thirties

she remained single. It must have been a surprise to family and friends when Lucinda decided at age thirty-seven to marry her neighbor, Seth Conant.

Lucinda dedicated herself to family life, but she did so at a time of economic uncertainty. The financial depression that followed the Panic of 1837 was the first major downturn in the economy in Lucinda's adulthood, and the country's worst depression up to that time. The following years were ones of "economic hardship and social frustration" for many.<sup>5</sup>

The Conants weathered the economic hard times only to face a crisis. In late summer 1850, Lucinda's only child, eleven-year-old Abram Conant, became ill and suffered "for ten days with dissentary complaints," which could not be stopped. On the morning of August 22 he was "partially raised in the bed, reclining upon his elbow, looking haggard beyond description" with his mother sitting by his side. As death pangs overcame him, he managed to say to his mother that he wanted to wait and see if his dead uncle, John Chandler, would come to take him away, reflecting a popular belief in spirits and becoming fellow companions with the deceased. With that utterance he fell back on the bed, "panting and gasping in death."<sup>6</sup>

The death of her son and only child plunged Lucinda Conant into deep depression. Her suffering sucked out her ambition and stymied whatever plans she had for the future. Getting by day to day must have been a struggle for weeks. It probably seemed she would never recover from this blow. Instead of recovering from depression, she descended into despair with a terminal illness. By late 1852, she had become, in her own words, "an invalid." It is unclear what Lucinda's condition was, but it involved a deterioration of her bones, resulting in a broken limb that would not heal. By mid 1853 she knew she would not improve and resigned herself to her situation. In a July 4, 1853, letter, a neighbor stated that Lucinda was "low[,] comfortable[,] and happy" but "her limbs continue to crumble to pieces." On September 10 she died in the house she was born in. She was fifty-three.<sup>7</sup>

This outline of Lucinda's life reveals little. If this were all there was to know, few people today would care that she had lived and died. She left no descendants. Her brother ended up with the family farm. Her husband remarried within a year of her death. She was quickly forgotten. If it were not for the manuscript Lucinda Conant composed in the days of her final illness, she would have remained unremembered.

After Lucinda Conant lost her son in 1850 and she herself became incapacitated by illness, there was little she could do. Melancholy was her constant companion, but as time passed she felt she needed some-

thing to keep her mind busy. She had time to reflect and revisit the days of her youth. She thought about life in the family home where she had grown up and now sat as an adult. She recalled the stories told by her parents about Pomfret before her birth, and her own memories. Lucinda formed a narrative in her mind about the history of her family and the house they had made their own. Eventually, toward the end of 1851, she thought about sharing her story with the younger members of her brother's family, who shared part of the old homestead with her and her husband.

Adding meaning to her narrative, Lucinda chose to formalize telling the story to the children by setting a special time when they would hear it. She chose Christmas day, 1851, her birthday, to invite the children into her room and listen to her. At 7:00 P.M. on December 25 the children were brought in, settled, and ready to listen.

Lucinda steeped her tale in mystery, as she did not tell the children until the end of the story that the events she related happened in their own home. What the children thought of this story is not known. What is known is that this event planted a seed in Lucinda Conant's mind to expand her topic beyond her family and its home to her neighbors and the whole town. By spring 1852, she determined to write a history of Pomfret.<sup>8</sup>

Lucinda Conant's decision to write a history of her town mirrored that of other New Englanders in the nineteenth century. History was a respected genre. Accounts of providential history, ancient history, kingdoms, wars, and American history were staples that literate families had devoured for years. The antebellum years were especially fertile for historical works to become popular. The fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1826 and a recognition that the Revolutionary generation was passing from the scene stimulated interest in national history. A plethora of historical works were published well before Lucinda ever put pen to paper.

While national history was popular, interest in local history was rare before the nineteenth century. People had previously encountered it in sermons at church. Ministers occasionally interspersed special sermons with local history to make a theological point, or to celebrate as providential the anniversary of an important local event.

Along with such sermons, public celebratory orations were often printed, making sure the historical narratives presented were preserved for posterity. These initial meager accounts sometimes inspired further inquiries into a town's history. The resulting mass of additional information many times was then organized and published as the antebellum era's first books of true local history. These and later local endeav-

ors were conceived and written specifically as historical literature. The era of published town histories was thus well underway when Lucinda Conant decided to write her own in 1852.

