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James Axtell

The Rise and Fall of the Stockbridge Indian Schools

THE GOAL OF THE ENGLISH missions in North America was to convert the Indians from a traditional to a totally new way of life and thought. No aspect of native life, no native person, was too small to ignore. Throughout the colonial period, missionaries tried to reach Indian children and adults at the same time. But when the English became frustrated in their attempts to convert native adults, their emphasis shifted perceptibly toward the young. This was a logical emphasis because from the beginning the English hoped to train native preachers, teachers, and interpreters to assume the task of converting their brethren to civility. The only feasible way to train this cadre of native agents was to catch Indian children early in their development, before the hereditary stain of “savagery” became indelible, and “bring them up English.”

According to the book-learned ministers and officials who designed the missions, conversion was essentially a form of education—reeducation—and education was something that transpired largely in formal institutions of learning. The best way, then, to “reduce” Indian children, primarily boys, to “civility” was to send them to English schools and colleges—sexually segregated, morally guarded, classically oriented, rigorously disciplined, patriarchally dominated and, until the eighteenth century, located in English territory, far from the contagion of traditional habits, families, and friends.

The English reliance on formal institutions was safe and convenient, but it failed to capture the imagination or the allegiance of the Indians. In stressing structure over example, compulsion over persuasion, duty over love, schools could never attain the influence wielded by charismatic missionaries living among the Indians. The English resort to schools constituted a surface attack on native habits, manners, and words, but not a deep thrust for conviction and loyalty. Schools touched the intellects of a few, but not the hearts of the many. Predictably, they failed.

One of the longest but least known experiments in native educa-

tion in the eighteenth century was mounted in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, which lay astride a principal warpath from Canada. But a flawed design, the "prevalence of party," and English land hunger doomed it to mixed failure.

During the peaceful interlude between Queen Anne's and King George's War (as the English knew them), Massachusetts farmers and speculators received from the General Court and purchased from the Indians most of the southwestern corner of the colony. The native Housatonics, who had suffered severe depopulation from smallpox and had incorporated into their number many Mahicans from the upper Hudson Valley, retained four villages, the most important of which were Skatekook and Wnahktukook. But boundary disputes with New York and the presence of Dutch farmers in the Housatonic Valley forestalled extensive English settlement until after 1736, when the mission town of Stockbridge was laid out on six square miles at a bend in the river. To give the ninety Indian townsmen visible models of civilized piety and industry, the government encouraged four English families to join John Sergeant, the resident missionary, and Timothy Woodbridge, the Indian schoolmaster. Almost inevitably, the advent of English farmers, led by the ambitious Ephraim Williams, resulted in the alienation of the Indians' land, the frustration of designs for their education in "civilized" ways, and their eventual removal to New York.

Stockbridge was founded largely to assist the missionary labors of Woodbridge and Sergeant, who since 1734 had divided their attentions between the two main Indian villages. Sergeant, a small, energetic man with a keen mind, lively black eyes, and a withered left hand, had been plucked from a comfortable tutorship at Yale College to answer the Housatonics' call for Christian succor. Blessed with a "catholick temper" and a "guileless spirit," he sought to avoid partisanship of any kind and to befriend everyone, Indian and white.¹ When he married Abigail Williams, the accomplished young daughter of Ephraim, however, he allied himself with one of the colony's most powerful and clannish families, thereby inadvertently raising the devil for his native neophytes and his ministerial successor. Unlike his son-in-law,

¹Samuel Hopkins, *Historical Memoirs Relating to the Housatonic Indians* [Boston, 1753], reprinted in *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*, Extra No. 17 (New York, 1911), 164-65. All further references to this source will be noted in the text as "Hopkins."

