MARTHA STEARNS MARSHALL

> *"Without the shadow of an usurped authority over the other sex, Mrs. Marshall, being a lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution has, in countless instances, melted a whole concourse into tears by her prayers and exhortations."*[1]

This famous quote about Martha Stearns Marshall has been invoked by numerous Baptist historians over the past two hundred years. Yet putting together a complete picture of this Baptist woman's life is no easy task. In records of the beginnings of the Separatist Baptist movement in the South, she is overshadowed by her husband and brother who are credited with its founding. Yet she must have also had her influences on them and the movement as a whole, for why else would we have any record of her? As counterpoint to this argument would be the fact all I have been able to discover of Shubal Stearns' wife is her name: Sara Johnstone, and nothing more.[2]

In fact Martha Stearns Marshall was leader in her own right, and did make a significant impact on the Sandy Creek Baptists, as well as other women who were part of the movement. In this brief essay I will outline the few biographical facts we know about her life, and offer a general sweep of the beginnings of the Sandy Creek Church, emphasizing the leadership of the Marshalls in several churches including the first Baptist church in Georgia. And finally I will suggest some ways Martha Marshall may have influenced the Baptists of her day.

Martha Stearns was the youngest of 10 children, born August 18, 1726 in Tolland, Connecticut, to Shubal Stearns II and Rebecca Lariby (also referred to as Rebecca Larriford Stearns[3]). Their oldest son, Shubal III (sometimes referred to as Jr.) was born in Boston, Massachusetts, January 28, 1706. It seems the oldest and youngest Stearns may have had some gifts in common. Martha's praise as a preacher, exhorter and public prayer leader must have been a family trait; for of her brother Shubal it was said:

Mr. Stearns was a man of small stature, but of good natural parts, and sound judgment. Of learning, he had but a little share, yet was pretty well acquainted with books. His voice was

musical, and strong, which he managed in such a manner as, one while, to make soft impressions on the heart, and fetch tears from the eyes in a mechanical way; and anon, to shake the very nerves and throw the animal system into tumults and perturbations. All Separate ministers copy after him in tones of voice and actions of body; and some few exceed him.[4]

We know almost nothing of Martha's childhood and adolescence, excepting the deduction that she like her husband and brother and many in their families and neighborhoods most likely fell under the sway of George Whitefield's preaching in the first "Great Awakening" of the 1740's and 50's.

In the same year that Martha was born, her future husband Daniel Marshall was being ordained as a deacon in the congregational church in Windsor, Connecticut. Raised by devout parents, he served in that role for the next twenty years. Daniel himself was the product of a Puritan family, which arrived in the first wave of dissenters from England.

Daniel Marshall's great grandfather, Thomas Marshall, immigrated to Boston in 1634 and seems to have been from Lincolnshire, England as were the families of Anne Hutchison and her brother-in-law John Wheelwright[5]. In fact he lost his right to bear arms as a result of signing a petition in support of Hutchison, one of the first female preachers in the Colonies. However, he still seemed to maintain a place of respectability among the folk of Boston. His son, Daniel's grandfather, Samuel Marshall, came also from England and moved rather soon to Windsor, Connecticut. He was married to Mary Wilton[6] and had nine children, one of whom was born February 18, 1683 and called Deacon Thomas Marshall, through most of his adult life, due to his role as deacon at the First Congregational Church in Windsor. He married Mary Drake on March 3, 1685/6 and they continued to live in Windsor and together had 11 children. The ninth of these children was Daniel Marshall, born 1705/6.[7] He was converted at 20 and like his father served as a deacon in his church for the next 20 years.[8] In 1742 he was married to Hannah Drake,[9] who died soon after giving birth to their son Daniel (II).

