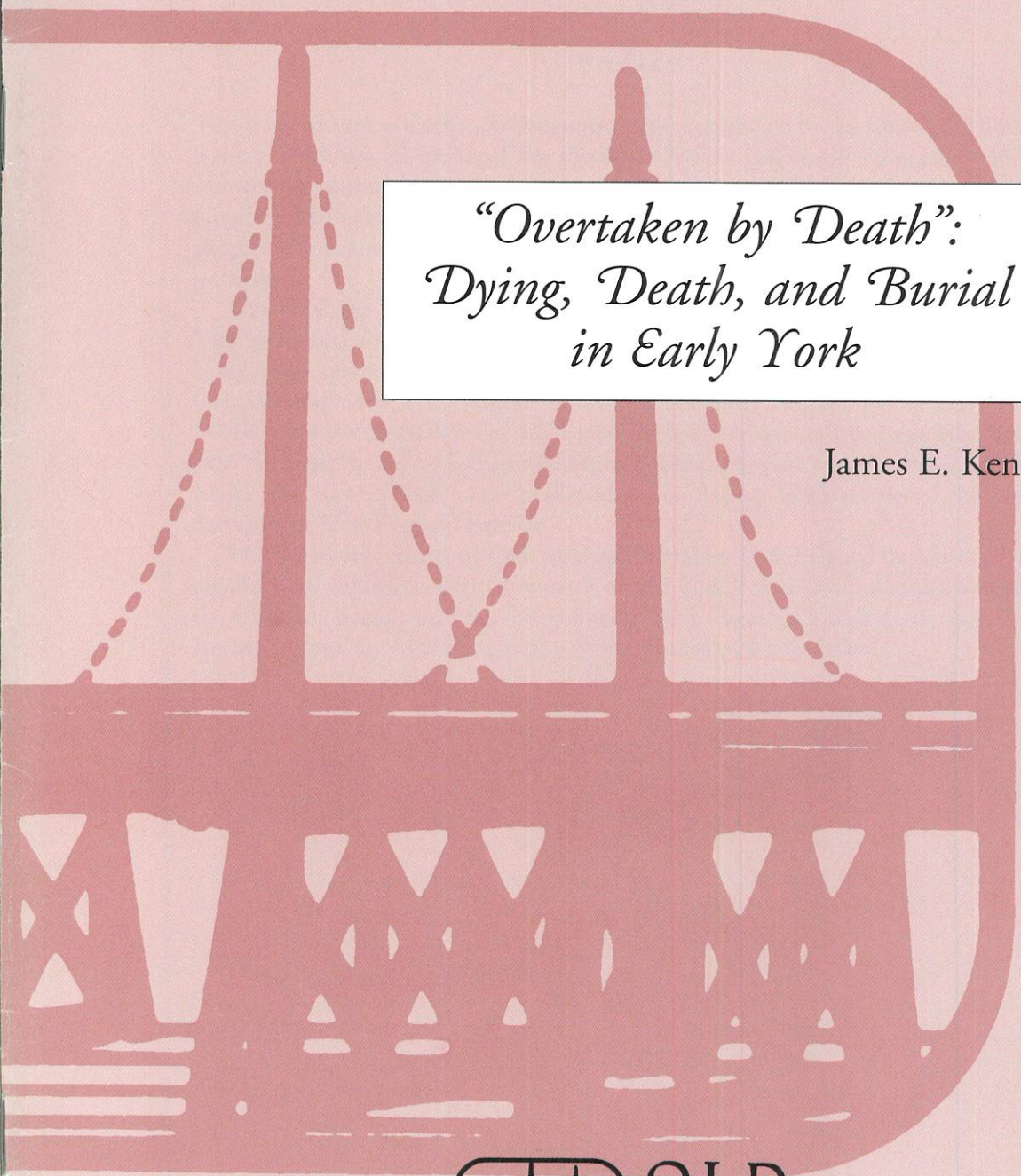
Occasional Paper Number Two

# *"Overtaken by Death": Dying, Death, and Burial in Early York*

James E. Kences



OLD YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
A Community Museum
York, Maine

Old York Historical Society
P. O. Box 312
York, Maine 03909

## Preface

This is the second in a series of Occasional Papers published by the Old York Historical Society. Since the inception of the Elizabeth Perkins Fellowship Program in 1988, a tremendous amount of research has taken place at the Museum. Additionally, staff members and Old York volunteers have conducted research for classes, exhibits, and programs. It is our intention to make as much of this valuable information available as possible.

