

# Hearts Of Edenton

Love and Marriage in Historic Edenton

Will the Real Penelope Please  
Stand Up?

## Part I

The lady, the leader, the legend-you can't visit Edenton without hearing her name at least once, but who was the REAL Penelope Barker?

Penelope's story is one of extremes, spanning tremendous triumphs and devastating losses, and resounding joy mixed with echoing pain.

While we do not have many details about Penelope's childhood, here is what we know. Penelope Padgett enters this world in 1728, born of Elizabeth Blount and her husband, Dr. Samuel Padgett. Penelope is then raised at Blenheim in modern-day Chowan County with her two sisters, Elizabeth and Sarah.

While we cannot say for certain, it is likely that the Padgett girls received some type of formal education, either through a boarding school or a governess.

Such an education would have involved the fundamentals of reading and writing, basic arithmetic, and likely some form of musical instrument, fine needlepoint, and/or other artistic pursuits. Based on the Padgetts' marital ambitions for their daughters, they may have also been taught the French language and general world history. Such skills would not only enable a woman of status to manage her household accounts (if she did not have an enslaved housekeeper), but would also help her support her husband's societal and political ambitions.

Whether for love or ambition we also cannot say, but in ca. 1740, Penelope's sister Elizabeth marries Edenton attorney and politician, John Hodgson. Soon after her marriage, Elizabeth Padgett Hodgson becomes pregnant and eventually has three children- Isabella, John, and Robert.

The joy of aunthood has come to the teenage Penelope, and the satisfaction of seeing her sister thrive.

Except, she doesn't.

Elizabeth passes away rather suddenly around 1744, leaving her three little ones without a mother to nurture them.

Now, what happens next might sound weird, but it was actually somewhat common back in the eighteenth century considering the low average life expectancy. Since John Hodgson cannot return their mother to his children, he decides to give them the next best thing: a new mother, and one who is so close to Elizabeth that they are almost the same person.

Oh yes, John Hodgson marries Penelope in 1744.

This sixteen-year-old girl who has been mourning her sister now suddenly has to adjust to life as a surrogate mother of three, and a wife to a man at least twenty years her senior. If that wasn't hectic enough, Penelope gives birth to a son, Samuel, in 1746. On top of it all, disaster strikes in 1747, for John Hodgson suddenly passes away without a will, leaving Penelope, pregnant once more, with the responsibility of taking care of the family.

And so, at just nineteen, Penelope is a widow with five children, all under the age of ten. But before she can properly mourn and figure out her next steps, she has to complete the mammoth task of settling her late husband's estate. She qualifies as administratrix before the Court with two of her uncles serving as surety, and soon discovers that while her husband may have been wealthy in land, he did not leave much available cash, and various individuals are seeking to collect on his debts.

Apparently struggling to keep it together, some of her relatives seek guardianships for the children from the Court, but Penelope is doing everything she can to keep the family together.

But in 1748, Penelope starts to turn the tables...

## Part II

The year is 1748, and Penelope has recently become a widow. At just nineteen years of age, she is also responsible for two sons, a niece, and two nephews, all under the age of ten. Things are getting to be overwhelming, and while some family members and friends are stepping in to help, she has the unpleasant task of facing her late husband's creditors.

Not only did John Hodgson die without a will, but he apparently left little cash on hand for his widow to pay his debts. What, then, is left for Penelope to do?

Start some lawsuits of her own!

Acting in the name of her late husband's estate, Penelope secures representation from various attorneys, and pushes to collect from those indebted to John Hodgson. One such attorney is James Craven, who had previously been in her late husband's political circle, as he also served in the General Assembly.

Now James Craven is a Yorkshireman by birth, and has already managed to amass great wealth during his time in North Carolina. While we do not know many particulars about him, he appears to be well-educated and cultured.

Perhaps he also forms a deep connection with Penelope during this difficult time, for in ca. 1751, Penelope becomes Penelope Padgett Hodgson Craven.

Alas, whatever joy Penelope experiences from this marriage that gives her and her children peace and stability is short-lived, for although James Craven is only in his early forties, he becomes ill and passes away in 1755, leaving the vast majority of his extensive estate to Penelope, including the in-town lots that she had sold to him prior to their marriage. Among other bequests, he also leaves money to each child in Penelope's care, though he leaves none of his own blood.

He also names Penelope and various friends as his executors, including Francis Corbin, who completes the Cupola House in 1758 (more on that later!). In order to properly fulfill James Craven's bequests, the executors proceed to create a detailed inventory of his property and goods, which gives us a glimpse into his daily life with Penelope and the children.



First, the Craven household seems to enjoy entertaining guests, for the inventory includes numerous tables, chairs, and glassware, as well as a backgammon gaming table and a spinnet. Second, the inventory mentions multiple bedrooms with elegant appointments, which suggests that most if not all of the children moved into the house after the wedding. Finally, James Craven leaves behind a massive library of 244 volumes, and directs that Penelope keep fifty of her choice.

And what a hard choice-James Craven's library not only includes the multitude of legal texts that one would expect of an attorney, but also everything from the classical works of Tacitus, Josephus, and Ovid to the works of Richard Bradley regarding gardening to multiple editions of Shakespeare's plays and "Paradise Lost"!

More “modern” histories are also represented, including the “Memoirs of [the Reign of] Charles I” and the “History of [Tahmas] Kuli Khan” (likely the English translation from French published in 1740). While we do not know which books she ultimately selects, such a bequest implies that Penelope enjoys a commitment to lifelong learning, and has already exceeded the usual educational expectations for a woman in the eighteenth century.