Just as the Stearns family in nearby Tolland, Daniel Marshall likely heard the preaching of George Whitefield between 1744 and 1745 while the evangelist was touring Connecticut.[10] Daniel Marshall's son Abraham, said his father, upon hearing the preaching of George Whitefield, became inspired to give his life in service of ministry. He moved with deliberation, however, for it was six or seven more years before he left behind a prosperous home and farm, and went to minister among the Mohawk Indian Nation for approximately 18 months. He met with some success there in converting the Indians before being forced to leave due to an upheaval among the Native Americans.[11]

In the mean time Daniel Marshall met Martha Stearns, twenty years his junior, in some unknown circumstances. The towns of Windsor and Tolland are less than 15 miles apart, so it seems likely that because they both belonged to Separatist families, they could have met or been introduced in any number of ways. In fact the Marshall family seems to have an affinity for women preachers. In addition to the connection with Hutchison a hundred years earlier, and Martha Stearns, Daniel Marshall's sister Eunice is reported to have been jailed for preaching when she, "took upon herself to exhort and preach Baptist doctrines; was ordered to desist, but not obeying, was (although pregnant at the time), thrown into jail."[12]

Daniel Marshall and Martha Stearns were married on June 23, 1747.[13] And upon having the first two of their ten children,[14] in addition to Daniel II, they took upon themselves the role of missionaries to the Indians in New York. According to some genealogical histories, they traveled with Joseph and Pricilla Avery Breed to minister to the Mohawks.[15] When they left due to the uprising, they traveled southward and stayed briefly at Connogogig, Pennsylvania, before moving on to Winchester Virginia in 1754.[16]

While in Opekon/Winchester, Virginia (now West Virginia) the Marshalls and the Breeds were joined by Shubal Stearns and a group of followers from his church in Tolland, Connecticut. And while there, Martha and Daniel were baptized by Samuel Heaton in the Opekon/Mill Creek Church.[17] It is likely there was no ordained minister to baptize them in Connecticut although they may have been practicing their Baptist beliefs even then.[18] Soon the group moved about 30 miles to Cacapon, Virginia where they served for approximately one year,[19] but they did not tarry long in that place.

When Stearns received a letter telling of the great need for preaching and places of worship in the frontier of North Carolina, the group set out on a journey to fulfill God's calling.[20] They traveled 200 miles through the mountains and valleys of the Appalachians until they found their way to Sandy Creek.[21] And it was there that they set up camp and began preaching, exhorting, praying and drawing settlers in from miles around. In 1755 the group who had set out to save the frontier, formed Sandy Creek Church, the first Separate Baptist church in the South.[22] Stearns was the pastor of the group and the only ordained minister, but Marshall, who had been licensed in Virginia, and Breed, were set up as his able assistants in the work. In addition to the Breeds, the Marshalls and the Stearns, there were the parents of Shubal III, Shubal, II and Rebecca Lariby Stearns; brothers of Shubal III, Ebenezer and his wife Anna Fields Stearns, and Peter Stearns and his wife; and Enos Stimpson[23] and Jonathan Polk and their wives.[24] Within just a few years the group had swelled from 16 to 606. But they had no intention of resting on the laurels of such growth.[25]

Soon the missionary zeal prompted many among the Sandy Creek Separates to take to the many trails, which converged at their settlement, in Guilford County (now Randolph County),

North Carolina, and to preach the Gospel far and wide.[26] Among the traveling witnesses were Daniel and Martha Marshall. They must have been a study in contrasts, for it was said of Daniel, that he was "a weak man, a stammerer, no schollar [sic]"[27]; "not possessed of great talents"[28]; and possessing gifts that were not "above mediocrity."[29] But what he lacked in ability he made up for in zeal. Together the two used their enthusiasm and conviction to preach the good news up into Virginia, and down into South Carolina and eventually Georgia.

The first church that was constituted out of the itinerant ministries of Stearns and the Marshalls was at Abbott's Creek. The group of believers meeting there called for Daniel to come and preach, and "as a result of the labors of this earnest and fervent evangelist, in which he doubtless had the assistance of his saintly and gifted wife, Mrs. Martha Stearns Marshall, great numbers turned to the Lord."[30]

While Stearns may have come over to baptize the new converts, it was Daniel Marshall that the new church wanted to call as their permanent pastor, and thus, they found themselves in a quandary. It seems that the only other ordained Baptist minister in the area was Stearns. So they set about the task of assembling an ordination committee (or presbytery of elders) for the task. When they appealed to some of the "Regular" Baptists who were in churches along the nearby Pedee River, they received a cutting reply. One Regular Baptist minister refused to be party to the ordination of anyone from "a disorderly set; suffering women to pray in public, and permitting every ignorant man to preach that chose; and that they encouraged noise and confusion in their meetings." [31] Eventually Henry Ledbetter, of Lynch's Creek Church in Craven County, South Carolina, and another brother-in-law of Marshall, was secured to help in the ordination.[32]

