

Sarah (Smith) Needham: How a Plucky Girl Overcame Frequent Hardships

Compiled by Robert Tucker Gregg, her fifth cousin four times removed,
from the Smith Genealogy in his possession

Sarah Smith was born the 27th of March 1820 in Medfield, the 3rd child to Samuel and Waitstill (Richards) Smith. At the time that her 36-year old father died at sea, Sarah was seven years of age and her mother was 33.

During the first few years of her life, she was of feeble frame and considered by her mother's friends to be not worth raising.

When eight years of age, being a great lover of books and reading, Sarah resolved to become a school teacher, and began to use every effort to get an education. At this time, her mother, being nearly destitute, broke up house-keeping, and Sarah lived with her relatives, first at one place then at another, working most of the time.

At the age of ten she sent to live with her aunt Chloe Balch at Grafton and four months after returned home. During the winter of 1830-31 she attended schools and, on the approach of warm weather, went to live with her grandmother Smith - her mother having moved at this time to Walpole to nurse some sick people. She went to school during part of the following summer and paid for her clothes by braiding straw in school hours and at other moments.

Untimely Accidents

In August she went to Walpole, Mass. to live with her father's aunt Lois Smith who kept a boarding house for factory girls. She injured her finger while working in the mill and it became so inflamed that she went back to Medfield; her mother came there also and acted as housekeeper for a family. Sarah stayed in a neighboring house and went to school during the winter.

In March 1832 she went to Walpole to work in another factory where all her associates were strangers. But misfortune again attended her. A few months after, the fingers of her right hand were caught in a cotton carding machine, and rasped clear to the bone.

In October when her hand was healed, she went, by direction of her mother, to Dedham to live with Mrs. Talbott who wanted someone to assist in the care of her young child. Life in Dedham was more pleasant because her brother George and sister Hattie were there. She went to school to Mr. Aldrich during the summer term and improved her opportunities to the utmost, gaining a prize in geography.

In March 1834 she visited a few weeks in Medfield and then returned to Dedham to live with her granduncle Jacob Clark. She continued to go to school to Mr. Aldrich for two years.

Ups and Downs in Bonnet Making



In the spring of 1836 at age 16, she was invited to stay with her second cousin William Clark in Newton, Mass. as a companion to his wife. This invitation was accepted and after a stay of two months she returned to Medfield. The bonnet business had become established there and girls of sixteen could make good wages. She therefore began to sew straw, living at home with her mother and sisters.

Waitstill (Richards) Smith, Sarah's mother

The financial troubles of 1837 caused all work to stop, and she thereupon resolved to spend her time in school. Her savings were sufficient to pay expenses for one quarter at Norton, Mass. At first, after her return, there was much difficulty in making a living, but business soon revived and she resumed bonnet making.

On the first of June 1838 she began teaching in the public school in Foxborough, having 25 pupils. After the public money was exhausted she opened a private school and continued until October. She then returned home and worked on straw until the next June - it being the custom then for men to teach in winter.

The summer of 1839 was spent in Foxborough like the previous one.

Her Teaching Career Begins

In June 1840 she took a school of sixty pupils in West Medway, Mass but in the fall transferred her field of operations to a private school in Medfield. This was continued until the approach of cold weather, whereupon she began to make bonnets again.

In the summer of 1841 her cousin Sally Mason from Louisville, made a visit to Medfield and among other things described the schools as they existed in Kentucky.

She did not begin teaching again until the fall of 1842 when the public school was closed. In the meantime she had staid at home, making bonnets.

Sept 1843 she went West with her uncle Johnson and cousin Louis Mason. On the way she sprained her ankle and thus had a very unpleasant journey over the mountains. The route was via New York, Baltimore, Wheeling and Cincinnati.

They arrived in Louisville at midnight and in a heavy rain. Not finding any hack, Mr. Mason hired a dray, and placed his protégés thereon with trunks for seats. They rode home to a house near the corner of Jefferson and Preston streets. The family was expecting them and gave a very cordial welcome. After deducting the cost of the journey - 31 dollars - from her savings, she had about two dollars left. At first she was troubled a little with homesickness but as acquaintances were made, these feelings passed off.

In January 1844 she began to teach school as an assistant to Miss Martha W. Bliss in a house behind the Second Presbyterian Church on Third St. She was accustomed to spend Saturday and Sunday with the family of her uncle, and occasionally while there, through the kindness of Mr. E.W. Gunter she took a music lesson on the piano. She and her cousins Louisa and Abba Mason were members of the choir in the Second Presbyterian Church and Mr. Gunter was leader.

