

Hannah Dustin: Hero? Heroine? A Case Study of Changed Values

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Abstract

Hannah Duston was honored and rewarded in the seventeenth century. One hundred fifty years later a statute was raised in remembrance—but-- at the same time, some people criticized, even condemned her. Another one hundred fifty years later, an honor to Dustin was revoked. Does our society define heroic women in the same way they define men? Why do judgments about a particular act sometimes change? And, importantly, how will future generations judge the choices *we* make of people to honor?

Introduction

Societies have erected statues for millennia. Their nature tells us something about a society's values. We Americans pay honor to symbolic figures like the Statue of Liberty and to figurative statues like those of George Washington. The goal here is, first, to try to understand why women are so rarely honored with a statue. Second, it is to reflect on why a society's view of what should be honored may change over time.

Statues educate as well as honor. Thus, a second goal is often to instruct, not just current, but also future generations. Again, a statue demonstrates what a society values, and, what it assumes will always be valued. That may be power, achievement, leadership, sacrifice, or a combination of some of the above.ⁱ

So whom has our society honored? Why? Does our statuary suggest that the values of yesterday are the same as the values of today? These questions will be explored through an examination of the statues erected in the late nineteenth century to Hannah Duston, also known as Dustin, (1657-1732) of Haverhill, Massachusetts. But first let us quickly review the state of our statuary.

The American Context

Washington D.C. has more statues than any other U.S. city so it is interesting to see who is honored there. A group called Kittytours compiled a list of 148 statues, monuments and memorials erected by the year 2002.ⁱⁱ The title of its listing is "Who is that man [sic] anyway?" suggesting that who or what was once important may no longer be important. Setting aside plaques and fountains and counting only full figure statues, Kittytours discovered images of 69 men including two of Abraham Lincoln and five of George Washington, six women, two dogs, and a river horse (hippopotamus). Eighteen are Americans who fought for the country (One fought on the Confederate side in the

Civil War.) and six honor foreign officers who assisted in the War for Independence. Some honor men who fought for their own country like the first president of Mexico, Benito Juarez, and Irish revolutionary Robert Emmet. The women honored are Mary McLeod Bethune, an African-American educator, Jane Delano who developed Red Cross nursing, Joan of Arc (a gift from French women to American women in 1922), Queen Isabella of Spain, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Olive Risley Seward, daughter of the Secretary of State who engineered the purchase of Alaska. Counting only Americans, women's statues are about the same in number as those of animals.

Note how many of the statutes involve the use of force, of legal violence. Women rarely employ legal or illegal violence. Could that be the reason we have so few statues of women? Hannah Duston, is a woman who *did* exercise force. She has been honored, but she has also been reviled for doing so. Are the rules for women and men different? Also, do the rules, values, change over time?

Hannah Duston: Time and Place

Nathaniel Philbrick's book Mayflower provides the background for the Duston story. The Mayflower's 102 voyagers landed at Plymouth in 1621. There they encountered the Wampanoags, a tribe led by Massasoit which had been decimated by disease brought to them by European fishermen. The two needy communities survived together for a decade, but then large numbers of Puritans began to arrive with plans to stay and to farm land used by the Indians. The first major confrontation between an Indian tribe and the new arrivals occurred in 1637 in what was called the Pequot War. In that conflict the English massacred not just Indian warriors, but women and children as well. In the war's aftermath, both the tribes and the English organized armed confederacies and relations between the two groups deteriorated.

Things came to a head in 1671 when colony authorities ordered Philip, Sachem of the Pokanokets and son of Massasoit, to give up his weapons and pay an annual tribute.

King Philip's War followed in 1675. It lasted only fourteen months but even "Praying Indians" (Christians) were considered suspect and interred on an island where hundreds died. Perhaps another thousand Indians were sold into West Indian slavery. The Narragansetts, who had tried to remain neutral, lost 350 to 600 men, women, and children in a single battle. (Philbrick, pp.267-280). Twenty percent of the English troops in that battle were killed or injured as well. Indeed, by the end of the war, one third of New England's towns had been burned and abandoned, and 5,000 of New England's 70,000 inhabitants had been killed. Three-fourths of that 5,000 were Indians whose ranks fell from 30 to 15 per cent of the total population (Philbrick xv and 345). King Philip was captured, drawn and quartered, and his head was publicly displayed for more than twenty years.