Town histories varied in presentation, depth, range, and accuracy. Some were published as letters of communication. Some were “annals,” enumerating in list form the town’s major events, year by year. Some dealt primarily with the early settlement era. Others were more concerned with Revolutionary history and the accomplishments of local citizens. Many focused on genealogy. Few approached what today would be considered balanced, objective history.<sup>9</sup>

Although New England was the center of local history publishing in the United States when Lucinda decided to write about Pomfret, published histories of Vermont towns were close to non-existent. Montpelier had a forty-eight-page booklet featuring a historical discourse published in 1843. In 1852, a Danville half-century sermon and a short history of Lyndon were published; both of less than twenty-five pages. Zadock Thompson, a former Pomfret and Woodstock teacher, produced an extensive history and gazetteer of Vermont in 1824, which included short historical sketches of each town in the state; he expanded that work into his famous *History of Vermont* in 1842. Although no record exists to confirm it, it is tempting to imagine that Thompson was one of Conant’s teachers. If true, she would have been a student well before he began work on his first historical writings in the 1820s. Thompson’s *History of Vermont* remained the most significant source of local history in the state until Abby Hemenway encouraged, promoted, and published her massive long-term project, the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, in the late 1860s and 1870s; but this was long after Lucinda Conant was dead. If Conant looked for and found examples of published town histories, she did so in volumes published outside of Vermont.<sup>10</sup>

Up to the time Lucinda decided to write her history of Pomfret many women wrote letters, some published books, and very few created local histories. Writing by women expanded greatly during the early nineteenth century. The increase in female literacy in the United States created not only an informed public able to read, but also a pool of potential writers.<sup>11</sup>

While it was possible for women to publish, it remained problematic. Women were disadvantaged. Because of their roles as housewives and mothers in the service of others, most women simply did not have enough time for sustained writing. This situation was buttressed by the prevailing cultural values of the time. Although intellectual pursuits, such as writing, were “reputable, useful and ornamental” for women,

“virtue good nature & innocence” were more important. Writing and virtue were viewed as, if not incompatible, then in an uneasy combination when applied to women.<sup>12</sup>

Although there were women writers during Lucinda Conant’s lifetime, few wrote and published history. Pursuing history involved acquiring new knowledge through research and fact checking. Girls were not taught to question authority or to focus on non-domestic matters in preparation for life. With marriage popularly presented as the defining moment in a woman’s life, intellectual questioning was seen as unnecessary. Many women felt it “enough to understand what all the talk was about” over an issue without learning about it in depth. The married women who actively pursued historical inquiry required very “special husbands” who indulged their interests.<sup>13</sup> A woman who aspired to write history in the antebellum era therefore generally had to be unmarried, childless, not needed as a caregiver, and not compelled to earn money. It is no wonder that the author of the *History of Norwich, Connecticut*, Frances M. Caulkins, was the only female local historian to have produced her own book by the time Lucinda Conant decided to write her own local history.<sup>14</sup>

Lucinda Conant was able to write her history of Pomfret because she had the time. Her endeavor was not enabled by “single blessedness,” as she was married, but because she was incapacitated by illness. No doubt the idle days between her Christmas house story of December 1851 and the start of her history of Pomfret in April 1852 provided hours of opportunity for reflection and consideration of her task. She later claimed that once she decided to write she began right away. This suggests that she already knew what her history would include.

Nonetheless, Conant needed sources beyond her own imagination to inform her work. Fortunately, because she was writing local history, her sources were readily accessible. These included books, town records, oral history, letters, and her own memory. Since she could not leave her room, all these sources were brought to her. She purchased and borrowed records; neighbors visited and related family lore and personal experiences; letters came from near and far; and she could still recall the stories her parents had told and the Pomfret of her youth.<sup>15</sup>

#### WOMEN IN LUCINDA’S HISTORY

Lucinda Conant set out to write a history of her town, but it ended up including much more. She wrote her Pomfret book in just over a year—a very short time for such an undertaking. Even so, the manuscript’s organization and the roughness of its last sections show that she was racing against time to finish it.

Conant's manuscript highlights several concerns and themes about Pomfret and herself, including history, religion, reform, and life and death. It is enlightening to analyze what she wrote using these general concerns as a roadmap into her mind. Lucinda Conant's history first of all is concerned with the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant advance out of the British Isles into the American wilderness. She quotes extensively from Thomas Babington Macaulay's *History of England* on "the Puritan fathers," showing that she accepted the ascendant interpretation of the Puritans as a once persecuted people in England. First they had battled Rome and Catholicism and then later their own monarchs and the Church of England before emigrating to New England where, as she wrote, they "sought a home in our country for religious and political freedom." They established Massachusetts and Connecticut, where in the course of a century they morphed from strict Puritans into the somewhat easier-going Yankees who first settled Pomfret.<sup>16</sup>

Writing about Pomfret's Yankee pioneer women particularly interested Conant. She excused those women who were ill prepared for frontier life but were dragged by their husbands to early Pomfret. She also defended women who had chosen not to marry in an age when those who remained single were generally denigrated.

