

Revere House Radio
Season 2 Episode 3
Becoming Mothers: Sarah and Rachel Revere

One of the facts about Paul Revere that gets the strongest reaction out of people when they hear it is how many children he had. I've seen reactions that truly run the gamut, and even though I'm not *trying* to shock people, that's the most common response. So, I wanted to do an episode that explores the experience of pregnancy and childbirth a little bit more. Was the Revere family average, or above average with 16 kids? How did people view and approach babies and childbirth? Big topic, I know, so to help myself narrow the focus a little, I'm going to concentrate on Paul's two wives, Sarah Orne and Rachel Walker, and what their lived experiences might have been before, during, and after pregnancy. Due to a lack of primary sources from either Sarah or Rachel, I cannot make concrete claims as to their experiences. What I can offer are generalizations and the experience of one midwife you'll hear me mention, Martha Ballard. Nonetheless, with each wife giving birth eight times, it's a topic worth discussing. Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly, let's dive in!

Paul Revere married Sarah Orne on August 17, 1757. He was 22 and she was 21. Sarah gave birth to their first child, a daughter they named Debroah, about 8 months after their wedding. At the time, births that took place less than the expected nine months after the wedding were not uncommon. That said, Deborah could have been premature or not, we don't know. Either way, the young Revere family was off to a strong start. Sarah would go on to have 7 more children, roughly one every other year for the next 14 years. According to one demographer, the average family size in Massachusetts in 1764 was 7.2 including parents, and in 1764 Paul and Sarah had 4 children. So a family of 6 was tracking right along with the average.

We know very little of Sarah in general, and even less about her particular experience of motherhood. Based on the expectations of the time, it seems like Sarah's experience is what we might call average. Frequent pregnancies while she was in her 20s and early 30s, with an unfortunate loss of two children very young - though none immediately after birth. Thanks to Laura Thatcher Ulrich's fascinating book, *A Midwife's Tale*, we have a sense of what the actual births might have been like. When Sarah went into labor, Paul may have sent for a midwife. The midwife would tend to and sit with the mother throughout labor, but when the mother went into the final phase and was expected to deliver soon, her female companions would be called. This could be mothers, sisters, aunts, or other friends. These women would help with the birth physically, providing support to the laboring woman or fetching supplies for the midwife, but they also would be an encouraging and supportive presence in the house. Sometimes they would sit through the night instead of traveling back to their own homes, although Sarah was giving birth in an urban setting, so perhaps less likely. The length of time a woman would spend in bed

after a birth also varies wildly, and seems to be closely tied with how much help she had around the house. For Sarah's first few births, she may have been back at her chores within days, while after her later births with older daughters, she could have afforded to rest for longer while they picked up the household work. This is all highly speculative, since we don't have primary sources from Sarah herself. Much of the research for this episode came from Ulrich's book, which is based on the diary of a Maine midwife during the colonial period. Martha Ballard was a practicing midwife and healer for decades, and Ulrich's analysis of her diary is absolutely fascinating and I would recommend giving it a read if you're interested in this topic.

Though we don't think Sarah's death was precipitated directly from giving birth, she did pass away in May of 1773. At the time, the youngest member of the family was a baby named Isannah, born in December of 1772. Grieving and with seven children to care for, Paul turned to what was at the time the most logical person, a young single woman named Rachel Walker. Rachel cared for many of the Revere children after Sarah's death but the family lore goes that she really fell in love with baby Isannah. In September of 1773 Isannah passed away, and in October, Rachel married Paul.

Newly married and with six step-children to care for, I would love to know how Rachel was feeling. She was an only child, and was 28 years old when she married Paul, who was 38 at the time. She wasn't in entirely new surroundings, however, since she grew up in Boston, so she most likely knew of Sarah and the children, even if she wasn't close with the family.

Because of Rachel's young age, there was high potential for many more children. About 14 months after their marriage, Rachel gave birth to her first child, a son, named Joshua. Rachel would go on to have eight children total, giving birth for the last time in 1787 at the age of 42. This cessation could have been caused by her body's natural decline in fertility as she aged, or it could have been more intentional. Based on Rachel's pregnancy patterns, it doesn't seem like she and Paul were actively trying to avoid pregnancy, although there were manuals out at the time that suggested avoiding sexual relations while the mother was breastfeeding, because it was thought to damage the milk she provided her infant. It seems that there was a lot of conversation about whether breast milk, menstrual blood, and sexual activity could healthily co-exist, and the wisdom of the time was that they could not. If the Revere family was following any of this advice, we don't know about it.

I should say at this point that establishing trends in family planning is quite hard due to lack of records from the time. Age, class, geographic location, religion, health, and many more factors informed how many children a particular couple might have. Like Sarah, we don't have primary sources from Rachel describing her birthing experiences or views on motherhood. Paul and Rachel seem to have had a loving relationship, and we do have records of Paul referring to his children as his "little lambs," so there is some evidence to suggest that they rejoiced at every

pregnancy. We also have a letter Paul wrote to his cousin John, dated 1787, that mourns the loss of his own two-year-old son named John. He writes that “I think I shall have no more children.” Hindsight is 2020 in this case, as we know that he in fact had one more child, a boy who he named John, and who would go on to be a successful doctor. Going back to Ulrich and her account of Martha Ballard, we can assume that any child born in the Revere’s 19 North Square home would have been welcomed by many women such as aunts, sisters, and friends of Rachel. Conveniently located in one of the busiest towns on the Eastern seaboard, Rachel would have had access to plenty of helpers, and male doctors if necessary. But what role did men play in childbirth?

The late 18th century was a time of great transition in the field of obstetrics, a word not used at the time. Midwives still ruled the domain of pregnancy, contraception, abortion and childbirth. Male doctors were called in case of great emergency, but by and large it seems childbirth was viewed less as a medical event than a social one. Martha Ballard records very few births involving doctors during her almost thirty year career as midwife. Eventually as the 1700s gave way to the 1800s, it became more common for male doctors to preside over a birth, and ushered in a decline in midwifery and women healers. As the medical field advanced and became more and more professionalized, women healers were viewed increasingly as ill-qualified for such an event as a birth, regardless of generations of hard earned wisdom and experience.

Another question is payment. Martha Ballard’s diary lists payments both in cash and in kind. We have no record of Paul Revere paying cash for the services of a midwife, but he very well could have provided other goods to a midwife’s family - or in fact Rachel could have handled the payment herself, for which we have no record. She may have offered goods that she made, or the services of her older daughters around a midwife’s home as recompense.

While this topic is fascinating on its own, it is frustrating to have so little information about the specific experiences of Sarah and Rachel as they were growing their families. What we can know is that family planning, pregnancy, childbirth and infancy were much discussed during this time period, so we can be confident that Sarah and Rachel took part in some of these conversations. What we do know are some birthdays of those children, and when this episode airs in mid-March, we will be right around the birthdays of both daughters named Mary, and the youngest Revere child, John, who was born March 27, 1787. If you are interested to know more details about the 16 Revere children and their lives, I suggest checking out our Revere Express post from September of 2020. I’ll link to that in the show notes. As we move into April, stay tuned for more Midnight Ride programming both here and on our blog, the Revere Express. This has been Revere House Radio, thanks for listening!