

Decrow, Sarah Moore Delano ^[1]

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ca. 1750–1795

Sarah Moore Delano Decrow, the first woman postmaster in the United States after the adoption of the Constitution, was born almost unnoted and died in obscurity. No portrait of her was ever painted; none of her private correspondence is extant. Almost the only authentic sources of information about her are court records, and it is from them that the course of her life and character may be determined. It is thought that she was the daughter of John Moore and Mary Ratlif, and that her birthplace was in Perquimans County ^[2]. In 1767 she married Ichabod Delano and soon became the mother of two children, Mary and Robert Delano. Ichabod Delano died in 1774; she served as executrix of his will and inherited land from him. In 1775 she married Robert Decrow; to this union were born two children, Sarah and Elizabeth Decrow. Robert Decrow, a man of substance, owned many acres in Perquimans County ^[3] and, with her assistance, kept an ordinary until his death in 1784.

Articulate and contentious, the widow became a controversial figure. As either plaintiff or defendant, she was in and out of the courtroom for years. In October 1787, with James Iredell as her attorney, she haled Hincea Gilliam into court on a charge of slander:

"Hincea Gilliam late of Perquimans County ^[2] Innholder was attached to answer Sarah Decrow of a plea of Trespass . . . the said Sarah is a Chaste, pious, Virtuous and faithfull Citizen of this State. . . . Nevertheless the said Hincea not ignorant of the premises but contriving and maliciously intending the good name & credit of the said Sarah to injure and take away did on the twentieth of August in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty six and at divers other times . . . speak, pronounce, publish & declare 'Sarah Decrow (meaning the now plaintiff) is a Whore and I can prove that Nat Williams . . . keeps her (meaning the said Sarah and that she lived in a state of Fornication & adultery with the said Nathaniel Williams in open violation of every Law Human & divine) and I will Indict her (meaning the said Sarah the now plaintiff) for it (meaning the Infamous & hurtfull Crimes of adultery and Fornication)' by reason of the speaking of which false, scandalous, malicious and opprobrious words . . . the said Sarah was in a great measure deprived of the benefits & comforts resulting from Society."

In the settlement of the case, made 14 Oct. 1788, she agreed "to dismiss the suit being an action of slander at her instance agt him for calling her a whore and for saying Nath Williams Senr had improper connections with her the said Mrs. Decrowe—upon the Condition of the said Hincea making a proper apology & recanting the truth of such suggestions—the said Hincea doth therefore deny his having used any such words to the best of his knowledge, swears that if he did use them, it was not with any intention of injuring the said Sarah."

On 15 Apr. 1789, Mrs. Decrow obtained a license to keep "an Ordinary, or Victualing house, at Hertford," promising not to "suffer unlawful gaming . . . nor on the Sabbath Day to suffer any person to tipple or drink more than is necessary." She failed to keep her promise, and on 27 April the sheriff of Perquimans County was "commanded to take the body of Sarah Decrowe Inn holder in your County . . . and her safely keep . . . so that you may have her . . . at the Court-house in Hertford on the second Monday in July next." In the words of the bill of indictment, "Sarah Decrow . . . on the 14th day of January . . . and a long time before that day and year and continually since that time with Force and Arms at the Dwelling House . . . did keep a Public Ordinary and did sell and continue to sell Victuals and Spirituous Liquors in small Measures to all persons calling for the Same. Contrary to the Act of the Assembly in that case made and provided to the great Injury of the Revinue of the Government and against the Peace and Dignity of the State." The final disposition of the case is not known. In 1791 she brought into court Dr. Ebenezer Belnap, a former lodger who was in debt to her twenty-one pounds and fourteen shillings. He absconded, but she was compensated by a court order to attach enough of the Belnap possessions to pay her.

The first mention of her in a federal document was in 1790, when she appeared in the first census of the United States as the head of a family of "three white females" and the owner of nine enslaved people. Meanwhile—the date is unrecorded—a post office was established in Hertford. On 27 Sept. 1792 she was commissioned postmaster, thus becoming the third woman postmaster in the United States and the first after the adoption of the Constitution. She submitted her first accounts to Postmaster General Thomas Pickering on 20 Mar. 1793. During the same year, feeling she had not been paid enough for her services, she threatened to resign. Assured on 25 Aug. 1793 that she was "entitled to 40% which is the highest rate of compensation the Postmaster General is authorized to allow any of his deputies," she continued in the office until the end of her life. She was succeeded by Thomas McNider on 9 Apr. 1795.

Mrs. Decrow died that year and was buried near Hertford in the Decrow Cemetery, the exact location of which is no longer known. Her will was probated in May 1795, and her chattels were sold at a public auction on the twenty-first and twenty-second of that month. The Account of Sales of the Estate, a three-page, closely-written document, reveals that she was

wealthy. Even after death she was controversial. A legal paper dated 12 Aug. 1798 shows that John Skinner, the only surviving executor of her estate, was still having difficulty with the settlement.

References:

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Jane F. Smith to Esther Evans, letter, 1964

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Subjects:

Biographies ^[4]

Public service ^[5]

Women ^[6]

Authors:

Evans, Esther ^[7]

Origin - location:

Perquimans County ^[8]

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[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/decrow-sarah> [2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/perquimans> [3] <https://ncpedia.org/geography/perquimans>

[4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/public-service> [6]

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