Conant also wrote about women whose reputations needed no defending. There was Mrs. Durkee, wife of Pomfret's unsavory first settler. Her father had been one of the early proprietors of Pomfret and he offered his son-in-law some of the wild land on which to settle. "Mr. Durkee, not of an enterprising spirit," Conant wrote, "was unwilling to accept of the offer, but his wife, a woman of much energy, was very anxious for the removal" of her family to Pomfret. She and her father eventually forced Durkee to accept the offer, but after getting him to Pomfret, she wanted to tie him up in a canoe and send him back down the river to Connecticut. Perhaps it was Mrs. Durkee's experience that inspired Conant to conclude that in contrast to the image of the lonely settler clearing his forest home himself, "women and children were very active in rendering assistance, and we fancy we can see them piling brush and setting fires with an activity surpassing that of the husband and father."<sup>17</sup>

Conant enjoyed writing about Alice Hewitt, who was of a "helpmate character, energetic in business, and decided in opinion." Hewitt became homesick after coming to Pomfret, but "like other women of her temperament" made time for herself. These times were hard to come by, however. One evening when Hewitt's husband was away and her children were in bed, "she thought it a good time to enjoy a special treat" of time to herself, "which she had been wishing for for some

days.” However, after it began raining, two cats came through a crack near the cabin’s chimney and rampaged through the cabin, then a neighbor fellow barged in, and after a few minutes of chatting “a noise of dogs quarreling was heard back of the house.” On “looking out at a back window they discovered by the twilight dogs fighting on a patch of melon vines. Mrs. H[ewitt] remarked that they would injure their vines very much” if not stopped. Because the visiting neighbor was “not offering to meddle” with the dogs, Mrs. Hewitt went outside, “took her shovel and beat the larger dog so unmercifully that they fled in different directions.” After her husband came home and she told him what transpired, he went out the next morning and by the tracks in the dirt found that one of the dogs had been a bear. This version of the story was well known in town at the time and we are lucky Conant wrote it down, as we will see later on.<sup>18</sup>

In another vignette about women, Conant relates a story involving the spunky identical twin sisters, Deborah and Betsey Perkins, both present when Deborah was about to marry John Conant. Conant, thinking himself quite witty, “requested Betsey to keep a little out of the way lest he should make a mistake” and marry her instead of Deborah. “Betsey replied that he need not concern himself about that.” Since “she was concerned in the matter she [would] take care” to avoid such a fate. Tales of such independent-minded women were particularly cogent to Lucinda Conant.<sup>19</sup>

## RELIGION

Along with history and the status of women, public and private morality were of great concern to Lucinda Conant and she infused her history with examples of both. An heir of the Puritans, she was well versed in matters of religion and personal morality.

Lucinda Conant drank deep of the cup of salvation her parents held out to her. They were of the evolving liberal Congregational stripe, which hewed close to Unitarianism. In general, Unitarians believed humans were so good that they did not deserve eternal punishment. Unitarian thought was present in Pomfret well before an official Unitarian congregation was formed in the 1840s. Conant does not explicitly claim Unitarianism as her creed, but her religious liberalism suggests it was. Not once did Lucinda mention punishment, hell, or the Devil in her writing.<sup>20</sup>

Conant’s faith allowed much wriggle room for the integration of various Christian doctrines. To her, God bestowed grace freely, “that all may receive if they have kept their spirits pure and impressable.” She saw the practical side of faith. She believed that when “we give our-



selves to God without reserve, and believe that he accepts us how fully every want is met. Life is invested with a new interest; labor is easy, trials are light." When one was facing especially difficult times, God was ever present. One neighbor woman went through hell on earth, but she "still cleaves to her integrity" because she kept her faith. Another neighbor had committed suicide, which was considered an act against God, but Conant felt pity and questioned, "Who shall be his judge but God Himself who made our frames and remembreth that we are dust." Conant's personal god was a loving God who forgave human failings. This god could not have been more different from that of her Puritan ancestors.<sup>21</sup>