Conflict continued. Between 1689 and 1704 Benjamin Church led five more expeditions in a series of conflicts which were part of what are now called the French and Indian Wars. Importantly, the struggle was not just between the settlers and the Indians. England and France were warring in Europe and their struggle was echoed in the colonies where Indian tribes were enlisted and armed by both sides. Hannah Duston's story is part of the first war in that series, King William's War (1689-97).ⁱⁱⁱ

Hannah Duston's Story as First Told

Hannah's story has been told many times. Cotton Mather (1662-1728) alone told it three times. The version which was published in his "The Ecclesiastical History of New England" is summarized below.^{iv}

On March 15, 1697 savages attacked the outskirts of Haverhill burning half a dozen houses and murdering and capturing some thirty-nine people. Hannah Duston had given birth a week before and was being attended by a nurse, Mary Neff. Duston's husband was not at home, but on learning of the attack he hurried there and told his seven children (aged 2 to 17) to hurry to the garrison. The Indians reached the house just as he

did, and his first impulse was to ride away hoping to save at least one child. However, in his “parental agony” he found he could not choose among his children and resolved “to live and die with them all”. Thus, he guarded the rear on horseback exchanging fire with the Indians while the children “by the singular providence of God” were able to reach a safe place a mile or two from the house. Hannah, the baby, and Neff were left behind.

After the Indians rifled and fired the house, the nurse, the new mother, and her baby were led away by nineteen or twenty Indians along with another ten captives. Soon the crying baby’s brains were bashed out on a tree and several captives who tired were killed with hatchets and left for “the birds and beasts to feed upon”. Duston and the nurse kept up, walking a dozen miles the first day and a total of 150 miles in the next two weeks.

The troop divided into smaller groups and the two women found “unexpected favor” from the particular Indian in charge of them. This was because his family, which consisted of twelve persons, two men, three women and seven children, were Christian. Indeed, the family, following instruction given them by the French, prayed three times a day and the children said prayers before eating or sleeping. Mather described these Indian as “idolaters” “who would not let the women captives say their English prayers.”^v Nevertheless, when the women were daily sent out “upon business” they prayed. Noting this, their Indian master said “Why trouble yourself? If your God will have you delivered, you shall be so!” The Indian family was traveling with the two captured women and also a boy, Samuell Lemerson, captured a year and a half before. They were told they were going to a conclave where they would be “stript, and scourg’d” and run the gauntlet through the whole army of Indians.

On April 30, while they were still miles from the meeting place and while the family was “dead asleep”, Hannah resolved to imitate the action of Jael upon “Siberia” She roused Mary Neff and the boy to help. Using hatchets they struck the sleeping oppressors, “at the feet of these poor prisoners, they bow’d, they fell, they lay down”.

[This is a paraphrase from the account of Jael's slaying of Sisera in the Old Testament book, *Judges*.] One squaw escaped into the dark as did a boy they had planned to take as a prisoner. They collected the scalps of the ten dead "wretches" and later received fifty pounds from the General Assembly, many "presents of congratulation" from friends, and a "very generous token of his favour" from the Governor of Maryland.^{vi}

Later Duston Narratives

The first narrative, then, was seen through a Biblical lens. Mather honored Hannah for fulfilling God's purpose, and had little sympathy for Indians, even those who were Christian--after all, they were Catholic. But there were other narratives. In fact, one historian has uncovered twenty-nine, most of which appeared between 1829 and 1837.^{vii} An account by John Warner Barber was especially dramatic. He described the Indians as arrayed in savage war dress with their muskets charged, their tomahawks drawn, and their scalping knives unsheathed. According to Barber, Mr. Dustin rushed to and into the house, ordered the children to flee and went to assist his wife, but, when the enemy arrived, he flew from the house, mounted his horse and sped after the children. Again he is described as agonized at the prospect of choosing one child to save since all "stretched out their little arms toward him for protection", "all fondly loved him--they called him by the endearing title of father, and were flesh of his flesh". He resolved to try to save them all. The Indians did overtake the fleeing Dustins, but shot only at a distance "for they saw his determination, and feared the vengeance of a father".

