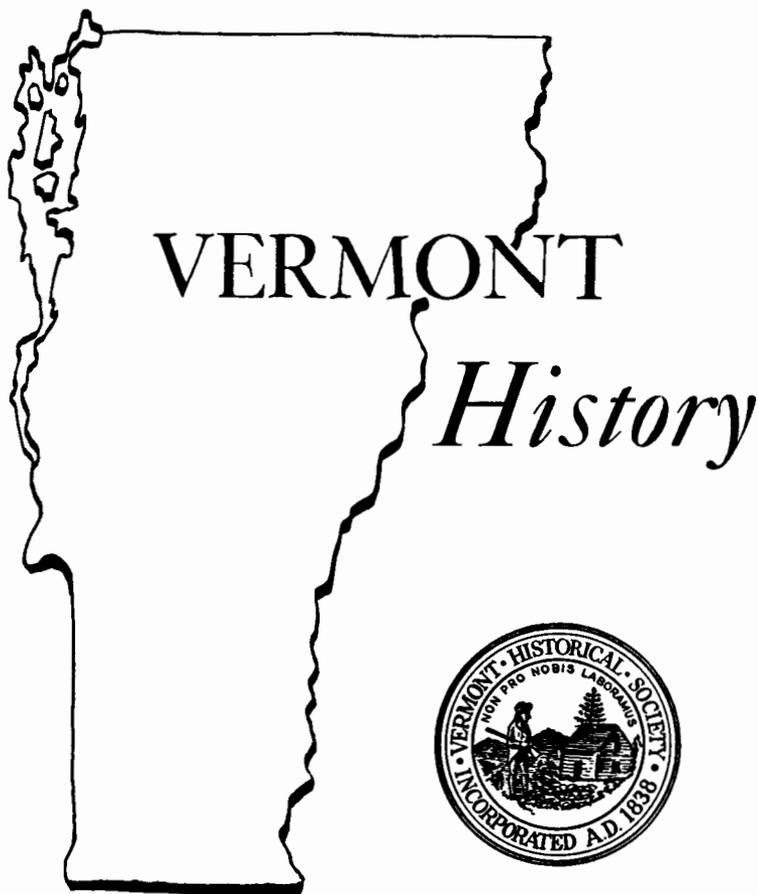
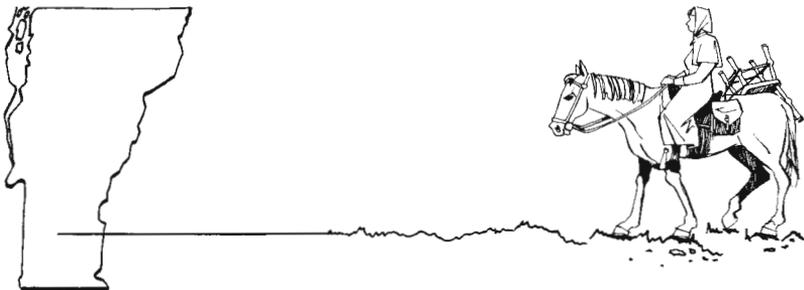


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A woman's life in frontier Vermont . . .

Elizabeth Whitmore: Midwife of Marlboro

By PRISCILLA SMITH BOTTI

WHEN the school of midwifery opened in Philadelphia in the mid-eighteenth century, Elizabeth Whitmore was not one of its students. As a matter of fact, it's doubtful she even heard of the school. The fact that she attended to over two thousand deliveries, rarely losing a patient, was due primarily to her natural skill in midwifery and devotion to duty. Her training had included the basic instructions from her mother and from other women in Middletown, Connecticut, along with careful observations of other midwives in their practices. It may be said that her "diploma" in midwifery was an obstetrical chair, given most probably by a retiring member of the midwifery profession.

For centuries, a midwife's chair was standard equipment. The chair's use was almost entirely discontinued in the early 19th century when male midwives, as the first doctors to attend deliveries were called, began to be accepted by even the most modest women. The midwife's chair could be described as an armchair, made of oak or pine, with the seat cut in a semicircle, allowing the baby to be extracted through that portion.

