



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter May 2021

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The next Board Meeting will be conducted by email on Tuesday, May 11th

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

A MATTER OF STRIFE AND DEATH

How Catherine “Kate” Homer, born and raised on the Old Kings Highway in East Dennis, unwittingly became part of a major medical controversy in Boston



We know precious little about how Kate Homer lived... but quite a lot, as it were, about how she died.

We know that Catherine “Kate” Homer was born in 1835 as the fourth of what would be ten children into the prominent East Dennis family of Stephen Homer Jr. and Mary Bassett Chapman, who lived in the house still found where Sears Road meets Route 6A near the Brewster line. The home was built on ten acres in 1798 by Kate’s grandfather Stephen, a Revolutionary War veteran, successful sea captain, and longstanding Justice of the Peace; and her grandmother Thankful Chapman, descended from the Isaac Chapman who had purchased 200 acres of woods and farmland from Peter Worden’s descendants in 1697. Kate’s father Stephen Jr. in the early 1830s purchased half the house he grew up in from his namesake father and raised his family there while also becoming a master mariner, a Justice of the Peace, and a leading Cape producer of salt in the 1840s. He later became a member of the Dennis School Committee, and Kate in adulthood first worked as a grammar school teacher in East Dennis and then as the administrator in charge of elementary education town-wide.

We also know that Kate was 30 or so years old and still single when she met Darwin Barnard of Boston, also born in 1835, and an executive at a successful insurance company. They fell in love and married in 1867, after which Kate moved to Boston. At that time, Kate was painted by the noted New England artist Edwin Tryon Billings, whose other commissions included portraits of Senator Daniel Webster, abolitionist and editor William Lloyd Garrison, and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes.

And we know that between Thanksgiving and Christmas of 1868, Kate became pregnant with the couple’s first child, due in early September of the following year. As the time for birth came near, Charles Edward Buckingham, Professor of Midwifery and Medical Jurisprudence at Harvard University, was brought in to oversee the delivery.

Within an hour of the birth of their son Frank on September 6, 1869, Kate Homer was dead after hemorrhaging and bleeding out, and her newborn son tragically died the following day.

What ensued was Darwin Barnard’s quest to understand his wife’s untimely passing.... and Dr. Charles Buckingham’s desire to defend his reputation. This played out in debates in Boston medical circles and was later summarized in Dr. Buckingham’s publication in 1870 of letters written in the months after Kate’s death (to and from Dr. Buckingham and Barnard) and affidavits (from witnesses in the room that fateful September day, including Thankful Homer Sears, Kate’s older sister and the widow of Seth Sears of East Dennis) about the events called *A Correspondence Concerning a Fatal Case of Placenta Provia*.

Did Dr. Buckingham fulfill his Hippocratic duty “to do no harm” in the case of Kate Barnard? Absolutely, according to Dr. Buckingham. And did Darwin Barnard come to believe that his wife should still be alive? Unquestionably—and that becomes more and more apparent as the letters and testimony continue, much of the content focused on the fact that Dr. Buckingham did not use ice as a common treatment for hemorrhaging post partum and only sporadically used compression of the uterus to stop blood flow. In the preface to *Correspondence*, Dr. Buckingham writes “From the beginning of the attendance, however, until the death took place, at least two physicians were in the room; and there was no time when one or the other was not compressing the uterus.... whereas no one, except myself and the medical gentlemen who were with me, knows what the treatment was, further than *no ice* was used; of course, no one except ourselves can tell whether the treatment was correct or not.”

Barnard on October 25, 1869 in a letter posing ten questions to Dr. Buckingham, based on Barnard’s considerable consulting with other medical men who were experts on mid-19th century child birthing best practices: “Ever since that dreadful day, I have borne an anguish which is beyond all power of language to express... What was there in the case of Mrs. Barnard to contra-indicate the use of ice, which is commonly resorted to in such cases? ... After you returned to her side, you removed a large basin full of clotted blood. If your hand had remained in the uterus, would it not have been a stimulus to contraction and preventative of hemorrhage?”

Dr. Buckingham on October 26: “I believe my position in the profession is sufficient, of itself, to allow me to judge what is to be the proper treatment of a patient in labor, under any circumstances, and with any complication.... I am perfectly willing to answer any questions ...being with you [in person] at that time, so that any misunderstanding of question or answer may be corrected on the spot.”

Dr. Buckingham on October 29: “I am not only confident that [my attending acumen] was correct, but that it would be so judged by all competent and fair-minded physicians.... On the night of the 27th, you called upon me.... In the course of that conversation, you charged me with being the cause of Mrs. Barnard’s death, either by neglect or malpractice, and you further uttered vague threats of ill consequences to me.”

