

## Counting Sheep: Unspinning the Mystery of the “Massachusetts Sheep Census”

Primary sources give historians a direct connection to the past. Yet they can be as difficult to understand as an overheard conversation in a foreign language. How do historians make sense of them? How can students learn to interrogate primary sources the way historians do? In this essay I describe how I identified and interpreted a document held by the Library of Congress’s Manuscript Division that appeared in the Library’s catalog with the puzzling title: “Massachusetts Sheep Census, 1787.” Compared to some of the collections in the Manuscript Division, such as the papers of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, this is a very humble document. But documents like these have stories to tell and because they have been less explored than documents produced by more well-known people they often contain mysteries that students can participate in unraveling.

When not long ago I started working as the early American specialist in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress one of my first tasks was to learn about the many collections the Division holds. Among the more stellar of these are the papers of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. But looking at the online catalog one day something small and strange caught my eye. It was described in the Library’s online catalog as the “Massachusetts Sheep Census, 1787.” What could this be, I wondered? Would a document like this be able to reveal something about the roots of textile production, so central to the industrial revolution, which began to sprout in the stony hills of New England in the first decades of the nineteenth century? Would it have

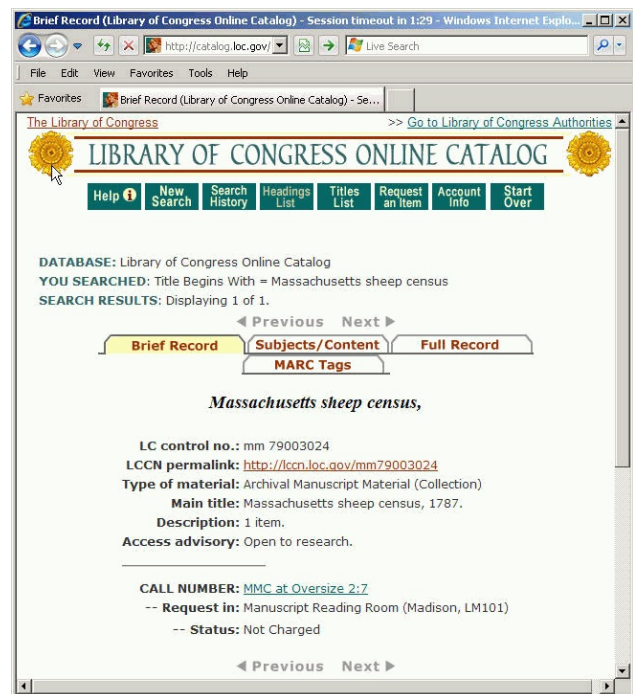


Figure 1 The Library of Congress listed the Sheep Census this way on its online catalog.

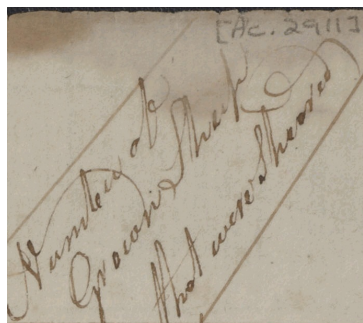


the right side, perhaps to achieve that size. Library conservator Yasmeeen Khan discovered needle pricks and shadowy marks left by stitches on the paper, showing that it was originally sewn together.<sup>1</sup> Now brittle and browning with age, it is also cracked through the middle. This



**Figure 3** Note the shadowy images of stitching on the back of the Sheep Census.

eighteenth-century table is not too different from a spreadsheet we might make on a computer



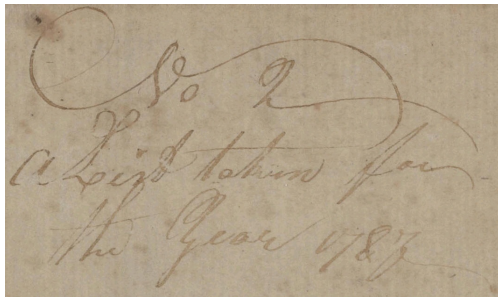
**Figure 4** The last column of the Sheep Census reads “Number of Grown Sheep That Were Sheared.”

today, except that its lines are drawn in ink and its contents are written in a spidery handwriting. In a column headed “Names” on the left side are listed thirty names, twenty-eight men and two women, representing twenty-nine households. Across the page march twenty-seven columns whose headings - blotted, squashed, obscured by the clumsy join - are less easy to read. But the last column is clear. It says: “Number of Grown Sheep that were Sheared.” This dominating mention of sheep probably gave the librarian who cataloged this document in the 1920s the idea for the title.

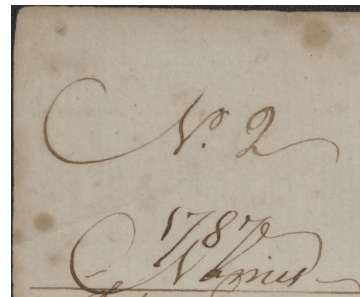
By this time, though, I realized that the librarian was largely guessing. For one thing, nowhere on the document does the word Massachusetts appear. Why then does the catalog identify it as a *Massachusetts* Sheep Census? The answer to this mystery probably lies in the document’s provenance. Provenance is the term curators and dealers of manuscripts and art use to describe an object’s history from its creation to the present as documented mainly by bills of sale and other papers establishing ownership. By tracking an object’s history along the paper trail it created over the course of its existence it is possible to learn where it is from, where it has been,

and often what it is. The Manuscript Division keeps records documenting the provenance of each collection it holds. The records of the Sheep Census show that it was given to the library in 1924 by Charles F. Heartman of New Jersey. Heartman (1883-1953) was a rare book dealer who gave the Division many manuscript items documenting life in eighteenth and nineteenth-century New England. Most of these are from Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> Thus it was logical to guess that this document too might be from Massachusetts. But as we will see, it was not.