Conant's Protestant amalgamation was accepting and forgiving, but it held no room for Roman Catholicism, with its rigid hierarchy and elaborate rituals. Like her ancestors, she abhorred the Catholic Church. Protestantism had been in continual struggle against and then in competition with Catholicism for more than three hundred years. Catholicism had been the faith of New England's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French-Canadian enemies, and in Conant's own day it was invading New England with the waves of Irish immigrants fleeing famine. Conant made it a point in her history to differentiate her Protestant Scotch-Irish ancestors from the Catholic newcomers.<sup>22</sup>

Along with Catholicism, Conant scrutinized the newly founded faith of the Church of Latter Day Saints, popularly termed Mormons, with skepticism. This was easy to do because of Mormonism's newness, having been founded only in the 1830s. Any new faith tends to be widely held as suspect because the messy business associated with its founding is within the memory of those present at its creation, both believers and non-believers. Mormonism did not have the advantage of nineteen centuries of traditional Christianity. In a nutshell, the Mormons held that Native Americans were descended from a group of ancient migrating Jews, that the Book of Mormon was, along with the Bible, the word of God, and that Joseph Smith was Christianity's newest prophet.<sup>23</sup>

Although Congregationalists, Unitarians, Baptists, and Methodists were all present in Pomfret and noted by Lucinda Conant, she did not expend much ink on these groups. Of prime interest to her were the new faiths grabbing attention and souls at the time she decided to write her history of Pomfret. These included, along with Mormonism, Transcendentalism, Swedenborgianism, and Spiritualism. Imagination had combined with faith and hope.

Transcendentalism is an imprecise term for various strains of thought deriving from traditional Christianity, humanism, and Romanticism, that sought a new spiritual way to experience the divine. Conant's con-

temporary, Frederic H. Hodges, described the disciples of Transcendentalism as a group of “young men, mostly in the Unitarian connection, with a sprinkling of elect ladies—all fired with hope of a new era in philosophy and the world. . . [and] a boding of some great revolution, some new avatar of the spirit, at whose birth their expectations were called to assist.” Ralph Waldo Emerson became the unofficial spokesman for the movement but even he could not intelligibly explain to the average person what it all meant. Nevertheless, what did resonate with many was the emphasis on the unity of the individual, the natural, and the spiritual. Hints of Transcendentalist thought were tapping at the doors of many liberal Christians at the time.<sup>24</sup>

One source of inspiration for Transcendentalists, as well as Lucinda Conant, was a resurgent interest in Swedenborgianism. Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and theologian, embraced non-traditional religious thought. Among his beliefs was that “Man is so created that he is at the same time in the spiritual world and in the natural world.”<sup>25</sup> The divisions within Protestant Christianity led many people to tolerate new ideas such as this and some, like Lucinda Conant, to accept them.

Conant became interested in Swedenborgianism through her brother-in-law, John Conant, who “never made a profession of religion” but who, after moving to Massachusetts, “received the Swedenborgian faith, and died in the same.” Her brother-in-law’s newfound faith impressed Lucinda and she too read the works of Swedenborg. She was impressed by what she learned, and because so “many people are ignorant of this faith, or have received false notions concerning it,” she included four pages of “extracts” from Swedenborg’s writings in her own book.<sup>26</sup>

Swedenborg’s union of body and spirit set the stage for Lucinda Conant’s consideration of Spiritualism, a controversial belief sweeping the country at the time whereby the living could communicate with the dead. Historically anathema to Christians of all stripes, Spiritualism was a logical extension of the new beliefs entwining the known world of the living with the unknown beyond. If body and soul were one and inhabited both worlds at the same time, was not contact with the dead possible? News from New York State in 1848 caused many to think so.

That year two sisters of the Fox family in Hydesville, New York, demonstrated to friends and neighbors their ability to communicate with spirits of the deceased through “rapping” messages. They had a strong support system within their own family confirming their newfound powers. The mother had already been predisposed toward the supernatural and their older brother helped the girls extend the con-

versational range with the spirits. An elder married sister arrived on the scene and promoted the girls vigorously.