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Williams kept a sharper eye on the Indians' soil than on their souls. From an initial homestead of 150 acres, situated symbolically on a proud eminence overlooking the native village along the river, Williams parlayed his position as town moderator and selectman into 1,500 acres by the time he left Stockbridge in 1753. Most of it was acquired after the 1744 separation of Indian and English precincts, in which the natives—for whom the town ostensibly was founded—received less than a third of its land.²

Despite the unsavory machinations of his father-in-law and his own postmarital move from a plain cottage among the Indians to an imposing Georgian pile on the hill, Sergeant seems to have maintained the trust and affection of his native congregation throughout his ministry. A major spring of their regard was his constant concern for their secular education as well as their spiritual welfare, which manifested itself even before he was ordained and installed as their missionary. When Sergeant was invited by the New England Company to assume the Housatonic post in September 1734, he wished to guide his senior class through commencement before leaving Yale. As a compromise, he visited the Housatonics for two months that fall, preaching and teaching with Woodbridge at a site midway between the two main villages. Returning to Yale in December, he was accompanied by two Indian boys, the eight-year-old son of "Lieutenant" Umpachenee, the headman of Skatekook, and the nine-year-old son of "Captain" Konkapot, the chief of Wnahktukook. Two years later these men would lead their tribesmen to Stockbridge and become its dominant Indian selectmen; although the Mahicans were matrilineal, Sergeant sought to equip their sons for future leadership roles by sending them to the New Haven free school. Living with Sergeant in college, these "very likely lads" learned English by day and taught an Indian dialect to their host by night. When their parents came to retrieve them in May, they must have been pleased to show off their new tongue, along with the college's library and "rareties." So promising was Konkapot's son that he was allowed to remain in school all summer, at the conclusion of which he had "learnt to speak and read English very well" (Hopkins, 39, 46).

²Sarah Cabot Sedgwick and Christina Sedgwick Marquand, *Stockbridge, 1739-1939: A Chronicle* (Great Barrington, Mass., 1939), 23, 51, 69; Daniel R. Mandell, *Change and Continuity in a Native American Community: Eighteenth Century Stockbridge* (M.A. thesis, Dept. of History, U. of Virginia, 1982), 33-34.

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After Sergeant settled among the Housatonics in July, he and Woodbridge both taught English and religion “in a catechetical way” to about forty children and a number of adults who wished to prepare for the brave new English world. As soon as the Indians moved to Stockbridge in 1736, however, the educational program received a tremendous boost from Isaac Hollis, a London clergyman whose recent inheritance allowed him to indulge his passion for missionary philanthropy. Hollis made a long-range commitment to underwrite the cost of lodging, diet, clothing, and tuition for twelve Indian boys. And about the same time another English benefactor contributed £100, which Sergeant earmarked for the domestic education of native girls (Hopkins, 28, 65–66).

Within two years Sergeant had spent only £5 to board two young girls, one of them Konkapot’s eldest daughter, with English families, because “thro’ a childish fondness for home,” as he called it, “they would not be contented to stay long enough where I sent them, to obtain any good by it” (Hopkins, 81–82). The Hollis grant, on the other hand, helped to solve the serious problem of native absenteeism. For several weeks in late winter the Housatonics traditionally left Stockbridge and repaired in family groups to sugar camps in the bush to collect and boil down maple sap. In the summer similar migrations took them to planting grounds around their old villages or to work for Dutch farmers in New York. Hunting expeditions in the fall and late winter also removed children from school. The lack of continuity in their English lessons, the frequent and often lengthy intervals of traditional living and speaking, and the daily influence of Indian-speaking parents at home conspired to minimize the impact of Master Woodbridge. Hollis’s benefaction made it possible for the English to tuck at least a dozen students firmly under their pedagogical wing for most of the year.

In January 1738 Sergeant took the twelve new Hollis scholars into his new bachelor’s quarters, overseen by an Indian housekeeper, and began to instruct them in reading and writing. But the care and feeding of such a youthful horde severely taxed the preacher’s domesticity, so after a year he placed them in English families, paying their living expenses from the Hollis fund while continuing to teach them. Those who could not or would not live with the English received only their clothes and were sent to the town school with Master Woodbridge. In the end, it was thought, “those who liv’d in English families made much the best progress

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in their learning, beside the benefit of gaining the English language" (Hopkins, 73-76).

By 1741 Sergeant realized that the placement of Indian children in a variety of unsupervised English families might not improve the natives' moral or social fortunes as much as their language. In a letter to the Reverend Benjamin Colman of Boston, one of the commissioners of the New England Company and a staunch advocate of the Stockbridge mission, Sergeant proposed the establishment of a "Charity-House for the instruction of our Indian children, both boys and girls, in business and industry, as well as in reading and writing and matters of religion." Because such a plan would require the donation of two hundred acres of unappropriated Indian land, the missionary rightly "suppos'd the jealousies [suspicions] of the Indians would be a bar in the way," so for two years he kept it to himself. But by 1743 a "more than ordinary spirit of religion" appeared among his native congregation. Symptomatic (to Sergeant's thinking) was the personal request of two Stockbridge girls to be placed in English families to learn the English language and manners. As Sergeant explained to Colman in a letter that was soon published as a prospectus, his missionary goal was to change the Indians' "whole habit of thinking and acting," to "raise them as far as possible into the condition of a civil, industrious and polish'd people," to instill the "principles of virtue and piety," and "withal to introduce the English language among them instead of their own imperfect and barbarous dialect." For this he sought to build a boarding school, on the lines of an "Irish Charity School," to remove boys between ten and twenty years old from the corrupting example of their parents and friends. Under the direction of a study master and a work master, they would have their congenital "idleness," "vicious habits," and "foolish, barbarous and wicked customs" rooted out of them, the whole enterprise supported eventually by the profits from their own stock raising and farming (Hopkins, 94-95, 106-111, 148).

Hollis, of course, was enthusiastic about the scheme and doubled his support. But the public subscription launched by Colman was a limited success. A number of English dignitaries responded generously, but in the colony only ten English inhabitants of Stockbridge and Colman himself came forward with cash. Four American gentlemen subscribed but never paid, probably because the whole affair was thrown into doubt by the outbreak of King George's War in 1744. When that conflagration died on the

frontiers four years later, Sergeant returned to the task. Hollis was champing to have his new donation spent specifically on twelve additional boys of “heathen parents, such as are not professors of Christianity,” which effectively eliminated most of the local Housatonics. With Colman now dead, however, Boston was even cooler to the idea of supporting an expensive boarding school for distant and dangerous savages, and gave nothing. Only a testamentary bequest and two church collections in Connecticut raised enough money to enable Sergeant to complete the construction of his boarding school in the summer of 1749, days before he died of a nervous fever (Hopkins, 117–34, 144–47, 154). Although he had lived to see his educational dream materialize, death spared him the cruel sight of its misuse and eventual destruction at the hands of the master he had appointed and his own relatives.

Even before the frontiers were completely safe, however, the importunity of Isaac Hollis had persuaded Sergeant to send twelve boys of “heathenish” proclivities to the relative security of Newington, Connecticut, to be schooled for a year in civility by Martin Kellogg, a sixty-year-old army captain, farmer, and interpreter. When the boarding school was completed the following summer, Kellogg was persuaded to transfer the boys to Stockbridge and to assume their direction for another year. Had he lived through the summer, Sergeant also planned to visit the New York Mohawks in the company of Kellogg, who spoke their tongue after being twice captured by the Caughnawagas, to invite them to send children to the new Hollis school (Hopkins, 145, 154–55).³ A number of Mohawk children—and their relatives—eventually moved to Stockbridge to board on the Hollis bounty, but the pedagogical incompetence of Kellogg and the internecine infighting of the English over the control of the town’s various Indian schools soon drove them away.

At the unlikely center of this educational imbroglio was Abigail, the brilliant and beautiful widow of John Sergeant. In the eyes of her father, Ephraim Williams, her taking of a new husband would perpetuate the Williams dynasty in Stockbridge, particularly if the lucky man also happened to be Sergeant’s successor as Indian missionary. Obliging, Abigail cast her eye first on Ezra Stiles, a

³Emma Lewis Coleman, *New England Captives Carried to Canada between 1677 and 1760 during the French and Indian Wars*, 2 vols. (Portland, Maine, 1925), 2:97–99, 113.

