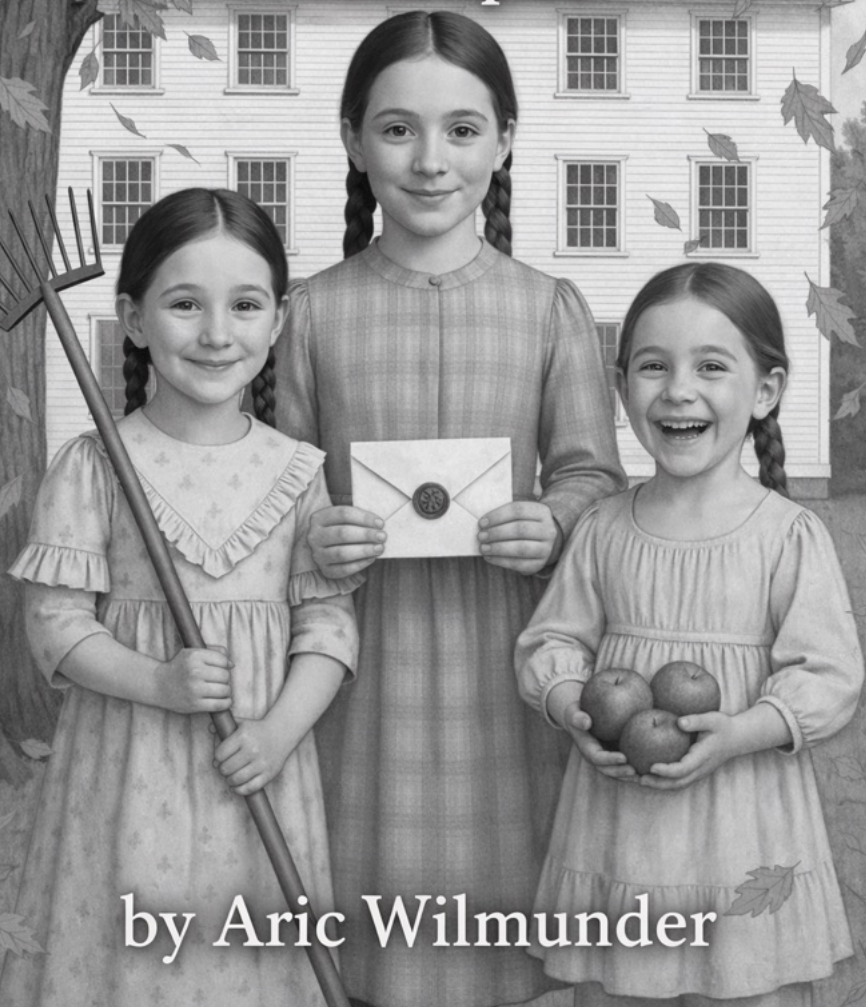


THE PRESCOTT GIRLS

A Letter from Philadelphia

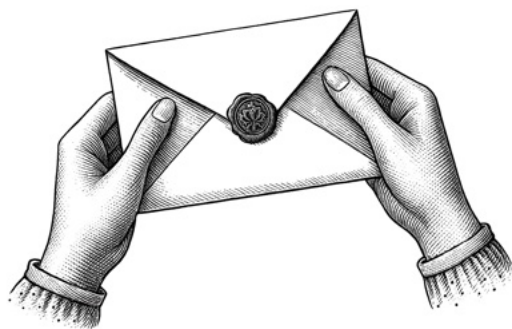


by Aric Wilmunder

The Prescott Girls

Book One

A Letter from Philadelphia



By Aric Wilmunder

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First Edition



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Dedication

To Lori, whose love of quiet stitches and the stories behind them brought these girls' samplers home again.

To the three Prescott sisters and so many like them, who stitched their names into history with needle and thread.

To those dedicated to keeping the story of the Pownalborough Court House alive.

Counties & County Towns of MAINE.