Barber wrote that Hannah's child was killed almost at once and that she was routed from bed so quickly that she left with only one shoe, fleeing in piercing cold over earth that was covered alternatively with snow and deep mud. The two women captives survived in "comparative health" though they feared that those left behind had been "butchered"--and that they themselves would be. In Barber's account their Indian master had once lived at the home of an English minister, and while he found the English

prayers “good”, he found the French prayers “better”. The master also told the women they would have to run the gauntlet nude.

Hannah is described as the leader in a plan to escape. No guard had been set since the women were not thought audacious, and the boy, Samuell, was considered as one of the Indian’s own children. According to Barber, Hannah had the boy inquire about how to quickly kill and scalp someone. That information was given to him, he conveyed it to Hannah, and she promptly put it to use. After the sleeping Indians had been killed, Hannah, Mary and Samuell scuttled all the canoes save one for their own use. Barber says they began their journey without the scalps, but returned to collect them fearing their story would not be believed without “palpable witnesses of their heroic and unparalleled deed”. When the trio finally reached a settlement, its inhabitants were astonished. Those who had fled to safety had assumed Hannah and her companion had been killed. They, in turn, assumed those who fled on foot had been killed. All rejoiced, and the Dustons set out for Boston on April 21 to tell their story, and to be rewarded for their “heroism”. In short, in this account, nearly a century and a half later, the role of the father is magnified and the whole account dramatized.

John Greenleaf Whittier, a native of Haverhill, offered a very different account which described Hannah as a woman transformed by her experience into an unhinged maternal avenger. “There was a thought of death at her heart—an insatiate longing for blood. An instantaneous change had been wrought in her very nature; the angel had become a demon”. She had nothing in common, he wrote, with what he described as the day’s “domestic angels” who were of a “milder and purer character”.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s account was critical not only of Hannah but also of Cotton Mather, a “hard-hearted pedantic bigot”. He reduced Mary Neff to a servant girl who held the hatchets and did not mention Samuell at all. Hawthorne argued that Thomas Duston did not rescue Hannah because “he had such knowledge of the good lady’s character as afforded him a comfortable hope that she would hold her own, even in a contest with a

whole tribe of Indians”. Hawthorne also suggested that Hannah was not actually endangered because she represented an opportunity for ransom. Thus, for Hawthorne, Hannah is simply the murderess of a Christian family whose demise he describes in grisly detail. Her death would have pleased him: “Would that the bloody old hag had been drowned in crossing the Contocook River, or that she had sunk over head and ears in a swamp, and been there buried, till summoned forth to confront her victims at the Day of Judgment...” In contrast, Hawthorne described her husband, Thomas, as that “tenderhearted yet valiant man”.

The Duston/Dustin Family Association published its “The Story of Hannah Duston” as part of the Haverhill Tercentenary in June 1940. It provides more details, for instance, that Hannah had given birth to twelve children although only eight had survived, that Thomas was building a new home from bricks he was manufacturing himself, that he had served as town Constable, and that a small garrison with soldiers was only a mile away on Pecker’s Hill. The narrative states that the French had offered bounties both for English prisoners and scalps. It says Hannah herself urged Thomas to leave her in order to save the children, and that he did not actually fire his weapon because once fired it would have taken so long to reload that the Indians would have been upon them. The location of the massacre and escape was established as an island at the juncture of the Contocook and Merrimack Rivers near Penacook, New Hampshire. In their escape the three traveled down the Merrimack by night and hid during the day; they reached a settlement at Dunstable where a monument was erected in 1902. By the time of their return, the new Duston house had been completed and soon became an official garrison house. It is pictured below.



Photo: www.members.mva.net/galaca/p14hdgar.html

Hannah had a thirteenth child and late in life formally applied for Congregational church membership.

The Captivity Narrative and Commemorating Duston^{viii}

Duston's story falls into the genre known as a captivity narrative. It is a stretch, though, because the captive (almost always female or a child) does not usually contrive her own escape, and certainly does not do so by killing her captors. Further, many seventeenth century captivity narratives were given a theological interpretation. The captive was said to be redeemed by God's grace. Indeed, a set of captivity narratives were collected by Mather and titled "Humiliations Follow'd with Deliverances". The message, according to Mather, was that his fellow citizens had had to be redeemed from their "Delinquencies".

Later captivity narratives were quite different. Many were popular literature, thrillers, exotica, even erotica. Fictional accounts were especially favored by women readers whose mid-nineteenth century lives were relatively prescribed. The stories of physical hardship, of being witness to horrid events, of having to eat native food and wear native dress, and, perhaps, even having to submit to the desires of a male captor had a sensational quality. While some of the novels described the Indian captors, or perhaps particular individuals, as having human characteristics, more often Indian characters were described as vile and heathen.

