Introduction

In 2007 a visitor to the Sandwich Glass Museum and Historical Society on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, would have seen many exhibits related to the development of the glass industry and the impact it had on the town. As museum goers moved through rooms of beautiful glass bowls, tumblers, plates, and other precious objects, they would have come across an unusual cabinet. This cabinet bore the name “Hannah Rebecca Burgess” in gilt letters and contained artifacts from the woman’s life, including her wedding gown, an ivory pagoda and other curios from her trip to China, and the story of how she navigated her husband’s ship Challenger, in 1856, when William lay ill from dysentery in his stateroom. In 2010 a visitor can see an expanded version of the cabinet in the form of a reconstruction of this woman’s dining room. The new exhibit incorporates her own china with glass made by the Boston and Sandwich glass company, and features a holographic display of the woman, played by the curator, Dorothy Schofield. Why is this exhibit on display in a museum dominated by the story of the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company? Who was this woman, and why is she the only other prominent individual featured in the museum besides Deming Jarvis, the incorporator of the glass company?

This book examines the life of Rebecca Burgess both as she presented it in her journals and in other personal documents, which she donated to the Sandwich Historical society, and in the journals she retained but did not explicitly donate to be kept in the public purview. Rebecca may well have been a footnote in history had it not been for the prodigious journals that she kept from the 1840s to 1878 and the way in which she presented herself and her memories to the local public. I explore the ways in which Rebecca defined herself as the captain’s wife, though she had sailed for only two years out of her eighty-three-year life. I also analyze the conditions in which Rebecca lived in to understand how Rebecca viewed the world and her role in it. As a Victorian woman of the provincial middle class in nineteenth-century Massachusetts, she experienced dramatic change in her lifetime, which
made her maritime legacy all the more compelling for the collective community’s heritage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I also define the ways in which Rebecca actively reconstructed her memories of maritime life through her work in her Sandwich village, as well as the ways in which the community embraced and helped Rebecca’s memories become a local legend. I attempt to present a picture of her village and her maritime world by piecing together contemporary sources, primarily from newspapers and census data, and from scholarly monographs that analyze the world in which Rebecca lived. This book essentially has two main objectives: to understand how Rebecca perceived her world and portrayed herself as an actor in it as she wrote in her journals, and to examine how Rebecca’s reproduction of memories as she reflected back on her life at sea helped her shape a legacy that would become a legend in her community.

Authenticity and the Fictive “Self” in Autobiography

Rebecca’s journals describe her experiences, her beliefs, and her relationships with others. Through the art of journal writing, Rebecca defined her core values and her identity for an audience that extended beyond herself and her family. Rebecca’s journal writing falls within the bounds of Victorian practices. Many scholars of women’s autobiography suggest that women often form their self-definitions in relation to others—family and friends—and even portray themselves more passively than men. Although Burgess defined her actions as those of a perfect wife and then grieving widow, frequently she used those conventions to justify her extremely independent actions. In journal entries her sense of adventure belied her image as the dependent wife, and her focus on the approximately two years she spent at sea enabled her to cast herself as the heroine of a maritime drama, creating a legacy that would be embraced by her contemporaries and by generations of Cape Codders to come. Like many other women journal writers, Rebecca assumed that she was writing for a public audience, certainly her husband and, as she mentions several times, her good friend and possibly her family. However, she made sure to extend that audience when she donated the journals to a public historical center. Through her journals, Rebecca identified herself as the captain’s wife and widow, and ensured that her legacy and her persona would live on in her writings.

One important question addressed throughout this book involves the veracity and authenticity of self-presentation in autobiography and journal keeping. Can we write our own lives and, in the process, rewrite them?
Burgess’s writing reveals an awareness of her audience and a self-conscious, deliberate manipulation of her image. Literary critics have long questioned the ability of autobiographers to present an objective, or even authentic, “self,” because they are essentially narrators who fashion themselves as the protagonists of stories that have a distinct objective in the telling—basically to explain issues from their own point of view. In essence, autobiographers’ personas are “fictive,” because they define themselves as individuals in a progressing narrative with a stable, and often single, persona throughout, much like a character in a novel. Many critics of autobiography and autobiographical material such as letters question whether one can even know oneself enough to write a narrative memoir. For example, Martha Hodes notes in her biography of Eunice Stone Connolly, manipulating narratives is a way to craft a life story: “The act of recounting always involves the selection of observations, the editing of emotions, even the omissions of entire experiences.”5 The autobiographical self is effectively a representation of the person the autobiographer wants readers to see—often as one persona among multiple identities or one position in a multitude of discourses that sometimes compete with one another.6