As word of their powers spread, accounts appeared in newspapers and people traveled to seek the sisters' assistance in communicating with deceased loved ones. The girls were tested and tricked by those wishing to expose them as fakes. Exams showed inconsistency and limits to the girls' abilities, but their sister was adamant about their powers. While it was easy for many to prove to themselves the falseness of the Foxes' claims, those wanting to believe did. Before long, others elsewhere found that they too had the power to communicate with the dead.<sup>27</sup>

Lucinda Conant's Pomfret was not immune to the new enthusiasm for Spiritualism. Her townsman, Justin Bugbee, was convinced of its truth and treated it as an article of faith. During the last year of Lucinda Conant's own life, Bugbee noted a "medium meeting" at Daniel Tinkham's house and attended another at Clement Whipple's, both in Pomfret. The Vails also left correspondence showing their interest in the new movement, although sister Hannah Vail wrote home that she was "Not quite so glad to hear you are all possessed or bewitched with spirits." She thought "no good can come of it," and that she herself had "seen neither rappings nor tappings" but "only one pretender." Hannah Vail also had "mediums just across the street" from where she lived, and wrote that she and a friend would go over to investigate for themselves. Even so, Hannah's sister-in-law, Harriet, informed her that they had "the reading of two newspapers devoted to [Spiritualism] and . . . cheering accounts of good being done in various ways" connected with it. Lucinda Conant died just as the movement was reaching its zenith in Pomfret.

Conant wrote a paragraph about Pomfret's "Spiritual manifestations" for her history. She claimed that spirits had "revealed themselves among the most respectable part of our citizens and are now undergoing a careful and thorough investigation by minds willing and anxious to ascertain their true character." She herself had suspended disbelief for the moment. It is not known if she died believing in spirit communication, but as her son had passed, she may have hoped it was true.<sup>28</sup>

#### SOCIAL REFORM

Spiritualism and religious faith were of prime interest to Lucinda Conant, but so were the plethora of social reform efforts hitting high gear as she began writing her history of Pomfret. She was interested in issues affecting both Pomfret and the country as a whole. Conant declared that the "general moral character of the town [of Pomfret] is

comparatively good.” She admitted that there “are lamentable dark shades, to be sure, but some improvement has been made in the moral state of society, and the idea in part settling in the minds of the citizens [is] that . . . more must be done.” The reforms that she believed needed attention and action were temperance, women’s rights, slavery, and attitudes toward Native American Indians.<sup>29</sup>

Temperance was of vital importance to Lucinda Conant. She did not indicate that “drinking to excess” had afflicted people in her family, but no doubt she had seen its effects locally. Throughout the colonial and early national periods, almost everyone drank alcohol, no matter the age or setting. Work, worship, and relaxation all proved equally conducive for consuming alcoholic beverages.

Accidents and physical abuse facilitated by excessive drinking unsurprisingly were common facts of life. However, by the antebellum era religious revivalism combined with growing efforts to improve society led to new endeavors to control individual behaviors formerly deemed acceptable, including drinking alcohol to excess. Early efforts at such enlightenment were initiated by the local elite. In Pomfret’s case, the Dana family provided an example by hosting a community work day in the 1820s with water to drink and no alcohol. It set a powerful precedent and in time more people followed suit, forming temperance societies and promoting abstinence. It was an easy matter for some to give up drinking, while those who were what would be later termed “alcoholic” remained examples to condemn.<sup>30</sup>

Lucinda Conant became a firm temperance advocate. In fact, her beliefs were militant. In her history, Conant censoriously reported that, “In 1850 one notorious house of immorality was broken up” in Pomfret, apparently referring to one of the local stores where liquor was sold or an inn where it was served. By what means this was accomplished she does not reveal, but at the time she was writing efforts were “being made for the destruction of another den of iniquity.” She noted that there was progress, but “not withstanding the many efforts which have been made in twenty five years for the suppression of intemperance, it is still an alarming evil and calls loudly for renewed exertions.” It may have taken twenty-five years of efforts by Conant and her allies to put an end to drinking in Pomfret, but another eighty years and the failure of a nationwide Prohibition Act proved the effort futile.<sup>31</sup>

Just as the Temperance Movement fired up Lucinda Conant, the articulation of women’s rights in the late 1840s fueled a pre-existing sense of female ability within her seeking justice. Conant developed a strong sense of herself and women’s abilities in general during the thirty-seven years before she married. Her treatment of “Womens’

Rights” in her history makes it clear she was very familiar with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. She was committed to expanding women’s role in society beyond the domestic sphere.<sup>32</sup>