Barnard, in despair on November 3: “For a man to bury one, bound to him by the ties the strongest and tenderest in life, is a task sad enough for any soul; but the feeling that the grave, which received these remains needed not to have been opened at all—that this wound to the bosom of our common mother should not have been made—could not fail to bring misery unutterable... You said to me [just after the birth] ‘Your wife is as safe as any woman’.... Then your patient complained of cold—then the pain in the back, shortly afterwards, ‘Doctor, I am flowing,’ were her words. The mention of blood brought terror to me—you were sitting in the corner of the room, writing. You did not go to her.... Soon afterwards, the words, ‘I am flowing dreadfully’ arrested your attention, and brought you to the patient.... A potion was placed to her lips, but not swallowed. You said: ‘It is too late.’ Then my wife was a corpse.... [Afterwards] arose the awful question... has she most dear to me suffered this dreadful death from negligence or want of professional knowledge.... I [later] got the opinion of many physicians; but they only augmented my torture—because *all* expressed surprise that nothing more had been done for the salvation of the life which was of consequence to me; and informed me of what they should have done in a similar case.... I may add that I can show you the written opinion of one who holds a place in a Medical School of New York City, equal in honor to any held by a Harvard Professor [Buckingham] —that the Physician, who should leave the bedside of any woman so soon as you did my wife, when so circumstanced, should justly be held responsible for her life.”

In the appendix to *Correspondence*, Barnard recounts the events of September 5, 1869: “Shortly after his arrival, [Dr. Buckingham] used the words, ‘she has a good pulse, and as far as I can judge, everything seems to be in her favor.’ The child, which was forcibly delivered, was born at fifteen minutes before three o’clock in the afternoon. Dr. Buckingham left the bed-side of the patient, without putting on swathe or compresses, and went to the further end of the room, which is a very long parlor, at twenty minutes past three o’clock, and sat by the window writing, which he afterwards told me were the notes of the case. He remained in that position by the window for at least half an hour.... [Finally, after my wife said] ‘O! I am flowing dreadfully...,’ Dr. Buckingham moderately put up his writing, came to the bedside and called for a basin. A common wash bowl was brought and filled twice with clotted blood, and the hemorrhage was not checked, but continued until she died.... No *cold* applications were applied. Ice was not called for, though there was an abundance of it in the house. I did not see him introduce his arm into the uterus or know of his doing so, although I was present and near him all the time. I did not see him compress the uterus even after his return to the bedside. He did not at any time express or indicate any alarm or anxiety to me, and after my wife had breathed her last, left the house without speaking to me.”

Betsey Prescott, witness in the room, in an affidavit April 18, 1870: “I have read the pamphlet published by Dr. Buckingham, and also Mr. Barnard’s appendix, and believe Mr. Barnard’s account of the case to be *strictly true*.”

Dr. Buckingham's statement in the Prefatory to the published correspondence, that 'there was no time when one or the other [of the physicians] was not compressing the uterus,' I *know* to be positively false."

Sophronia Perkins, witness in the room, in an affidavit April 18, 1870: "I have read the correspondence which has been published by Dr. Buckingham, and the appendix by Mr. Barnard, and believe Mr. Barnard's account of the case to be *true in every particular*. I have read with surprise and amazement Dr. Buckingham's statement in regard to the constant attendance upon Mrs. Barnard. His declaration in the Preface to his pamphlet that 'there was no time when one or the other (of the physicians present) was not compressing the uterus'... is wholly and absolutely untrue."

Thankful Homer Sears of East Dennis in an affidavit April 11, 1870: "The statement that 'there was no time when one or the other was not compressing the uterus' I solemnly state to be untrue. I *know* it is false, for I *saw* my sister, lying *alone* on the bed, *unattended* by anyone, for many minutes, after Dr. Buckingham left her, subsequent to the birth of her child."



Headstone of Kate Homer & her infant son Frank



*Mother and Son Footstone
Kate Homer Barnard
&
Frank Darwin Barnard*



Headstone of Darwin Barnard

Kate and her son Frank were buried side by side in the southeast corner of Worden Cemetery, diagonally behind present-day Worden Hall, in September 1869. Darwin Barnard remained living in and around Boston but never remarried, and when he died in 1914—so nearly 45 years later—he was laid to rest next to the love of his life, Kate Homer Barnard, and his only child Frank. Kate's sister Thankful Homer Sears lived the remainder of her years in East Dennis, died in 1905, and is buried with her husband Seth in Quivet Neck Cemetery.

Despite the controversy, Dr. Buckingham continued to work at Harvard Medical School until his death in 1877. He is buried in Boston.



Kevin Keegan, Director of Publicity for the DHS, lives with his wife Linda in the 1798 Stephen and Thankful Homer House in East Dennis. All the images in this article were taken by Kevin.



A huge thank you to Kevin for providing us with this fascinating piece of local and medical history!

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Coming in June!

Under the heading *Location Unknown*, the March Newsletter included an image sent in by James Bryant of Newton, MA. All that was known about the photograph were the names *Constant Sears & Isaiah Sears House* written on the back. I think you will all be amazed at what has been learned!



This note from Roland W. Kelley was attached to his 2021-2022 Membership Renewal –

“That 1934 Whooping Cough Epidemic when Phyllis Horton caught it must have been the time I got it while living in Dennis with my grandparents, Mr. & Mrs. W.R. Kelley, after my mother died in 1933.

PS- If you see Phyllis, please pass this on.”

Thank you Roland!