By the mid nineteenth century, then, there were competing narratives about Duston. While writers like Hawthorne and Whittier were unwilling to see her as someone to be emulated, others celebrated her. Indeed, the first two statues of a woman erected in the United States were to Duston, one in Haverhill, her home, and one on an island in the Merrimac River in Boscawen/Boscawen, New Hampshire at the site of her escape. The latter is a tall monument with an imposing figure of Hannah carrying a hatchet and ten Indian scalps. The inscriptions on the four sides are as follows:

1) A list of twenty-three donors

2) Heroum Gesta
 Fides Justitia
 Hannah Duston
 Mary Neff
 Samuel Leonardson
 March 30, 1697
 Mid-night

3) March 15 1697
 The War Whoop Tomahawk
 Faggot & Infanticides
 Were at Haverhill
 The Ashes of
 Wigwam-Camp-Fires at Night
 & of Ten of the Tribe
 Are Here

4) Know ye that we with many plant it

In trust to the State we give & grant it
That the tide of time may never cart it
Nor mar nor ever
That pilgrims here may heed the mother
That truth & faith & all the others
With banner high in glorious colors
May stand forever



Photo:

www.hannahdustin.com/dustin.hannah50.jpg

The Haverhill monument is on the common facing the Haverhill Public Library. Erected in 1879, this Hannah carries a hatchet but no scalps. The plaques on the side of this monument show the capture by Indians, her husband's defense of the children, the killing of the Indians, and the escape by canoe.



Photo: www.members.mva.net/galaca.p16hdstat.html

And Today

Contemporaries esteemed Hannah. A century and a half later the heroism of her husband and her alleged madness became a part of the narrative. Nevertheless, two statues were raised in Dustin's honor. A second hundred and fifty years later, public discussion emphasized the Native Americans' deaths. Still, Dustin's statue in New Hampshire has been featured on the New Hampshire State Parks website, and a 1967 historical marker proclaimed "Hannah Dustin, Famous symbol of frontier heroism". Her memory was also kept alive in Haverhill, a "resurgent" town 30 miles north of Boston with a population of 60,000. There her name was given to a school, a street, and a nursing home. The town library contains a special collection of *Dustonalia*, and at one point it was possible to buy a *Duston* T shirt.

But uneasiness developed about the local luminary. In 1997 a debate which reached the *New York Times* (11-30-97) ensued over naming a new school after her. A

school which had borne her name had recently been torn down. The question was whether or not the new school should also bear her name. The decision was “no”. In 2002 when the New Hampshire marker was to be refurbished, historians in the Division of Historical Resources argued that the marker should reflect the perspective of Native Americans as well. A debate about political and historical correctness then followed. In the fall of 2006 Hannah, ostensibly playing a guitar, was used as the image for Haverhill’s Fall Rock Festival. This too provoked debate far beyond the town’s borders.

The *Boston Globe* (9-3-06) questioned the use of an “ax wielding heroine” to promote what was once a “blueblood” and is now a “blue collar” town. Paul Poullot, a descendant of the tribe whose members Duston killed, argued “She committed a terrible act of violence...” He also cast doubt on the story arguing “These were battle-hardened Indians used to hand-to-hand combat”. He concluded that somehow she must have gotten them drunk in order to kill them. The *Eagle Tribune* (August 2006) explored the question of whether she was “heroine or villainess” by collecting a variety of views relating to the festival poster: “Lizzie Borden?” “A vigilante murderess”? An “icon of vengeance”? The *Globe* and Eastman’s Online Genealogy Newsletter invited comments on a web site. These were diverse and passionate. Some argued that the town’s desire to attract attention by evoking its history could have been better served by looking to poet John Greenleaf Whittier, to Rowland Hussey Macy of department store fame, or even Bob Montana creator of the “Archie” comic strip.

What are we to think? Should Duston’s memory be erased, the street renamed, the statue removed? Or should she continue to be honored as a hero, noting only that times have changed, and that the relationship between Native Americans and the culture and the government itself continues to be fraught even if it no longer involves violent struggle.

Hero?