Scholars of autobiography often maintain that women’s writing is inherently gendered in a way that makes it distinctive from men’s. They posit that frequently women autobiographers ascribe to prevailing norms for women in their culture in order to justify their behavior or actions. For example, Sidonie Smith argues that the female autobiographer “enacts the roles assigned to her in the fictions of patriarchal culture.”7 Moreover, many scholars contend that women’s autobiographies focus more on the personal and less on heroic acts; more on their relationships with others than as autonomous individuals; more on their multiple identities in connections with others and less on themselves as one-dimensional actors.8 Rebecca’s journals both reflect and challenge these assumptions. Although she often defined herself as bound to her husband, her family, and her community, she usually employed that language to justify what amounted to extremely independent actions.

Rebecca developed her persona through her journals, which are different from what many people today would consider private writings. Rebecca’s journals are what Lynn Bloom defines as “public diaries.” Scholars note that many women wrote public diaries in the nineteenth century. These are distinguished from private diaries by their broad form, flashbacks or foreshadows, and theme repetition. These are all stylistic literary devices, and the women who employed them were creating self-contained narratives in which they themselves were the central character. The women who created
public diaries transcended family history by leaving both historic and literary legacies. In her extensive study of six women’s diaries, Amy Wink concludes that in writing their stories these women declared to future readers that they were important. They constructed their own identities through their works, and they defined their audience as they created themselves for their readers. Rebecca used her journals to fashion a persona, create a legacy, and situate herself in the world around her, even as the cultural context of her world changed.

No matter the subject, Rebecca exhibited great familiarity and ease in employing certain cultural norms in her writing. Several critics of autobiography assert that all writers must situate themselves within certain cultural standards, whether they defy them or adhere to them. This is essential to the writing process, these critics argue, because individuals construct their identities based on the assumptions and values of the dominant culture in their society. In essence, autobiographers use or challenge the “models of identity” available to them in that “particular historical moment.” To understand how Rebecca defined herself, we have to understand the prevailing societal norms of the white middle class in nineteenth-century New England.

The Cult of True Womanhood

The existence of the “cult of true womanhood” and its ramifications for women in the nineteenth century has been debated by women’s historians for three decades, almost since the definition of the term by Barbara Welter in the 1960s. According to some scholars, the “cult of true womanhood” emerged in antebellum America just as middle-class men began to move from farms to take jobs working for others and as families started to move from their villages to places as near as a large local industrial region or as far as the West Coast looking for economic opportunity. As defined by these historians, this Victorian ideology deemed the ideal woman to be submissive, subsuming her will and beliefs to her husband’s, and existing solely to sacrifice her own needs for the good of her family. In prevailing Victorian literature and advice books aimed at a white, middle-class, and largely urban female readership, these “angels of the home” represented the domestic, or private, realm in a “separation of spheres” that reflected women’s unsuitability for “public life,” whether in the form of working or voting. Prescriptive literature often pointed to women’s “inherent” gentleness, physical weakness but moral strength, religious faith, and proclivities toward the home, family, and children. This literature depicted this gendered ideal of white middle-
class womanhood, a model of passivity, self-sacrifice, and motherly love, which historians define as the “cult of true womanhood.” The woman’s role was to maintain a peaceful, moral home as a refuge for her husband who had to go out into the corruptible world of the free market and the political landscape.12

While many women’s historians have convincingly disproved the physical existence of “separate spheres,” public and private spaces inhabited by men and women respectively and exclusively, this does not mean that Victorian society held no gender conventions. These scholars attest to the disjuncture between reality and prescriptive literature found in women’s magazines and nonfiction reading that created false dichotomies between the public and private worlds. In reality, however, middle-class women were neither inclined nor able to shut out the world and inhabit only the small domestic realm. In fact, many women used society’s assumption of their superior morality and virtue to claim space in reform movements, such as temperance and abolitionism.13

