

# Whitney

prior to the Civil War. But far beyond her following, Sarah possessed a particular kind of genius in her ability to link seemingly different subjects.

By linking literature – equated with the liberation of thought through reading and writing – to freedom, she challenged accepted views and boundaries and dared her public to rethink the place of women in society. At the same time, she promoted American literature as an invaluable avenue for a society to reflect upon itself and thus embrace positive change.

Hale's own life struggles lead her to discover the redemptive power of the written word – for herself, for others and as a way to change the world.

Sarah Josepha Buell was nothing if not resilient – re-inventing herself in five different careers – as teacher, innkeeper, novelist, milliner-business owner, and editor. Passionate about books, she availed herself of studies shared by her brother, Horatio, who graduated with honors from Dartmouth. In 1806, Sarah Buell opened a school in Guild and eventually in Newport. Sarah continued her home studies when she married lawyer David Hale who encouraged Sarah in her writing. In 1810, Sarah stopped teaching to help her family run an inn.

When Hale died in 1822, Sarah – the widowed mother of five children under 6 years – began her third career, starting a millinery business with her sister-in-law. The next year, Sarah took her writing to market. In 1823, her first publication, *The Genius of Oblivion and Other Original Poems*, garnered her an entrance into publishing. In 1825, Hale wrote *Northwood: Life North and South*, one of the earliest novels dealing with the Civil War, a book that was published in 1827, when it caught the attention of Episcopal clergyman, the Reverend John Blake.

In 1828, when Blake offered Hale the opportunity to edit a new magazine created for her, she could not turn away opportunity. Dispersing and placing four of her five children to live with family members in and around Newport, Hale risked her reputation and scandalized Newport society who thought her decision to

move to Boston “indelicate” – even if accompanied by her youngest son, William.

In her career, Hale wrote seven volumes of poetry; six volumes of fiction; several books on cooking and house-keeping; and a 900-page book, documenting women's history. Hale edited at least two dozen books and fostered the careers of young writers, publishing works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Sigourney in her magazine.

Newport has embraced their most celebrated citizen for decades. In 1956, the Friends of the Richards Free Library established the Sarah Josepha Hale Award, the first recipient of which was Robert Frost.

Today we need Sarah Hale's legacy as never before. According to recent data, (1) 33 percent of high school graduates never read another book the rest of their lives; (2) 42 percent of college grads never read another book after college; (3) 70 percent of American adults have not been in a bookstore in the last five years; (4) 80 percent of American families did not buy or read a book last year.

Why? Because somewhere along the line, readers have forgotten, or simply never knew and so left behind, the joy of discovery that happens within the covers of a book. As important as fictional literature is, the contributions of Nathaniel Philbrick and other creative non-fiction writers like him are perhaps even more important, given our current literary crisis.

By writing and bringing to life the people and events of the past, the things that really happened, historians and biographers flesh out the specific courage of another time. We learn about the reserves held by people with far less material goods than we know today who “made do,” and even excelled beyond all expectation and against phenomenal odds. These true lives inform us about ourselves, help us empathize with others, and help us to rethink what is possible.

Last week, as I climbed the stairs of the beautifully appointed Richards Free Library, rich with century-old wood paneling, librarian Andrea Thorpe re-introduced me to the Sarah Josepha Hale Award Room, decorated with posters of 62 recipients. Thorpe: “We have three book groups here at the library, and everyone

is reading Philbrick. So many have said: ‘I had no idea that history could be so interesting.’”

A Boston native and Brown University All-American sailor, Philbrick became editor for *Sailing World* magazine, and founder of the Egan Maritime Institute and was a research fellow at the Nantucket Historical Association. His first book, *Away Off Shore*, a history of Nantucket, was published in 1994, followed by *Abram's Eyes*, a study about Nantucket's native legacy.

Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* won the 2000 National Book Award for nonfiction. In 2003, *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, the U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* won the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize and the Albion-Monroe Award from the National Maritime Historical Society. *Mayflower* was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in History, and winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Award and the Massachusetts Book Award for nonfiction. Philbrick's newest book is due out in October – *In the Hurricane's Eye: The Genius of George Washington and the Victory at Yorktown*.

In 2013, the Sarah Josepha Hale Memorial Park was completed, an outdoor mandala around which a circle of sculptures, by Finnish sculptor Jari Mannisto, commemorate the divergent legacies of Sarah Josepha Hale. Bunker Hill signifies that, by appealing to her readership, Hale raised the \$30,000 needed to complete the towering monument. Two hands in broken chains signify the fact that Hale, a passionate abolitionist, authored one of the first American novels about slavery. A tower of books suggests her life as author, novelist, editor, women's historian. A fountain pen and scroll and a cornucopia. Today, we have a national holiday of Thanksgiving because of the relentless determination of Sarah Hale who petitioned five presidents over 17 years until, in 1863, President Lincoln made Thanksgiving a national holiday. Hale's legacy is the legacy of books. Hale said: “The burning soul, the burdened mind. In books alone companions find.”

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