On the Road Again

She continued with Miss Bliss during the remainder of the scholastic year, and made another engagement to stay until the next September. But the serious sickness of her sister at Medfield called her home. Rev. James Bliss who was on his way to Portland, Maine accompanied her. They had a very slow and difficult journey and when she arrived in Boston, she found that her sister had been buried two weeks. Fanny had died in September 1844. She remained in Medfield until the first of November and then after considerable consultation, resolved to return to Louisville. The death of her sister changed some of her plans for the future; she gave up the idea of going to school any more and was only ambitious to add to the comfort and pleasure of her mother. Sarah was 24 years old at this time.

The money for her trip to the West - 40 dollars - was borrowed from her grandmother Smith. She started from Boston with Mr. Samuel Spear and on the way stopped in Newark N.J. to visit her uncle Leonard Richards. Mr. Spear had business in Philadelphia to detain him a few days, and agreed to meet her when she should arrive from Newark, and then proceed in together again. When she arrived in Philadelphia an immense crowd was at the wharf to learn the result of the Presidential election won by James Polk, and in the confusion of the landing, Mr. Spear failed to find his companion.

Another Setback

She however started alone for Baltimore the next morning. The exposure while waiting for Mr. Spear resulted in a heavy cold which continued to grow worse and when she came to Cumberland, the terminus of the railroad, she could go no farther. She was placed in a good hotel by the conductor, and a physician called in who pronounced her disease inflammation of the lungs. She remained there for two weeks and then in a weak condition started over the mountains for Wheeling. Fortunately she reached Louisville without any delay but soon after she was taken sick again, and for a month did not go out of the house. The death of her sister and also of her brother's wife just at this time, family troubles in general, and the debt incurred by her sickness preyed upon her mind and made her illness of longer duration.

However in January 1845 she was able to accept the invitation of Mrs. Martha W. Ewbank to teach for a few hours each day in a school opposite to her uncle's house. She gradually grew better and continued to teach until the vacation. The next September she and Mrs. Ewbank hired a cottage and opened a flourishing school. No interruption occurred until March when she went to Dayton in company of her aunt Mrs. Mason to pay a visit to her cousin William Clark, being absent about a week. At the close of the term, June 1846, she went back to Dayton, intending to spend only the vacation. But kind friends assisted in establishing a good school and she remained until the following April.

She then returned to Louisville and in May started for Massachusetts, remaining among her relatives about three months. The journey back to Kentucky, though uneventful on itself, was, by comparison with the last she had taken in the same direction, a very pleasant one.



Edgar Alford Needham

She married August 24 1847 Edgar Needham of Louisville. The ceremony was performed by Rev. E.P. Humphrey at the residence of her uncle Johnson Mason.

Immediately after, she went to her husband's house on Portland Avenue and took possession as mistress with very little ceremony.

Great Changes Begin

From this time great changes in her life began. She was no longer a school teacher with a permanent abode; her husband owned the residence and had a reasonable chance of providing a comfortable living. Besides the responsibility of house-keeping, she had to assume the duties of a mother at once, for her husband was a widower with two boys, eight and four years of age, and she endeavored conscientiously to do her part in their training. When, in the course of time, her own children made their appearance, many new and perplexing questions came up for which she asked advice, principally from her aunt, Mrs. Mason (formerly Sallie Smith) who on many occasions acted like a mother.

Previous to the outbreak of the civil war, and at intervals between 1850 and 1860, Sarah and her husband Edgar considered the advisability of leaving Louisville and of raising their family in a free state. And, when the war actually came they feared that Kentucky would become a battle ground. This reason, ~~with others not necessary to set forth~~, caused the wife and children to move to Massachusetts for a few months and afterwards to make Madison, Indiana, their residence. As the war progressed, however, and there was no fear of Louisville falling into the power of the Confederacy, the family took up their residence again in Louisville in the latter part of 1863.

All of her 7 children were now beyond the stage of infancy, and her greatest care was devoted to their moral and intellectual training. In proportion also as she had time and opportunity, she engaged in words of benevolence among the poor and friendless; of her church she had ever been an exemplary member. Her life seemed to be opening upon a period of comparative tranquility, but about 1870 her health became impaired, and, worse than all, in March 1873 her husband died after a short illness of pneumonia. She became executrix under her husband's will, and found a multitude of diverse and perplexing questions thrust upon her for decision. She had no fear of poverty, but the great financial panic which burst upon the country in September 1873 caused many unexpected complications, and prevented the liquidation of a number of investments made by her husband.