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Yale tutor, (as Sergeant had once been) though five years her junior, who proved acceptable to the Indians and the Williams side of the church. But Stiles had doubts about his own religious orthodoxy and sensed that a hornet's nest of intrigue awaited him in Stockbridge. When he announced to Abigail his withdrawal from ecclesiastical (and, by implication, marital) consideration in the fall of 1750, her anguished response must have confirmed the wisdom of his decision. She revealed that Deacon Woodbridge, a religious New Light, was pushing to have the Indian missionary post given to Jonathan Edwards, the brilliant theologian who had recently been ousted from his Northampton pulpit by another branch of the Williams clan. Her father and Captain Kellogg, of course, were "very Bitterly against" his appointment. But the crowning blow, she confessed, was that Woodbridge had told the Indians that "they must not have a young man, [for] if they do he will likely marry in to my fathers famely and then Be under his Direction."⁴ Thanks to Stiles, and much to the chagrin of the Williamses, the elderly Edwards was duly installed nine months later.

Frustrated in love, Abigail sought to build her own Indian fiefdom by becoming mistress of the Indian girls' school, which did not yet exist. Although various English benefactors had contributed toward the education of girls, little had been done and their monies had been diverted. But in April 1750 her father had persuaded the General Court to spend annually £150 for seven years to educate twelve Indian girls, six Housatonics and six Mohawks, "according to the Plan of the late Reverend Mr. Sergeant." Although another Williams was to administer the funds, the legislators asked Colonel Williams and Captain Kellogg for their opinion of the plan and to inform the Mohawks, about twenty of whom had recently moved to Stockbridge at Sergeant's earlier invitation.⁵ Apparently, the colonel successfully presented his daughter's credentials for the job. The following summer Elisha Williams, an American member of the London Board, persuaded the New England Company to pay his cousin Abigail

⁴Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles, 1727-1795* (New Haven, 1962), ch. 5, at 87.

⁵*Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1749-1750* (Boston, 1951), 225-26; Massachusetts Archives, State House, Boston, 32:30-32; Sereno E. Dwight, *The Works of President [Jonathan] Edwards with a Memoir of His Life*, 10 vols. (New York, 1830), 1:452.

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£30 a year to serve as schoolmistress to not more than ten native girls, each of whom would also be credited with £7.10s for clothes and lodging. An extra £10 was drafted to enable Mrs. Sergeant to put her already impressive house in order.⁶ Clearly, a widow with three children could do worse than to set herself up in the Indian business.

Abigail did even better in 1752 when she married Joseph Dwight of Brookfield, a forty-nine-year-old politician, speculator, brigadier general, and recent widower. They had undoubtedly come to a meeting of minds during the previous winter, when Abigail took some of her Indian girls to Brookfield and put them out to service rather than teaching them herself. From then on the Dwights moved to monopolize Indian affairs in Stockbridge, with no little hope of personal profit. The general assumed charge of provincial affairs in the west, the Hollis foundation, and the business of the New England Company, bypassing Edwards, the Company's missionary, at every turn. Edwards could only conclude that the proud and domineering Abigail had twisted her courtly consort around her finger; nothing else seemed to explain the abrupt reversal of Dwight's lifelong admiration for Edwards.⁷ It looked to Edwards as if the Williams clan was trying to duplicate its Northampton victory in Stockbridge. Although the stakes were much less theological, the aging missionary was determined not to lose another round. He unleashed the only weapon at his command—verifiable truth—in a barrage of letters to officials in London and Boston. In unambiguous detail, he described how the Dwight-Williams ring had wasted the Hollis fund, wrecked the promising Mohawk mission, and made a mockery of the girls' school.

The Dwights' interest in the Indian girls' school, Edwards revealed, was little more than a brazen attempt to pervert the public trust for personal profit. With funds and materials provided by the General Court, they proceeded to build a schoolhouse on the widow Sergeant's land, hoping eventually to sell the parcel to the province at a "high rate." In the meantime, two of their sons were maintained and educated at public expense, two daughters similarly enjoyed free rides in the girls' school, a Dwight relative served

⁶William Kellaway, *The New England Company, 1649-1776* (London, 1961), 274-75.

⁷John L. Sibley and Clifford K. Skipton, *Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College* (Cambridge, Mass., 1873-), 7:62-63.

