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THE LAST DAYS OF HERMIONE PELHAM AND JOHN BANISTER
OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Marian Mathison Desrosiers, PhD

Two Newport landmarks, the Old Stone Mill and a large Georgian manse near Banister's Wharf, once were central to the lives of Hermione (Pelham) Banister and her husband John Banister. Hermione was a descendant of the first settlers of the colony and in particular a great-granddaughter of the first Rhode Island Governor, Benedict Arnold. From 1735–1758 her husband created a small fortune in shipping New England goods to the Carolinas, the West Indies, and England. The well-known couple passed into history, however, with little physical evidence of the end to their illustrious lives. What happened to the wealthy Banisters, who owned many downtown Newport shops and houses, lands east to Bellevue Avenue, and even country estates in Middletown? Where are their gravestones? Recently, a close reading of some Banister accounts revealed clues to the mystery. Banister's personal entries in a Memorandum Book provided hints of Hermione's lingering illness and of her last days. A Cash Book held accounts for bills and payments. A Letter Book with lengthy entries to a Boston doctor revealed the concluding chapter in John Banister's own life, along with his views on his progeny and legacy.

A sense of achievement pervaded the lives of Hermione and John Banister in 1764, as the oldest son, John Banister II, 20, received his baccalaureate degree from Harvard College. He returned to Newport and began working toward his MA degree by spending his days learning from his father the skills of merchant, warehouse owner, broker, and real estate developer. In those days, the prerequisite for the graduate degree was three years of experiences in a profession, such as commerce, law, medicine, or the ministry.¹ As fate would have it, 1764–1765 proved to be the last year of his mother's life, and John may have been a comfort and support to both of his parents. At the time, their only other child, Thomas, 14, boarded in Boston with merchant Ralph Inman or merchant Stephen Minot, while he attended school under the tutelage of Masters Holbrook and Pateshall.²

The Banister family enjoyed a wide circle of friends and family in Newport. Hermione's mother, sisters and their children lived there. Peter Harrison,

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1. *Boston Gazette*, 25 July 1764, shows his rank of ninth in the class of forty-six, in July 1764 as Banister attained his undergraduate diploma. Clifton K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 16:13–15. See Banister Cash Book 1758–1767, No. 362, Newport Historical Society Library [hereafter NHS] for the work and travels young Banister did for his father in Newport, Boston, and numerous eastern Connecticut towns.
 2. Cash Book No. 362, NHS. The cash book shows money due and money spent, sometimes with a date, more often with only a month. It has no page numbers. Robert Francis Seybolt, *Private Schools of Colonial Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 41–42. Holbrook and Pateshall frequently advertised their schools in the *Boston Gazette*.

Hermione's brother-in-law, designed buildings for education, worship, and commerce. Life's comforts were many as she enjoyed the spaciousness and beauty of their 1751 home in Newport and "Edgehill," their 1756 country home in Middletown. Hermione (Pelham) Banister fell ill in December 1764 at their Middletown estate with a lingering disease that led to her death in July 1765. John Banister's cash book for this month shows repeated payments to Nurse Bateman. Doctor Vignerón of Newport attended her daily as well during her last month. Based on the medicine he gave Hermione, she may have experienced dropsy, a swelling condition caused by sedentary life style. The medicine "Sol Vol Sucini Cons Roses" was a solution of *succinum* (amber) to stimulate the neural and immune systems, especially to disrupt cardiac arrhythmia. The doctor combined the ground amber with ground rosehips, rich in vitamins B, C, K and minerals.³

When Hermione died on 8 July 1765, people—some who lived far away, some who did not know her or travel in her social circles—knew about it quickly. Samuel Tillinghast, a small shopkeeper in Warwick, Rhode Island, noted in his diary: "1765 June 8 Died John Banisters Wife at Middletown on Rhode Island in ye 47 year of her Age."⁴ John Banister probably wrote her obituary for the *Newport Mercury*:

Newport, July 15. On the 8th Instant died at Middletown, after a lingering Illness, in the 47th Year of her Age, greatly lamented, Mrs. Hermione Banister, Wife of John Banister, Esq; and Great-Grand-Daughter to Governor Arnold, the only Governor of this Colony ever cloathed with the King's Commission. In her Death, the Poor have met with a Loss, and the Town deprived of a valuable Member. — Her Remains were interred on Thursday, in said Governor Arnold's Burying Ground, attended by a great Number of people, of different Perswasions.⁵

It was, in fact, a splendid funeral. John Banister ordered 216 pairs of gloves given to attendees at a cost of £1,164 as a way to honor Hermione Pelham's memory. The money spent for just the gift of gloves for his wife's funeral was substantially more than most working people's income over several years.⁶

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3. Henry E. Turner, "Vignerón," *Newport Historical Magazine*, Vol. 3 (Oct. 1882) No. 2: 93–96. There were three Vignerón physicians, who served in Newport, the father Norbert Félicien (1671–1764), the son Charles Antoine (1717–1772), and the grandson, Stephen (1748–1781). The doctor visited Hermione five times that month, discussed the medicines in his notes, and the charge of £76 (Vignerón Physician's Ledger C 1764–1769, No. 603, NHS, one of four Vignerón Ledgers). In 77 A.D., Pliny first recorded the use of amber as a medicine. See a contemporary work by William Buchan, M.D. (1729–1805), *Domestic Medicine, or the Family Physician*, 2nd ed. (London: 1785 [1769]). He describes the symptoms and medicines for the condition.
 4. *The Diary of Capt. Samuel Tillinghast of Warwick, Rhode Island, 1757–1766*, ed. Cherry Fletcher Bamberg (Greenville, R.I.: R.I. Genealogical Society, 2000), 380.
 5. *Newport Mercury*, 15 July 1765, p. 2.
 6. Banister Memorandum Book 1749–1767, 15 July 1765, 313, NHS.

9 dozen Women's lamb gloves @ £36 /doz. £324
 1 dozen men's kid mark gloves @ 50 /doz. £ 600
 8 dozen men's white lamb gloves @ 30/doz. £ 240

One week after his wife's death, in a letter to his dear friend, merchant Ralph Inman, Esq. (1713–1788) of Cambridge and Boston, John Banister wrote that the loss of Mrs. Banister, his wife of twenty-eight years, left him in a state of great sorrow and “my house is expressly melancholy.”⁷

It is interesting that Reverend Ezra Stiles, minister of Second Congregational Church noted the death of “Mrs Banister” on July 8th in his Bills of Mortality, 1765–1776, adding P to show that she was Presbyterian.⁸ At some point earlier, Hermione may have returned to worship at the First Congregational Church of her birth on Mill Street. Her father Edward Pelham in his will of 1740 established payment of the pew for the life of his widow Arabella, so that she could worship in the Pelham pew. Arabella (Pelham) Holman had passed away December 1762, only a few years before Hermione.⁹

Hermione Banister's quiet illness and death occurred at a time of noisy, sometimes violent protest: local mobs were demonstrating against British taxes and stamps, catapulting Newport into chaos. Banister experienced an internal conflict over his membership in Trinity Church. Pew rental at Trinity, the church to which he had belonged for decades, raised money for the church, but the King of England was head of the church. Clearly, opponents of the King's treatment of colonial citizens had difficulty supporting the church. In March 1765 John Banister gave up his pew at the Anglican church and signed “the paper to the Church this day, one of their wardens present...conveyance of the pews complete.”¹⁰ While a hundred men in Newport signed their names in support of obeying British laws, Banister did not.

John Banister's account books suggest that he retreated to his Middletown country home, tending to his orchards and to animal husbandry, occasionally selling horses and cattle. Frequently, he sold orchard fruits and agricultural produce. He helped family members, settled accounts outstanding, and finished payments on old lawsuits. During this time, Banister experienced a setback in his own health. In December 1765, he wrote to Dr. Nathaniel Perkins in Boston that he discovered, “a large hard bar has formed within the rim of my belly on the right side, as low as the bottom of the belly, extending upwards above some of my ribbs and I conjectured

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7. John Banister, Middletown to Ralph Inman, Cambridge 18 July 1765, Banister Letter Book 1761–1767, 37, NHS.
 8. Second Congregational Church Record Book 1725 to 1772, Second Congregational Church Records, Newport Historical Society, Volume 836e, 72. In his Bill of Mortality for that year, Stiles recorded a "P" or a "Cv" for those members of Rev. Vinal's First Congregational Church on Mill Street.
 9. Will of Edward Pelham, made 21 May 1740, proved Newport 21 Oct. 1749, NHS, Box 36, Folder 3. *Newport Mercury*, 6 December 1762.
 10. Banister Memorandum Book, 16 Mar. 1765, 314, NHS.

about six inches in length and four in width..." His letters reveal a self-diagnosis that the inflammation was in his liver, and he attributed the infection to his love for peaches, raw oysters, and cider which he consumed in large quantities over a lifetime. Liver disease is usually associated with excess alcohol consumption or hepatitis. For the next two years, the merchant stayed on a regimen of gruel with brown sugar, chamomile tea with lemon, poultry broth, toasted bread, and an occasional Madeira wine. His doctors took multiple approaches to decrease his pain by "tincture sacre," an infusion of aloe powder, with snake-root and ginger in wine and brandy to loosen his stools; pills containing calomel (mercury chloride) to purge his system; and diuretics, made of juniper water, marsh-mallow leaf, and chamomile flowers to hasten urine secretion.¹¹

In the fall of 1766, both sons were in Massachusetts: John in Cambridge worked on his graduate degree defense, and sixteen-year-old Thomas Banister in "Newbery" [Newbury in Essex Co.] attended Dummer Academy under the tutelage of Master Samuel Moody (1726-1795).¹² The liver inflammation from which merchant Banister suffered slowly consumed him with "fever, fatigue, and emaciated flesh." As John Banister prepared for departure from this life, in June 1767, he wrote a poignant letter to his youngest son, requesting the sixteen-year-old Thomas come home "at the next vacancy," because he was "doing poorly." The father added, "You must provide yourself a heady horse and set out for Boston with some school mate" to Ralph Inman Esq, who will see to it that he can get you home. He signed the letter, "I remain Dear Child, Your affectionate father."¹³

Banister remained predictably business-like in his accounts, recording his careful preparations for his impending death. He paid £24 to Thomas Johnson II

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11. Correspondence of John Banister, Edgehill, Middletown to Doctor Nathaniel Perkins Boston Dec 1765, Letter Book No. 546, 40-42, 50, 60, NHS. See also, Robert Hooper, M.D. (1773-1835) and Samuel Akerly, M.D. *Lexicon Medicum or Medical Dictionary*, [1798], 2 vols., 13th ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860) for explanations of the origin and use of each medicine. Banister had access to books by several English physicians written for the educated public. See also Robert Dossie, *Theory and Practice of Chirurgical Pharmacy Dispensatory for the Use of Surgeons* (Dublin, Ireland: George and Alexander Ewing, 1761). His book explains the quantities of each item in the plasters, tinctures, pills, and powders, based on recipes from the colleges of medicine, hospitals, and well-known doctors.
 12. John Ragle, *Governor Dummer Academy History 1763-1963* (South Byfield, Mass.: Governor Dummer Academy, 1963). William Dummer served as Massachusetts Governor 1723-1728, during a time of warfare against the Abenaki in Maine. "Dummer School" opened in Feb. 1763 to twenty-eight pupils. Students took their lessons in the Little Red Schoolhouse, located near the former Massachusetts Governor's Mansion House. John Banister gave a bell to the school (Correspondence of John Banister, Edgehill Farm, Middletown to Stephen Minot, Boston Dec. 1766, Letter Book of 1761-1767, 54). This Letter Book is bound with Invoice Book (1747-1757) and Wharfage Account Book 1802-1805, No. 546, NHS. Another record of his payment for the bell for Dummer School is in Cash Book No. 362. Apr. 1767.
 13. Letter Book No. 546, 11 June 1767, NHS.