End of Life Issues

In the autumn of 1874 she broke up house-keeping in Louisville, and removed with her youngest children to Cambridgeport, Mass., where she made herself as



**Mary (Needham) Gregg,
Sarah's daughter**

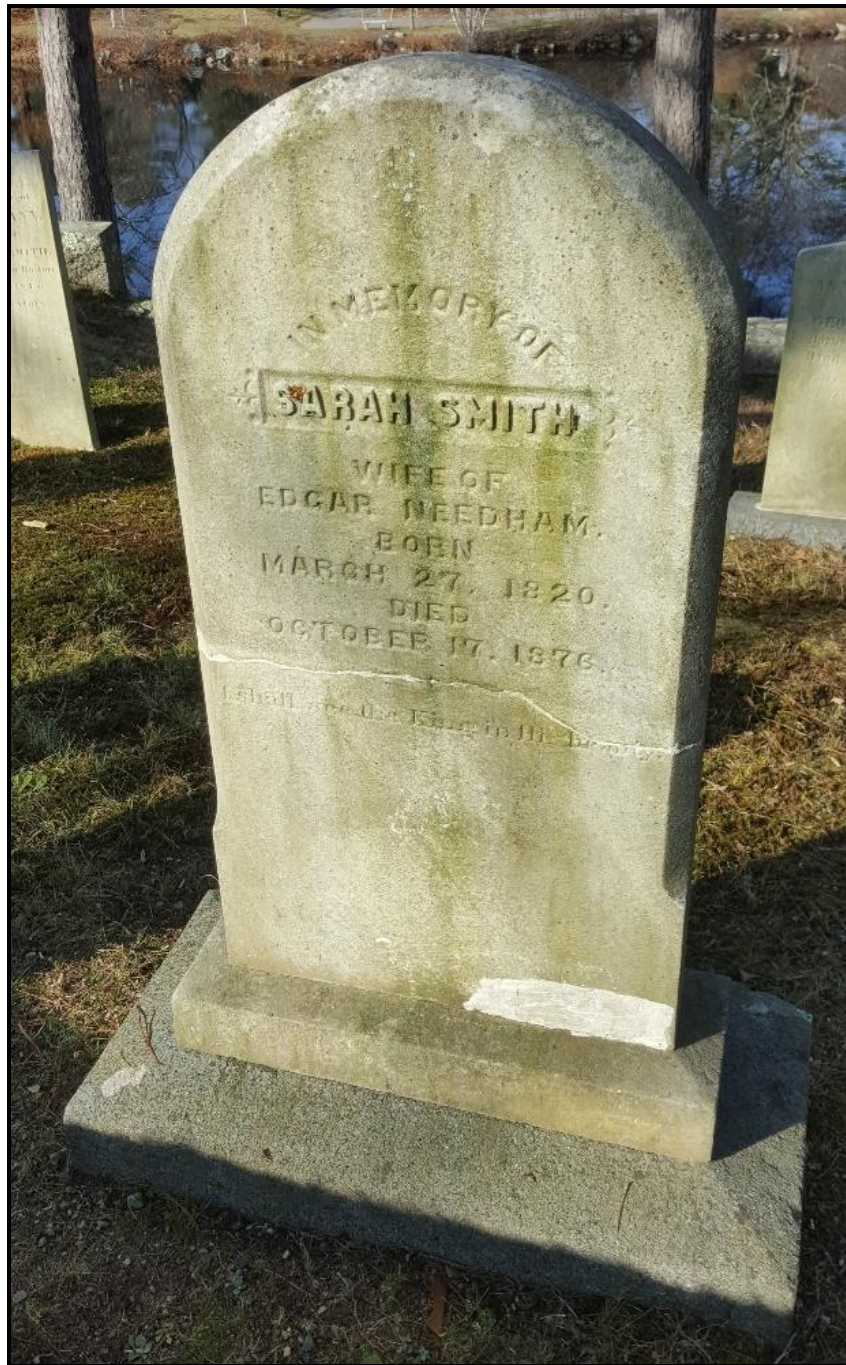
and buried near her mother.

comfortable as possible in a boarding house. She returned to Kentucky the following year to make a final settlement in the division of her husband's estate; this was her last journey to the Ohio valley. Failing health and bodily weakness demanded better care than she could obtain in a boarding house, and she therefore, soon after her return to New England, went to Hartford, Conn., where her eldest daughter, Mary, was living. Her disease was incurable and all that could relieve her sufferings and brighten her existence was done; but the end finally came on the 17th of October, 1876. After the funeral in Hartford, her body was taken to Medfield

Many pleasant and joyful events were scattered through her life to vary the serious and sorrowful ones which have been there principally noted. She preserved the cheerful disposition which was nature's gift, and met the hardships of life with all the force that was at her command. She conscientiously discharged every duty, and endeavored to make her daily conduct conform to the teachings of the Bible. At her death she looked with confidence to a home of permanence and purity, reserved for those who have been faithful, and for whom there is no reward provided on earth. The inscription on her gravestone reads "I shall see the King in his beauty."



Sarah (Smith) Needham



Vine Lake Cemetery, Medfield - Lot 117, Grave 3