The attribution of the date, 1787, is firmer. It appears in two places on the Sheep Census itself. On the back of the document a note reads: “A List Taken from the Year 1787.” And then again on the front, over the column headed “Names.”



**Figure 5** This notation on the back of the Sheep Census reads: “No. 2 a List taken from the Year 1787.”



**Figure 6** The Sheep Census is clearly dated. Just above “Names” it says “1787.”

The other solidly usable pieces of information on the Sheep Census were those names. Even without knowing exactly what state the Sheep Census was from, the prevalence of Old Testament names told me that it was most likely from New England. Eighteenth-century New Englanders were the descendants of Puritans and they, more than other Americans, gave their children Biblical names.<sup>3</sup> 1787 was more than a century and a half after the first Puritans arrived in Plymouth. By then Puritanism had faded as a controlling force in New England. But for many New England families Biblical names had become family names and they and their descendants continued to use them well into the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> However, I still didn’t know which New England state Jabez, Jesse, Obadiah, Rebecca, and the others came from. To find them I would have to look in the federal census.

The first federal census was conducted in 1790, so I thought that would be a good place to start. Americans were very mobile in this period, as they would continue to be into the nineteenth century and up through the present, but three years is not a long time. In 1790 many of them would probably still be living where they had lived in 1787. I began by limiting my search to Massachusetts, looking in the 1790 census and also, for good measure, the one from 1800. This proved unfruitful - I found no cluster of Sheep Census names in either year. At that point I realized that it probably did not come from Massachusetts, so I widened my search to include all states. That's when I saw a concentration of sheep census names listed in a town called Canterbury in Windham County, Connecticut and I realized I had found what I was looking for.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1790 census seven of the Sheep Census's thirty names appear listed in Canterbury; in 1800 there are ten. My discovery not only of people with common names - John Fitch and Nathan Williams, for example - but also with more unusual names - Jesse Ensworth, Darius Fish, Erastus Hough, Obadiah Johnson, and Elisha Paine - enforced my feeling that I had found the right town. The census also revealed that the listing on the Sheep Census represented only a small portion of the town's population: the 1790 census found 288 households in Canterbury; in 1800 there were 309. The sheep census lists only twenty-nine households. But this is list "No. 2." Perhaps there were other lists?

Even though I now knew where the Sheep Census was from I still didn't know what it was. Before the federal census began in 1790 the colonies, and then the states, took local censuses. Could this be a local census?<sup>6</sup> The Sheep Census contains more information than is typically found in a census. Not only did it count sheep, but also other livestock, land, houses, and valuable items such as clocks, money, and silver. Each of these items was assigned a value in pounds, shillings, and pence, and the value of each household, as well as the collective value of the property owned by the twenty-nine households, was added up. Further, the first two columns contained the word "polls" (heads) between the ages of sixteen and seventy. At the time this document was created, states and localities collected poll or head taxes, typically on men older than sixteen, and they also assessed household heads for the value of their property. The listings

of polls and property on the Sheep Census and the calculations of value convinced me that I was probably not looking at a census but at a state or local tax assessment list.<sup>7</sup>

My guess was confirmed when I was lucky enough to find a book titled *Acts and Laws of the State of Connecticut in America* (Hartford, 1786).<sup>8</sup> The Library of Congress owns this book, as well as editions of Connecticut laws from other years, and it has been digitized by Google Books (you can see it online at [books.google.com](https://books.google.com)). One of the laws (on pages 128-132), “An Act for the Direction of Listers in Their Office and Duty,” was particularly relevant. Listers were appointed to assemble lists of “polls and rateable estates” (heads and taxable property) in each town so that Connecticut citizens could be assessed for taxes. The instructions the law laid out for listers corresponded largely to what I saw on the Sheep Census. A list of taxable people and property drawn up as a model for the listers to follow was especially helpful. Taxable polls included men aged sixteen to twenty-one, who were taxed at £9, and twenty-one to seventy, at £18 (older men were evidently considered twice as valuable as younger ones). Livestock, land, clocks, silver, and their valuations are described in the law just as they appear on the sheep census. The law also helped me decipher some words that were hard to read - including the word “houses,” which was partly obscured by the bad join.

The “Act for the Direction of Listers” lists more taxable items than appear on the Sheep Census. These include, among other things, swine, ships, and several kinds of carriages. Possibly the lister had the discretion to list only things that townspeople actually owned. Since Canterbury is inland, it is probable that no shipowners lived there. Possibly Canterburyans owned no swine or carriages, either, or not in numbers large enough to count. Curiously, there is no mention of sheep in this law, and we know that Canterburyans did own sheep - but I will have more to say about that later.

Sheep or no sheep, now I knew that I was looking at a list (probably one among several) of “polls and rateable estates” made by a lister for the town of Canterbury, Connecticut in 1787. And because the law gave the listers a schedule they were obliged to follow - in July the listers had to

post a notice on a public signpost asking citizens to hand in their lists of polls and property, between August 20 and September 10 the lists were due to the listers - I know that as the listers and townspeople of Canterbury were gathering up information for this list the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, who met between May and September, 1787, were carrying out their own, extraordinary work.

Part of that work included changing the way the government collected taxes. The Continental Congress had not had the power to tax citizens, instead leaving that responsibility to the states. The states used the tax money they collected to finance their own operations as well as those of the United States, including the costs of the Revolutionary War. The federal Constitution, which was ratified by the summer of 1788, gave the United States the power, for the first time, to “lay and collect” taxes.<sup>9</sup>

Taxes were a sensitive topic in eighteenth-century America. Anti-tax sentiment flared in the 1760s when Americans began to chafe beneath British power as represented in part by taxes on printed items (the stamp tax), tea, and other goods. After the Revolution taxes remained a sore topic. In 1786-1787 there were agitations in Massachusetts by citizens angry at what they thought was the unfair imposition of taxes by their state government. In January 1787 a group of tax protesters led by revolutionary war veteran Daniel Shays marched on Springfield in an effort to seize the arsenal there.