(1718–1774) for the delivery of “a sett of Tombstones from Connecticut.”¹⁴ He chose a simple inscription “Here lies the Remains of Hermione the much esteemed Consort of John Banister who left this life the 8th of July in the 45th year of her Age” to be followed by ten lines from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man* (1734) as well as two lines he translated from Horace: “And who can grieve too much? What time shall end our mourning of so dear a friend?”¹⁵

Rich as they are, Banister’s records offer confusing hints as to his intentions for his own gravestone. We know the inscription he wanted, “He departed this life [blank space filled in by another hand] 58th Year of his Age,” noting that it was to be done “without Diminution or single Addition.” He suggested these lines for his own epitaph: “Here lieth John Banister in Expectation of the last Day. What sort of Man he was, that Day will Discover.”¹⁶ These words are not original. They are said to be what George Whitefield, the “Great Awakening” preacher, wanted on his own marker.¹⁷ Banister directed his executor to “Cut and send down such a Monument as I have erected to the Memory of my Dear Wife, Provided he will take the Price paid him for that, Ten pounds Lawfull Money & put it up into the Bargain.” He went on to describe what has to be a table stone, directing “that the Inscription be put on each end and not on the Top (as Connecticut Stone won’t do for Inscriptions) agreeable to the Method in Boston & Cut on our Portsmouth Stone of the Slaty kind.” How such a table stone could be said to match his wife’s stone is unclear. No record of payment for it has been found.

The stones would have arrived in Newport on schooners known as “brownstoners,” departing from the Connecticut River near Middletown and Cromwell. Johnson was from a large family famous for making gravestones (sold in pairs with a headstone and footstone) as well as large, imposing table stones. Johnson carved motifs of winged cherubs, flowery borders, and careful lettering on brown sandstone.¹⁸ Additionally, Banister paid £4 for carting the gravestones “from the Wharf to Mr. Vinal’s Meeting House,” namely, the First Congregational Church on Mill Street. The church stood adjacent to the Governor Arnold Burial Ground,

14. He had done business with the Johnsons before. In December 1763 he had paid Capt. Allen of Swansea for bringing four tons of “Connect’ Stones” from Johnson of Middletown (Cash Book No. 362, Dec. 1763, NHS).

15. Banister Letter to my Children, June 1767, Mss Box 36, Folder 3, NHS.

16. Banister, Letter to my Children, June 1767, Box 36, Folder 3, NHS.

17. Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1990), 154. George Whitefield did not get his wish. His cenotaph at the Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Mass. has a long biographical inscription (Find A Grave Memorial# 11611).

18. Kevin M. Sweeney, “Where the Bay Meets the River: Gravestones and Stonecutters in the River Towns of Western Massachusetts, 1690-1810,” in *Markers III: The Journal of the Association for Gravestone Studies*, edited by David Watters (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 11–12.

where he buried Hermione and first son, Pelham. Banister paid Johnson “£10.6 for the sett[ing] of Monumental Stones & Erecting Them.”¹⁹

Few details of John Banister’s actual death in November 1767 are known. His Cash Book No. 362 does show numerous payments, starting in October 1767, to Samuel Keen for “watching,” i.e., sitting by a dying person. At his death the *Newport Mercury* reported, “At his Seat near this Town, John Banister, Esq. aged about 60 Years, late a very eminent Merchant in this Place. His Remains were decently interred last Friday.”²⁰ His directions were for his burial “by the remains of my late Dear Wife in the family burying ground near Mr. Vinal’s Meeting House.” He asked for a “plain pine board coffin with no clasps or handles” and “no Irish halloo” [wake], but his body was to be “laid in the South-East Room” of his Newport home. There is no account indicating who presided at Banister’s funeral as he disapproved “of a Funeral Oration, as it put the author upon Transgressing those bounds they ought not to Invade.” However, he listed among his special friends and invited guests, an Anglican minister and two Baptist ministers, Gilbert Stuart, father of the future painter. He disapproved of the ceremonies of the Anglican [Trinity Church] funeral service at his grave.²¹ He also stated, “neither would I have my corps carried into Mr. Vinal’s Meeting House”—not because of any conflict with the Congregationalists—but because he thought that “Sanctuaries ought not to be defiled with dead Carcasses.” He ordered that his pall was to be carried by six of his tenants. Banister told his sons not to buy new mourning clothes and not to spend money on his funeral for rings and gloves, but rather take the \$200 and give it to the poor, bearing in mind “the store God has given you without Cost of Labor or Expense to you.”²²