Whether one believes in the existence of separate spheres or the cult of true womanhood in Victorian America, Rebecca’s journals attest to her understanding of the concept. In her donated materials, she presented an orchestrated autobiography of a genteel lady, but she left the door ajar to explore her own contradictions of those values. Her written narrative reveals daring choices and extremely independent behavior, but she usually described her actions as entirely consistent with the ideals of the age and focused on her devotion to her husband and family, her duties as a wife and widow to her home and community.14 For example, in order to maintain balance between the construction of Victorian women as passive and domestic, Rebecca justified her love of the sea by defining it within the parameters of a wife’s duties to her husband: “I know that I love the Sea, but more I love to be with my husband. . . . I enjoy going to sea, because I am with my husband. With him any place is home.” This reflects the sentiments of many captains’ wives who chose to go out to sea.15 Rebecca never explained the details behind her short career as a navigator, but even that surprising act can be defined as “wifely duty” to her dying husband. Even in widowhood, Rebecca chose to define herself as the perfect nineteenth-century lady, joining other Victorian women who “raised mourning to an elaborately practiced art form,”16 and choosing community service over remarriage. However, at the same time she perpetuated this image, Rebecca became a businesswoman, investing in stocks, maintaining a diversified financial portfolio, and living off the income of loans she made with her inheritance. Rebecca defined herself as a
Victorian woman by remaining closely tied to her husband and by embrac-
ing the ideals of domesticity in her journals, even when her actions remained
far outside the norm of Victorian womanhood. In this way Rebecca was not
unlike many other middle-class women who “crossed boundaries” in the
nineteenth century. Her embrace of dominant middle-class values mirrors
the behavior of women who traveled to foreign lands as visitors, captains’
or pioneers’ wives, or missionaries. As they moved well beyond the actions
of a woman who embraced the cult of domesticity, they used those values to
define themselves as ladies, with strong principles that kept them anchored
in a familiar theoretical model of womanhood.17

Rebecca used Victorian values as one method to create an unchanging
picture of herself. By engaging with the journals Rebecca donated and her
other historical writings, I explore the ways in which Rebecca both identified
with and contrasted herself against prevailing white, middle-class cultural
norms. I also try to discern her motivations behind her identification with
the cultural norms of the time.

Exploring Memory: Personal and Communal

After Rebecca returned home from the sea, she began to recount her mar-
titime tales to the local community and record them in her journals. At this
point she often kept her memories of events in a journal that she began while
at sea and wrote of her daily activities in a separate journal. By writing down
and telling her stories, Rebecca was actively re-creating memories of her life
aboard her husband’s ships. In the telling Rebecca displayed her concern for
creating a legacy, and her interest in having her story remembered as a mari-
time drama. Critics of autobiography argue that people do not remember
fixed events of the past as much as they re-represent them, assigning them
meaning in a way that helps them understand their current context.18 Mem-
ory is a function of what James Olney calls external experiences and internal
imaginations, and people can alter, invent, and imagine events of their pasts.
Remembering past events involves what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call
“a reinterpretation of the past in the present” and is often conditioned by
political contexts.19

Rebecca used her writing as a way not only to construct and reconstruct
her own recollections but also, by donating them to the historical society, to
transfer those memories to other generations. As historian Robert McGlone
suggests, memories must be processed for years to achieve permanence, and
Rebecca did this through her writing. McGlone also explains that memo-
ries of experience are reassembled, rather than re-experienced. People use schemas to assist them in recalling events and experiences, finding patterns in everyday events. In fact, these schemas develop into scripts that provide frameworks for remembering important routines and events, particularly highly emotional events. As he notes, people turn their experiences into stories that they use to create structure and to understand meaning. They incorporate their stories into “higher-level schemas,” which are themes that address different periods in life. This is called “autobiographical memory,” which helps people define themselves.

It is important to understand why someone remembers certain events and forgets others, why events are remembered in particular ways, and why memories change over time. Memory, in effect, is not about how the past is represented but rather why people accept or reject representations of the past. The way in which people remember the past is itself a political act, as individual narratives become part of the collective and communal memory of places or events.

Rebecca spent sixty years of her life recounting numerous memories of her time at sea but, in particular, one story in which she allegedly displayed a tremendous amount of heroism by nursing her husband through his debilitating illness and saving his ship with her navigational skills. Most important in this story is not whether the event occurred or how it happened, but how Rebecca told and altered the story over the next sixty years, continually adding to and reconstructing the memory, until she finally recounted the tale from start to finish in two accounts she dictated in her last year of life. In the second half of this book I attempt to analyze and explore the reasons behind Rebecca’s repeated recollection of these stories, and what this continuous remembrance and recounting means to her legacy.