The people listed on the Sheep Census surely knew about the fury percolating in Massachusetts, which we remember today as Shays’ Rebellion. Massachusetts bordered Connecticut, and Connecticut newspapers, like newspapers around the country, published articles about Shays.<sup>10</sup> But if the Canterburyans listed on the Sheep Census had feelings about taxes or about Shays and his followers they did not express them in this pragmatic listing of people and possessions. The Sheep Census contains what historians call quantitative data. Quantitative data consists of lists of names, things, numbers, and other data that can be counted.<sup>11</sup> Unlike letters, speeches, or diary entries (examples of documents historians call narrative sources), quantitative data can be

pretty skeletal. But, sparse as it is, quantitative data is often the only written record of people who never learned to write, such as slaves, the poor, and, in early America, many women. In fact, quantitative data is often the only extant information about all kinds of people who went about their daily business making no special mark on history. That is to say, most people.

What can the quantitative data in the Sheep Census tell us about the townspeople of Canterbury both individually and collectively? The two columns listing polls are a good place to start. In eighteenth-century America household heads typically paid poll taxes on members of their households over the age of sixteen. To be a household head in the eighteenth century was to hold considerable power over other members of the household, even other adults. Wives, children, indentured servants, apprentices, and slaves were all legal dependents of husbands, fathers and masters. Note that in the Sheep Census only household heads are named and all but two of them are men.

In the years after the Sheep Census was created the power of household heads diminished. In the nineteenth century both slavery and indentured servitude were outlawed and apprenticeship declined as a method for training the young in skilled crafts. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women, including married women, were gradually granted full civil rights. As a result of all these important changes the structure of the family and the household changed. Male household heads, who had once had several categories of dependents under their control, became simply fathers and husbands, no longer masters.<sup>12</sup> This document records what households looked like before these changes took place in one particular but not atypical place.

While twenty-six of the twenty-nine households are headed by one man each, three are different. One consists of two men and the other two are headed by women. What can we tell about the two men, Jabez Ensworth and [Rufus] Safford who lived together? (Brackets, [ ], are used by editors to note their own insertions in a text. In this case I'm guessing a name I can't read.) They have different last names so they probably weren't brothers or father and son, but they might have been related in some other way. Since both are listed, one was not subordinate to the other



as a master and servant or slave would have been. Probably they were young unmarried men sharing the labor of a farm, although all we can tell for sure about their ages is that they were between twenty-one and seventy. Note that while every other household that owns “oxen and bulls” has two, this household has four, possibly because each of these men had his own team to pull his own plow. They also had two horses (although so did other households) and perhaps more significantly, two houses.

The two women who headed their own households were Lydia Johnson and Rebecca Fitch. In the eighteenth century women who headed households were almost always widows. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, when the laws gradually began to change, married women were subsumed beneath the legal identities of their husbands. In Anglo-American law this was known as “coverture.” This meant that husbands controlled their wives’ property and had custody of the family’s children. Women were also barred from full civic participation; they could neither vote nor hold public office. Because of these legal and customary limitations on women’s participation in public life, most women did not head households or pay taxes. When their husbands died, however, married women could regain control over their property. Note that Rebecca Fitch and Lydia Johnson each owned her own house. Had they had husbands, they would not have. Widows, then, became liable for taxes (although they still could not vote or hold public office).<sup>13</sup>

Note that in the columns for polls on the Sheep Census, nothing is entered for Lydia Johnson and Rebecca Fitch. Before I saw the *Acts and Laws of the State of Connecticut* I thought that was because they must have been widows over seventy. Only polls (heads) between the ages of sixteen and seventy were listed and widows were obviously more likely to be older than seventy than younger than sixteen. But when I saw another law (on pages 197-203) in *Acts and Laws*, “An Act for Collecting and Paying Rates or Taxes,” the answer became clear: women who owned property were taxed on their property but not their polls. This law clearly states that “every inhabitant in this state” must pay taxes; it makes no exception for women. Actually, the law makes no mention of women at all. Its author simply took for granted the legal and cultural

norms that reduced the majority of women to dependence on their husbands or on their fathers or masters if they were unmarried. At the same time, “An Act for the Direction of Listers in Their Office and Duty,” states just as clearly that only the polls of *males* between sixteen and seventy were taxed.

In 1848 the women’s rights advocate Elizabeth Cady Stanton complained about the inequity inherent in state laws, still in effect in the nineteenth century, that recognized women property-holders at tax-time but ignored them on election day. In her “Declaration of Sentiments,” modeled on the Declaration of Independence and presented at the women’s rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York she charged: “After depriving her of all rights as a married woman, if single and the owner of property, he has taxed her to support a government which recognizes her only when her property can be made profitable to it.”<sup>14</sup> The Sheep Census shows this inequity in action.

While the first two columns on the Sheep Census count people, the remaining twenty-five document possessions. We can assume that Canterburyans owned more than just what is listed here. They certainly owned clothing, furniture, pots and pans, and maybe a few fancier items, such as books, china, musical instruments, or mirrors. But the things listed on the Sheep Census are the ones that the state of Connecticut determined were the important ones, largely because they were the ones in which the bulk of a household’s wealth was concentrated. What were these things and what do they tell us about how these people lived? The prominence of land and livestock, including sheep, makes it clear that the townspeople of Canterbury earned their livelihoods on the land. Note that the richest man on the list, Solomon Paine (at £110, 11 shillings, 3 pence), is rich not only in money, but also in land and livestock. The poorest, Phinias [Thindall - once again, I can’t be sure of my reading of this name so I’m using brackets to show that this is my guess] (just £1) owns only uncultivated forest, described as “woodland” on the Sheep Census and as “uninclosed land” in the “Act for the Direction of Listers.”

