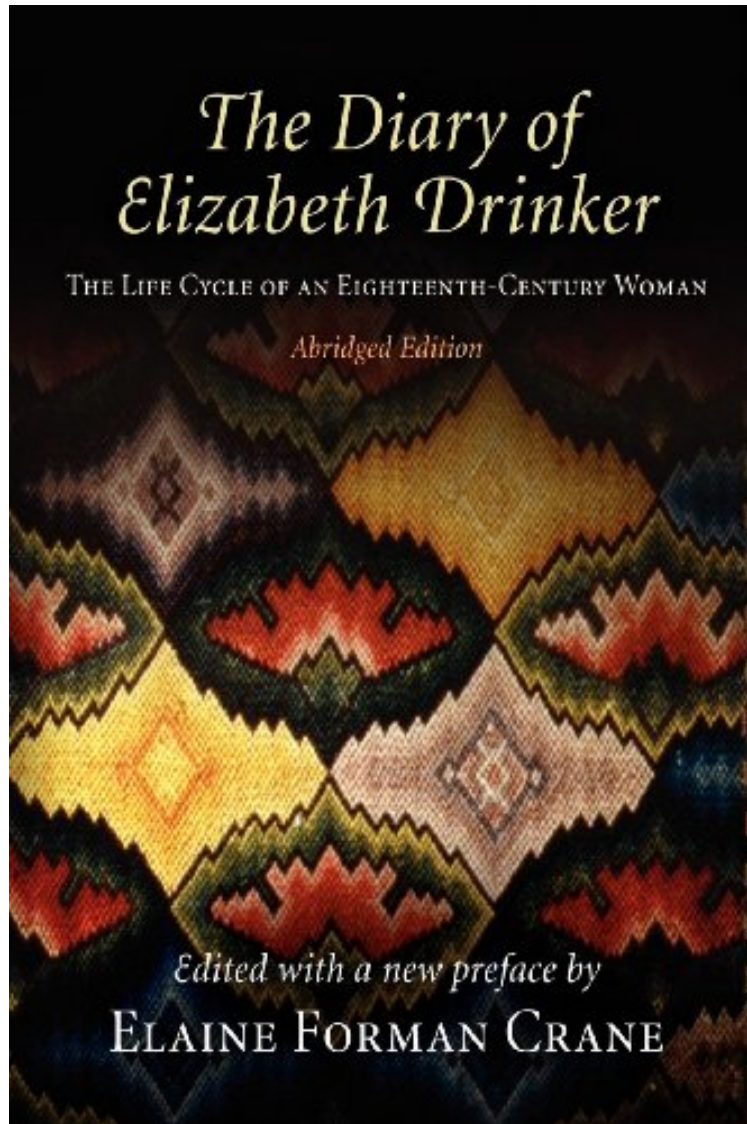


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The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman

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The journal of Philadelphia Quaker Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker (1735-1807) is perhaps the single most significant personal record of eighteenth-century life in America from a woman's perspective. Drinker wrote in her diary nearly continuously between 1758 and 1807, from two years before her marriage to the night before her last illness. The extraordinary span and sustained quality of the journal make it a rewarding document for a multitude of historical purposes. One of the most prolific early American diarists her journal runs to thirty-six manuscript volumes Elizabeth Drinker saw English colonies evolve into the American nation while Drinker herself changed from a young unmarried woman into a wife, mother, and grandmother. Her journal entries touch on every contemporary subject political, personal, and familial. Focusing on different stages of Drinker's personal development within the domestic context, this abridged edition highlights four critical phases of her life cycle: youth and courtship, wife and mother, middle age in years of crisis, and grandmother and family elder. There is little that escaped Elizabeth Drinker's quill, and her diary is a delight not only for the information it contains but also for the way in which she conveys her world across the centuries.

"[Drinker's] diary, which spans the years 1758 to 1807, is the most substantial woman's diary that survives from eighteenth-century America; and it ranks with the diaries of Samuel Sewall, William Byrd, Landon Carter, John Adams, and William Bentley in its richness as a source for understanding the social and cultural history of the period it covers." American Historical About the Author Elaine Forman Crane is Professor of History at Fordham University. She is the author of *Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell* and editor of the journal *Early American Studies*, the latter also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Preface A Woman for All Seasons Elizabeth Drinker and I go back a long way. We met by chance at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania about three decades ago, and since then courtesy of her diary and the passage of time she has been a friend, sister, or mother (depending on her age and mine). I have always maintained that historians are drawn to specific subjects consciously or unconsciously and for reasons that do not easily succumb to analysis. I suspect this is why there are aspects of Elizabeth Drinker's life that resonate in my own world, something that was repeatedly confirmed during the ten years and more it took to transcribe, edit, and annotate what turned out to be two thousand pages of text. The three-volume unabridged diary was published in 1991; the condensed *Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman* in 1994. This preface marks the republication of the abridged version. Its purpose is to review the secrets that the diary has already yielded and to propose new ways of translating Drinker's words into historical lessons. While most historians who have mined the diary since its twentieth-century incarnation have had something to say about Drinker as a person, the majority have taken greater interest in Drinker's world than in Drinker herself. As a result, many recent scholars have sifted through the diary for information about Philadelphia, yellow fever, the Revolution, or servitude rather than exploring it to construct a biography of an extraordinary woman. Nevertheless, a few historians have tried to unravel Drinker's personal philosophy and, in so doing, have come closer to revealing the person behind the quill. Susan Branson, for example, approaches Drinker through her political ideology in the context of postrevolutionary developments in Philadelphia. Her analysis of Drinker's language shows the emergence of Drinker's strong Federalist principles, putting to rest the assumption that women were apolitical creatures. Drinker's political outlook also takes center stage in an article by Judith Van Buskirk, who uses the diary to investigate the experiences of women during the Revolutionary War. Van Buskirk concludes that what Elizabeth Drinker and other women saw and heard under the British and American occupations of Philadelphia shaped their political persuasions and that, because of these experiences, Drinker remained a keen observer of politics throughout her life. True enough, although one could argue that women (like Drinker) were politically savvy long before the revolutionary movement forced them to take sides. Indeed, as Branson and Van Buskirk note, the proliferation of newspapers and pamphlets that flooded Philadelphia in the pre- and postrevolutionary years were ideology-forming weapons. Drinker's voracious appetite for the written word also holds Mary Kelley's attention in her highly acclaimed book, *Learning to Stand and Speak*. Kelley points to Drinker's eclectic taste in reading, the multiplicity of themes and range of opinions that attracted her, as evidence of Drinker's tolerant world view. If her tolerance had limits (which it did!), Drinker was still, as Kelley puts it, a cosmopolitan reader. By linking Drinker to her literary preferences, Kelley also draws attention to Drinker as a biographical subject rather than as a mere backdrop to external and peripheral issues. Straddling the two themes (Drinker as subject and Drinker's diary as research tool) is Helena Wall's essay on illness in Elizabeth Drinker's household and her role as caregiver. Wall converts Drinker's concerns about the fragility of life into a thesis about childhood without sacrificing Drinker's personal reaction to sickness and death. On the one hand, Wall addresses Drinker's grief over the loss of her young son, Henry, in 1769; on the other, she interprets the experience of childhood through the diary of a mother and grandmother. More directly concerned with health as it related to the development of medical practices in Philadelphia, Sarah Blank Dine deftly culls Drinker's journal for

