

WHO WAS LUCY BRAN?

§ Compiled in 2020 by Robert Tucker Gregg and Revised in 2023 §

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

“The last Indian resident of the Town [Medfield] was Lucy Bran...” (Tilden, W.S., “Indians of Medfield,” *Dedham Historical Register*, Volume 9, 1899, page 53).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LUCY BRAN THROUGH VITAL RECORDS

Birth date and place:

- December 1752 (*Medfield Vital Records to 1850*, page 196) at an unknown location, probably Natick.

Father:

- 1) Porto-Bran, a Native American oracle (DeSorgher, Richard, *This Old Town*, Fleetwood 9, Infinity Publishing, 2013, page 117).
- 2) Also listed as a Doctor of Natick (*Massachusetts Death and Burials 1795-1910*, GS Film 836218).
- 3) Also listed as Joshua Brand, the Indian Doctor in Natick. “...the doctor died, and his widow was long known as ‘Nurse Brand,’ which indicates her vocation during her widowhood. One daughter was married and went to Medfield, where she died in 1837.” (Cheney, Amos P., *A Review of the First Fourteen Years of the Historical, Natural History and Library Society of South Natick, Mass*, 1884, page 46).

Mother:

- Name unknown but called ‘Nurse Brand’ (Cheney, page 46). Possibly a white woman or an African based on Lucy’s death record which follows. She was definitely not an Indian; only Lucy’s father was, in order to make Lucy a half-Indian as listed below.

Sister:

- Mina, daughter of Joshua Brand, baptized August 9, 1761, age about 18 years (*Vital Records of Natick, Massachusetts to the Year 1850*, page 20). She was born about 1743, nine years before Lucy.

Death date and place:

- December 19, 1837 at age 85 in Medfield (*Medfield Vital Records to 1850*, page 196). She was listed as half-Indian (*Deaths in Medfield from 1652 to 1875*, page 19, Compiled by Jeremiah B. Hale).

Probate:

- She left no will (Norfolk County Probate Court).

Burial location:

- Lucy is buried in an unmarked grave at Medfield's Vine Lake Cemetery (*Deaths*, page 19).

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HER THROUGH CENSUS POPULATION RECORDS

- 1790 – resident of Medfield (GS Film 0568144 Image 370) listed as Lucy Brane, a free white female, living with two other free white females whose names are not listed
- 1800 – resident of Medfield (GS Film 2095616 Image 0096) listed as a Free Person of Color
- 1810 – resident of Medfield (GS Film 0205626 Image 00497) listed as a free person
- 1820 – not listed
- 1830 – resident of Medfield (GS Film 0337918 Image 00572) listed as Lucy Brant

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HER MAIN STREET RESIDENCE

It appears that Lucy was always a tenant and never held title to any house in which she lived. Her name is not found on any deed at the Norfolk County Registry of Deeds in Dedham.

“This house was steeped in local legend as pre dating the incorporation of the town (1650) and began as a herd house for people from Dedham who led their animals to the Charles River meadow for fodder...Eastern portion seems to date from late First Period (1620–1725) while the later western portion dates from the Second Period, probably from the mid Eighteenth Century. The original southeast room probably was, as local legend suggests a utilitarian building rather than a dwelling...” (Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System [MACRIS] MED40).

“The Lucy Bran House at 661 Main Street, reputed to have been constructed prior to 1730 (east half) and expanded in the mid–18th century, is locally significant as a fine example of a modest Cape–type, Colonial house. The property is also historically important for its associations with early settlement, agricultural land use patterns, and Native American and African American residents in...Medfield. The house sits on land owned by Eleazar Ellis, who may have built the structure, and remained in the Ellis family for five generations.

By 1758 the house was lived in by Lucy Bran [undocumented], Medfield's last Native American resident...The house was subsequently lived in by Samuel Green, his wife and two children of African descent. Green was listed as the “first man” of Captain William Peters who lived at Tannery Farm to the east. The house is depicted in an 1889 painting entitled “Roadside Cottage” by Dennis Miller Bunker which is exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The Lucy Bran House possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship...” (*National Register of Historic Places Criteria Statement Form*, Massachusetts Historical Commission, Boston).

