

## **HIST 5453 – New American Republic**

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### *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*

#### Response Paper

Faith is a theme that can be taken into account in multiple ways. This theme runs the length of the book through different lenses. Martha Ballard has faith in her work. She is knowledgeable either through formal training or self-taught. She does not discuss this in her diary. Ballard shows faith in her community through the relationships she has mentioned. Through her midwifery and other interactions, Ballard created a network of customers who called on her in their time of need. Not only for child birthing but as a confidant and witness in important events. One major event is discussed throughout chapter three. Ballard gained the trust of the women in the community, allowing them to discuss difficult topics. Chapter three discusses an encounter between Ballard and a woman in her community, Rebecca Foster. Foster opened up to Ballard about a rape that she endured when her husband was gone, resulting in a pregnancy. Ballard then was called as a witness to the trial of the accused rapist, a judge in the community. This shows that faith within the local community goes both ways. The community had faith in Ballard and Ballard had faith in the community.

A second theme in the book is that Ballard is set in her ways. This theme coincides and goes hand in hand with the faith theme that is evident in the book. Ballard is aware of what treatments are successful for her patients. She sticks to what she knows—Ballard witnesses what works and what does not work on illnesses and injuries. On page 58, the author, Ulrich, discusses

the diary entry regarding Ballard's thoughts on the new doctor in town. She was skeptical of the new doctor because, in her mind, he practiced radical medicine. Her reaction to the doctor shows her resistance to change. She stepped back and allowed the doctor to attempt his new techniques. It turns out that Martha ended up delivering the baby. The mother summoned Ballard again to deliver another child. This not only confirms the theme of faith that is mentioned earlier but also demonstrates as an example that her trusted techniques are what the community desires. In the broader scheme of social life in early America, this tells of the nervousness of people and communities when new ideas are being discovered and tested.

Between Ulrich's description and the primary writing of Ballard, it was surprising how Ballard came across as someone who wore multiple hats more than I had anticipated. In parts of the book, it seems like Ballard runs the household. Not only was she a midwife, she sometimes carried out duties that, in modern terms, would describe a physician (pg 58). She also was the family breadwinner in a way. Her work as a healer seemed to have a steadier income than her husband's. She ran the household, raised her children, ensured food was on the table, and all the duties at home were fulfilled. Ephraim, her husband, was gone quite often with jobs and other commitments, causing her to satisfy the head of the household role. Ballard was a record keeper, a gardener, and someone who cared for the community. With the lack of details or description in the diary, it is hard to assess if this arrangement became natural due to personality or a necessity because of circumstances. She continued her duties in multiple forms until the end of her diary. Whatever it may have been, Martha Ballard did what she could to survive.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's approach to Martha Ballard's diary is new to me. I think this book was the one I looked forward to the most when I saw the book list for this class. This book was stimulating for someone like me who is interested in everyday life, especially medicine, as

these topics are not usually assigned. I have not read a book where snippets of a dairy were the main subject, with the author creating a narrative for the reader's understanding. This book is my first experience of everyday life through the eyes of a primary source. I find Ulrich's approach to be innovative and refreshing. She breathed life into a document that was essentially someone's personal record keeping. However, I found the book title to be a little misleading. Because of the title, I expected a more detailed medical book like a dictionary. Instead, this book is a daily account of a woman's life. This was still an engaging read. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's book, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, could be utilized in multiple academic venues. Not only does this book qualify to be in an early American history class, but I can also see this in a historiography class, anthropology or sociology courses, and possibly a law history, writing, or research class.