This paper was written by James Kences, a York resident and member of the Old York Historical Society. Mr. Kences is an archaeological and historical researcher who is especially interested in the social, political, and psychological consequences of the Colonial wars. He is the author of *Some Unexplored Relationships of Essex County Witchcraft to the India Wars of 1675 and 1689* which was awarded the Honorarium Prize for Best Article by the Essex Institute in 1984. His paper on the horses and horse trades of Colonial Boston was presented at the August 1993 session of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife.

This paper was edited by Old York staff members and designed by Martha Drury, an Old York volunteer. Related research on the York Burial Ground available through the Historical Society includes the pamphlet "Set in Stone: A Guide to the York Village Burial Ground" by Michelle Craig, a 1993 Elizabeth Perkins Fellow.

*Richard C. Borges, Ph.D.*
*Director, Old York Historical Society*
*February 1996*

# Introduction: A Walk into the Burying Yard

The old burying ground at York Village was actively used from the early eighteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth. Within that period of approximately one hundred and fifty years, the town was to progress from its stature as a frontier settlement within Colonial Massachusetts to an agricultural community that belonged to the independent state of Maine, connected to the outside world by railroads and telegraph lines.

Styles of gravestones were to change markedly between 1705, the date of the oldest stone, and the 1850s. The materials and even the technology of stone carving changed as well. The oldest stones in the burying yard were fashioned from slate. The carver was supplied with an array of tools, but no machinery. But by the early nineteenth century, new materials, particularly marble, and new technologies were introduced.

Surveyed at a distance the burying ground is revealed to us as dark stones, black or brown in color, interspersed with chalky white stones—this is the contrast of the older slates and the younger marble.

Gravestones differ from one another because of the quality of manufacture, the varied quality of the materials used, and finally, the wealth and social position of the deceased. Ordinarily, there were two stones set into the ground; the larger stone is the headstone engraved with the ornamental motifs or the epitaph. The smaller of the two stones, placed four or five feet behind the other, is the footstone, engraved most often with the name or the initials of the dead person and the year of his or her death.

As we approach the ground more closely we are able to perceive that the ornamental motifs changed over time. Perhaps the easiest way to distinguish the different motifs is to examine the gravestones of a single family line—the Moodys. In July of 1705, the Reverend Samuel Moody buried his infant daughter Lucy in the burying yard. Her gravestone bears a Death's-Head. There are also Death's-Heads engraved upon the stones of her grandmother, Hannah Toppan, who died in 1723, and of her mother, Hannah, who died in 1728.

When the Reverend Moody died in 1747, a stone bearing a Cherub was erected in his memory at the yard. Fifty years later, Samuel Moody, his grandson, was provided at his death with a stone which combined the style of the Cherub with the newer style, a Classical Urn. That same man's brother, Joseph Moody, and Joseph's son, Samuel Moody, who died in the nineteenth century, possess grave monuments fashioned from marble.

## Death in Joseph Moody's York—The 1720s

The Moody family and the Preble family were the first to bury their dead in the yard. Less than ten years after Lucy Moody had been buried, Captain Abraham Preble was interred. The two families had continued to maintain ties of friendship in spite of a tragedy enacted in the early 1700s:

> ...Mr. Moody's son of York, a lad of 8 years old, firing off a pistol childishly, shot Capt. Preble's son (a lad of 12 years) through the temples and killed him... (GD:566)

The minister's son was Joseph Moody, Captain Preble's boy was named Ebenezer. Young Moody entered Harvard College as a teen and returned to York as a school master and assistant minister. During the years 1720 to 1724, Moody kept a diary which serves as an invaluable source of information on the character of life and death at York.

The diary of Joseph Moody reveals the mind of a man who was periodically preoccupied with death and dying. "...I was oppressed by the fear that I might be overtaken by death." (MD:105) In July of 1722, in the midst of an outbreak of smallpox, the Reverend Moody privately confided his anxiety in the pages of his diary. Smallpox had spread northward to York from Boston where the disease had claimed almost 900 lives the previous year.