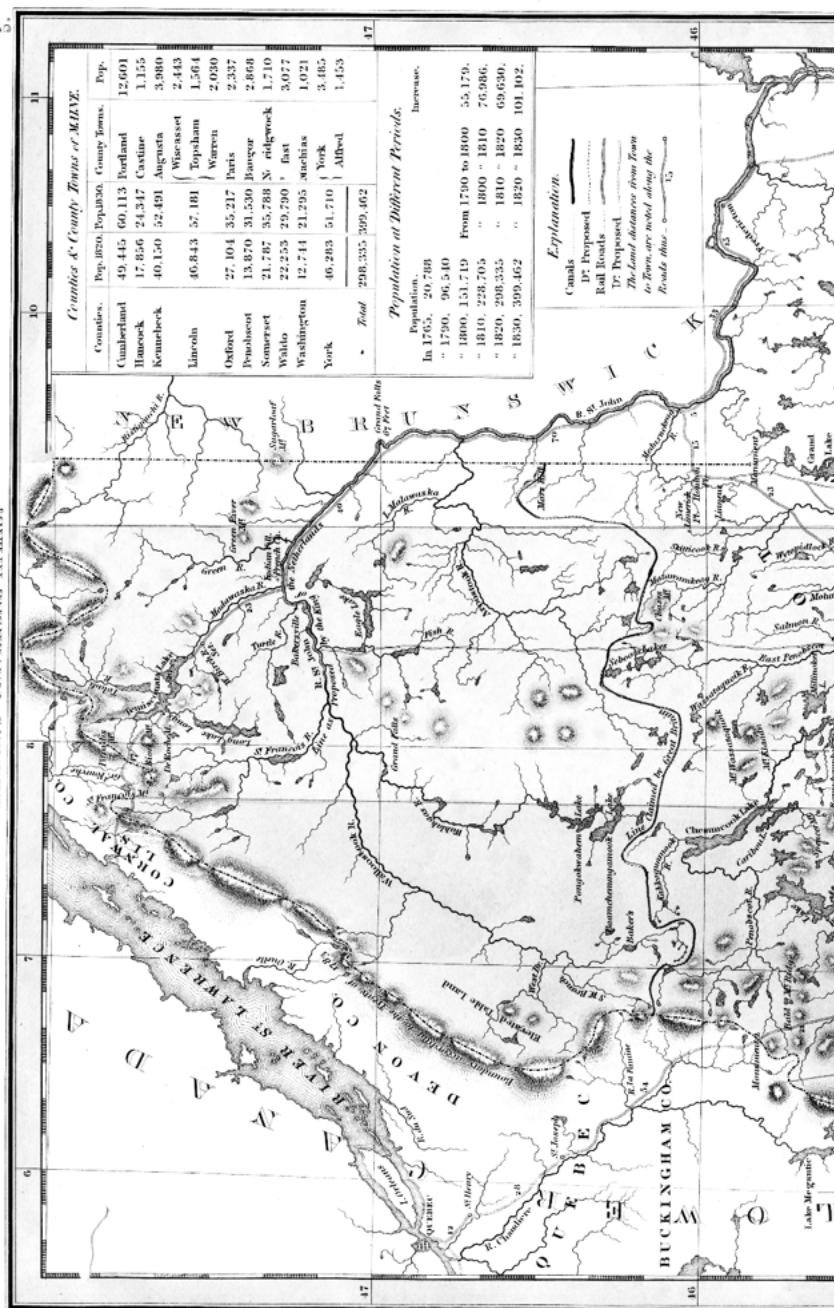
Counties.	Pop. 1870.	Pop. 1880.	County Towns.	Pop.
Cumberland	49,445	60,113	Portland	12,601
Hancock	17,856	24,347	Castine	1,155
Kennebec	40,150	52,491	Augusta	3,980
			Wiscasset	2,443
Lincoln	46,843	57,101	Topsham	1,561
			Warren	2,030
Oxford	22,104	35,217	Paris	2,337
Piscataquis	13,879	31,539	Bangor	2,868
Somerset	21,767	35,788	S. Bridgport	1,710
Waldo	22,253	29,790	East	3,077
Washington	12,714	21,295	Acushnet	1,021
York	46,293	51,710	York	3,485
			Alfred	1,453
Total	298,335	399,462		

Population at Different Periods.

Population.	Increase.
In 1765, 20,788	
" 1790, 96,540	
" 1800, 131,719	From 1790 to 1800 35,179.
" 1810, 228,705	" 1800 - 1810 76,986.
" 1820, 298,335	" 1810 - 1820 69,630.
" 1830, 399,462	" 1820 - 1830 101,127.

Explanation.

- Canals
 Dotted Proposed
 Rail Roads
 Dotted Proposed
 Dotted Proposed
 The dotted distance from Town
 to Town is noted along the
 Route this is 1/2



Map of Maine 1833

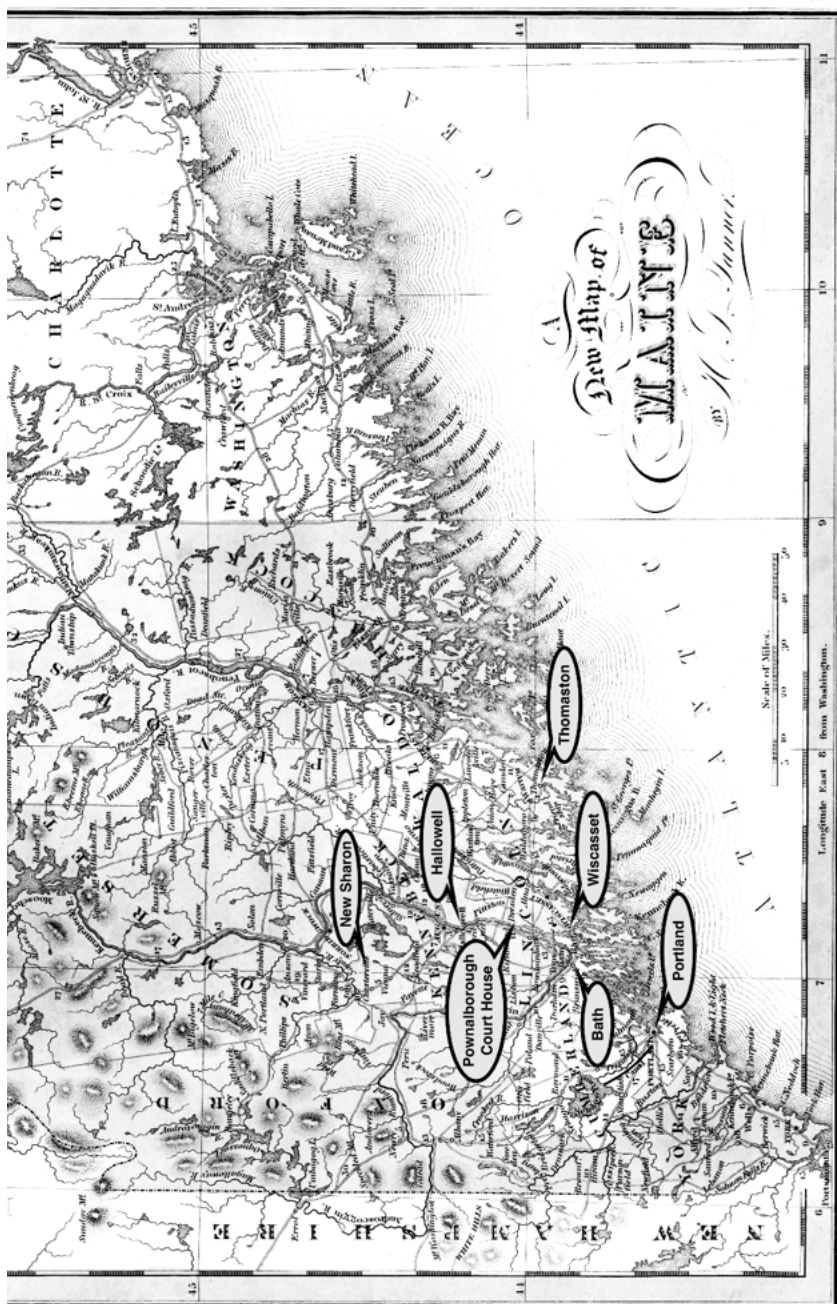




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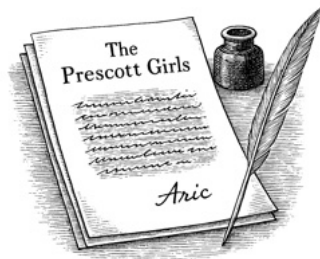
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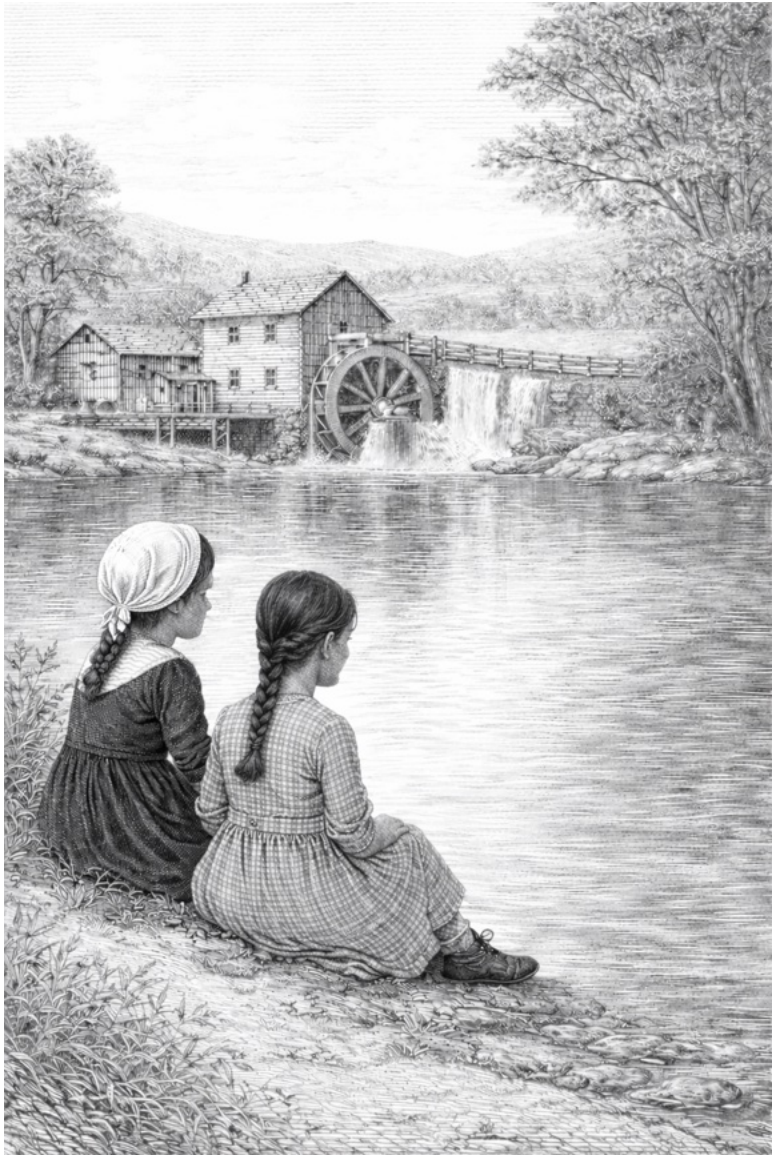
Foreword

This story is drawn from the lives of three real sisters, Beckie, Louisa, and Sallie Prescott, who lived at the Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine, during the 1830s. Their home, now a museum, once echoed with their footsteps and laughter. Within its thick white walls and wide pine floors, they learned, played, stitched, and grew up, leaving behind needlework samplers that still offer a glimpse into their world.

Though this story is a work of fiction, it is rooted in real people, real places, and the patterns of daily life. The courthouse, the schoolroom, village roads, and the nearby Kennebec River are taken from the landscape the Prescott family would have known. Where the historical record falls silent, imagination steps in, guided by the spirit of the time and respect for the lives these girls may have led.

Written for young readers, this book opens a window onto a particular time and place, and onto the quiet courage of three sisters. Their story, once nearly lost, has at last found its way home.





One – Sandy River



Beckie stood by the bank of the Sandy River, using a broken branch to make channels in the mud. Hannah watched quietly as each channel filled with water. Beckie paused, then threw the branch as far as she could into the water, watching it drift, then quicken as it passed over the rocks where the river narrowed.

Beckie drew in a breath and began to speak. “We could not come to meet you until the packing was finished.”

Hannah nodded, and Beckie continued, “Our uncles arrive tomorrow. The journey to Dresden will take us three days.”

The girls sat down along the riverbank. Hannah pulled off a burr that had caught on her plain Quaker dress. She looked over at Beckie’s yellow plaid dress and sighed. “Is there not anything thee might do?” Hannah asked.

Beckie’s brow furrowed. “Mother told us that the court chose the day. They even told us

which things we might take. The house is to be sold off to pay Father's debts."

Hannah interrupted. "But he died a year ago. Why now?"

Beckie explained. "The courts made a reckoning, like sums at school. They decided our home must be sold to make the numbers come out right."

"That does not seem fair," Hannah said softly.

Beckie shrugged and looked out across the river. The steady thump of the sawmill echoed from the other side. She kept a careful watch as her sister Sallie waded in the water, her shoes off, mud between her toes, the hem of her dress dark where the river had soaked it.



Beckie watched as Sallie reached into the water and giggled at the tickle of minnows around her ankles. A dragonfly zipped by, its wings flickering, and Sallie followed it as it landed on a bush.

Beyond the bush, Louisa and her three closest friends were huddled under a tree, the tall grass bent beneath them. Louisa's face was wet with tears, and her friends held her as she sobbed.



Beckie turned to Hannah. "Will you see us off tomorrow?"

"I will be there," Hannah added, "and I will bring thee something special."

That brought a slight smile, but Beckie still looked uneasy, wondering when she and Hannah might next sit side by side at the water's edge.

“And we will write,” Hannah added. “Father says he must go back to his business in Philadelphia. Soon we will be packing as well. My parents talk of my brother being apprenticed to a printer.”

While Hannah spoke, Beckie tugged at a clump of tall grass. The clump gave way suddenly, sending sand and dirt onto their skirts. They laughed, then stood to brush themselves off. They looked around to see if anyone had seen them. Where the clump had been, Beckie spotted a flat stone and picked it up, feeling its smoothness. Perhaps this one could be skipped to the far bank. She threw it skipping across the river, but it still sank short.

A redwing blackbird flew overhead, calling out as it guarded its nest. The warm afternoon began to cool, and Beckie watched the light fade along the Sandy River. Beckie walked to the patch of ferns and flowers on the bank. She and Hannah picked handfuls of buttercups and floated them downriver like tiny boats.

The two girls spoke of small things and large ones, of what they would miss and what might come next. They spoke of Hannah returning to the city, and how everything seemed to be changing in ways Beckie did not understand. Eventually Beckie gathered her sisters for the walk home. Even that felt strange, knowing the only home she had ever known would soon be left behind.





Two – Leaving New Sharon



The house in New Sharon stood nearly empty. Only echoes lingered in its corners, where the daily laughter had given way to tears after Father died. The floors creaked in ways that had once felt familiar, but now sounded strange in the empty rooms. A single chest sat by the front door, its brass fittings dulled with age, packed tightly with what little the family was allowed to keep. Everything else, furniture, books, and dishes, had been taken and sold to satisfy debts that were not theirs.

Outside, Uncle William and Uncle Thomas arrived with their wagon, its bed already lined with hay and woolen blankets. There was a water barrel up front, and lanterns set alongside the baskets of food for the journey.

Uncle Thomas stepped down and adjusted the straps on the horses, while Uncle William released the tailboard for loading. The sky was wide and clear,



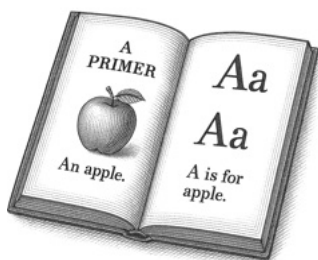
and the air in Maine held a stillness that hinted at the heat to come.

Inside, Mother tied Sallie's bonnet. "There," she said gently, smoothing a wisp of hair from her daughter's cheek. Sallie blinked back tears, but said nothing.

Beckie stood near the hearth, arms crossed. "It is not right," she said, her voice low but steady.

"No," Mother replied. "But it is finished."

Louisa knelt to gather the last of their things: Mother's hymnal, a worn primer, and Beckie's writing slate. She packed them into a linen bag and tightened the drawstring. Her hands moved



quickly, but her mouth was tight with thought.

The sound of heavy boots came from the threshold. Grandfather Samuel Prescott stepped inside. He held the key to the front door in one hand, and a court order for the family to leave their home in the other. Stamped in red in one corner was the date, June 15, 1834.

