

The Peabody Chronicles

Ignored by history, the brilliant Peabody sisters of 19th-century Boston finally get their due.

Photograph by TSAR FEDORSKY

They were not blond, particularly beautiful or even rich, but the three Peabody women of 19th-century Massachusetts were an intellectual sister act that any of today's celebrity siblings would be hard-pressed to follow. The accomplished trio were "extraordinarily creative, bright and self-educating," says author Megan Marshall, whose book, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Houghton Mifflin), is out in April.

Elizabeth, Mary and Sophia Peabody published and translated books, ran schools and hobnobbed with Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson (once Elizabeth's Greek tutor) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (who married Sophia, the youngest, in 1842). The Peabody family's West Street house in Boston, also home to Elizabeth's bookshop, Mary's school and Sophia's art studio, became a leading Transcendentalist salon in the 1840s where, Marshall writes, "ideas were born, opinions shaped, causes argued, fought and sometimes won."

This type of open exchange was encouraged in the Peabody household, where all three girls studied languages and literature from a young age. Elizabeth even taught herself Hebrew at the age of 12 so she could read the Old Testament. Their parents, Eliza, a teacher, and Nathaniel, an unprosperous doctor, often sent the girls to live with relatives when money was tight.

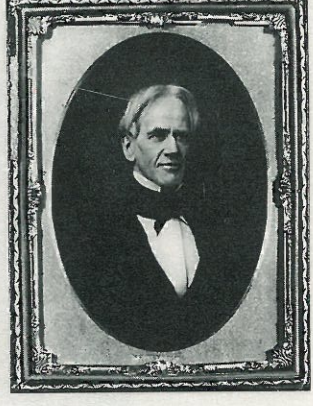
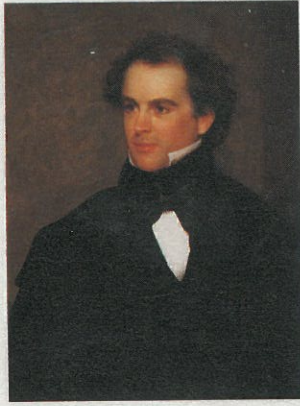
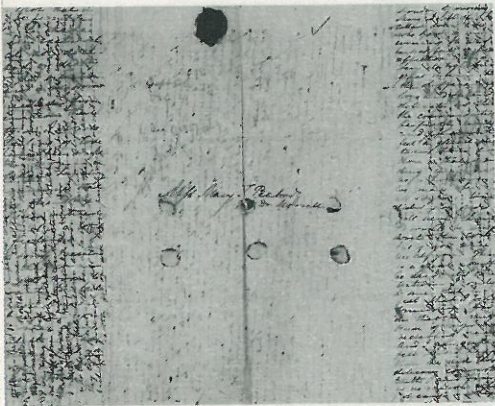
Europe. Sophia was a talented landscape and portrait painter whose work hung alongside the great New England painters of the day at Boston's first fine art museum, the Athenæum Gallery.

"They were just as active as the men, but their stories had been erased," says the author. "They were not just people's wives or 'little women.' They accomplished a lot that, to a certain extent, was overlooked even by themselves."

The book is the first by Marshall, 50, a Harvard graduate who wrote regularly for *The New Republic* in her 20s before she married and became a self-described "soccer mom" in the Boston suburb of Newton. Her husband,

John Sedgwick, is a writer whose own storied family (he's Kyrá's uncle and was a first cousin to Edie) is, in fact, related to a different branch of the Peabodys. Marshall became intrigued with the family in the Seventies, when she took one of the first women's history classes given at Harvard. "I really wanted to do something lasting," says Marshall of her study, which took her 20 years to complete. "Little did I know how lasting it would be."

When her first deadline loomed in 1988, she was still in the research stage, decoding letters the sisters had "cross-written" each other to save on postage. (They used each side of paper twice by rotating a filled page 90 degrees and writing over it.) At the 10-year mark Marshall had to overhaul most of her manuscript when she came across a never-completed, 700-page biography of Elizabeth at the Massachusetts Historical



Top: Author Megan Marshall at her home in Newton, Massachusetts. Above, from left: A "cross-written" letter from Elizabeth to her sister Mary; Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sophia's husband; silhouettes of the Peabody family; Sophia Peabody; Mary's husband, educator Horace Mann.

(Though their last name conjures up images of New England wealth, they were only distant relations of philanthropist George Peabody.) In their teenage years, the sisters shared friends and, later, suitors. Elizabeth, the eldest, was perhaps the most prolific of the three: She published some of Hawthorne's earliest works, owned a foreign-language bookshop (a Boston version of Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare & Co. in Paris) and founded America's first kindergarten. Middle sister Mary, also a teacher, went on to marry educator Horace Mann. The couple was so dedicated to their vocation that they spent their honeymoon touring schools, asylums and prisons in

Society. The discovery allowed her to confirm for the first time what had long been speculated: that Elizabeth was once engaged to Nathaniel Hawthorne, just four years before he married Sophia. "I did everything I could, but I didn't necessarily expect to find out," she says. "That was the thing about spending so long and being so thorough."

Though it is customary for a biography to be 10 years in the making, Marshall knew she was pushing it when the two-decade point approached. "I was worried," she says with a laugh, that by the time she finished, "people wouldn't be reading books anymore."

—JAMIE ROSEN