In 1773 by “age 21 she was an accomplished weaver...from which she established a business...Because of the profits of her skill, she was able to live comfortably, alone most of the time, in her cottage...” (DeSorgher, page 117).

In 1784, at age 32 Lucy is listed as “...Indian...abutter in deed of Jonathan Breck to Peter Warren who built the house westerly of Lucy Bran Cottage.” (MACRIS MED40).

Lucy “occupied much of her time in weaving homespun cloth; she seemed to have supported herself by her own industry, and to have lived a respected life...” (Mandell, Daniel R., *Tribe, Race, History: Native Americans in Southern New England*, John Hopkins University Press, 2008, Page 190).

“The last Indian resident of the town was Lucy Bran, who as early, at least, as 1785, owned a small house on W. Main Street. Lucy was a tall, gaunt woman, with dark, piercing eyes. She occupied much of her time in weaving homespun cloth; she seems to have supported herself by her own industry, and to have lived a respected life among our citizens. Her old Bible is in the possession of our Historical Society, and her signature in a creditable hand is preserved in our collection of autographs. Her room was kept very neatly, and she generally had a few “posies” in the window. She was apparently a regular attendant at the old parish church, sitting in the gallery, where, according to the custom of the times, seats were set apart for colored people. This last resident of aboriginal stock died in 1835, aged 87 years.” (Tilden, page 53). Note: Her correct death date and age are found prior.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LUCY FROM THE SETH SMITH 1758 DIARY ENTRY

Seth Smith enters this fact in his diary: “Lucy Bran Began to Bord hear the 5 day of november.” This entry has numerous and profound implications for Lucy’s story.

- The 1758 date fixes Lucy’s age at six years, the first indication of her age since her birth.
- That date announces her arrival in Medfield. No other references point to an earlier date.
- It begs the questions as to when her parents died and why there was no one in Natick to care for her.
- Why was Medfield selected for Lucy and not Natick where there was a thriving Indian community? In 1753 there were 25 Indian families residing there. By 1759 disease had drastically reduced that number (Bacon, Oliver N., *A History of Natick*, Damrell & Moore, Boston, 1856, page 21). Perhaps Lucy was removed to Medfield for opportunistic health reasons.
- What was particular about the Smith family for her placement in Medfield if indeed they were the first family in this town to host her? Seth Smith was 22 years old when he made his diary entry. He was eleven months away from his marriage to Drusilla Lyon of Walpole. Were they living together in 1758 or was Seth still living at home with his parents, Samuel and Silence (Morse) Smith? Of Seth’s eight siblings,

only he and two brothers were possibly still living in 1758 with their parents who were 59 and 58 years old, respectively.

- Was there a place for six-year-old Lucy in the Samuel Smith home, or did the “hear” in the diary entry refer to Seth and Drusilla Smith’s home on High Street?
- The High Street home for the Smiths (if so) eliminates the Main Street roadside cottage home for Lucy at this early age of six years. It is unknown when she takes up residence at the cottage. She was 21 when reference is made to her living alone, probably by then in the famed cottage.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HER THROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD INFORMATION

Immediately west of Lucy’s residence stood a house which is speculated to have been built in 1784 by Peter Warren, a man of mixed race and 13 years her elder. There is no conclusive evidence that Peter purchased the property from Jonathan Breck in that year (Suffolk County Registry of Deeds).

However, in the August 12, 1884 edition of the *Boston Post*, a Sarah Forbes, wife of William Forbes, states in an article, “Quaint Old Medfield,” that Peter Warren was the builder. In either case, the houses’ proximity to each other may have occasioned Peter and Lucy’s friendship. What follows is a story from that article as told by Sarah (Harding) Forbes who along with her husband were residents of the house next to Lucy’s, 57 years after her death.

“‘It was built by Peter Warren,’ she said. ‘Peter Warren, who is buried in the old graveyard yonder, under the stone which reads, ‘A respectable man of color.’ He was a slave, who bought his freedom and then settled down on his farm here.