Subela Bragdon had succumbed to the disease and her corpse was buried in the burying yard. "They fear about Mrs. Bragdon" Moody recorded in his diary on May 31, 1722. She died on Sunday, June 2, 1722. Moody met with her grieving husband the next morning:

> At noon Bragdon made a widower yesterday, visited me....On the next Lord's day, if I am still in health, I must preach on the subject of death. But what do I believe about death? (MD:100)

"The point of death," "the edge of death," and finally, "taken by death;" those were the three phrases Joseph Moody usually employed to summarize the tragedy of death in his diary. In a town with a relatively small population, the significance of each death was amplified. The intimacy of close knit families, friendships of many years standing, and the short distances between neighbors broadened the impact. Few men within York could avoid the obligations upon an estate, or serving upon a jury of inquest.

It required much fortitude to face the deaths of close kindred. But, as might be expected, not everyone could display that kind of courage:

> ...I went to the burial of Tom Grover. The wife controlled herself well; the brothers contained themselves with great difficulty... (MD:77)

Moody tried to console one woman who was "grief stricken and sick because of the death of her oldest son..." (MD:136-137)

Infant life in early York was filled with many risks. In the first days, weeks, and months after birth, many of these newborns died. Joseph Moody recorded the baptism of Captain Abraham Preble's daughter Hepzibah, on October 30, 1720. Then, in the middle of November, he was to write:

> Hepzibah Preble was buried...14 days after she was born. (MD:43)

The deaths of very small children were recorded with the greatest frequency in the diary.

Children who were fortunate enough—or strong enough—to survive the early years, would confront a new set of perils in adolescence. There was a formidable grouping of childhood diseases which might range from whooping cough, diphtheria, or the measles to scarlet fever. Even if they were to survive those illnesses they were still vulnerable to accidents.

In adulthood there were the hazards associated with childbirth for women, soldiering and occupational activities for men. The phrase "dangerous labor" (MD:70) which Moody had used to describe birth in 1721, evokes a sense of potential difficulties. In 1736, Joseph Moody lost both his wife and newborn child. As a consequence, the burden of raising the four surviving children had to be assumed by him. It is probable that those deaths may have contributed to the eventual collapse he suffered around 1739. (MD:21)

In the frontier setting of early York weapons such as guns and swords always seemed close at hand and were common to all households. Domestic violence and personal feuds could be punctuated by vehement threats of death. Toward the end of 1721 a Kittery man, as witnessed by two York residents, threatened his foe that he "would shoot him through the heart with a brace of bullets." (MPCR 6:80-81)

As York was a coastal town, its maritime character further contributed to the list of hazards. Fishermen and sailors were lost at sea and drowned. Occasionally the anonymous corpses washed to shore. In marked contrast to the great sensitivity townspeople displayed at the funerals of their neighbors, the corpses of those who could not be identified were treated with minimal ceremony. For example, a matter-of-fact listing of expenses for disposing of the "body of a certain person who was found on the seashore...on the 23rd day of November 1723" included the costs of digging his grave, fetching the coroner, and a gallon of rum and some cider. (MPCR 6:126)

Eighteen "good and lawful men of York," among whom was Joseph Moody's uncle, Samuel Sewall, were assembled together as a jury of inquest on May 31, 1724 to view the corpse of another drowning victim. The men concluded that the deceased had been lost in the sinking of a vessel two weeks earlier. (MPCR 6:164)

## The Impact of Death

In the spring of 1724 the town of York conducted two very different burials. The first, for the aforementioned drowning victim, had only minimal expenses; the second, held for Captain Abraham Preble, had been very elaborate:

> ...Captain Preble was buried. The bearers were Col. Wheelright, Major Hammond, Justice Hill, and Captain Leighton... (MD:182)

Death was an extremely disruptive event for the community. Complicated relationships of property, inheritance, and family tradition which had taken shape over generations were put in disarray and might remain unsettled for many years afterwards.

The sudden death of Captain Preble at age fifty, in March 1724, is illustrative of this disruption. Preble was a York selectman and militia officer, a justice of the peace, and county treasurer. An Indian war was at its height when all of these offices had become vacant with his death.