The listings of land and livestock on the Sheep Census allow us to quantify these possessions, but I think that the language used to describe them is also telling. Today most Americans live in cities and suburbs but in the eighteenth century most were farmers. They lived in a landscape that European and African transplants and their descendants had not been cultivating for very long. Thus they observed the landscape with the evaluating, unsentimental eyes of settlers and cultivators, people who had (or whose parents or grandparents had) tamed wilderness and now relied on that subdued landscape for their living. The detail with which land and livestock are described on the Sheep Census is evidence of Canterburyans' deep and daily immersion in every aspect of farm life. Thus, cattle are not just cattle, but oxen, bulls, steer, cows, and heifers. Land is not just land but plow land, mowing pasture, meadowland, bog meadow, and bush pasture. Woodland is first-, second-, and third-rate. These descriptions help reconstitute a picture, almost visual in its detail, of the Connecticut landscape in the eighteenth century as perceived by the people who lived on it.

The special focus on sheep is also meaningful. The column reads: "number of grown sheep that were sheared." What mattered here was wool. Even before what we think of as the industrial revolution New England was a center for textile production. Not only wool, but flax (for linen) and silk were grown here. Women spun, wove, knitted, and sewed, for home use, barter, and sale.<sup>15</sup> Girls and young women also spun and wove in "manufactories," or workplaces, even before the British mechanic Samuel Slater brought the secrets of water-powered machinery from England to Rhode Island in 1790.

George Washington visited some of these early textile factories on the tour of New England he took in October and November 1789, less than a year after his inauguration as president. Like his treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, Washington was interested in finding out what role manufacturing could play in the economy of the new United States.<sup>16</sup> As he traveled through Connecticut and Massachusetts Washington visited or informed himself about the textile factories he found there. In Hartford, Connecticut he noted the hybrid nature of late-eighteenth-century textile production, with some work being done at home, the rest in factories: on October

20 he wrote in his diary: “All the parts of this business are performed at the Manufactory except the Spinning--this is done by the Country people who are paid by the cut.” He ordered himself a suit of Hartford-made woolen broadcloth and had it sent home to New York, then the national capital. In Boston he visited a sailcloth factory where he witnessed girls at work spinning flax. “This is a work of public utility & private advantage,” he commented approvingly in his diary on October 28.<sup>17</sup>

Wool production was clearly important to Canterburyans, but there is something peculiar about the way sheep are listed on the Sheep Census. Their column is last, and it comes after the column headed “Sum Total.” The value of sheep was not calculated into each household’s wealth. Why not? Once again, the 1786 Connecticut *Acts and Laws* provides the answer. “An Act for the Encouragement of Raising Sheep” (page 345) makes everything clear: sheep owners received a tax deduction of four shillings per sheep. The law instructed citizens to hand the listers a count of their shorn sheep along with their lists of polls and property so that they could receive this benefit. Connecticut wanted to encourage wool production and the developing textile industry that George Washington saw when he traveled through the state two years later.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this encouragement from the state, most households on the Sheep Census (twenty out of twenty-nine) did not own sheep. In contrast, most did own cattle and horses (only five households had neither cattle nor horses). But even though just nine households owned sheep, there are almost twice as many sheep (241) than cattle and horses (126) on the list. Most Canterburyans evidently found it possible to do without sheep entirely, while a few felt differently and acquired a lot of them. The tax credit may have had an effect (although it may be that households were illegally failing to report their cattle and horses, on which they had to pay taxes, and overreporting their sheep, on which they received credits). Or, the association between sheep ownership and textile production may have been as evident to some of these Canterburyans as it was to the state. Possibly this group saw a new economic trend coming and wanted to be a part of it. Sheep ownership, then, may have signaled a willingness to belong to a woolly vanguard, to be part of something new and potentially profitable.

While most of the columns on the Sheep Census are devoted to land and livestock, five columns are for other valuable possessions. Three of these are devoted to clocks and watches: silver watches, clocks with brass “wheels” or movements, and clocks with wooden movements. Why are clocks so prominently featured? Clocks were associated with town and factory life; farmers told time by sun and seasons. Clocks are, in fact, very rare among the households listed on the Sheep Census. Among the twenty-nine households there are just four timepieces: three silver watches and one wooden clock. The wooden clock belonged to Rebecca Fitch; one of the silver watches belonged to Simion Palmer, who listed no other taxable property; Solomon Paine, the richest man on the list, whose ratables included thirty-three sheep and five houses, owned no clocks.

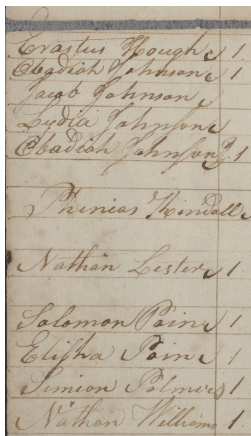
Clock ownership, then, did not correlate exactly to wealth, but it did mean something to these people. According to historian Paul G. E. Clemens, who has studied clock-ownership in eighteenth-century Connecticut, clocks “were the most technologically sophisticated everyday product of the eighteenth century.”<sup>19</sup> Eighteenth-century people bought clocks very much in the same way we twenty-first century people buy shoes that catch our eye even though we already have shoes on our feet, or iPads that we’re not exactly sure what to do with. The four Canterbury households that owned timepieces may not have needed them, but they wanted them, probably for the same reason we want shoes and iPads, because we feel that possessions help define who we are or would like to be.<sup>20</sup> Counting clocks in the eighteenth century might be considered the equivalent of counting television sets in the 1960s, or personal computers in the 1990s, or digital gadgets today. But there was more to it than that. Like the owners of sheep, the owners of clocks were preparing themselves to participate in the rapidly approaching industrial future of New England.