Common parlance today suggests that a hero is a courageous individual who risks or sacrifices life for a noble purpose. A second usage describes a “hero” as a person of exceptional achievement, for instance, in the field of medicine, while a third refers to the central character in a piece of fiction. In each instance sex is not specified, but male is usually assumed. A heroine, though, is by definition a woman. She, too, can be noted for daring and courage, for special achievement, or as a fictional character. More often, though, heroines are people who are rescued by heroes.

The question is “Does Duston meet the male standard for heroism?” Probably not. While she was certainly courageous, her purpose was merely survival which is not usually thought of as “noble”. If a man had done exactly as Duston did, one doubts that he would have enjoyed renown. Thus, she was probably seen by contemporaries as remarkable, not by an absolute standard, but “for a woman”.

A hundred and fifty years later, in a more peaceful era, she was criticized by eminent writers. But would a man have been criticized? Probably not. In her day the killing of Native Americans was ordinary and even rewarded. Thus, the criticism, like the emulation, probably also attached to her sex. A woman who had given birth a dozen times ought not to have killed another woman and her children.

Let us again consider the statues of Washington D.C. It is evident that the male statues, (especially those on horseback) were not about self-sacrifice. They were raised to men who may have risked their lives, but they also directed the killing of others. Thus, while risking death is, indeed, important, being willing to kill has also long been associated with the heroic. After all, most of us would rather not kill. Indeed, military training works hard to instill the discipline which overcomes such reluctance. When we think of heroes, then, risk and sacrifice, are involved, but so, too, is killing.

In most societies killing is a function officially reserved to men even though, when needed, women do participate in killing. For a woman, Dustan *was* remarkable in

her willingness to kill. Other statues to frontier women celebrate quite different acts. These include Sacagawea who guided Lewis and Clark across the northwest. Indeed, there are probably more U.S. statues to her than to any other woman. There are also figures of the women who walked to what is now Salt Lake City pushing a cart with their belongings, and of Pocahontas who allegedly offered her life for that of John Smith.

Should Duston be honored today? Have our values changed? And, which women of today should we be honoring? Most importantly, what will future generations think of the choices *we* make?

Historical thinking forward is as important as a review of the past.

ENDNOTES

ⁱWhen a society changes radically and quickly, statues may be destroyed. Thus, Lenin disappeared from many Soviet cities and towns in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When the rest of the massive statue of the Shah of Iran was destroyed during Iran's 1979 revolution, the statue's boots were left in front of his grand palace reinforcing the message of his downfall.

ⁱⁱwww.kittytours.org/thatman2/index.html retrieved January, 11,2007.

ⁱⁱⁱKing William's War was followed by Queen Anne's War (1702-1713) and King George's War (1744-1748). Fighting continued intermittently until 1763 when the Treaty of Paris was signed and France was finally expelled from Canada.

^{iv} Four hundred copies of "Captivity Narrative of Hannah Duston" published by Arion Press in San Francisco in 1987 contains four accounts, that of Cotton Mather (published in 1702), John Greenleaf Whittier (1831), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1836), and Henry David Thoreau (1849). The other accounts are

summarized later in the text.

^vRemember that the Pilgrims and the Puritans who followed them were staunch Protestants, that the English Civil War of 1640 to 1660 had a religious base, and that Protestantism had just, finally, triumphed in England in 1689 when William took the throne.

^{vi}A law offering a bounty for Indian scalps had recently expired, but on June 5, 1697 Thomas Dunston petitioned the Governor and General Assembly saying that his wife “disposed and assisted by heaven to do an extraordinary action in the just slaughter of many Barbarians” and that her action still had merit as demonstrated by the fact that it was the “Universal Desire through this Whole Province that it should not pass unrecompensed”. It wasn’t. Dunston received 25 pounds, and Mary Neff and Samuell Lemerson, 12 pounds 10 shillings each.

^{vii}Ann-Marie Weis “The Murderous Mother and the Solicitous Father: Violence, Jacksonian Family Values, and Hannah Duston’s Captivity.” *American Studies International*, v.n36.1, 1998, pp. 46-65. See also “Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, Etc., Relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts, with Geographical Descriptions”. <http://www.rienzihills.com/Hannah/hsstory.htm>. Retrieved 6/22/06.

^{viii} More than a 1.000 individuals were captured in the colonial period. A number of them were ransomed to the French to work as slaves.

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