When John Banister and his wife passed away, the golden era of Newport life for countless colonials was nearing an end. Banister must have cringed often over political decisions during the last year of his life. Although Parliament rescinded earlier revenue laws, the Townshend Acts placed new customs duties on paper, paint, lead, glass, and tea imported to the colonies, precisely the goods that had been among the mainstay of his trade for so many decades. In 1767, the Rhode Island legislators set a new tax rate that would take into account, “all developed lands such as wharves, still houses, sugar houses, ropewalks, warehouses, homes, mills, kilns, furnaces, spermaceti works, tan yards, iron work, pot ash works above 20 years.” The colony placed taxes on those who owned slaves, gold, stocks, silver plate,

19. Cash Book No. 362, June 1767, NHS.

20. *Newport Mercury*, 16 Nov. 1767

21. The service for the day of burial for members of the Anglican Church was still that in *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of England Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David* (Cambridge, UK: John Baskerville, 1762). Prayers typical of an Anglican funeral service were Psalm 39 of David, Psalm 90 of Moses, and I Corinthians 15 on the Resurrection.

22. Banister, Letter to my Children, June 1767, Box 36 Folder 3, NHS. Rev. Stiles entered John Banister’s name without an indicator of religious affiliation in his Bill of Mortality for 1767.

livestock, and land (pasture, tillage, orchard, and mowing land).²³ The next generation, he knew, would have many decisions to make, dealing with the enormous wealth willed to them by their father.

The Banister records show that the sons returned to Newport in 1767 for their father's funeral and lived into the early nineteenth century. The last Newport Banister, grandson John Banister III, died in 1831. The gravestones and bones of Hermione and John Banister were in the Governor Arnold Cemetery at least until the mid-nineteenth century when Captain Augustus Littlefield, who built a house nearby the Banister home on Pelham Street in 1838, dug up stones, coffins, and bones, in order to use the land of the cemetery. Although the local population put a stop to the activity, some gravestones and once buried bones were never restored to their original places.²⁴ John and Hermione may, in fact, have been there much longer, perhaps even to this day. Toward the end of the nineteenth century George Henry Richardson found five gravestones there, illegible but for the surname Banister.²⁵ If the graves are still there, the stones were not found during the restoration of the cemetery in 1960.

John Banister played many roles—broker for other merchants, retailer, ship builder, and real estate developer—that helped Newport's economy boom. His substantial income made possible, of course, a comfortable lifestyle for his own family with beautiful furniture, clothes, and foods from faraway places. The wages he paid the dockworkers and shipbuilding tradesmen helped their families, who in turn could buy import items from local Newport shopkeepers. Banister's real estate development of houses, shops, and farms provided wages for many additional artisans and laborers, both black and white, free and slave. At the end of his life this enterprising and energetic man who transformed the economy of colonial America chose not to memorialize his individual accomplishments or his status. Instead, Banister's orders for his burial and gravestone inscription convey the solemnity and simplicity of his parting.

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23. Rhode Island General Assembly Acts and Resolves (June 1767), R.I. State Archives, 22; Howard Kemble Stokes, *The Finances and Administration of Providence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1903), 126–128.
 24. Alice Brayton, *The Burying Place of Governor Arnold* (Newport: Privately printed, 1960), 13, 18. Littlefield had an agreement with the Newport aldermen.
 25. George Henry Richardson, "Arnold Burial Ground," Cemetery Records Originals, No. 974, 16. The page is torn after the entry "5 tombstones Banisters." Nothing in this record indicates the presence of a table stone.