

Butler, Mary E. – School Compositions, 1855

Mary Butler, who attended the Colebrook Center School in the years immediately prior to the Civil War, left several compositions, diaries and school related material, some of which are quite interesting. We heard from her a few months back in this column; here are some of her other compositions:

“Composition No. 7; Pilgrim Hall.”

“Who that has ever seen or read of the Puritans would not like to visit Plymouth, and see the rock where they ended their long and tiresome voyage, or the relics which they have left behind them. As I read sometime ago an interesting account of the Pilgrims and the relics at Puritan Hall, I thought I would attempt to give you an account of the most wonderful things to be seen there - some of which were brought over in the Mayflower.

The Hall is built in the Grecian style, of rough granite with a wooden front. The corner stone was laid in Sept. 1824. In the yard that surrounds this hall is a piece of the rock on which the Pilgrims landed. It was removed from its original position to the Town Square in the year 1774. It was the intention of the people to remove the whole rock, but in the attempt it broke, so the top only was removed. In 1838 it was again removed to where it now lies enclosed by an iron railing.

Passing on into the hall we find many relics. One is a painting of the landing of the Pilgrims on each side of which stands a chair that was brought over in the Mayflower. They are made of oak with rush bottoms and very straight backs. A tall clock that belonged to Gov. Hancock composed entirely of iron and which now keeps good time, although it is now more than one hundred and fifty years old. The cradle of Mr. Samuel Fuller is a very interesting relic, the framework being so strong that a person was led to remark that although he was a good man he must have been a very restless and crying baby. The rockers are very much worn, which would lead to the conclusion that he required a great deal of rocking to keep him quiet. A shoe made of brocade silk, the heel of which is three inches high and comes up to a sharp point at the toe. There is also a Bible that was printed in 1620 and was brought over by the Pilgrims. It is bound in leather with a rim of brass around the edge of the covers. There is another Bible that was printed at Cambridge in 1663; it is in the Indian language and formerly belonged to John Eliot, the apostle to the Indians.”

Mary E. Butler, Colebrook, Jan. 27 1855

Her next composition was entitled “Death”. It seems rather out of place these days for a 12-year-old girl to be dwelling upon such a topic, but we must remember that we are living in a much different world than did our predecessors. A trip to any old cemetery reveals endless accounts of what we would refer to as untimely deaths. Some are truly heart breaking, with a family plot containing a husband alongside two or perhaps more wives and more often than not several infants or young children. Many women died of complications of childbirth with the newborn either following its mother into the grave or surviving to face one of two probabilities: Either the father would have to remarry, or the child (or children) would be farmed out to relatives, or even friends. Another common occurrence was scourges of diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough and small pox, just to mention a few. There probably isn’t one cemetery from the

seventeenth or eighteenth centuries in which you won't find cases of these events happening to one family not once, but two or more times. The Beech Hill cemetery has one plot showing that a man lost his wife and their three children, the oldest being 12 within a few days time. Ten years later the adjacent headstones show that the exact same sequence of events repeated themselves. My initial thoughts on this are to wonder how the survivors kept their sanity, but I know the answer: it was their faith in a life hereafter. From a very early age, children were prepared for Death arriving unannounced either in their family or surely in their community. They accepted that knowledge just the same way we are sure that in a few months Spring flowers will replace the snowdrifts of January. With that thought in mind, read a 12-year-old's observations on the subject of death over 150 years ago and breath a sigh of relief that it is doubtful that any student in the Colebrook Consolidated School would be likely to compose such a composition.

"Death"

"Death is the most certain and yet the most uncertain of events. It may come to the young; it must come to the aged. It may seize the little infant before it has been made impure by the vices of this world, and bear its spirit to a fairer world where it will have no trouble. How sweet does an infant look in death; how much like an angel, for it has known no sin.

Or it may select for its victim a youth, whose prospects were fair and promising who was laying many plans for the future and thinking, it may be, only of this world, its pleasures and cares, and anticipating a long life of happiness, but death came and cut him off in the midst of his days.

How often does it come to those of middle age who are busy laying up the treasures of this world to support their declining years thinking that death is yet far from them and that in their old age they will prepare for it, overtakes them and they must meet their God unprepared.

How certain that it must come to the aged, but how cheering the prospect if they are only prepared; if they can exchange this world of sin, sorrow and suffering for one of happiness and bliss where they are free from trouble and care and where sin and death are unknown.

We should not think because we are young that there is no need of preparing for death now. It does not always select the old, but many a time has it taken the young and thoughtless and brought them before the bar of God and it may before another year take us, therefore how important that we should be prepared to meet it."

Mary E. Butler, Colebrook, Feb. 8 1855

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg