The Prescott Girls – Facts and Fiction

The Prescott Girls is a work of historical fiction inspired by real people and real objects connected to the Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine. The story draws from documented history and surviving artifacts. At the same time, many scenes, conversations, and daily experiences in the book are imagined in order to bring the past to life.

This guide is intended to help readers explore the relationship between historical evidence and storytelling. Some details in the book come directly from the historical record, while others have been thoughtfully imagined where the record is incomplete.

As you read, consider what can be known from evidence, what must be inferred, and how imagination can be used responsibly to create a fuller picture of the past.

The following notes explain which parts of the story come directly from historical evidence and which elements were created for the narrative.

The Prescott Sisters

Beckie, Louisa, and Sallie Prescott were real sisters who lived with their mother in the old Pownalborough Court House during the 1830s. By that time the building, which had once served as a courthouse, tavern, and post office, had been converted into a residence.

Several objects connected to the Prescott family still survive. Among the most important are the needlework samplers stitched by Beckie and Louisa Prescott and by their mother. These samplers remain preserved today and provided inspiration for many details in the story. A third unfinished sampler on display may have belonged to Sallie Prescott.

Other objects that appear in the book, such as chalk sketches, sleds used in winter, household tools, toys, and the loom mentioned in the story, do exist and may have been part of their everyday life.

What is known from historical evidence

- The Prescott sisters were real and lived in the Court House
- The building had been repurposed as a residence by the 1830s
- Samplers created by members of the family still exist today

- Objects similar to those described in the story were part of daily life

What has been imagined

- The sisters' conversations, personalities, and daily interactions
- Specific moments involving the objects described in the story

Questions for discussion

- What can objects like samplers tell us about the lives of children in the past?
- What kinds of details are usually missing from historical records?
- How does imagining conversations help bring historical figures to life?

Life at the Pownalborough Court House

The Pownalborough Court House was built in 1761 and originally served as the center of government for Lincoln County, which once included a large part of what is now Maine. By the time the Prescott family lived there, the building had long since ceased to function as a courthouse and had become a family home.

Historical records confirm that members of the Prescott family lived in the building and that it was used for multiple purposes over time. In the story, Uncle Thomas is described as running the local post office while Uncle William maintains the property. These roles reflect historical accounts connected to the building and its occupants.

The girls' exploration of the large rooms, staircases, and former court spaces is imagined, but it reflects the unusual experience of growing up inside a structure that had once served as a center of public life.

What is known from historical evidence

- The Court House was built in 1761 and served as a government building
- It was later used as a residence by members of the Prescott family
- The building had multiple functions over time, including postal use

What has been imagined

- The girls' movements through the building and their specific experiences inside it
- Detailed descriptions of how spaces were used in daily life

Questions for discussion

- How might living in a former public building feel different from living in a typical home?
- What clues can buildings provide about how they were used in the past?
- Why might some details about daily life inside the building not be recorded?

Hannah and the Quaker Connection

The character Hannah in the story is inspired in part by Ann Canby, whose sampler was discovered alongside those made by members of the Prescott family. Ann's brother, Caleb Canby, married Jane Claypoole, Betsy Ross's daughter.

Ann Canby was part of a Quaker family, and this connection provided a historical pathway for introducing ideas that were circulating in Quaker communities during the early nineteenth century.

The Prescott family themselves were Congregational rather than Quaker, though communities in New England often interacted across church lines. Conversations between children from different families would not have been unusual.

What is known from historical evidence

- Ann Canby was connected to the Prescott family through associated artifacts
- The Canby family had ties to Betsy Ross's family
- Quaker communities were active in the region and shared ideas across communities

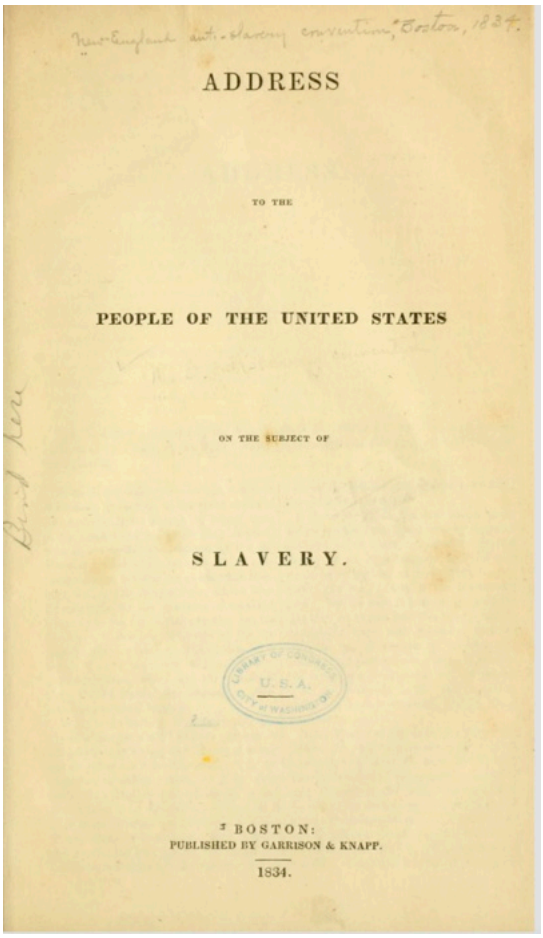
What has been imagined

- The character of Hannah and her specific interactions with the Prescott girls
- The particular conversations depicted in the story

Questions for discussion

- How might ideas have spread between different communities in the early nineteenth century?
- Why might conversations between children not appear in historical records?
- How can a fictional character help introduce real historical ideas?