In the little house up the road lived Lucy Brandt. She was the last of the Natick Indians, and her skin was copper-colored, like that of a mulatto. Peter Warren was very black, but he fell in love with Lucy Brandt, and began paying many neighborly attentions. He confided at last to one of the village wags that he was going to ask Lucy to marry him.

Lucy was quietly informed of this intention, and, it is said, was very indignant at his presumption. At any rate, when Peter Warren went to do his courting a neighbor stole into the house to see the sport, and the story runs that the Indian woman rose up in wrath and took the broomstick to her black suitor. So Peter Warren lived on alone here, and for all I know died here.’” (*Boston Post*, August 12, 1884, Page 19, composed by Amy Robsart). Today the house at 671 Main Street (next to Lucy’s former residence at 661 Main Street) is called the Peter Warren House (MACRIS MED41).

When Peter died in 1814, he owed Lucy \$29.34. At today’s rate (2024), that amount is \$529.93. Did she collect? The expectation is yes.

WAS LUCY MARRIED?

No. Lucy “never married but took up a lasting friendship with Peter Warren, who was half African.” (DeSorgher, page 117).

Yes. She was listed as “married.” (Cheney, page 46) .

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THREE BURIAL LOCATIONS: EPHRAIM, WARREN, BRAN

“Records show that ‘Peter and Lucy died in 1837 of the same disease and are laid side by side together for all time.’” (DeSorgher, page 118).

- Correction: Peter Warren died in Medfield on January 8, 1814, not in 1837 (*Medfield Vital Records to 1850*, page 240).
- Fact: Peter Warren is buried in Vine Lake Cemetery, Section A-3, Lot 197 Grave 4 (Vine Lake Preservation Trust, Burial Records).
- Fact: Lucy Bran is buried in an unmarked grave at Vine Lake Cemetery (*Deaths*, page 19).
- Fact: Causes of death were not always recorded during this time period. No cause of death is listed for either Peter or Lucy (Medfield Vital Records).

Soon after her 14 November 1808 death, a Sally Ephraim (b. 1777) was buried in Section A-3, Lot 197 Grave 3, adjacent to where Peter Warren was later interred. From subsequent but not extensive research, her lineage appears traceable to the Indian family of Ephraims in Natick. She died at the Medfield home of Joseph Clark, Jr., which poses a question about her role or status.

Six years later, Peter Warren, a mulatto, was buried in the same lot next to Sally’s burial location. Both burial locations are marked today with slate markers.

By 1814, Sally Ephraim and Peter Warren are the first and only burials of an Indian and an African American, respectively, in the cemetery. Their locations just happen to be on the western-most perimeter (the outer edge) of what was then called the Burying Grounds. No burials happened beyond this perimeter before that date.

A case could be made that in this area were buried Medfield citizens who were colored.

When Lucy Bran died in 1837, the town may have decided that she too was to be buried, albeit in an unmarked grave, next to Peter Warren and Sally Ephraim, race being the deciding factor.

WHAT WE ARE LEFT WITH REGARDING LUCY’S STORY

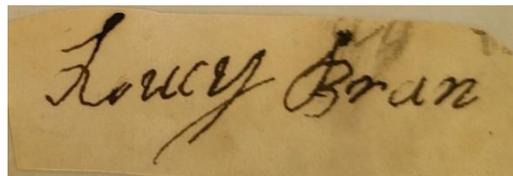
There are more questions than answers.

- When did Lucy’s father and mother die? What was her mother’s name and race?
- Did she have more siblings than Mina? When did Mina die? If she indeed resided with Lucy and died in Medfield, her death after Lucy’s would have made her the last living Indian resident. Through research, that became Lucy’s fame.