Women’s condition had a checkered past, according to Conant, and their present condition still needed improving. Women remained subservient to men. In quoting Abby Price, she made the point that women had to transcend “fashion . . . public sentiment, and vain show” before men would take their aspirations seriously. The Cult of Domesticity must come to an end; Horace Mann had denounced “Women’s Sphere” as only a “hemisphere.” The law of coverture, whereby a married man and woman became a legal “one” and the woman’s rights were subsumed by those of her husband, forced women to battle for their own legal rights. “Legal rights,” quoted Conant, must not be granted as “a gift of charity, but as an act of justice.” She advised those single women who owned property and paid taxes to withhold paying them as an example of taxation without representation. Men viewed voting as part of their humanity; in denying voting to women, men denied women’s humanity. Mrs. Jane E. Janes, Conant related, declared that she wanted nothing less than “the right to vote and to be voted for.” Lucinda Conant was as firm an advocate of radical women’s rights as any of the era’s feminist leaders, with the probable exception of those who promoted sexual freedom. One must wonder how her own personal experiences helped form her position.<sup>33</sup>

Conant’s section on “Indians” reflected an attitude shared by many of her contemporaries. It was easy to have sympathy with a defeated, vanquished people. What she and others ignored, however, was that in her own day plenty of Indians were still struggling for their rights and lives. She wrote nothing about the forced relocation of the Southern tribes during the recent “Trail of Tears,” or of the ongoing pressures west of the Mississippi to clear out the Indians for further white expansion.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Indians, African American slaves increased in numbers dramatically during the antebellum era. By the time Lucinda Conant wrote her history of Pomfret slavery had been propelled to the forefront of public consciousness. Her treatment of the slavery issue mirrored the attitude of many who also found it convenient to sympathize with displaced Indians. It was easy for New Englanders to moralize about slavery, as they were far removed from the front lines, in this case, south of the Mason-Dixon Line, where slavery was thriving.

While Conant opposed slavery, it is unknown what she thought about the slaves. Most likely, pity. However, if she was like many other New Englanders in the antislavery camp, she held contradictory views about those who were enslaved becoming free. Conant and others approved

of public pronouncements against slavery, but very few people espoused anything resembling a belief in the equality of whites and blacks. In fact, attitudes toward African Americans had hardened. As the antebellum era progressed, the belief among whites that black people were inherently inferior intensified and became widespread. While Southern slavemasters used this scientific racism tool to justify slavery, many Northerners also accepted it as fact. Unlike Southerners who encountered competent skilled slaves in everyday life, rural Yankees rarely interacted with black people. Thus, it was ironically easy to perpetuate negative stereotypes of blacks in the North. Recent studies have contributed to our understanding of the history of African Americans in Vermont, but at the same time, they also highlight the fact that they were few in number. It would be surprising if Lucinda Conant's antislavery views were not bound up with racial anxieties. She left out any hint of this in her history, however. As with her account of the Indians, it was easier to imagine contemporary rural New England without black people.<sup>35</sup>

#### TWO HISTORIES OF POMFRET

Lucinda Conant probably intended to write more and address other topics as she attempted to finish her manuscript during her decline. She had to give up, however. Years later, Conant's work was wrapped up by her niece and labeled *Aunt Lucinda's Attempted History of Pomfret*. It may seem obvious why Conant's manuscript was designated an "attempted history"; it was an unfinished effort. However, another reason why Conant's niece simply labeled and tucked away the work was because by then it had been superseded.

While Conant's manuscript lay hidden, another history of Pomfret was written and published as the authoritative history of the town. Henry Hobart Vail grew up on his family's Pomfret farm and was fourteen years old when Lucinda Conant died. Vail left Pomfret and pursued a career in the book publishing industry, eventually becoming editor in chief of the American Book Company. Later in life he returned to Vermont, retiring to a house on the Woodstock Green in the 1890s. Vail's brother remained on the family farm in Pomfret, maintaining a personal connection there for Henry, who no doubt visited the homestead frequently. With his renewed connection to his native town, Vail decided to research its early history. He spent days with the town's early records and other sources and wrote a book-length manuscript highlighting Pomfret's beginning, its progression, the faiths of the forefathers, and a separate section on the town's early settler families. Vail's treatment of Pomfret history unknowingly paralleled Lucinda Conant's

in many ways. And like Conant, Henry Vail also died before readying his history for publication. Unlike Conant, however, Vail had a daughter who saw that her father's work was published in 1930.<sup>36</sup>

Henry Hobart Vail and Lucinda Conant both produced histories of their small New England town, covering similar topics and following accepted conventions, but there are big differences between these works. While Vail's was a polished literary accomplishment and Conant's a rough draft, the more important differences between them have to do with when and why they were written, and the gender of the author.