The Sugar Boycott and Abolition



There is no evidence that the real Prescott girls participated in abolitionist activity or took part in organized boycotts.

However, the ideas discussed in the book are drawn from the historical environment of the 1830s. During this time, abolitionist movements were expanding throughout the northern United States. One form of protest involved refusing to purchase goods produced by enslaved labor.

Quakers were among the earliest and most active supporters of such boycotts. Some refused to purchase sugar, cotton, rum, or tobacco produced on plantations that relied on enslaved labor.

The pamphlet *Address to the People of the United States on the Subject of Slavery* mentioned in the story is a real document from that period.

Young girls publicly debating these issues would have been unusual, but it is not impossible that such conversations might have occurred within families or local communities.

What is known from historical evidence

- Abolitionist movements were growing in the 1830s
- Boycotts of goods produced by enslaved labor were practiced
- Quaker communities played an important role in these efforts
- The pamphlet mentioned in the story is historically real

What has been imagined

- The Prescott girls directly participating in or discussing a boycott

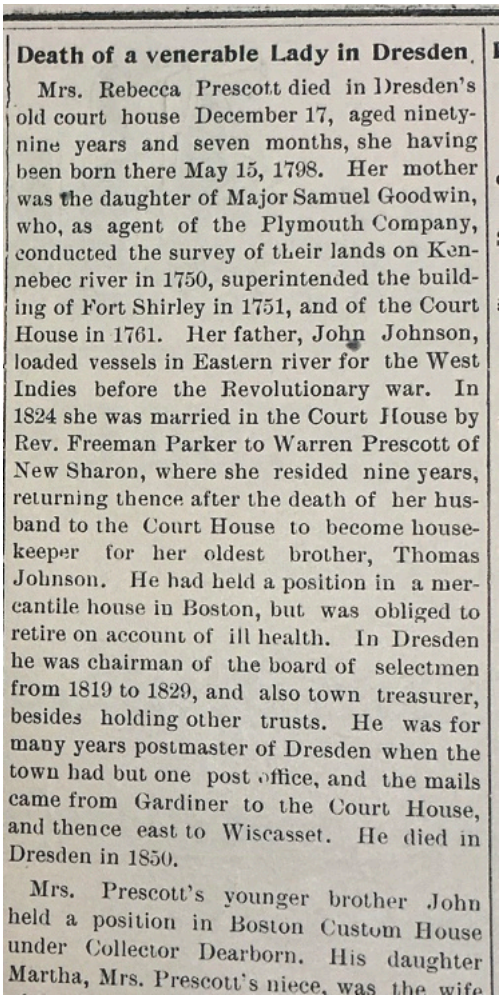
Questions for discussion

- Why might people choose to boycott certain goods?
- Would it have been easy or difficult to take part in a boycott at that time?
- Why might historical records not include children's voices in these movements?

The Prescott Family After Warren Prescott's Death

Warren Prescott died in March of 1833 after falling through the ice on the Kennebec River. His death left the family with debts that needed to be settled. Court records from the period list various household purchases and outstanding debts.

An obituary written in 1897, when the girls' mother died at the age of ninety-nine, records that she had been married to Warren Prescott in the old Court House by Reverend Freeman Parker, who was known locally as the "Blind Preacher of Dresden."



Death of a venerable Lady in Dresden.

Mrs. Rebecca Prescott died in Dresden's old court house December 17, aged ninety-nine years and seven months, she having been born there May 15, 1798. Her mother was the daughter of Major Samuel Goodwin, who, as agent of the Plymouth Company, conducted the survey of their lands on Kennebec river in 1750, superintended the building of Fort Shirley in 1751, and of the Court House in 1761. Her father, John Johnson, loaded vessels in Eastern river for the West Indies before the Revolutionary war. In 1824 she was married in the Court House by Rev. Freeman Parker to Warren Prescott of New Sharon, where she resided nine years, returning thence after the death of her husband to the Court House to become housekeeper for her oldest brother, Thomas Johnson. He had held a position in a mercantile house in Boston, but was obliged to retire on account of ill health. In Dresden he was chairman of the board of selectmen from 1819 to 1829, and also town treasurer, besides holding other trusts. He was for many years postmaster of Dresden when the town had but one post office, and the mails came from Gardiner to the Court House, and thence east to Wiscasset. He died in Dresden in 1850.