Fifty pounds in money collected by the constables as a tax assessment could not be accounted for. A committee appointed to examine his accounts submitted their report:

> We met at the house of Abraham Preble Esq. late Treasurer of the county of York and proceeded to examine the accounts of the deceased relating to the Treasury...we cannot find by any of his books or papers where he has received the money or what constables hands it was in... (MPCR 6:159)

The captain was apparently not a very organized man. Joseph Moody acknowledged privately he was "glad rather than sorry that Preble's records and proceedings were badly confused." (MD:191)

The debts of the estate were so large that the widow was forced to sell portions of land and even a section of her house in July 1727. The deed in which she transferred sixty acres of land to Richard Milberry for one-hundred thirty-one pounds indicates that the money was

> ...to be applied for & towards the discharging of the just debts of the deceased. (YD 12:157-158)

Only a few feet away from Preble's grave in the York burying yard is the grave of Captain Lewis Bane. Over the course of a week in June 1721, Joseph Moody had assisted Bane in the drafting of his will. The captain was buried "with military honor" on June 26, 1721, "many people being present." (MD:64-65)

The will had included a carefully worked out scheme for apportioning the estate to his widow, his four sons—Jonathan, Lewis, John, and Ebenezer, and his three daughters—Mary, the wife of John Sayward, Elinor, and Mehitable. (MW:226) But the scheme did not remain intact very long; in March of 1723 Bane's widow died and was buried with her husband in the burying yard. (MD:134)

A succession of local land transactions conducted in 1722 and 1723 suggests that the debts of the estate may have interfered with the bequests. Still another complicating factor was the decision made not to divide the land because such a division would have "spoiled the whole." (YP Bk 3:95) The eldest son Lewis inherited the property. Shortly after his father's funeral, Jonathan Bane transferred to his brother John part of his inheritance, and John Bane transferred to brother Lewis four acres, that property having been:

> ...a part of ye homestead of Lewis Bane Esq. late of said York deceased... (YD 11 :f26)

In 1723 three of the brothers sold a sawmill located in the town of Wells for the sum of one-hundred thirty-five pounds. (YD ll:fll8) That sale reinforces the conjecture of estate indebtedness.

Whenever death removed a prominent and active York inhabitant from the scene it set into motion a chain of consequences that frequently upset the town socially and even politically—debt, property sale, conflict over estate division, vacancy of crucial offices, and political rivalry.

## The Costs of Death

It is probable that the funeral of the Reverend Samuel Moody in 1747 was among the most expensive funerals witnessed in early York. The town records tell the story:

> Voted, that the assessor's acct. of the charges already disbursed on acct. of the funeral of the Rev. Samuel Moody amounting to one hundred and five pounds [be accepted and allowed] and that there be forty pounds paid to the widow of the deceased to enable to put herself in mouming... (YCR:27)

Estate expenses quickly accumulated, and it is not unusual for the lists of those expenses to occupy one or two pages in the probate books. Virtually every detail of an estate

settlement, funeral, or burial, cost money. Sometimes the costs were only a few shillings, but sometimes it was several pounds. The men who took inventory were paid for their services; the food and drink which they consumed also had to be paid for. Horse riders who travelled between towns on errands for the estate were paid. The legalities of death and the accompanying paperwork cost money.

The administrators of the estate of Joseph Preble had prepared a list of expenses after his death which totaled nearly five-hundred pounds. At least fifty-eight pounds of that sum had been used for his funeral:

> ...clothing his family with mourning, digging the grave & coffin, grave stone and other necessarys. (YP Bk 5:62)

Another two-hundred ninety-eight pounds of the total was to be used toward the payment of bequests to his five children. Preble had planned to give two hundred pounds to each child, but Timothy and Joseph Preble later died. (MW:323-326) Their funerals had cost eleven pounds and sixteen pounds respectively. (YP Bk 5:129)

Examining these various costs enables us to visualize aspects of death in the Colonial era which could otherwise be lost. We know the names of the physicians who attended the dying man or woman, the carpenters who fashioned their coffins, and the men who actually dug the grave.

As we look upon the grave of Mrs. Hannah Moulton in the burying yard, we see that she was a forty-two year old woman who died in the first week of December 1757. The account book of her family physician, Doctor John Swett, lists several urgent visits to the Moulton home in late November and early December 1757:

> November 19, 1757 Visit to your wife. Called out of bed.
> Bleeding and...[sic]
> November 20, 1757, visit no. 2
> November 21, visit—
> November 22, 1757, visit no. 3, and medicines. (SAB)

Doctor Swett made eight separate visits to the Moulton house just before Hannah died. Within a week the New Hampshire Gazette published an obituary:

> York, December 6, 1757...Last Saturday died here the amiable and pious consort of Jeremiah Moulton Jr., Esq. sheriff...(she) was a person highly esteemed, greatly beloved, and universally lamented... (NHG)

## Death in Jonathan Sayward's York—The Revolutionary Era

"...Heard I was appointed judge of probates," Jonathan Sayward entered into his diary in March of 1772. (SD) Thus it had become his personal responsibility to supervise the numerous legal details, inventories, guardianships, inheritances, and property divisions relating to deceased York residents. Sayward was a local merchant and ship owner. He was also among those who supplied mourning items for funerals. The administrator of some local estates often "paid Jonathan Sayward for gloves" (YP Bk 11:227) that were distributed to the mourners.

Though death could impoverish some families with estate debts or diminished property, it could also contribute to another man's prosperity. Cotton Bradbury earned

much of his money by making coffins (BAB); Edward Emerson, the nephew of Joseph Moody, was a shopkeeper who regularly sold "necessarys for the funeral." (YP Bk 12:249)

Jonathan Sayward had prospered in a different way. If he perceived himself as one of the few landed gentry of his town, it was because he had achieved that status amassing the properties of the deceased or their indebted families. In February of 1764, he entered into his diary that he had sold a tract of town land to Johnson Moulton, land that he had earlier obtained from "John Bane the executor." Three years later in an enumeration of all the property he then owned, Sayward listed "the late estate of Ebenezer Young" and "the estate that was Abraham Stovers' at Cape Neck..." (SD) He seemed especially proud of a purchase in March of 1770:

> I bought all the rights in York commons which belonged to the late Deacon Jeremiah Bragdon of the widow of Samuel Bragdon for the consideration of seventeen pounds. (SD)

Sayward became a Loyalist in the decade preceding the Revolution. Deprived of his political offices and of his social position, he was to remain in York throughout the war, despite harassment by his townsmen. In the early autumn of 1775 with the British besieged in Boston by the American armies, his wife died. The diary provides a record of the agony she experienced in August and September:

> August 31, 1775, my wife hath been dangerously sick for 17 days past. It began with vomiting and afterwards wholly bloody purging without vomiting, and a severe fever attending...
>
> September 12, 1775, my dear wife died about twenty minutes after one o'clock after twenty-eight days of sickness, vomiting and purging. Was willing to die, and died repeating the words my land and my king... (SD)

For the next six years Sayward was to witness a succession of misfortunes as York's population was decimated by the war. Much of the death was caused by highly contagious diseases brought into the town by ailing soldiers. Brigadier General Jotham Moulton, his father, and two of his cousins, succumbed to illness during May 1777. Within months another epidemic struck:

> February 1778...Last week died and was buried James Hill's wife of this town of a contagious fever brought from the army by one of her sons—five have died of it, two are sick... (SD)

Stephen Crosby, an officer on the American privateer the Venus was buried in the burying yard in July 1780:

> Capt. Nathaniel Harmon arrived from the West Indies, and Master Stephen Crosby died on board and was brought in a corpse... (SD)

Jonathan Sayward lamented bitterly, "the unhappy war was the cause of death..." (SD)

## Epilogue: The World of the Death's-Head

The design of the Death's-Head carved into stone is a symbol of great force. As we reflect upon the world in which that symbol so long presided, its force only increases. It was a world rife with contagious diseases; it was a world without anesthesia or major surgical procedures; it was a world in which women of childbearing age and small babies were most vulnerable.

