

Sarah Osborn's Impact, Doug Hayhoe, October 2022

The First Great Awakening was a turning point in the history of America, especially of the original thirteen colonies. While prominent men such as Jonathan Edwards stand out, women such as Sarah Osborn played a major role, even though this has not always been recognized.

The First Great Awakening swept through New England in the 18th century, just a few decades before the war of independence. Led by evangelists George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Gilbert Tennant, it changed the moral fabric of the thirteen colonies. You might say it came just in time, as deism was taking hold of America's future leaders such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. The deists were proposing the idea that the only truths worth accepting are those established by reason alone. In the great awakening, Spirit-filled theologians and evangelists were persuading people to accept by faith the truths revealed in the Bible, God's living Word, including the experience of new birth.

Perhaps you've read biographies of the Christian men who led the Great Awakening in early America. What is less known is the key role that women played. That story is now being told. I refer particularly to the 2013 biography, [*Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America*](#), by the American historian, Catherine A. Brekus. The story of another woman of that time, Phylis Wheatley, a female slave and remarkable Christian poet, will be left for a later occasion.



Figure 1 [Colonial buildings in the Newport Historic District](#) (Daniel Case, 18 February 2008).¹

Osborn's early life and memoir

Sarah Osborn lived in Newport, Rhode Island, in the mid 1700s (Figure 1). She was born in 1714, when the thirteen colonies had four hundred thousand people. By the end of her life in 1796, their population had increased ten times, rising to four million. Ninety percent worked on farms, while the others lived in small cities such as Boston, New York, and Newport. If you've visited Colonial Williamsburg, you have an idea of what it was like to live in those days. In God's sovereignty, Sarah

lived at a propitious time in the history of America, to give a strong Christian witness to a rapidly growing nation.

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At age 29, Sarah published a memoir of the story of God's work in her life up to that point, filling "140 pages with her bittersweet memories of God's 'dealings' with her" (Brekus, p. 16). While several other Christian women had published writings by that time, it was still a rare thing. Nevertheless, Sarah Osborn wanted to share God's grace with as many as possible. She said, "My intent has been all along to show how God's glorious grace has triumphed over my sins and temptations, infirmities, and everything that has risen in opposition to it" (p. 30).

Here's a summary. At age 17, Sarah stole her mother's money and eloped with a sailor. He soon drowned at sea, leaving her in poverty with a baby son. She returned to her city and started a school, which soon had 60 children, although she earned very little from it. While still in her 20s, she struggled both with deep guilt, at having stolen from her mother, and strong anger, because her mother was ignoring her ongoing need. "So close did she come [to committing suicide]," Brekus writes, "that years later she couldn't reflect back on that near calamity without tears coming to her eyes" (p. 67). At this lowest point, however, God intervened. After several years of deep exercise, Sarah was blessed by the visit of George Whitefield to Newport. His preaching helped her find peace with God and a deep appreciation of God's "Amazing grace" (the title she used for a long chapter in her memoir).

Osborn's selfless service, personal afflictions, and poverty

After her conversion, Sarah gave up "worldly pursuits" such as going to dances and playing cards with her friends, to focus on evangelism, the encouragement of other believers, and the health of the local church. But these were just her extracurricular activities; her main task was supporting herself and her son by running the school and managing the few finances she had at her disposal. She was also developing early signs of a crippling disease that troubled her all her life, likely rheumatoid arthritis. Yet, despite this, she would rise before dawn to start writing. In addition to her memoir, she wrote hundreds of letters with her quill, and numerous diaries, filling more than fifty volumes with thousands of pages. This is why we can study her personal story in such detail today.

Sarah's greatest tragedy was the death of her son at 12 years of age. She never recovered from this. Later challenges came from a second marriage to a widower. He brought two sons into the marriage, as well as large debts that led him into bankruptcy. Then, when one of his sons failed to return from the British-French war, Sarah had to adopt his children, as the wife was unable to cope with their needs. By this time, Sarah had started a boarding school on top of her day school to bring in enough funds to support her family. She wrote in her diary, "This week we knew not what to do for food" (p. 190).

The years when Sarah Osborn was financially burdened, overworked, and in physical pain, saw the greatest blessing in her ministry. She welcomed dozens of young black slaves to her house Sunday evenings to read the Bible to them and teach them how to read – a very controversial move at that time. The controversy got worse when young *white* people joined the black youth for the Sunday evenings. On Monday evenings, Baptist men met at her house; on Tuesday evenings, more blacks; on Thursday evenings, the women's society

she led; and on Fridays, the Baptist women. More than 500 people met at her house every week. Here is a summary of what one Sunday evening get-together looked like:

“It is a cold Sunday night in the middle of winter. Candles and firelight illuminate Sarah Osborn’s house ... seventy slaves and free blacks sit quietly in her kitchen as she reads the Bible to them ... though she has difficulty walking and standing because of her advancing illness, she has never felt more alive ... Crowds of people [are] at her door... waiting to pray, read the Bible, and sing hymns with her.” (p. 249)

Despite welcoming the Baptists, Sarah still attended the Congregational Church. In those days, only men voted in church decisions. Sarah was not deterred by this. When the time came to vote for a new pastor, she had the women persuade their husbands to vote for the one who took the Bible seriously. Though a leader, she seldom prayed before the men who met at her house; she got her husband to pray instead. What a remarkable example of a godly woman’s influence in an age when only men voted, preached, and prayed publicly!

Osborn’s writings

On top of all her activities, Osborn maintained a life of constant writing. Her letters, personal diaries, and spiritual reflections were later published and had as significant an impact on the Great Awakening as most of its male leaders. And without these, we would be ignorant today not only of her outward activities, but more importantly, her inward struggles, feelings, prayers, and firm confidence in God’s Word.

She lived to 82, a ripe old age for that time. We know little about her last 20 years, probably because illness kept her from writing. But we can be certain that she maintained her intense love for the Lord. In 1757, she had written, “Lord, nothing Else can. Nothing else shall satisfy my craving soul but thee ... O fill myself with thyself” (p. 20). And when her final time came, 20 years later, she was more than ready to leave her suffering body behind, “to come face to face with Jesus, her greatest desire” (p. 317).

Osborn’s impact

After her death, her minister, Samuel Hopkins, published excerpts from her diaries, which soon became standard reading for the devout believers in the colonies. Hopkins was just one of many church leaders at that time who had been influenced by her. The outstanding example she had provided in her free education of the blacks led Hopkins to become known, even today, as America’s first abolitionist.

Experiential Christianity was an essential aspect of the Great Awakening, and Sarah Osborn’s diaries show that this is what her life was about. Personal feelings were engaged in her communion with God, arguments with him, disappointments, and exultations. She was not the only evangelical woman leader of the time. Each of the colonial cities no doubt had gifted and devoted women who similarly influenced their communities. But what made her different was her determination to write everything down. This meant that we today can be inspired by her unique contribution to America’s Great Awakening!