Over the next years, the influence of the Sandy Creek church grew and was directly responsible for numerous churches across the Southeast. As Morgan Edwards said, "It is a mother church, nay a grand mother, and a great grandmother. All the separate Baptists sprang hence: not only eastward towards the sea, but westward towards the great river Mississippi, but northward to Virginia and southward to South Carolina and Georgia."[33]

In many of these churches Morgan Edwards discovered the presence and functioning of deaconesses as well as deacons, and eldresses as well as elders. He located as many as 40 churches with deaconesses and six churches with eldresses in his travels in the South.[34] The role of women in these churches was given purpose and definition in the sincere efforts of the Separates to emulate the patterns of service and ministry they found in the New Testament. *Eldresses* had the responsibilities of praying, teaching, presiding and ruling in separate assemblies, representing the interests of the women to the elders, "attending at the unction of sick sisters" and assisting in the baptism of women. They were to be veiled when preaching or praying.. Similar to deacons, *deaconesses* were primarily set aside for care of the "sick, miserable, and distressed poor." Both groups of women were elected by the church and could expect honor and "maintenance" (pay) in return for their services; they were considered officers of the church an apparently were set aside with the "laying of hands" in ordination.[35] They must have surely also been influenced by the presence of women like Martha Stearns Marshall who accompanied her husband in his work, praying, preaching and prophesying alongside him, and according to the record, maybe even being the more effective of the two in speaking.

As had become the tradition of the Separates in this frontier country, the Marshalls along with most of the church at Abbott's Creek moved to Beaver Creek South Carolina around 1760 to establish yet another church. From there some of the group migrated south again to Stevens

Creek just outside of Augusta, Georgia on the South Carolina side.[36] At this church Edwards identified the presence of deaconesses.[37] From this point, as was his style, Daniel Marshall, no doubt with some help from Martha, and son, Abraham, made forays into the countryside preaching.

At one point in his preaching in Georgia, Daniel Marshall was arrested for breaking the law by holding a public religious meeting in a state that had the Church of England as its official state religion. When he was brought to trial in Augusta, it was his wife Martha that spoke her mind. The *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* reports the scene this way:

> "to the surprise of all present, the indignation which swells the bosom of Mr. Marshall, finds vent through the lips of his wife. Mrs. Martha Marshall, who is sitting near and has witnessed the whole scene. With the solemnity of the prophets of old, she denounces such proceedings and such a law, and to sustain her position, quotes many passages for the Holy Scriptures with a force and pertinency which carry conviction to the hearts of many."[38]

Her sermon found its mark in the arresting constable, Samuel Cartledge, who was converted, and eventually baptized by Marshall, ordained as a deacon and subsequently as a preacher, serving Baptist churches for over 50 years. The judge also came to be devout believer in Baptist principles as well, although he was never baptized in deference to his wife.[39]

Soon their good fortune in Georgia changed, and Daniel, Martha and Abraham Marshall were caught up in founding the first continuous Baptist church in the state, next to Kiokwee Creek in Richmond County in the spring of 1771.[40] It was here that they settled for the first time in many years and Daniel and Martha lived out the remainder of their lives.[41]

Their son Abraham followed his father as pastor of that church and offers some of the only extant information about his parents and their lives. He tells the story of his father's death and final words on November 2, 1784:

> The venerable partner of his cares, and I may add, faithful assistant in all his labors, sitting bedewed with tears, by his side; he proceeded:
> 'Go on, my dear wife, to serve the Lord. Hold out to the end. Eternal glory is before us!'[42]

Furthermore, in a eulogy to Daniel Marshall there is found the following:

> In 1748, Mr. Marshall married his second and last wife, Miss Martha Stearns, sister to Rev. Shubael [sic] Stearns. Mr. Marshall had the rare felicity of finding in this lady a Pricilla, a helper in the gospel. In fact, it should not be concealed that his extraordinary success in the ministry is ascribable in no small degree to Mrs. Marshall's unwearied, and zealous cooperation. Without the shadow of a usurped authority over the other sex, Mrs. Marshall, being a lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution, has, in countless instances melted a whole concourse into tears, by her prayers and exhortations!"[43]

In forty-one years of ministry among native peoples, in the towns and suburbs of New England, and into the wilds of the new frontier, Martha Stearns Marshall had to have been a hearty soul, and while we will never know the full extent of her influence on her brother, husband or family, or the churches they began together, nor will we know of the impact she had on their form of governance and organization, we can deduce a few things from what we do know. She was a woman that made an impression. One did not make it into the history books as woman without having left some mark on those in her spheres of influence.[44]

She was a part of bringing the "Great Awakening" to the southern colonies. She was one of the many hundred preachers and proclaimers and exhorters who turned the masses on the frontier to the Baptist faith. And many historians have recognized the high praise as found in the quotes about her abilities and enthusiasm. As Lumpkin points out, the movement in and of itself is no small thing, and Martha Stearns Marshall was one of the leading forces in that movement, not just for her familial connections to brother, husband and son, but in her own right. The presence and fuller participation of women in this new movement, rarely brought distinction to the Separates, but rather drew criticism regularly, and stood as a dividing wall between Separates

and Regulars in the south. In fact the involvement of women in the churches may have been the most significant practical division among Baptists of the south until they agreed to union in 1787.[45] It seems likely that more of the history and influence of women like Martha Marshall was glossed over in part due to its being a source of contention among Baptist groups.

We also can deduce from Martha Stearns Marshall's life that she must have had some influence on the other women in the Separatist movement. If it was nothing more than the intimacies of frontier living with just a few other families or the involvements of women working to build a new church, she must have made an impact. However, due to the regular reports of public speaking and praying by women in the movement, and by the existence of eldresses and deaconesses in the Separatist churches, it seems possible that her influence may have been more far more prominent as a leader or exemplar than the records we have explicitly demonstrate. As one historian noted, she was "destined to be of inestimable help to her husband,"[46] and we could add to the churches and the movement as a whole.

Finally, it seems that in the way some individual's lives take on powerful symbolic functions, Martha Stearns Marshall has become a symbol of the power of God's spirit to use all people, male and female, to proclaim the gospel, share in the work of ministry and dedicate one's life to the cause of answering God's call. Certainly the emphasis in Baptist polity on the right of the individual to hear and respond to God's call first to salvation then to service, is embodied in this woman; and the power of living that call with zeal and enthusiasm is evident in the sketchy story of her life. So in some ways her power in death is stronger maybe even than it was in life, and that would fit the convictions of these deeply devoted Baptists of two centuries ago, to know that the power of the gospel lives on in the stories of their lives.

Notes

[1] Phyllis R. Pleasants, "Martha Stearns Marshall," *Dictionary of Baptists in America,* ed. Bill J. Leonard

[2] Morgan Edwards, *Materials towards the History of Baptists in North Carolina*, quoted in George Washington Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists Vol. I, 1663-1805.* (Reprint of 1930 ed., Gallatin, TN: Church History Research & Archives, 1990), p. 228.

[3] William Latane Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South: Tracing through the Separates the Influence of the Great Awakening*, 1754-1787 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1961), p. 21.

[4] Morgan Edwards, *Materials Toward a History of the Baptists Vol*. 2, p. 93., quoted in Leon McBeth *Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), p. 228.

[5] The following information regarding Daniel Marshall's ancestry was taken from James Donovan Mosteller, *A History of the Kiokee Baptist Church in Georgia.* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1952), pp.45-47.

[6] According to the web site: www.ea.ucla.edu/~jill/gen/html/d0002/g0000080.html.

[7] Mosteller, p. 47.

[8] There is some dispute as to whether this was in fact the same Congregational church in which his father was a deacon, or if it was in fact a Presbyterian church as reported by hi son, Abraham Marshall in an essay about Daniel Marshall in James B. Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers* (Second ed., Richmond, VA: Yale & Watt, 1838), pp. 14-21.

[9] Mosteller, p. 53

[10] David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and other Parts of the World* (Boston, MA: Printed by Lincoln & Edmands for the author, 1813), Vol. 2, pp. 350-55. In this account Abraham Marshall says his father was 38 when he heard Whitfield preach.