- Why was Lucy listed as a free white female in the 1790 census? Who were the two other free white females living with her in that year? Sally Ephraim (age 13)? Mina Bran (age unknown)? A case can be made that Mina did not live with Lucy because Mina (age 47) would be senior to her sister (age 38) at that residence and recorded as such, which was not the case. One of them could have been Sally Ephraim, a minor. Lucy was the senior adult resident and the two others could have been minors. To the census enumerator, listings by race were not a factor.
- Under what circumstances was she placed in a Medfield home at age 6 and by whom and in which family and at which location?
- Who taught her to weave? It might have been Seth Smith of the Diary connection, depending on how long she resided in his home. In 1786 his probated inventory listed 'a weavers loom and appurtenances,' i.e., accessory objects (*Suffolk County, MA: Probate File Papers*). Where did she market her weaving?
- Was she baptized and did she become a member of the Old Parish?
- How well did she know Sally Ephraim? Under what circumstances did Sally relocate to Medfield and at what date? With whom did she reside beside Joseph Clark, Jr. in whose home she died in 1808?
- Who arranged for Lucy's burial?
- What would Lucy's response be today when realizing the notoriety of her home (below) after it was featured in 'A Roadside Cottage,' a most famous 1889 impressionist painting by Dennis Miller Bunker?

WHAT WE ARE LEFT WITH REGARDING LUCY'S MEMORABILIA

*These items were photographed by the compiler through the courtesy of the Medfield Historical Society.

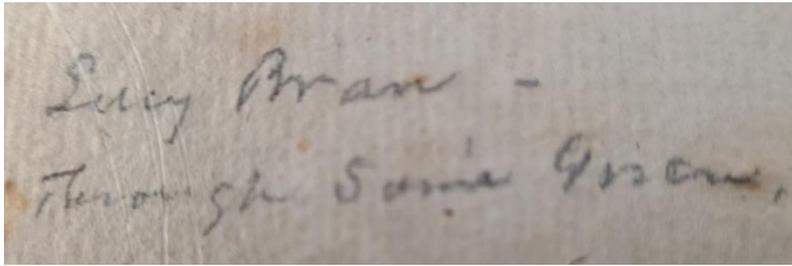


***Her Signature**



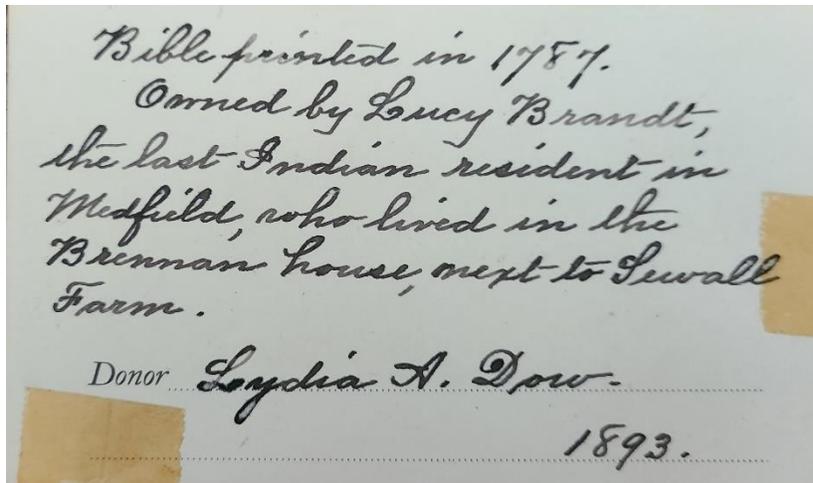
***Provenance #1-**

Lucy's possesses her Bible 6 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 2 1/2"



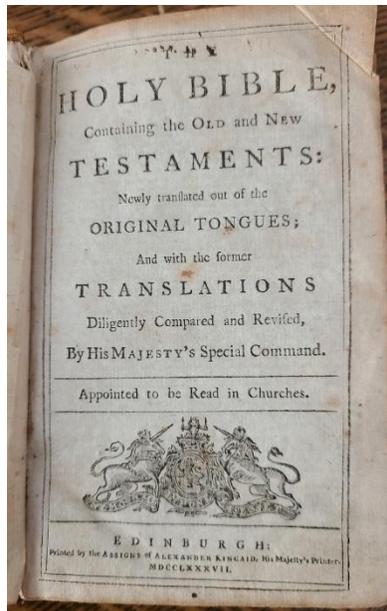
Lucy Bran -
Through some means,

***Provenance #2- Upon her death, Lucy's Bible was in possession of Samuel Greene, a black man, who resided with his family at the roadside cottage**