So far I had learned what the Sheep Census was, and I had managed to learn something about the material world of Canterbury, Connecticut, but I still didn’t know much about who the people on the Sheep Census were as individuals. Because I assumed they were obscure people, I thought that there would be no books or scholarly journal articles about them. So I turned to the sources

that family historians typically use when they look for information about their ancestors: local histories and genealogies.<sup>21</sup>

Local histories and genealogies are full of valuable information but they can be tricky sources to use. Local histories had a heyday from about the middle of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, produced by bursts of patriotism, boosterism, and nostalgia. Typically they are compendiums of regional lore, legend, and hearsay, and often they also reproduce valuable local records, such as marriage records, gravestone inscriptions, and muster rolls.

Genealogies are family histories, often written and published by descendants. Unlike professional historians, who are expected by their colleagues to steep themselves in the literature of their field, to document their sources in footnotes, to submit their manuscripts to their peers for review before publication, and to strive toward objectivity, these amateur historians often have little or no professional training and publish privately. Still, their work contains much good, usable information and professional historians often rely on it.



**Figure 7** Most people on the Sheep Census are listed in family groups. Note the clusters of Johnsons (which include two Obadiah Johnsons) and Paines. View [online](#).

Most of the names listed on the Sheep Census are grouped in families. The Ensworth family is most heavily represented, and there are also Fitches, Fishes (given the irregularities of eighteenth-century spelling it is possible that these are members of the same family), Johnsons, and Paines. The six apparently familyless individuals are: [Rufus] Safford, Joseph [Gorman], Erastus Hough, Phinias [Thindall], Nathan Lester, and Nathan Williams. Many of these names appeared in the local histories and genealogies I looked at, confirming what I learned from the census, that the list is from Canterbury, Connecticut. However, these sources also introduced confusion since many of these names were used over and over in families. Which individuals were these, exactly? And then as I read further I discovered something interesting: Canterbury was not quite the sleepy farming town I assumed it was. Instead, it was the site

of social turbulence in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and some of the people listed on the Sheep Census, whoever they were, were related to upheavals that rocked the town.

In the 1740s a dramatic religious revival split the town of Canterbury and its Congregational church. The Canterbury revival was part of a broad evangelical movement, known as the Great Awakening, that swept through the American colonies in the eighteenth century. Once I learned that Canterbury had been involved in a movement that was of interest to professional historians, I turned from the local histories and genealogies to academic books and journals. From all of these sources I learned that three names that appear on the sheep census: Solomon Paine, Elisha Paine, and Obadiah Johnson (there are two Obadiah Johnsons on the Sheep Census) belonged to men who were at the heart of Canterbury's revival.



**Figure 8** First Congregational Church, Canterbury, Connecticut. This structure was built in 1784 on the site of an earlier church. The photograph was taken on September 5, 1940 by the Historic American Buildings Survey. Photographer: Stanley P. Mixon. HABS, Conn, 8 - Canbu, 3-1. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. View [online](#).

Brothers Elisha and Solomon Paine, born on Cape Cod (site of the first Puritan settlements) in 1693 and 1698 respectively, came to Canterbury with their parents, Elisha and Rebecca Paine, around the turn of the eighteenth century, soon after the town was settled. Elisha Paine grew up to become a prominent lawyer, but in 1742 he gave up the law and, in the spirit of the Great Awakening, became an itinerant preacher. Irregular preaching was against the law in colonial Connecticut, and Elisha Paine was arrested and jailed several times. In 1746 the Paines, who led a dissenting faction in the Canterbury Congregational Church, formed a new church called the Canterbury Separate Church.<sup>22</sup> Solomon Paine became its pastor. Also prominent in this movement was Obadiah Johnson. Johnson was born in 1702 and, like the Paines, was the son of

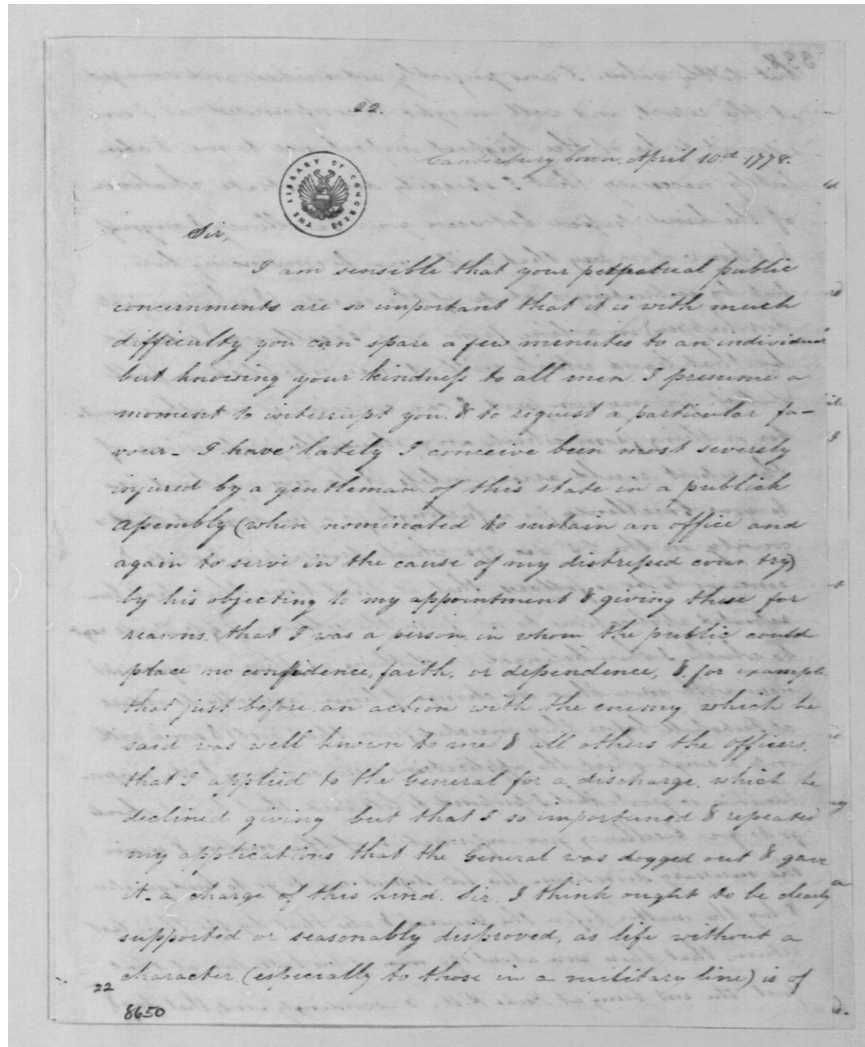
an early Canterbury settler. According to historian Christopher M. Jedrey, Obadiah was “Canterbury’s wealthiest and most influential citizen.”<sup>23</sup>

But was he, or were the Paines, the same men of those names who appear on the Sheep Census in 1787? Evidently not. In 1752 Elisha Paine left Canterbury and went to Bridgehampton, Long Island, New York, where he settled down as the minister of the Congregational church there. He died on Long Island in 1775 at the age of eighty-three. Thus he is not the Elisha Paine listed on the Sheep Census in 1787. His brother Solomon died in Canterbury in 1754 at fifty-seven, so he too was gone by the time the Sheep Census was created.<sup>24</sup> The Paines and their siblings had many children and among these are several Solomons and Elishas, named, perhaps, for the religious radicals or perhaps for other forebears. Elisha, remember, was himself the son of another Elisha. So which Elisha and Solomon are listed on the Sheep Census? The answer to this can probably be found in genealogies, local histories, the census, newspapers, and perhaps other sources.

The Obadiah Johnson who participated in the Canterbury revival with the Paines in the 1740s died in 1765. But he and his wife Lydia Cleaveland had several children, among them a son, also Obadiah, who was born in 1735 and died in Canterbury in 1801.<sup>25</sup> This Obadiah, an officer in the Connecticut militia in the Revolutionary war, was alive and probably living in Canterbury at the time the Sheep Census was created. His military correspondence with George Washington and copies of his orderly books are in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.<sup>26</sup>



On April 10, 1778, Johnson, who had by this time left the army and was home in Canterbury, wrote General Washington to ask him for a character reference. He was running for public office and “a gentleman of this state,” presumably a political enemy, had accused him of being “a Person in whom the Publick could place no Confidence Faith or Dependance” because while serving he had pressed Washington to give him a furlough, against the general’s judgement, at a time when he was needed. Johnson asked Washington to put into writing what he recalled of the incident and so help him clear his name since “Life without a Character (especially to those in a Military Line) is of but little Value.”



**Figure 9** Obadiah Johnson to George Washington, April 10, 1778. George Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. [View full version online.](#)

Johnson must have been disappointed by the character reference Washington wrote for him. At first, Washington wrote, he could not recall Johnson’s application for a furlough. He did, however, remember that in December, 1776, the time in question, he and his troops were camped near the Delaware River just before the Battle of Trenton and everyone was needed. However,

he added, Johnson would not have known about the upcoming attack on Trenton “because the success of the enterprise depended too much upon the secrecy of it.” But then almost a year later something jogged Washington’s memory. Now he remembered the furlough request and added a postscript to the copy of the letter that he had retained for his own records. In the postscript he added that “I have a faint remembrance that his applications were importunate and teasing, and complied with reluctantly, in terms, perhaps, not very acceptable to a military character.”<sup>27</sup> Was this one of the two Obadiah Johnsons listed on the Sheep Census? Given the propensity of these New Englanders to reuse names, there may have been even more Obadiah Johnsons in town. But it could be him.

c 1779 Sept. 4<sup>o</sup> (178)

I have no perfect remembrance of the conduct, or the particular applications of Lieut. Col. Johnston of Col. Ward's Regiment for a furlough - nor do I at this period recollect how or by what means he obtained one while the army under ~~my~~ my command lay in Bucks County in the State of Pennsylvania. - It is a fact notorious however, that the situation of our affairs at the time we lay on the west bank of the Delaware (in the month of Decem<sup>r</sup>. 1776) was such as to require the attendance of every officer & soldier, and the greatest exertion of the former, our force being small & we in daily expectation of the enemy's attempt to force the passage of the River on their route to Philadelphia - the supposed object of the Expedition - I do not believe that Lieut. Col. Johnston had any knowledge of the intended attack upon Trenton because the success of the enterprise depended too much upon

**Figure 10** George Washington, Report on Obadiah Johnson, September 4, 1779, with postscript, October 19, 1778. George Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. [View full version online](#)

What about the Lydia Johnson on the Sheep Census? Colonel Obadiah Johnson’s mother was Lydia Cleaveland Johnson, but she died in 1775. His sister was also named Lydia, but she was married before 1787 and thus no longer a Johnson. There was a widowed Lydia Johnson who is the right age: this is Lydia Brewster Johnson, who married Ebenezer Johnson (1745-1774), Colonel Johnson’s brother, in 1765.<sup>28</sup> But was she alive and living in Canterbury in 1787? The Lydia Johnson of the Sheep Census was one of the poorest people on the list, owning only a fourth-rate house and two cows or steers. In a town where nearly everybody was a farmer, she

owned no land. (Compare her to Rebecca Fitch, the only other woman listed, who was reasonably prosperous.) The Johnsons were a wealthy family. Does this make sense? It might, if her late husband Ebenezer had been unlucky.