That world continued to exist for as long as the York burying yard was used. Very slowly that world began to change with improved medical knowledge and hygiene:

> A slight increase in general life expectancy at birth between 1790 and 1850...the figure for males rose from 34.5 years in 1790 to 38.3 in 1850; that for females from 36.5 to 40.5 during the same interval. Expectancy continued to increase in the same gradual manner during the rest of the century. (Shyrock 1975:166)

In 1824, after Maine had become a state, York's infants were still vulnerable:

> ...child born 7 o'clock. Died between 9 and 10. Mr. Samuel Webber buried it in the afternoon... (WD)

In 1824, one century after a smallpox outbreak had invaded York, the disease almost killed off an entire family within the space of only a few days:

> April 1824, Abraham Bowden a son to Mr. John Bowden departed this life...smallpox the doctors supposed to be yellow fever by which the infection spread...May 5, Eunice Bowden, mother of Abraham died, smallpox. Ann Bowden died May 6, smallpox. May 7, John Bowden departed this life-smallpox. May 9, James Bowden died... (JWD)

By the 1840s, the ancient burying yard was full and another begun behind the First Congregational Church. York had changed in numerous ways by the mid nineteenth century. Gravestones were now of marble, railroads and telegraph lines were reaching into Maine, and tuberculosis was the principle threat:

> May 5, 1845 Robert R. Moody died of consumption, aged 19 years.
>
> June 22, 1845, died of rapid consumption, Louisa, daughter of Capt. Samuel Preble, aged 17 years. (YVR: 466-467)

The accomplishments of modern medicine eventually diminished the menace of consumption, and extended life expectancy. Vaccines, antibiotics, anesthesia, and disinfectants hastened the passing of that world over which the Death's-Head had presided.

It is only when we walk among the sad weathered stones of an old buying ground that we are reminded of the terror of diseases that are only held in abeyance by modern medicine. When we start to look upon the Death's-Head with comfortable detachment, we may also begin to forget that we are not so distant from those times of suffering. It is because of our curiosity that we wonder about these stones. It should be because of our wisdom that we preserve them.

### Books and Articles

Noyes, Sybil with CTL and WGD. 1991. *Genealogical Dictionary of Maine and New Hampshire.* Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company. (GD)

Schryock, Richard H. 1975. *Medicine and Society in America: 1660–1860.* Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press

### Published Primary Sources

Allen, Neal W., Jr. 1975. *Province and Court Records of Maine,* Vol. 6. Portland, ME: Maine Historical Society. (MPCR)

Bragdon, Lester M., and Frost E. Frost, comp. 1992. *Vital Records of York, Maine.* Camden, ME: Picton Press. (YVR)

Sargent, William M., comp. 1887. *Maine Wills, 1640–1760.* Portland, ME (MW)

———. 1903. *York Deeds,* Book 12, Part 1. Bethel, ME: Maine Genealogical Society. (YD)

Woodwell, Philip McIntire. 1981. *Handkerchief Moody, the Diary and the Man.* Portland, ME: Colonial Offset Printing. (MD)

### Unpublished Primary Sources

Account Book of Cotton Bradbury, on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. (BAB)

Account Book of Dr. John Swett, on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. (SAB)

Diary of Jonathan Sayward, photostat copy on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. (SD)

Diary of Jeremiah Weare, 1788–1853. Transcribed copy on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. (JWD)

Diary of Joseph Weare, Jr., 1803–1856. Transcribed copy on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. (WD)

*New Hampshire Gazette,* Portsmouth Athenæum, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. (NHG)

York Church Records, photostat copy on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. (YCR)

York Probate, Books 1–12, Registry of Probate, Alfred, Maine. (YP)


### Abbreviations Used

| | |
|---|---|
| JWD | Diary of Jeremiah Weare, 1788–1853. Transcribed copy on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. |
| MD | Woodwell, Philip McIntire. 1981. *Handkerchief Moody, the Diary and the Man.* Portland, ME: Colonial Offset Printing. |
| MPA | Frost, John Eldridge, comp. 1991. *Maine Probate Abstracts, Vol 1, 1687–1775.* Camden, ME: Picton Press. |
| MPCR | Allen, Neal W., Jr. 1975. *Province and Court Records of Maine,* Vol. 6. Portland, ME: Maine Historical Society. |
| MW | Sargent, William M., comp. 1887. *Maine Wills, 1640–1760.* Portland, ME. |
| WD | Diary of Joseph Weare, Jr., 1803–1856. Transcribed copy on deposit at Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. |
| YD | *York Deeds,* Book 12, Part 1. Bethel, ME: Maine Genealogical Society. |
| YVR | Bragdon, Lester M., and Frost E. Frost, comp. 1992. *Vital Records of York, Maine.* Camden, ME: Picton Press. |
| Shryock | Shryock, Richard H. 1975. *Medicine and Society in America: 1660–1860.* Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press |