The two histories were the products of different times. Conant's antebellum America was plagued with anxieties about slavery, expansion, temperance, women's rights, but also filled with a sense of progress, buttressed by hope and the belief that humankind could direct the course of history with new and enlightened knowledge. Vail wrote his history at the end of the nineteenth century, when a plethora of town and local histories were produced in reaction to changes seen as threatening American society. Rapid industrialization, increasing urbanization, and massive immigration from eastern and southern Europe proved disconcerting to many. Local historians highlighted the struggles, democratic institutions, and seeming simplicity of colonial and early-national America as touchstones for modern Americans to reflect and act upon. As a result, Vail dedicated over 80 percent of his narrative to the settlement period of the late eighteenth century.

In addition to different times, Conant and Vail were very different people. Lucinda Conant was a struggling, provincial farmwife; Henry Vail was an educated, cosmopolitan, high-Victorian gentleman. It is not surprising that they looked at history differently, as informed by their experiences of and beliefs about gender. Whereas Conant derided Bartholomew Durkee as a lazy weakling, Vail celebrated him as Pomfret's strong, determined first settler. Conant's Alice Hewitt had gone out into the night, found a shovel, and beaten a bear. Vail simply domesticated Hewitt inside the cabin thumping the bear through the narrow doorway with her broom without crossing the threshold. And while Conant wondered about the beneficial possibilities of the Spiritualist movement, Vail, embarrassed by his parents' early embrace of it, never mentions Spiritualism as a religious phenomenon in town.<sup>37</sup>

It is easy to simply accept the accuracy of long-held narratives of local history such as Henry Vail's history of Pomfret when there are no alternative interpretations. While modern-day local historians offer new ways to view past events, it is rare and exciting to discover unknown voices from the past that can enlighten and entertain us. Lucinda Conant's "attempted" history of Pomfret does both.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henry Hobart Vail, *Pomfret, Vermont*, 2 vols. (Boston: Cockayne, 1930), 2: 467-469; Michelle M. Coughlin, *One Colonial Woman's World: The Life and Writings of Mehetabel Chandler Coit* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Lucinda Conant, *The Pomfret Book*, manuscript, hereafter cited as Manuscript. The manuscript was found by the author while organizing the papers of the Moore family of Pomfret, Vermont. The author transcribed the manuscript and a copy has been deposited with the Pomfret Historical Society. He would like to thank John Moore, David Moore, and Emily Grube for allowing him access to their family's papers and John Moore, especially, for providing funding for the manuscript's transcription.

<sup>3</sup> Vail, *Pomfret*, 2: 344-345, 467-469; E. Jennifer Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 236-239; Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006), 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Bode, *American Life in the 1840s* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 59, 63, 65-66, 76; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 19-23, 64-100; Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 124-126; Kathryn K. Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 78, 83, 136-137, 151-153; Sally McMurry, *Families and Farmhouses in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 56-57; Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992; New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 281, 305-306.

<sup>5</sup> Vail, *Pomfret*, 2: 458-459, 567-569; Mary Beth Sievens, *Stray Wives: Marital Conflict in Early National New England* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 46-50, 55-56, 79-80, 87; Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 10, 56, 109.

<sup>6</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 19; Harriet Vail to Hannah Vail, 4 July 1853, private collection; Vail, *Pomfret*, 2: 468.

<sup>8</sup> Pomfret, Vermont Land Records, 13/151, 392; Conant, Manuscript, 2, 19; Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xii, 2, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Francesca Morgan, "Lineage as Capital: Genealogy in Antebellum New England," *New England Quarterly*, 83 (June 2010): 256-257; Katherine Wolff, *Culture Club: The Curious History of the Boston Athenaeum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 72; Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), passim.; John Farmer, *Historical Sketch of Amherst* (Concord, N.H.: Asa McFarland, 1837); Nathaniel Adams, *Annals of Portsmouth, Comprising a Period of Two Hundred Years from the First Settlement of the Town; With Biographical Sketches of a Few of the Most Respectable Inhabitants* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Published by the author, 1825); Daniel Huntington, *A discourse, delivered in the North Meeting-House in Bridgewater, on Friday, December 22, 1820: being the second centennial anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth* (Boston: Lincoln, 1821); Isaac Goodwin, *An oration, delivered at Lancaster, February 21, 1826, in commemoration of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the destruction of that Town by the Indians* (Worcester, Mass.: Rogers & Griffin, 1826); George C. Woodruff, *History of the Town of Litchfield, Connecticut* (Litchfield, Conn.: Charles Adams, 1845); Edwin Hall, ed., *The Ancient Historical Records of Norwalk, Connecticut; with a plan of the ancient settlement, and of the Town in 1847* (Norwalk, Conn.: James Mallory, 1847).