Mrs. Prescott's younger brother John held a position in Boston Custom House under Collector Dearborn. His daughter Martha, Mrs. Prescott's niece, was the wife

An obituary also notes that members of her family had once kept enslaved people and that she lived long enough to see slavery abolished thirty-five years before her death.

What is known from historical evidence

- Warren Prescott died in 1833 after falling through the ice
- Court records document the family's financial situation
- The obituary provides details about family history and connections

What has been imagined

- The emotional experiences of the family following his death
- Conversations and decisions made in response to these events

Questions for discussion

- What kinds of information can be found in court records and obituaries?
- What important details about people's lives might be missing from these records?
- How does imagining personal experiences change the way we understand historical events?

Later Lives of the Sisters

Historical records show that the Prescott sisters later became part of a much broader American story. Beckie and Sallie spent many years in Philadelphia, and Beckie later returned to the Court House in Dresden. Louisa married William Jackson Canby, the grandson of Betsy Ross, the

woman traditionally credited with sewing the first American flag.

Members of the extended family eventually traveled west to California, where they grew oranges and preserved the Prescott samplers for nearly two centuries.

Readers interested in Sallie's later life may wish to explore *Sallie & Captain Sam*, which is based on her real diary.

What is known from historical evidence

- The later movements and marriages of the Prescott sisters
- The connection to the Canby family and Betsy Ross
- The preservation of the samplers over generations

What has been imagined

- The personal experiences and decisions that shaped these later lives

Questions for discussion

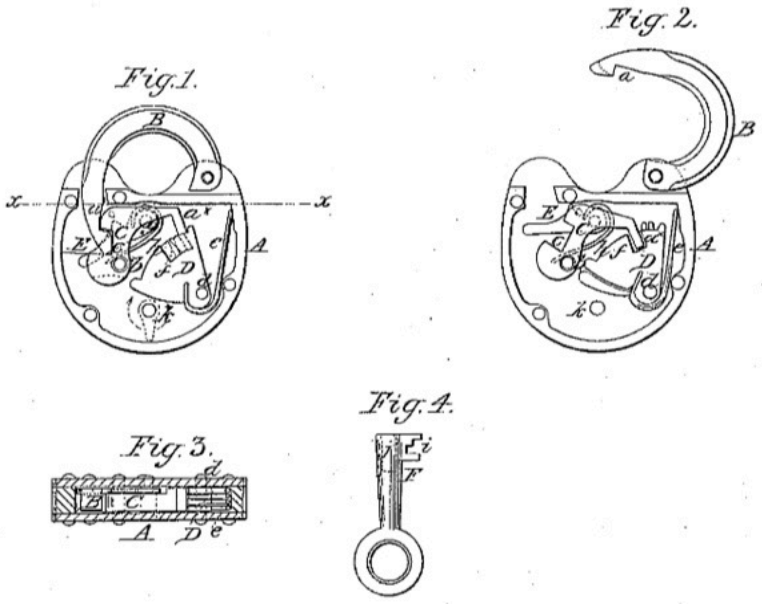
- How can historians trace the lives of individuals over time?
- What kinds of records help connect people across generations?
- Why might some parts of a person's life be well documented while others are not?

The Lock Beckie Examines

One small detail in the story presented an unexpected challenge during research.

In one scene, Beckie examines the inside of a lock. Wanting to describe the mechanism accurately, the author searched for examples of American locks from the 1830s. Surprisingly few detailed illustrations from that period could be located.

The search eventually led to records at the United States Patent Office. Unfortunately, many early patent drawings were lost when a fire destroyed a large portion of the Patent Office records in the nineteenth century.



Although a lock from the exact period could not be located, a patent drawing from the 1860s was found that showed the internal mechanism clearly. That design served as the basis for the description used in the story.

While the exact lock Beckie examines is fictional, the mechanism described in the book reflects the types of mechanical locks that would have been familiar during the nineteenth century.

What is known from historical evidence

- Early patent records once documented lock designs
- Many of these records were lost in a fire
- Later nineteenth-century designs show similar mechanisms

What has been imagined

- The specific lock Beckie examines
- The exact details of that moment in the story

Questions for discussion

- What do historians do when direct evidence is missing?
- How can later sources help reconstruct earlier designs?
- What are the risks and benefits of using informed interpretation?

Bringing History to Life

The conversations, thoughts, and daily scenes in *The Prescott Girls* are imagined. They are intended to help readers experience what life might have felt like for three young sisters growing up in an unusual home during a time of social change.

The Pownalborough Court House still stands today. Visitors can see the Prescott samplers and many related objects preserved there, offering a direct connection between the present and the lives of the Prescott family.

Comparing Evidence and Interpretation

The images below present real objects from the Court House alongside reimagined scenes inspired by them. These comparisons offer one way to think about how historical evidence can be interpreted and expanded into a story.

Questions for discussion

- What details can you observe in the original object?
- What has been added in the reimagined version?
- Which additions seem most believable, and why?