

July, 1776

The church bell clanged and muskets thundered. My eldest sister picked me up and rushed outside our farmhouse. Her gasping breaths dampened my cheek as she ran toward the town square. My other sister and our mother, with the baby cradled in her arms, caught up to us when we slowed. We met my father and older brothers near the Congregational Church. Huddled into small groups, normally sedate people shouted their confusion. “What’s going on?” “Why are the neighboring town bells ringing?” “Are the Redcoats coming?”

The selectmen appeared, stood on top of the stairs, and called for silence. One of them read the Declaration of Independence.

My name is Increase Mathews. I was born on December 22, 1772, and this is my earliest memory. It would be years before I understood this day’s importance, but its impact on my life was immediate.

The sixth son, I’m the ninth of ten children. My family is a motley bunch, because we range from short to tall, with fair to dark hair and complexions. My father is Daniel Mathews Jr. who is five feet eight with piercing dark blue eyes. He is a foot taller than my dark-haired mother, Huldah Putnam Mathews. My older brothers are Elisha, John and Eli. Susannah and Sarah are my older sisters. Luther was born this past February. Three other siblings died young: Daniel III at age three; Samuel at age six; and Eunice before her second birthday.

Mother and Father argued the same night. Before this, I’d never heard my mother raise her voice in anger. I was upstairs in my bed, too far away to hear their exact words, but I could hear the outrage which filled their voices. I also didn’t understand why Mother hadn’t picked up and comforted my baby brother who was crying. This was very odd.

Frightened, I crawled from my bed, crept across the room, past Eli who slept, and woke flaxen-haired John.

“I’m scared. Luther’s been crying for a long time. Why are they yelling?”

“It’ll be all right, Ink. Sometimes grownups disagree over important things. Climb into bed with me.”

My parents’ argument continued as we ate breakfast.

“Again, I say.” Mother’s voice increased in volume. “You’re *too old* at age fifty. Lish is too young! I had a hard enough time taking care of the farm when you were previously gone. With two children under age five, what am I supposed to do with them while I’m busy taking *your* place in the fields?”

Father said, “If Elisha comes with me, I can watch out for him. If I leave without him, he’ll sneak away to join. Then, no one will know where he is or what’s happening to him. Isn’t it better if he comes with me?”

My father had used my eldest brother’s formal name, showing the depth of his annoyance. Ordinarily, we always referred to my eldest brother as “Lish”. He would turn fifteen on the 25th of July and be able to join without their consent. Father had made his point about my eldest brother, but Mother was still upset. Their disagreement continued.

Father said, “The King’s absolute rule is tyrannical.” He pointed at Mother. “You *know* the taxes are unfair, Huldah.” His voice intensified. “The current judicial system is a travesty. Anyone born in America—no matter their family surname—is equal to anyone born in Britain.”

He still chafed at the supercilious treatment he’d received from British officers during the French and Indian War. Later, I learned he’d served on the Committee of Correspondence and attended conventions in Worcester, before the Provincial Congress convened in October of 1774. He’d been ready to fight since the English blockade of Boston Harbor.

Mother was unable to dissuade my father to stay home. He remained firm in his conviction that America needed to separate from England.

New Braintree is in central Massachusetts, almost sixty miles due west of Boston. Our farm lay on the southeast corner where Matthews Road met Utley Road. This is close to the town's square, which lies at the juncture of roads leading to Brookfield, Hardwick, and Oakham. Like many New England residences, our house was a white two-story saltbox with a rear porch off the kitchen. A central fireplace heated it in fall and winter.

My father was a millwright and a grain farmer. He owned the sash-type sawmill on Mill Road. Under normal circumstances, his business closed during planting and harvesting seasons, or when the water level in Sucker Brook dropped due to freezing or to extreme drought. Now, he closed his mill for the duration.

Father signed up as a bombardier in Colonel Thomas Craft's artillery. Lish enlisted with the same Worcester County regiment. Susannah decided to live with us when her husband, Jonathan Stone, joined up. My father's younger brother Aaron was a sawyer at our mill, and his family lived in town. My uncle also enlisted in the Continental Army.

Though it was only summer, the men chopped and stacked an enormous amount of firewood next to the house before they left. Father said, "This should be enough to last you through winter, but I hope to be home before then."

I remember the tears in Mother's hazel eyes as she kissed and hugged the men goodbye. "God keep you safe and bring you home!"

Susannah also cried as she bid her newlywed husband farewell. "Promise that you'll come back to me."

Jonathan nodded, then turned away to greet Uncle Aaron who joined their ranks. The men picked up their muskets and packs, then left us behind. Their departure changed our lives