<sup>10</sup> Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont, Natural, Civil, and Statistical* (Burlington: Chauncy Goodrich, 1842); Vail, *Pomfret*, 2: 344; John Gridley, *History of Montpelier: a discourse delivered in the Brick Church, Montpelier, Vermont, on Thanksgiving Day, December 8, 1842* (Montpelier, Vt.: E.P. Walton and Sons, 1843); John Dudley, *Half-century sermon, preached at the dedication of the new Congregational meeting house of Danville, Vermont, December 20, 1851* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth Printers, 1852); Jonathan Greenleaf, *A sketch of the settlement of the Town of Lyndon, in the County of Caledonia, and State of Vermont, collected from authentic records, and from reliable tradition, in March, 1842* (Middlebury, Vt.: Justus Cobb, 1852); Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, 5 vols. (Various locations and printers, 1868-1891).

<sup>11</sup> Monaghan, *Learning to Read and Write*, 7, 299, 365-368; William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 44-47; Karen V. Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 2-3, 40-42.



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<sup>12</sup> Deborah P. Clifford, *The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the Making of History* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001), 70, 96; Joan W. Goodwin, *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley: The Life of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 27-28, 49, 60, 170; Wolff, *Culture Club*, 28, 64-66, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Baym, *American Women Writers*, 1, 8, 12-13, 19; Nancy R. Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), xi-xii; Wolff, *Culture Club*, 64-66, 78; Morgan, "Lineage as Capital," 254, 258, 263; Goodwin, *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley*, xxii, 14-15, 87, 89, 99, 116, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, "Lineage as Capital," 254; F[rances] M. Caulkins, *History of Norwich, Connecticut, from Its Settlement in 1660 to January 1845* (Norwich, Conn.: Thomas Robinson, 1845). This judgment is based on my review of New England town histories published before 1853 listed in Committee for a New England Bibliography, John Borden Armstrong, series ed., *Bibliographies of New England History*, 6 vols. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1976-1986).

<sup>15</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 2, 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 192-193; Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), passim; Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), passim; Charles E. Clark, *The Eastern Frontier: The Settlement of Northern New England, 1610-1763* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983), 334-359.

<sup>17</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 5-6, 14, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4, passim; Vail, *Pomfret*, 1: 241-249; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 284-287.

<sup>21</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 24, 29, 49, 78, 80; Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 19-21.

<sup>22</sup> David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 5, 90, 166-167; Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 104-107; Conant, Manuscript, 65.

<sup>23</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 71-76; Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2002), passim.; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 57, 80-83, 84-112.

<sup>24</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 3-4; Goodwin, *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley*, 178.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189, 203, 262; Perry Miller, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), ix-x, 1-4, 21-27, 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 61-64.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 1-6, 10, 13-20, 21; Goodwin, *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley*, 196, 208.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Bugbee Diary, 2 January; 7 January; 18 February; 25 December 1853, Bugbee Papers, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington; Hannah Vail to Harriet Vail, 7 July 1852, private collection; Conant, Manuscript, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 4; W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), passim; Ronald J. Zboray and Mary S. Zboray, *Voices Without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2010), 38-41, 62, 73, 135, 146, 152, 181.

<sup>30</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 4, 21, 84-85; Vail, *Pomfret*, 2: 475.

<sup>31</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 4; Deborah P. Clifford, "The Women's War against Rum," *Vermont History*, 52 (Summer 1984): 141-160.

<sup>32</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 82; Lori D. Ginzberg, *Untidy Origins: A Story of Women's Rights in Antebellum New York* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7, 10, 20, 83; Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Women's Rights Convention* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), passim.

<sup>33</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 82, 90-91.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89; Stuart Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 84, 121-122, 148-149; Zboray and Zboray, *Voices Without Votes*, 39, 41.

<sup>35</sup> Conant, Manuscript, 81-82; Paul Finkelman, "Rehearsal for Reconstruction: Antebellum Origins of the Fourteenth Amendment," in Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr., eds., *The Facts*

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*of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 4-6, 8, 14, 17, 23-25; Joanne P. Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), xii, 1-2, 39, 76, 193-194, 221-222; Elise A. Guyette, *Discovering Black Vermont: African American Farmers in Hinesburgh, 1790-1890* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2010), passim; Harvey Amani Whitfield, *The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, 1777-1800* (Barre, Vt.: Vermont Historical Society, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Personal knowledge of the author; Vail, *Pomfret*, 2: 376-378.

<sup>37</sup> Conant, Manuscript, passim.; Vail, *Pomfret*, 1: 101-102, 234-252; 2 : 506.