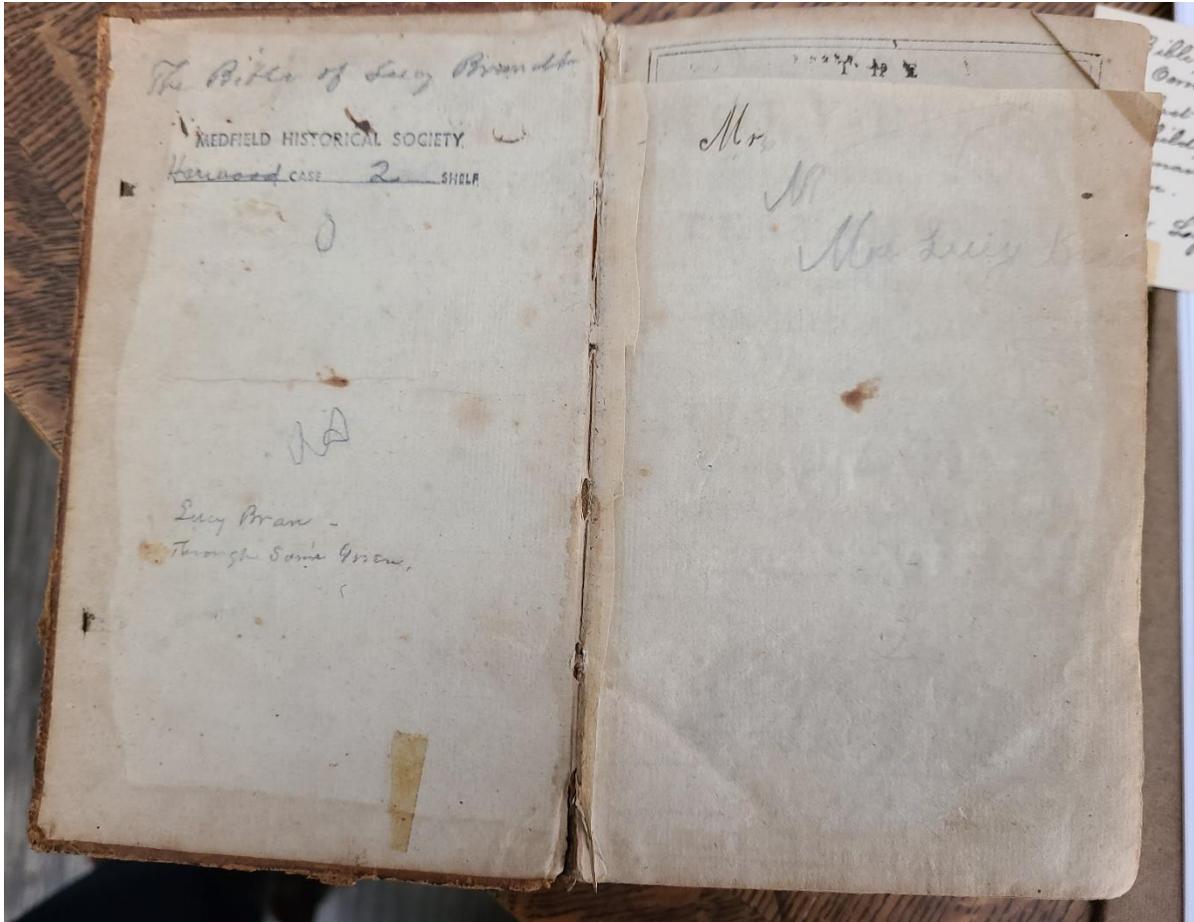


Bible printed in 1787.
Owned by Lucy Brandt,
the last Indian resident in
Medfield, who lived in the
Brennan house, next to Sewall
Farm.
Donor Lydia A. Dow.
1893.

***Provenance #3 - Upon Greene's wife's death in 1878, Lucy's Bible was in possession of Lydia Anna Dow, a white woman, who resided with the Greene family on Frairy Street. In 1893 she donated it to the Medfield Historical Society.**



***Provenance #4 - Medfield Historical Society**



***Inside Cover and Fly Leaf of Lucy's Bible**



A Roadside Cottage - Painting by Dennis Miller Bunker, 1889



661 Main Street, Medfield - 2023



House Historical Sign

