

Aunt Dolly Nichols

By

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Dorothy 'Dolly' Nichols—often referred to as Aunt Dolly—is probably the best known Bear Islander in history. She became something of a legend during the first half of the 1800s but was often caricatured as an eccentric in the literature about Winnepesaukee. Although she never personally owned any land on Bear, Dolly lived on the island for almost 40 years.

Dolly was born in Meredith in c. 1777, the third child of Ensign Robert and Joanna Bryant. The Bryants were Newmarket, NH natives who were among the first dozen families that moved to Meredith (then named New Salem) c. 1764 when it was first being carved out of the wilderness. Their farm was located in the vicinity of today's Parade Road (Rte. 106) and Roller Coaster Road.

Dolly's early life is unknown, although daughters in those days were always required to assist with the family farm until they were married. Sometime before 1800, she married Joseph Nichols, a family friend but a man apparently without clear direction in life. Dolly and Joseph never owned a farm of their own, presumably getting by working for others.

Around 1814, Dolly and Joseph decided on a new venture. They moved to Bear Island where Ensign Bryant and a handful of other settlers had established year-round farms beginning in c. 1801. But Dolly and Joseph did not go out there to farm. They began a ferry boat service between the island and Meredith Neck, not only for the permanent farmers but also for others who purchased land on Bear for seasonal grazing.



Original sign for Dolly's Ferry (Meredith Historical Society)

But things did not go well personally for Dolly. By the late 1820s, she was living alone on the island, her husband and two of her children apparently having died and her third child, Robert M., having left home.¹ One 1849 reporter had a different take on the events, reporting that “she had a quarrel with her husband, and separated from him and a large family, which fact caused her hermit-like life.”²

Whatever the circumstances, Dolly carried on. She maintained “a little shack” that neighbors had built for her across from what is now known as Cattle Landing on Meredith Neck. Here she cultivated a small garden where she grew corn, potatoes, and a few vegetables. She also supplemented her ferry income by furnishing food and drink to fishermen who stopped by her place.³ She even provided some of them with occasional lodging when the weather forced them to take refuge on the island.

Her presence and services were indispensable to fishermen as well as to the island farmers. The ferry service was vital during the first half of the 1800s because boats large enough to transport livestock to the island were few and far between. Dolly obtained her supplies by rowing (in summer) or walking (in winter) to the Weirs where she picked them up at either Davis (Long) Island or from the Old Red Store that occupied what is now the Weirs beach. The most prized of these supplies was rum.

Dolly became “a locally famous character” probably as a result of the 1849 launching of the steamboat, the *Lady of the Lake*.⁴ The *Lady’s* regular travel route took it past Dolly’s cabin on the point at least a couple of times a day. The boat’s pilot was Dolly’s Bear Island neighbor, Eleazer Bickford Jr., who undoubtedly told his passengers about Dolly as part of his informal travelogue.⁵ Her reputation became so widely known that a newspaper correspondent from Springfield, MA, made a special trip to Bear Island in 1851 just to meet her. He referred to her as “a celebrated old woman, in whose history I expected to be interested” and as “the greatest female attraction of Bear Island.”⁶

The reporter came away impressed. “Aunt Dolly is a true philosopher in her way—and a pattern to others for energy and contentment.” In describing the interior of her cabin, he noted “in one corner is a *beaufet* full of china, where her tin quart mugs are seen to shine as bright as the old-time silver tankards. Over her bed hangs a

¹ There is no documentary confirmation of these deaths. Some sources say that Joseph simply left and moved to Maine. Briggs, *Meredith Neck*; S. Colby, “Aunt Dolly Nichols,” in *Early Meredith*, p. 68.

² The *Boston Semi-weekly Atlas*, August 4, 1849, p. 2.

³ *Old Meredith and Vicinity*, p. 91. One publication, *The Lakes Region New Hampshire: A Visual History*, p. 88 says her place on Bear was named “Fisherman’s Haven” although we found no historical support for the name.

⁴ *Meredith News*, Nov 28, 1928.

⁵ Eleazer Bickford was born on Bear in 1822. One newspaperman wrote, regarding Eleazer’s commentary, that he “gives many interesting incidents, in travel across (the lake)...” The *Boston Traveler*, August 11, 1857, p. 4. Aunt Dolly also received mention in an 1852 article about steamboat travel across the lake. The *Boston Recorder*, August 12, 1852, p. 130.

⁶ “Bear Island- Aunt Dolly,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, July 28, 1851, p. 1. This article may be the only first-hand interview with Dolly that exists. As such it is like a very rare stamp! My sincerest thanks to Leslie Hopper Keeler for finding it.

defaced canopy of chintz, and sundry other less conspicuous 'remains' may be noticed in this old homestead."⁷

But Dolly's fortunes took a turn for the worse right around 1850. The beginning of her downfall occurred when she was robbed by a lodger who had taken shelter at her place during a stormy night. The thief took "with him all Aunt Dolly's hoard of money—the savings of long years and much self-denial." In discussing the theft a year or so later with a reporter, Dolly lamented:

"I hain't had much luck in life. It seems as if fate went strongly agin me sometimes, but arter all, I've had as much as I could eat and drink, and I've got it all honestly, and that's more than some on 'em can say, may be."⁸

With advancing age, Dolly's health began to fail in the 1850s. In 1853, she was moved to the town's Poor Farm on Hatch Road. In 1856, she was moved back to Meredith Neck when the town purchased a new Poor Farm (or Alms House) located on what is now Old Hubbard Road.⁹ Dolly died in late 1857 at the age of 81. She was buried at the Poor Farm cemetery, but the burial site was disturbed many years later by a land owner expanding the property. Her grave were subsequently moved to an unknown, unmarked location nearby.¹⁰

Little remains to commemorate this most legendary of Bear Islanders. Dolly lived a vigorous but difficult life. She persevered in her own version of the great American survival story. While her old well, cellar hole, and some chimney bricks were still readily identifiable in the late 1880s,¹¹ no trace can any longer be found. The only physical reminder of Dolly's domain is the old cemetery near where her shack stood on the western end of Dolly's Point. The three Dolly Islands nearby, named in her honor, also serve to commemorate this remarkable woman.

⁷ "Bear Island- Aunt Dolly," Boston Evening Transcript, July 28, 1851, p. 1. The reporter had sailed to Bear from Center Harbor. It took four hours for the visiting reporter's party to maneuver their sailboat back to Center Harbor from Bear due to a strong northwest wind.

⁸ "Bear Island- Aunt Dolly," Boston Evening Transcript, July 28, 1851, p. 1.

⁹ BCRI, B/P 25/376. L. Babb to D. Vittum. The Poor Farm was located on what is now Old Hubbard Road.

¹⁰ Colby, "Aunt Dolly," Early Meredith, p. 69.

¹¹ See: news article, Springfield Republican (MA), October 1, 1887, p.8. A picture of her old well is found in Old Meredith and Vicinity, p. 92.