Mother looked at the paper in his hand and then at the girls. "Step outside for a moment," she said gently. "See if Uncle William needs help with the horses."

When the girls left, Samuel asked, “Is everything ready?” His voice was low, not meeting Mother’s eyes.

“As much as it can be,” she replied.

He looked around, his eyes lingering on the chest. “Is that all you intend to take?”

“It is all that the courts have permitted,” Mother replied.

Samuel nodded once, a small motion, and turned toward her as she approached. “These debts,” Mother said quietly, “were not debts my daughters and I took on, but we carry the costs.”

“My son, your husband, signed the notes,” Samuel said. “And the court requires they be honored.”

“And still the burden falls on us,” she replied. “Yet I am grateful that you stood by us when all else felt uncertain. When creditors came with ledgers and legal claims to be settled after Warren’s death, you read through each page. You spoke calmly to the magistrate on our behalf. You reminded him that Warren was more than a balance of bills to be paid. I could not have faced this alone.”

He did not answer. Instead, Samuel stepped aside as Uncles Thomas and William came inside for the chest. Mother said



goodbye and went out to the wagon. She did not turn toward the house again. The memories of joy there had long since been replaced by grief, then numbness. She walked steadily to the waiting wagon.

Uncle Thomas strained a bit as he and Uncle William lifted the chest into the back.

“Girls,” Uncle Thomas called out gently. “Time to go.”

At the gate, a few neighbors and friends waited quietly. Mrs. Pemberton held out a paper-wrapped bundle of oatcakes. Her daughter Hannah stood holding a neatly folded packet and a small posy of wildflowers, already wilting in the sun. “For Dresden,” Hannah said simply, pressing them into Beckie’s hand. Beckie looked at the packet. On the outside in Hannah’s neat script were the words, *“Flower seeds for thy new home.”*



“My family is returning to Philadelphia,” said Hannah. “I will write soon, and often.”

“We will be at the old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden,” Beckie replied. “My Uncle Thomas owns it and is the postmaster. Be sure to send your letters there.”

Uncle Thomas helped Sallie into the back of the wagon, while Louisa, in her usual

independent way, carried the linen bag into the front and stepped over the seat to join her sister.

Beckie paused and looked at the house. Her jaw was set. Uncle Thomas, always the gentleman, offered Beckie both his hands. She took them, and he lifted her in.

Next, Uncle Thomas helped Mother into the front seat, where he and Uncle William sat beside her.

“We should have taken more,” Beckie muttered.

“Mother said there was nothing left to take that did not bear the judge’s seal,” Louisa replied.

Sallie leaned into Beckie, looking at the wildflowers by the gate. “Will there be flowers where we are going?”

Beckie blinked, surprised by Sallie’s gentle, unexpected question. “Perhaps. We shall see. If not, we will plant some.”

Uncle William took the reins and made a soft clucking sound to the horses. The wagon began to move.

Dust rose behind them as they left New Sharon. The road ahead wound southward through fields and forests toward Dresden, where the old courthouse stood waiting on the banks of the Kennebec River. It was not home. Not yet. But soon it would be.



Beckie's Sampler Today



Stitched by Rebecca “Beckie” G. J. Prescott in 1835. Now preserved at the Pownalborough Court House Museum in Maine.

Historical Notes

Beckie, Louisa, and Sallie Prescott were real sisters who lived with their mother in the upstairs rooms of the old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine. The building, once a courthouse, tavern, and post office, became their home in the 1830s. Many of the details in the book come from their documented lives and surviving objects, including the samplers stitched by Beckie and Louisa, and by their mother. A third unfinished sampler on display may have been Sallie's. Other objects that appear in the story, such as the chalk sketches, the snow sled, the loom, and the Noah's Ark toy, reflect items that would have been part of their daily world.

Uncle Thomas did run the Post Office, and Uncle William maintained the property. Hannah is inspired by Ann Canby, whose Quaker sampler was found alongside those made by the Prescott family.

While there is no evidence that the real Prescott girls were involved in organized abolitionist activity, the ideas discussed in the story are drawn from the historical setting in which they lived. The girls were Congregational, with later ties to the Quaker community. Quakers in particular played a

leading role in boycotting goods produced by enslaved labor, including sugar, cotton, rum, and tobacco. The pamphlet *Address to the People of the United States on the Subject of Slavery* is a real document from that era. Young girls speaking publicly about these ideas would have been unusual, though not impossible.

Their mother's obituary, written in 1897 when she died at age ninety-nine, records that she was married to Warren Prescott in the old courthouse by Reverend Freeman Parker, known locally as the Blind Preacher of Dresden. It also notes that her ancestors had once kept enslaved people there and that she lived long enough to see slavery abolished thirty-five years before her death. Warren Prescott died in March of 1833 when he fell through the ice on the Kennebec River. Court records list numerous household purchases and outstanding debts. These debts needed to be paid after his death.

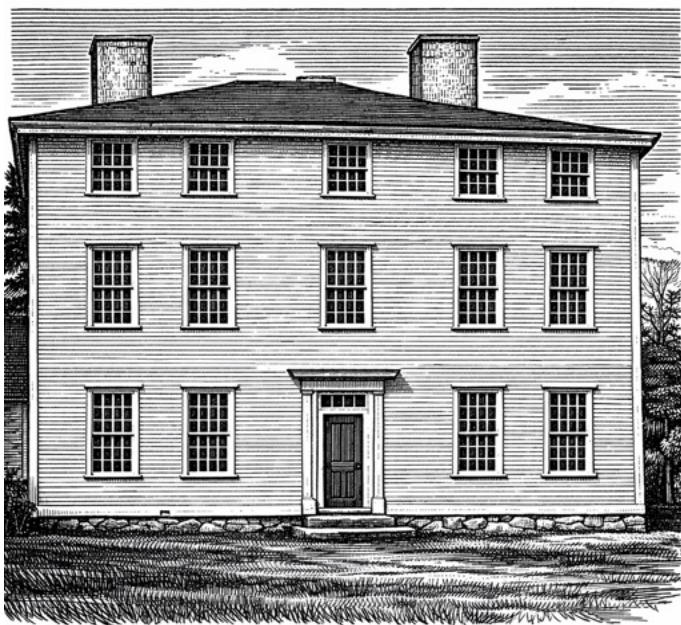
What can be documented of the sisters' later lives shows them to have been part of a wider American story. Beckie and Sallie spent many years in Philadelphia, and Beckie later returned to the courthouse. Louisa married William Jackson Canby, the grandson of Betsy Ross, the woman traditionally credited with sewing the first American flag. Their descendants traveled west to California, where

they grew oranges and preserved the samplers together for nearly two centuries.

Readers who would like to learn more about Sallie's later life can look to *Sallie & Captain Sam*, which is based on her real diary.

The conversations, thoughts, and daily scenes in this book are imagined, but they are grounded in the historical record. They are offered as a way to bring to life not only what is known to have happened, but what might have been experienced by three young sisters growing up in an unusual home during a time of change.

The Pownalborough Court House still stands today. The samplers and many related objects can be seen there, connecting the present to the lives of the Prescott family.



Sources & Acknowledgments

Wardrobe

Selected illustrations in this book draw upon garments in the Historic Textile & Costume Collection at the University of Rhode Island and the Maine Historical Society collections. Each of these pieces is identified by its Maine Memory Network (MMN) number so that the original object may be located:

- MMN #105390 - Brown cotton print dress with large cape collar and full sleeves, c.1830s
- MMN #105985 - White Printed Cotton Mid-19th century
- MMN #105806 - Red Print Cotton 1843