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as Abigail's usher, their family servants were disguised as the school's workmen, and the whole family eventually moved into the school, which drove the remaining Mohawks straight back to New York. Although Abigail did provide a certain amount of care to the native girls, her three batches of children—his, hers, and theirs—monopolized her time and energies, just as Edwards warned the commissioners it would. And superintending all of this chicanery was the province's resident trustee of Indian affairs and two commissioners of the Boston Board—her husband, her father, and her cousin.⁸

The Hollis fund and boarding school were equally mismanaged, which in turn undermined the province's efforts to secure the Mohawks' critical allegiance through education. By the end of King George's War, if not long before, it became clear to New Englanders that their exposed northern frontiers could not be guarded without the keen eyes and ears of native allies, preferably those living in English territory. The Mohawks fit the bill nicely because they enjoyed an enviable reputation for martial prowess, had relatives in Canadian *reserves* who might act as unwitting spies or refuse to fight, could influence the other five nations of Iroquois to sever their French connections or at least to remain neutral, and were located nearby in eastern New York. If a substantial number could be induced to relocate in Stockbridge, western Massachusetts would have not only a mobile force of experienced guerilla warriors but a collection of young hostages to ensure the right behavior of countrymen at home. In the boarding school and the ample funds provided by Hollis and the General Court, the material means existed to attract the Mohawks to Stockbridge. All that remained was to give their children an educational experience that did not alienate their affections but also had some discernible payoff in improved behavior and literacy. This the aggrandizing army of General Dwight, Colonel Williams, and Captain Kellogg could not provide, no matter how earnestly they sought the Mohawks' allegiance.

The heart of the matter was the indisputable incompetence of Kellogg. Even Sergeant who had appointed him recognized his mistake, but he died before he could find a suitable replacement. Since the new boarding school was largely finished, Kellogg

⁸Mass. Archives, 32:300, 367-68; Dwight, *Works of President Edwards*, 1:480, 491, 494, 527.

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returned the Hollis boys to Stockbridge and carried on there as best he could. His best was simply not good enough for the parents of the few boys who remained in his charge. Early in 1750 twenty Mohawks who had moved to town for the sake of their children's education left, complaining that the boys were "not cloathed so well as they are at home." Only a great deal of verbal and material persuasion by provincial agents brought the Mohawks back to Stockbridge. In October 1751 nearly a hundred arrived to settle on prepared farm land around the boarding school, partly on the strength of Kellogg's promise that he now had clothes in abundance. What he meant was that he had clothes and room for twenty-four boys on the Hollis fund but not for the other Mohawk children, who numbered thirty-six by January. When the provincial committee asked him to take all of the Mohawk boys until a separate schoolhouse could be built, he refused, saying "he was Independent in his School, and inclined to keep it separately," conveniently forgetting that "his" school was built partly with government funds. Accordingly, Benjamin Ashley, Kellogg's assistant and brother-in-law, was ordered to teach the other boys.⁹

After watching Kellogg rapidly alienate the Iroquois, Edwards could hold his peace no longer. Speaking for the vast majority of Indian and English townsmen as well, he penned a series of frank letters to Hollis and various Boston officials exposing Kellogg's utter unfitness. First, as even the longhouse-dwelling Indians noticed, the boarding school was in a "miserable state"—unfinished, too small, and ill-equipped. Ceilings in two of the five rooms and a staircase were missing, as were adequate beds, writing tables, benches, and bedclothes. Still worse was Kellogg's care and government of the boys. Although he drew full pay from the Hollis fund for two years, he never made an accounting of his expenditures to Hollis or to Dwight, apparently with good reason, for the boys were poorly "dieted" and their clothes cost "but a trifle." Furthermore, he spent a third of the year away from school pursuing more pressing "avocations," which was perhaps just as well because when he was present his teaching and discipline left much to be desired. Barely literate himself, Kellogg managed to teach only mindless memorization. The children merely learned to attach sounds to clusters of marks "but know not *the meaning* of the

⁹Mass. Archives, 32:206-12, 248-49, 370; Dwight, *Works of President Edwards*, 1:486.