information about changing views on childbirth and inoculation as the eighteenth century wanes. Although Drinker is somewhat reticent about her own experiences, she freely discusses the many pregnancies and lying-ins of her three daughters. As for inoculation and vaccination, Drinker confirms the distrust and ambivalence about these procedures that lingered as Philadelphians debated the best method of keeping smallpox at bay. Historians have also found that Drinker's diary lends insight into race and racial relationships in the new Republic, topics analyzed by both Susan Klepp and Alison Duncan Hirsch. In a 1994 *William and Mary Quarterly* article on racial differences in mortality in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, Klepp notes that, among her other findings, she learned from Drinker just how elusive social equality was for blacks even as emancipation freed African Americans from slavery. Hirsch's interest in multiraciality led her to consider Drinker's use of words to describe racial distinctions. As a result, Hirsch was able to draw conclusions about the words mulatto and yellow as they were understood in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. One of the amazing aspects of Drinker's fifty-year journal apart from its formidable length is the way historians have drawn on it each time their attention turns in a new direction. Elizabeth Drinker may not have been a feminist as the term is commonly defined, but as a source for the study of women's lives and the interpretation of gender roles in early America, the diary has few competitors. Debra O'Neil investigated the plight of single, female domestic workers through Drinker's pages and concluded that the shift from indentured servitude to wage labor created hardships, particularly for single women. More recently, Karin Wulf has expanded on O'Neil's assertions about the economic frailty of never married and widowed women as they clustered in urban areas in the eighteenth century. Although Wulf is more interested in the less affluent women with whom Drinker came in contact, the diary also proves an unusual resource for understanding the place of more prosperous single women in expanded households. Mary Sandwith, Elizabeth's single older sister, took up residence with Elizabeth and Henry Drinker, sharing their home and domestic responsibilities during her entire adult life. As studies of gender and the role of men in society take their place alongside women's studies, historians have turned to Drinker's diary for information about male and female relationships. Jessica Kross has demonstrated through the diary how Drinker used her bedroom as public space for her female friends. Nicole Eustace turned to Drinker to examine gendered views of courtship, its connection to romantic love, and the socioeconomic concerns of the time. And Thomas Hallock may have used Drinker's journal only sparingly, but it did buttress his argument that men and women took botanical expeditions not only to commune with nature but also to communicate with people of their own sex. He found that the shared pleasures of the garden and forest established and enhanced same-sex bonds. It is also interesting that Drinker has caught the attention of scholars outside the textual world. Linda Baumgarten, whose expertise is material culture, cites Drinker to show how clothing reflects time, place, and circumstances. In a section on mourning apparel, Baumgarten quotes the diary to show the extent of Drinker's grief at the loss of her daughter. She then implies that the distribution of the deceased's clothing links the living to the dead and, perhaps, mitigates the anguish of separation. While the foregoing array of topics that Drinker and historians have joined forces to plumb is hardly exhaustive, the journal offers a range of research opportunities that scholars have only begun to contemplate. Drinker may not have realized it herself, but she was a perceptive observer of human relationships as well as human nature, and historians would do well to consider what she has to say about the lifestyles of the rich and not-so-famous in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Indeed, early American family life among the well-to-do is surprisingly understudied. Henry and Elizabeth Drinker provide an unusual example of a husband and wife who celebrated more than four decades together. By all accounts it was a successful marriage. What made it so? Did they have clearly defined roles? When did Elizabeth bend? Henry? How elite was elite if Elizabeth made and mended clothing for servants? Was Henry's masculine role compromised if he took his daughter fishing or attended the birth of a grandchild? Henry and Elizabeth were born a year apart, making them very close in age. Yet a surprising number of early American husbands were at least a decade older than their wives. How did a marriage fare with such age disparity? Did it exaggerate female dependence? Male paternalism? A closer look at Drinker's comments about friends and family might generate interesting even unforeseen results. Childhood and sibling relationships have begun to attract the attention of historians. With reports about her five surviving children dotting nearly every page, the journal is a wonderful source for exploring the experience of children as well as the bonds between brothers and sisters in youth and adulthood. And as Betsy Sandwith becomes Elizabeth Drinker and as Elizabeth becomes a parent and then a grandparent, generational connections arise as topics ripe for research. Historians have taken note of the relationship between mothers and daughters. What about mothers and sons? Fathers and daughters? How often does Elizabeth Drinker take her grandchildren under her wing? Does she spoil them? Quite the opposite. Moreover, by extending her commentary beyond family, Drinker allows us to probe female relationships, networks, and connections. Fifty years in Philadelphia. Name a topic and Drinker mentions it. Whether about weather, food, transportation, mermaids, animals, secular religion, or cancer, Elizabeth Drinker's diary permits a look backward and, perhaps, forward as well. Would she be pleased that we were eavesdropping on the past by peering into her private writings? She intimated she would rather have kept her diary out of the public's reach. Certainly she could not have predicted a wide circulation, much less the ability of historians and literary scholars to intrude on her space. Ever a pragmatist, however, Drinker would have agreed that a better understanding of the past is a worthy goal for the

present.