Almost a century after the revivals Canterbury was once again at the center of controversy. By this time it was the 1830s, and the abolitionist movement was gaining traction. In 1833 a young Canterbury woman named Prudence Crandall opened a teacher-training school for African-American women in the town. (The house she bought for her school had been built in 1805 for none other than Elisha Paine, but not the Elisha Paine of the Sheep Census, who was dead by then.) Canterbury rose up against her, attacking her school both physically and legally. Defeated, she closed the school and left town. Among the leaders of the movement against her was a man named Solomon Paine. On March 12, 1833 an abolitionist named Henry Benson wrote William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a supporter of Prudence Crandall, describing a Canterbury town meeting called to discuss the Crandall affair. When a man at the meeting stood up to defend Crandall he “was continually interrupted by one Solomon Paine.”<sup>29</sup> Paine was also a member of a group that sued Garrison for libel, which they believed he had committed while supporting Crandall.<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 11** Elisha Payne House/Prudence Crandall School, Canterbury, Connecticut. This house was built in 1805 for an Elisha Payne born later than the one on the Sheep Census. Prudence Crandall bought it in 1831 and established her school there. The photograph was taken on July 16 1940 by the Historic American Buildings Survey. Photographer: Stanley P. Mixon. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. HABS Conn, 8 - Canbu, 1-2. View [online](#).

Was this the Solomon Paine of the 1787 Sheep Census? Forty-six years separate 1787 and 1833. It is possible that he is the same man, but it is more likely that he is a descendant. It took wealth,

power, and probably also the confidence brought by decades of family leadership to bring a lawsuit on behalf of a faction in a town cause. Added to this may have been feelings created by the fact that Crandall's school was in a house that had once belonged to a member of his family. The Solomon Paine of the Sheep Census is the richest man on the list. Even if he wasn't the one who opposed Prudence Crandall, his wealth, listed on the Sheep Census in the form of land, livestock, money, houses, and thirty-three sheep, possibly inherited by a descendant of the same name, may have paid for the lawsuit against Garrison and other expenses of the anti-Crandall campaign.

At the start of this essay I suggested that the Sheep Census would be able to tell us something about people who lived in the past. Now that I'm at the end, what have I discovered? The Sheep Census, which was created in 1787, is a product of the same historical moment that produced the Constitution of the United States and it tells us something about what it was like to live at that moment. Like all historical documents, and especially quantitative ones, the Sheep Census is able to reveal some things and not others. It can tell us that Solomon Paine was a rich man, but not how he felt about his schismatic ancestors. It can suggest that Rebecca Fitch was a widow, tell us that she owned the only clock in town, but not explain how she came to own the clock or what it meant to her. It can reveal the number of males in each household between the ages of sixteen and seventy but, aside from the named household heads, it has nothing else to say about them or any other men and women, boys and girls, or servants and slaves living in those households. The federal census shows that there were 98 slaves living in Windham County in 1790.<sup>31</sup> Did any of them live in Canterbury? Because slaves did not own property, their names, like the names of married women, did not appear on tax assessment lists. Because of limitations like these, historians typically do not rely on single items to tell their stories. Instead they gather as many perspectives as they can, relying on both primary and secondary sources, as I have done here.

Despite its limitations, however, the Sheep Census still has plenty to reveal about a part of Canterbury, Connecticut in 1787. Because this is a list of what people owned it offers a sense of the economy of the town in 1787. It shows something of the texture of its daily life and even of its values. The prominence of sheep conveys the importance of spinning, weaving and other facets of woolen textile production in this region. The predominance of male householders on the list shows that Connecticut, like everywhere else in early America, valued the economic contributions of men more highly than those of women. Because a list like this is a snapshot in time it gives the impression of stasis. But the presence of clocks and the addition of sheep as tax deductions show that change was creeping in.

Read together with other primary and secondary sources, the Sheep Census is also able to show the interpenetration of the mundane and the extraordinary in this eighteenth-century Connecticut town: the annual shearing of sheep and the periodic sparking of social controversy; the mowing of meadows and the creation of a nation. Like an archaeologist who leaves some artifacts buried for future diggers, I have pulled out some questions and left others where I found them. This is an invitation for you to follow them wherever they take you.

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**Notes:**

1. How does the Library of Congress preserve its books, manuscripts, and other materials? To find out go to: <http://www.loc.gov/preserv/>.
2. For the interesting life of Charles Heartman, see: Peggy Price, "The Book Farm: Charles F. Heartman's Utopia for Intellectuals." *Fine Books and Collections* (April, 2010) <http://www.finebooksmagazine.com/issue/201004/heartman-1.phtml>
3. On naming in New England: David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Gloria L. Main, "Naming Children in

Early New England,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (Summer, 1996): 1-27; Daniel Scott Smith, “Child-Naming Practices, Kinship Ties, and Change in Family Attitudes in Hingham, Massachusetts, 1641 to 1880,” *Journal of Social History* 18 (Summer, 1985): 541-566.

4. To find teaching resources about colonial America, including the Puritans, see: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/colonial-america/exhibitions.html>.
5. To search the federal census I used Ancestry, Library Edition, which is available by subscription to libraries. To find it and other databases that include census records go to <http://eresources.loc.gov/> and choose Genealogy. These are only available onsite at libraries that subscribe to them. For more information about the census, see the website of the U.S. Census Bureau: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov). The National Archives is also a good source of information for family historians, see: <http://www.archives.gov/>.
6. The Connecticut State Library has produced a Research Guide to Colonial and State Census Records: <http://www.cslib.org/colcens.htm>. It includes an image of a 1782 Connecticut census. You can find it by clicking “printed summary” under 1782 or go to: <http://www.cslib.org/images/1782census.jpg>.
7. Lawrence H. Gipson, “Connecticut Taxation and Parliamentary Aid Preceding the Revolutionary War,” *American Historical Review* 36 (July 1931): 721-739, and Alvin Rabushka, *Taxation in Colonial America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
8. My discovery of the *Acts and Laws* was a lucky accident. The nineteenth column appeared to be headed “brass wheeled clocks,” but the phrase was difficult to read and I didn’t know what a brass wheeled clock was. I searched Google, assuming that if such a thing existed, I would find it on the websites of antiques dealers. I did, but I also found it in the digitized text of the very 1786 Connecticut law that describes the duties of the listers who made this list.
9. To learn about the Continental Congress and the creation of the federal Constitution, see this web guide: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Constitution.html> and “Creating the United States,” an online exhibition: <http://myloc.gov/Exhibitions/creatingtheus/Pages/default.aspx>. See also: Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911). Online at: “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/>
10. Connecticut newspapers that printed articles about Shays’ rebellion include the *New Haven Chronicle* and the *Connecticut Journal*, both January 3, 1787. News traveled across the Atlantic reaching John and Abigail Adams in London and Thomas Jefferson in Paris. On January 29, 1787 Abigail Adams wrote to Jefferson describing “the Tumults in my Native state” which she described as the work of “Ignorant, wrestless [sic] desperadoes.” <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib002499> Jefferson replied to her on February 22, 1787. He disagreed with her characterization of Shays and his men, writing: “I hope they pardoned them.