[11] Taylor, pp. 15-16.

[12] H. H. Stiles, *The History and Genealogies of Ancient Windsor, Connecticut, Vol. II*, p. 467, quoted in Mosteller, p. 54.

[13] Mosteller, p. 53.

[14] Ibid. Children born to Martha and Daniel were the following: Abraham, John, Zaccheus, Levi, Moses, Solomon, Joseph, Eunice, Mary, and Benjamin.

[15] See the history given in "The Frontier Missionaries," a part of the Chuicy Family Home Page, at the web site: http://members.aol.com/CHUICY/mission.html#seventeen.

[16] Mosteller, p. 55.

[17] Lumpkin, p. 27. Mosteller (p. 56) claims that Joseph Breed (and Priscilla?) were also baptized at Mill Creek according to Morgan Edwards *Materials . . . North Carolina*, p. 24.

[18] Mosteller, offers a discussion on this on pp. 54-55.

[19] Lumpkin, p. 27.

[20] Lumpkin, p. 29.

[21] Mosteller, p. 56.

[22] McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, p. 228.

[23] "Enos Stimpson" in Robert Baylor Semple, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia.* (Reprint of 1894 ed., Lafayette, TN: Church History Research and Archives, 1976), p. 14*;* "Enos Stinson" in Edwards, *Materials . . . North Carolina* as quoted in Pascal, p. 227.

[24] This information on the names of the original members of the Sandy Creek Church is compiled from Semple's *History*, p. 14 (which only lists the male names), and genealogical information found at http://members.localnet.com/~rossbk/GenStearns.htm, which is taken from "Genealogy and Memoirs of Charles and Nathaniel Stearns, and Their Descendants, " by Mrs. Avis Stearns Van Wagenen, p. 41. Additionally, "Ebenezer Stearns" wife Anna Fields is identified at the web site: http://www.shirleyassociation.com/starnes_surname.htm. However, if the "Ebenezer Stearns" were Shubal III's uncle rather than his brother, which is not impossible, then his wife is Martha Burnap.

[25] McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, p. 228.

[26] Lumpkin, p. 30.

[27] Morgan Edwards, "Materials Towards a History of the Baptist in the Provinces of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia" vol. VI, (MS in the Furman University Library, Greenville, SC), p. 1. quoted in Lumpkin, p. 39.

[28] Semple, p. 16.
[29] Taylor, p. 16.
[30] Paschal, p. 291.
[31] Benedict *Fifty Years Among Baptists* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1860), p. 684, quoted in Mosteller, p. 59.
[32] Mosteller, p. 59. It is unclear to whom Ledbetter was married.
[33] Edwards, *Materials . . . North Carolina*, as quoted in Pascal, *History*, p. 227.
[34] Catherine Breckus reports these numbers in *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 63-64. She has compiled her numbers from Morgan Edwards: *The Customs of Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1768). I was not able to verify the numbers, although I looked at the MiPrint of the same.
[35] Morgan Edwards, *The Customs of Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia: printed by Andrew Steuart, 1768; *Early American Imprints,* First series, no. 10891), pp. 41-47.
[36] Mosteller, pp. 60-61.
[37] Ibid.
[38] *The History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (Atlanta, GA: Jas. Pl Harrison & Co., 1881), p. 14.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Mosteller (pp. 70-73) offers a careful discussion of the dispute between the spring of 1771 or 1772 and concludes convincingly for the former. The *History of the Baptist Denomination in Georgia* (pp. 13-14) alternately suggests the 1772 date.
[41] According to an unpublished paper by L.H. Harris, Martha Stearns Marshall possibly died in 1793. The land of her home was not deeded to Abraham until, that year, and there is evidence that she was living still in 1790.
[42] Semple, p. 16.
[43] Ibid, pp. 19-20.
[44] I came across a number of histories of the Separates, including the stories of her husband's ordination, which completely ignore women's role in the movement, and fail to ever mention her in any form.
[45] Leon McBeth, *Women in Baptist Life* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1979), pp. 45-46, agrees with Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1602-1972* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1974), p. 49, on this point. Notably, by this date both Daniel Marshall and Shubal Stearns were deceased.
[46] Mosteller, p. 53.