Yet her new status as one of the wealthiest, youthful, and educated widows in North Carolina cannot save her from yet more heartbreak, for in 1755, she also loses her eldest child, Samuel Hodgson, at just nine years of age.

## Part III

In 1755, Penelope Padgett Hodgson Craven not only becomes a widow for the second time, but also experiences the pain of losing a child. Once again, she also faces the prospect of settling her late husband's debts on top of mourning such tremendous loss.

To assist with the inevitable lawsuits, Penelope and the other executors of James Craven's estate hire a certain local and prominent lawyer to represent them. And who is this new figure in our story? We've finally reached him-Thomas Barker!

Not only is Thomas Barker a successful lawyer, but he is also a member of the General Assembly and owns a massive plantation in Bertie County. He also happens to be a widower, and has only one child-a ten-year-old daughter named Betsy.

Y'all can imagine what happens next-a widow and widower, both wealthy, cultured, and educated, have a professional relationship but realize that they both have experienced the pain of losing a spouse. On top of this, Penelope only has one biological child left, and Thomas only has one, and they both happen to be about the same age. Single parents who can understand what the other is going through...is it fate?

While it certainly feels like we're setting up the next Hallmark Channel hit movie, we do not know for sure whether it is for love or stability, but we do know that in 1757, Penelope Padgett Hodgson Craven adds her most famous surname: Barker.

Interestingly enough, before their wedding Thomas Barker does the same thing as his predecessor, James Craven-he purchases Penelope's lots in downtown Edenton. While, again, we do not know for certain why they made such an arrangement, one possibility is that Penelope once more needs cash in order to satisfy her late husband's creditors.

In any case, in 1757 the Barker family members make their home together in Edenton. But over the next few years, Penelope and Thomas' attempts to grow their family continue to result in heartbreak, for little Penelope, Thomas, and Nathaniel do not make it to their first birthdays. On top of such sorrow, Thomas is selected as an agent to represent the colony in London, and husband and wife are separated by the Atlantic Ocean in 1761.

They likely knew that they would not be reunited for at least a couple of years due to the nature of his position, but who could have expected what would happen next? In response to the high cost of the French and Indian War, Great Britain begins to impose heavy taxes on the American colonies, and does so without colonial representation in Parliament. In the growing unrest, Thomas' role in London is prolonged, and he is only able to return home in 1778, after traveling to France to find a ship that would risk the British blockade of American ports.

Wait, 1761-1778? Oh yes, Penelope and Thomas lived apart for SEVENTEEN YEARS.

Seventeen years is a long time-does the ocean between them pull them apart? Do the long years make each unrecognizable to the other? How do they handle the loneliness, and how many times does Penelope stand at the foot of the Courthouse Green, looking across the water, waiting for the ship that would bring her husband home? Alas, we do not know the answers, but we do know that in the midst of the Revolutionary War and at the dawn of a new era, the Barker home is finally whole once again.

And so much has happened during those seventeen years! Not only does Thomas have to swear an oath of allegiance to a new nation upon his return, but he returns home to find all of the children gone.

Penelope's niece and nephews, Isabella, John, and Robert Hodgson, had grown but have already passed away.

Penelope's last remaining biological child, Thomas, has also passed at just 25 years of age. Thankfully Betsy is still living, but she is happily married and living in Virginia with her husband, William Tunstall.

Together again, Penelope and Thomas face how the long years have affected them, and in particular, how Penelope became involved with something that caused a massive scandal in London and may have even put Thomas in danger—a certain circumstance that would later be named the “Edenton Tea Party”.

Back in 1774, four years before their reunion, Penelope joined fifty other women from Edenton and the surrounding area in signing a resolution, which affirmed these ladies' support for North Carolina's decision to join the other colonies in boycotting British goods to protest taxation without representation.

Penelope, along with her niece Elizabeth Ormond (who would later reside in the Cupola House with her second husband, Dr. Samuel Dickinson), joined women from across the spectrum of colonial society (including members of the Johnston family who we've met before in this series) in putting their own names on this document, which they then sent to be published in the London newspapers! While the mere thought of women conducting their own protest was considered so absurd by many London elites that it even provoked one newspaper to publish a highly unflattering cartoon interpretation of the event, seeing his wife's name in print must have put Thomas into a strange and perhaps uncomfortable position.

Whether he is angry and/or proud of Penelope we do not know, but once reunited the couple begins to rebuild their life together. In 1782, they complete the oldest section of the Barker House as it stands today, likely incorporating part of their original house.



Their home stands in the “middle of the action” on one of Penelope’s lots on Broad Street, and will not be moved to the waterfront until almost two hundred years later. Here they live until Thomas passes away in 1789.

Widowed yet again at 61, what is Penelope to do? While we do not know many specifics, we do know that her beloved niece is living just a couple of blocks down the street, and will eventually name her youngest daughter after Penelope. We also know from the 1790 census that Penelope’s household consists of herself and twenty-five enslaved persons, so she is certainly not alone and is not struggling to maintain her house. Thomas also leaves her a considerable amount of property, so she is still highly affluent. But money isn’t everything, and while friendship and kinship can soften sorrow, they cannot take it away.

After outliving all three of her husbands and all but one child (Betsy) under her care, Penelope Padgett Hodgson Craven Barker passes away in 1793, and perhaps unexpectedly, for she does not leave behind a will. Yet her legacy lives on, as does her fight to forge a more equitable future.

And as for this particular heart of Edenton, she and Thomas still rest side-by-side at Hayes.