Rebecca’s story, however, could only become legend with the collusion of the community; otherwise, it would have died with her, as she had no direct heirs, only a sister who lived in California and one brother left in the village. Historians of memory argue that society can take up individual memories and stories and preserve them collectively for many reasons. Rebecca represented herself as a maritime heroine, defined by a two-week experience in her eight decades of life, and the community continues to perpetuate that legacy in museum exhibits and community lore. The community, essentially, reified Rebecca’s legacy through continuous performance of tales, images, and rituals, which many historians claim are necessary for the perpetuation of memory. Rebecca’s individual story became part of the history of Cape Cod; her maritime experience lived on as part of the broader social and cultural collective history.
These theories explain how societies preserve memory, but they do not suggest why Sandwich residents would have chosen to embrace Rebecca as an important part of their legacy. Some historians suggest that many communities use memory and reflections on the past as a way to resist rapid change within a society. Often these visions of the past reflect a common heritage, whether based on racial, class, or regional ties. They also call up a past that is unsullied by strife or corruption. Sandwich experienced rapid economic, social, and political change. In the nineteenth century Sandwich moved from an agrarian maritime economy to one dominated by the industrialized glass factory. With industrialization came Irish immigrants, who fundamentally changed the face of the community. After the Civil War, the maritime industry continued to decline, and the glass industry also faltered. The 1880s saw the rise of a railcar manufactory right down the street from Rebecca’s home. This heavy industry employed hundreds of Italian immigrants in the early twentieth century. Sandwich experienced political change, too, as the town of Bourne, which included Rebecca’s village, broke away in the early 1880s. Rebecca stood as a symbol of maritime heritage. She defined herself as the captain’s widow, and the community accepted her legacy and perpetuated it through newspaper articles about her, oral histories, and physical museum exhibits that continue to this day. Historians have also memorialized Rebecca’s actions, as no fewer than ten have featured her story in their works on the American maritime world or on local Sandwich history. Although I focus on Rebecca’s stories and perceptions of society in the text, I also interweave the history of Sandwich and West Sandwich in order to locate Rebecca in a specific local historical context and to explain why the town readily embraced her memories.

Rebecca Burgess grew up in a town buffeted by change. She fashioned herself as a legend by being a symbol of continuity, a woman who embraced typical nineteenth-century values of gentility, philanthropy, and religiosity, and through her focus on her maritime activities in which she engaged from 1854 to 1856. She negotiated successfully between her often unconventional life and the contradictory definitions of Victorian womanhood, and ultimately by publicly telling the story of her adventures on the sea to a community needing to hold onto the heritage it was losing; and, by donating artifacts to the local museum, she reinforced her identity as the genteel captain’s widow. Rebecca’s life became a legend because, as the community changed, she provided a living link to the maritime past. She succeeded in becoming part of the community’s collective memory as her story became formalized in museums and history books, and as her story continues to intrigue historians and Cape Cod enthusiasts today.
Writing this book has been a challenge. Although I have the benefit of Rebecca’s extensive journal entries and recollections, I have nothing written by her from her childhood or from the three decades before her death. I do not know if she stopped recording in journals or if she failed or refused to retain those materials. I could not find material written by Rebecca’s friends or family, with the exception of the notes her husband, William, wrote in her journal and one of his letters that she placed at the front of one of her journals. Character sketches of William are colored by her perception of him. What we know of her family’s values reflect her point of view alone. In an effort to provide a clearer picture of Rebecca’s world I have used whatever primary sources I could find as well as the prodigious secondary source literature on Massachusetts and the maritime world in the nineteenth century. The focus of the book, however, remains on her perceptions, necessitated by the available source base.

This book has been challenging for another reason: I do not know whether to believe the story of heroism that has made Rebecca legendary. No one has ever questioned the veracity of her tale, but there is no evidence besides her own stories to corroborate her actions, and there is counterevidence to refute her claims that she single-handedly saved the Challenger at a time of great peril to captain, crew, and cargo. I will let the reader decide if her story rings true. However, I do not pretend to be objective—I would have liked Rebecca, and I find her an interesting and admirable character deserving of a book-length study. No matter what she truly did in her lifetime, she exhibited independence and a resilience of spirit that I find extremely remarkable. I use lengthy quotes in each chapter, and, in deference to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s excellent study of another resilient New England woman from the colonial era, I begin each chapter with lines from Rebecca’s journals.27 By doing so I hope readers can get a better impression of who Rebecca was—or who she wanted us to believe she was.

In the end we will never really know the “real” Rebecca Burgess, because we only have her version of events, her stories, and her musings on society. Getting at the “truthfulness” of her image and her stories, however, is not the aim of this book. Instead, I hope that the book suggests answers to the questions of how and why a woman raised in the strict guidelines of the “Cult of True Womanhood” positioned herself as a maritime heroine and why the community perpetuated that legend. In understanding Rebecca’s story, we can better comprehend how people fashion legacies, present public personas, and try to claim their own “places” in history.