The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. . . . I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere.” <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib002565> . Jefferson expressed a similar sentiment to William Smith on November 13, 1787. These letters come from the online Thomas Jefferson papers at the Library of Congress, [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers/) and this online exhibition: “Thomas Jefferson,” <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/jefffed.html>.

11. See this definition of quantitative data on the HistoryMatters website: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/numbers/what.html>.

12. For a description of the change in status heads of household underwent in the nineteenth century see Carole Shammas, *A History of Household Government in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

13. Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). These books describe the legal status of women in early America.

14. For more on Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the 1848 “Declaration of Sentiments” see: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr040.html>.

15. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001). For references to silk cultivation see page 378; for flax, page 281.

16. To find out more about Alexander Hamilton and his vision see “Alexander Hamilton, A Resource Guide,” <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/hamilton/related.html>. See also his 1791 “Report on Manufactures,” in a Library of Congress online exhibition: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trm157.html>.

17. To see the Library’s George Washington papers, including the diaries, online, go to: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>. For a George Washington resource guide go to: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/presidents/washington/>.

18. Thomas Jefferson was also interested in wool cultivation. To see the wool samples he collected and that came to the Library in his papers go to the online Thomas Jefferson papers: [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson\\_papers/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers/) and enter wool samples in the search box.

19. Paul G. E. Clemens, “The Consumer Culture of the Mid-Atlantic, 1760-1820,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (October, 2005).

20. For clocks as consumer items, and for the development of “time-consciousness” see Martin Bruegel, “‘Time That Can be Relied on’: The Evolution of Time Consciousness in the Mid-Hudson Valley, 1790-1860” *Journal of Social History* 28 (Spring 1995): 547-564; Clemens, “Consumer Culture”; and E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967): 56-97.

21. These are some of the local histories and genealogies I used: Canterbury Congregational Church, *Records of the Congregational Church in Canterbury, Connecticut, 1711-1844* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society and the Society of Mayflower Descendants in the State of Connecticut, 1932); Roscoe Conkling Fitch, *History of the Fitch Family, A.D. 1400-1930* (Published Privately by the Fitch Family, [1930]); Ellen D. Larned, *Historic Gleanings in Windham County, Connecticut* (Providence, RI: Preston and Rounds, Co., 1899); Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (Worcester, MA: Published by the Author, 1874); Henry D. Paine, *Paine Family Records: A Journal of Genealogical and Biographical Information* (Albany, NY: Munsell, 1880-1883); Gary Boyd Roberts, *Genealogies of Connecticut Families, From the New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2006); Duane E. Wilson, *Our Ensworth Family, Being Some of the Descendants of the English Immigrant, Tyxhall Ensworth (ca. 1655-1727) of Canterbury, Connecticut* (Privately Printed: Naperville, IL, [2001?]). To find out more see the website of the Local History and Genealogy Reading Room at the Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/>.

22. For a taste of Solomon Paine’s views see: Solomon Paine, *A Short View of the Differences Between the Church of Christ, and the Established Churches in the Colony of Connecticut* (Newport, 1752). For the Canterbury revival and the roles of Elisha and Solomon Paine in it, see: James F. Cooper, Jr., “Enthusiasts or Democrats? Separatism, the Great Awakening, and Church Government in Massachusetts,” *New England Quarterly* 65 (June, 1992), 268; Christopher Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England* (New York: WW. Norton, 1979), 13, 18-20, 36-37; John W. Jeffries. “The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church: Religion, Family, and Politics in a Connecticut Town,” *New England Quarterly* 52 (December 1979), 525-535; Henry D. Paine, *Paine Family Records: A Journal of Genealogical and Biographical Information* (Albany, NY: Munsell, 1880-1883), 156-163.

23. Jedrey, *World of John Cleaveland*, 71. For more on Johnson’s role in the Canterbury revivals see Jeffries, “Separation,” 527, 533-536, 545.

24. Jeffries, “Separation,” 534-535; you can see descriptions of their tombstones, and a photograph of Solomon Paine’s, on [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com).

25. Roberts, *Genealogies of Connecticut Families*; Jeffries, “Separation,” 535.

26. Obadiah Johnson Papers, Peter Force Collection, Series 7E, entry 65. Johnson’s correspondence with Washington is in the George Washington Papers. You can see these online at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>. Both, Manuscript Division, Library of



Congress, Washington DC.

27. George Washington to Obadiah Johnson, October 19, 1778 (misidentified as 1779 online), with postscript, September 4, 1779, George Washington Papers. It is not clear whether or not Johnson saw the postscript.

28. Roberts, *Genealogies of Connecticut Families*, 312-313.

29. Henry B. Benson, "Letter to William Lloyd Garrison (March 12, 1833)," "A Canterbury Tale: A Document Package for Connecticut's Prudence Crandall Affair," Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, <http://www.yale.edu/glc/crandall/06.htm>. This website notes that the letter was published in *Fruits of Colonization* in 1833.

30. Miriam Small and Edwin Small, "Prudence Crandall, Champion of Negro Education," *New England Quarterly* 17 (December, 1944), 525.

31. I made this calculation using the Historical Census Browser at the University of Virginia: <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html>.