Elizabeth Whitmore began her practice of delivering babies in Middletown, Connecticut, where she was born in 1727 and raised. She married Francis Whitmore in 1747. No doubt she would have lived her days there but for her husband's views on the fanatical religious spirit prevailing then in Connecticut. Determined that their daughter Phelina should not be raised in a community of intolerance, Francis Whitmore decided to move his family up the Connecticut River Valley

with Colrain, Massachusetts as a tentative destination.

For some unexplained reason, Colrain proved to be only a stop. The purchase of cattle further north in Halifax, Vermont, brought the family to this town, but the Whitmores didn't stay in Halifax either. Why they left is not known; according to family legend Elizabeth wished to remain because "one woman had a needle and the less fortunate neighbors were welcome to come to her house and do their sewing."

Driving the cattle in front of them, with the pack horse carrying Francis' tinker's tools, scant necessities, and Elizabeth's chair, the Whitmores arrived in what is now Marlboro, Vermont, in 1763. What attracted them there is hard to say; perhaps the wilderness travel and the toting of personal items was too much on the family. But Marlboro was their final destination and the chair came to rest there.

The first winter for Elizabeth and Phelina was arduous, as were all winters in a wilderness area. In pursuit of his tinker's trade, Francis spent considerable time on horseback riding through the New Hampshire Grants. The mother and daughter had only a few neighbors and they faced the Vermont winter with determination and courage. Occasionally hunters passed their isolated cabin bringing news of new cabins being constructed within the immediate vicinity but they were still too distant to be visited on foot, especially in wintertime.

Spring brought more settlers to the Marlboro area and many of the women were pregnant. In those first few years in the Vermont wilderness it was Elizabeth's profession of midwifery which financially sustained the Whitmores. With Francis planting crops and clearing the forest money for needed supplies came from child delivery fees. Elizabeth set a standard fee of two dollars, regardless of the distance traveled or time spent in bringing a baby into the world.

Oftentimes reaching her patients proved not only difficult but dangerous. If the distance was within five or ten miles of her home, Elizabeth made the trip on foot with the obstetrical chair strapped to her back. And seldom did she venture on her missions without a gun for protection. She was sometimes known to bag game en route, to supplement the family larder. If inclement weather made winter trips on horseback impossible, she would trek via snowshoes. And in the spring and summer she often found it quicker to use a canoe for river transportation to reach her patients.

Apparently her practice flourished, for Francis was able to devote time to military affairs. In 1775 he was appointed captain of the first military company ever marshalled in Marlboro. As one of the Green

Mountain Boys he was chosen as the town's representative to the first general body assembled in Vermont, convening at Dorset on July 24, 1776, to determine the area's stand in the New York-New Hampshire Grant land controversy. Later, when the Constitution of Vermont was formed at Windsor in 1777, he was Marlboro's delegate.

As Captain Whitmore helped shape the destiny of Vermont, Elizabeth brought into the world the future leaders and the women who would stand with them. For more than fifty years she proved a blessing and a comfort to her fellow pioneer mothers.

Finally, advanced age and the coming of younger doctors retired Elizabeth Whitmore from midwifery. For all the hardships she and her husband endured, they lived a prosperous life and were esteemed and honored in the community. Though Francis died in 1790, leaving her a widow for 25 years until her death in 1814, she had the strength to survive.¹ At the age of eighty-five she left her home and retired to her daughter's hearth. She was there when her great-grandson, Humphrey Barrett, was born. It was a premature birth and the doctor held out no hope for the child's survival, unless, he said, "Granny was to do something." Calling on all her skills, Elizabeth took the tiny baby, bathed him in warm goose oil and nestled him in a box near the fireplace. She dipped feathers in milk and passed them over the baby's mouth for sustenance.

She didn't live to see Humphrey Barrett grow up, but today there are many people who owe their being to her tireless efforts.

As he was my great-grandfather, I'm one of them.

1. Francis Whitmore was buried in the Meeting House Cemetery, West Brattleboro, Vt. Elizabeth Whitmore was buried there after her death in 1814.

FRIEND: "Why do you have such misspelled and ungrammatical signs in your front windows?"

SHARP TRADESMAN: "People think I'm a dunce and come in to swindle me. Trade's just booming."

— item in the West Townshend *Merchant*, November, 1904.