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words,” said Edwards, “and so have neither profit nor pleasure in reading, and will therefore be apt soon to lose even what they have learned.” And even though the Mohawks gave their children over for English-style “Correction & Discipline” as well as instruction, Kellogg’s scholars made “no progress in civility & vertue,” the townsmen accused, “but have rather declin’d, living an idle life, and much without government.” Understandably, parents complained loudly of the “increase of unrulyness & disorder in their children” and would have withdrawn them and moved from Stockbridge altogether had Edwards, at the request of the Boston Commissioners, not hired in February 1752 an able master to teach the Iroquois not enrolled in the Hollis school.¹⁰

The new master, Gideon Hawley, was a twenty-four-year-old Yale graduate with a “happy talent in teaching” and a “good spirit of government.” Within weeks of his arrival he was diligently teaching the colonial 3Rs to about thirty-six pupils, several of them lured away from Kellogg. In addition, he was learning an Iroquois tongue (Mohawk or Oneida) and teaching it to a couple of English boys whom the province had placed in the school to prepare for future work as missionaries or interpreters. Perhaps most pleasing to the Iroquois parents, who “strengthen[ed] his hands” whenever possible, was his regulation of the children’s “manners” and establishment of “good order.”¹¹

The advent of a successful rival soon drove Kellogg, Williams, and Dwight to distraction. Not only had their nemesis Edwards made the appointment, but Benjamin Ashley had been permanently assigned to Hawley as an assistant master and all three had advised the Iroquois in an open meeting to remove their children from the captain’s ill-run school, which seven of them promptly did. With only a handful of students left, Kellogg took to coming into Hawley’s school and acting as though the boys were his. In his most imperious manner Dwight did the same thing, sometimes removing boys for several days to teach himself. Since the Indians disliked a man of his “sovereign & forbidding aers,” they were especially disgusted by his treatment of their young master after

¹⁰Mass. Archives, 32:299, 303, 305, 366; Dwight, *Works of President Edwards*, 1:470, 490–91; *Colls. Mass. His. Soc.*, 1st ser. 10 (1809), 142–53, at 148.

¹¹Jonathan Edwards to Joshua Paine, Feb. 24, 1752, Yale Univ. Lib., Andover-Newton Edwards Collection (transcript), folder 1752B; *Sibley’s Harvard Graduates*, 12:392–411.

Hawley had castigated a Williams associate for coming into his school and caning one of his students, the son of an Oneida chief, without just cause. In response, Dwight flew into Hawley's classroom and, before the alarmed children, berated him for a full three hours. Some of his anger was undoubtedly stoked by the frustration of having watched Hawley appointed just days before he could intrude his own son Henry, a Harvard student, into the school. For the next several months the general kept threatening to underwrite a rival school with Kellogg as steward and young Henry as master, a threat which came to naught. For his part, Ephraim Williams made the most manic gesture of all. One October morning, in an effort to undercut Edwards's base of local support, he literally tried, cash in hand, to buy out every English farmer in Stockbridge. Needless to say, he too failed and was soon laughed out of town.¹²

The Williams family's search for autocracy in Stockbridge Indian affairs died in one final act of desperation in 1753, shortly before the colonel moved to Deerfield. After the boarding school had been sufficiently repaired, Hawley had moved in in the fall of 1752 to be near his young linguistic informants. On a bitter New England day in the following February, the school, "in a way unknown, took fire, and was reduced to ashes," along with Hawley's furniture, books, and clothing. Hawley had no doubts that the school had been fired "by design"—and not by the faction adhering to Edwards and Woodbridge. Early in April two-thirds of the Mohawks returned to New York, thoroughly disenchanted with Dwight's stonewalling techniques and the nasty turn of events in the life of their school; the rest followed a year later, ironically, only two weeks after Edwards had been given complete control over the town's Indian affairs. On April 9, 1754, eight days before the Seven Years' War effectively began at the forks of the Ohio, the General Court wrote the epitaph to their long, frustrating experiment in native education by referring to the "late Mohawk School at Stockbridge."¹³

¹²Dwight, *Works of President Edwards*, 1:303-304, 490-91, 504-505, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 7:62-63, 13:399; Sedgwick and Marquand, *Stockbridge*, 66-67.

¹³*Colls. Mas. His. Soc.*, 1st ser. 4 (1795), 54-56; Dwight, *Works of President Edwards*, 1:527; *Mass. Archives*, 32:476-77, 508.