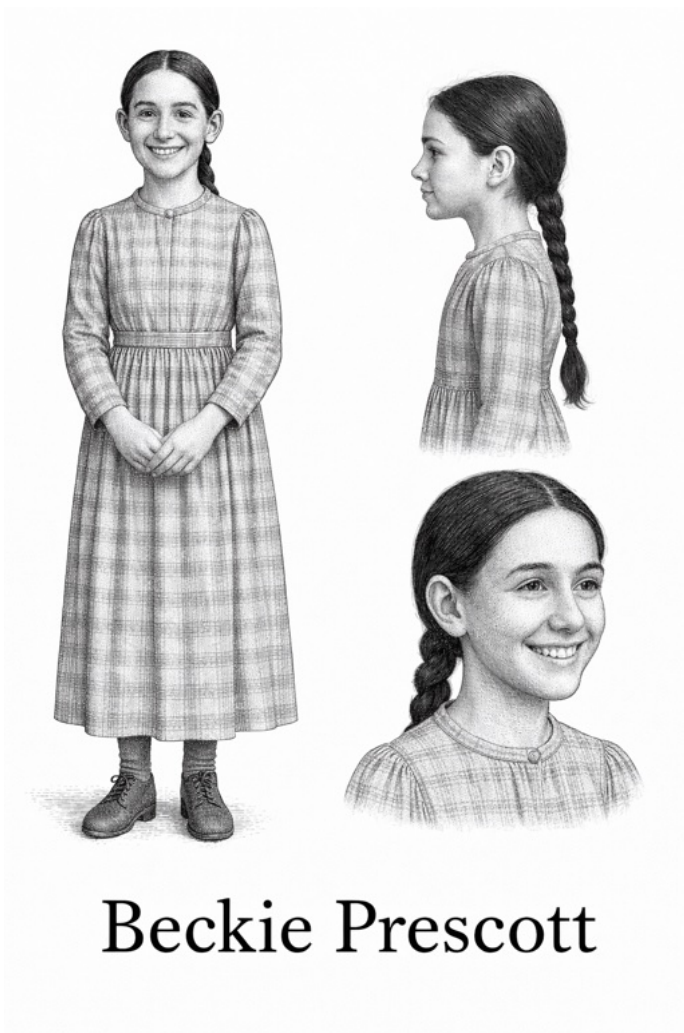
Map of Maine, 1833

Tanner, Henry Schenck, “A New Map of Maine by H.S. Tanner” (1833). *Maine Bicentennial*. 27.

<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainebicentennial/27>

Character Studies

Illustrations prepared during development to ensure historical accuracy of clothing and consistency of facial features.

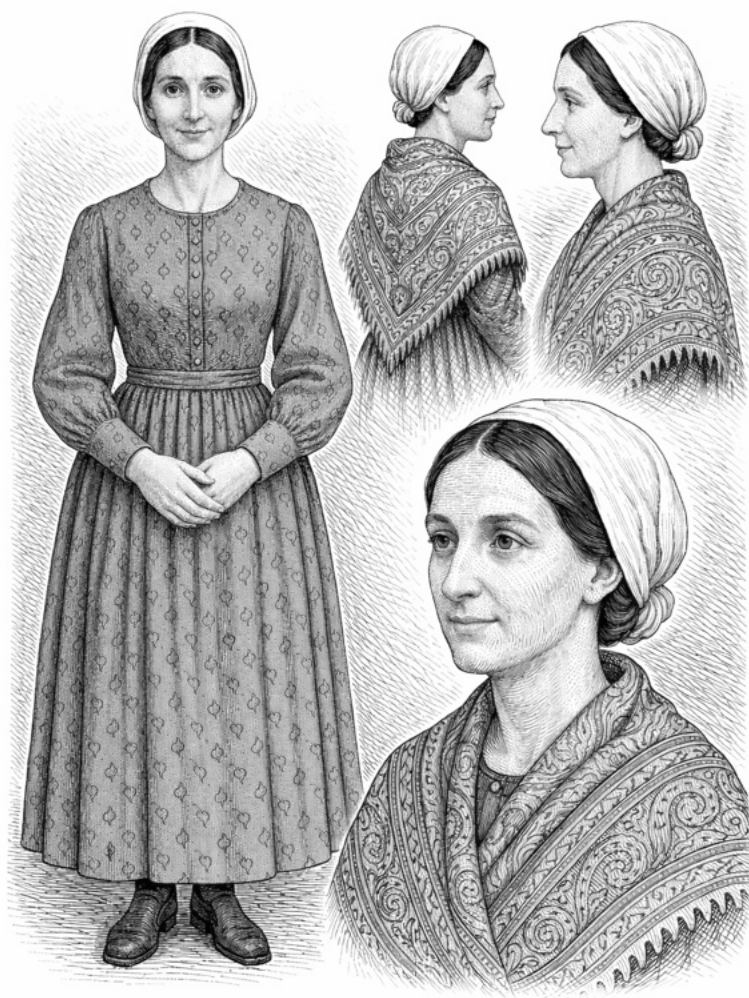




Louisa Prescott



Sallie
Prescott



Rebecca Johnson Prescott



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