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History to Song: “The Hazzard Widows”

BY PEGGY LYNN

For me, it all began in the Paul Smith’s College Library, looking at historical photos of Paul’s hotel with the librarian, Neil Surprenant. Neil kept telling me how major parts of the Paul Smith empire were the idea of his wife, Lydia: the electric company, the sawmills, the training of their sons in hospitality. As he finished telling me their story, I asked why there was no large portrait of her on campus, and only a dormitory named after her. He said, “You’re a songwriter; write her a song.”

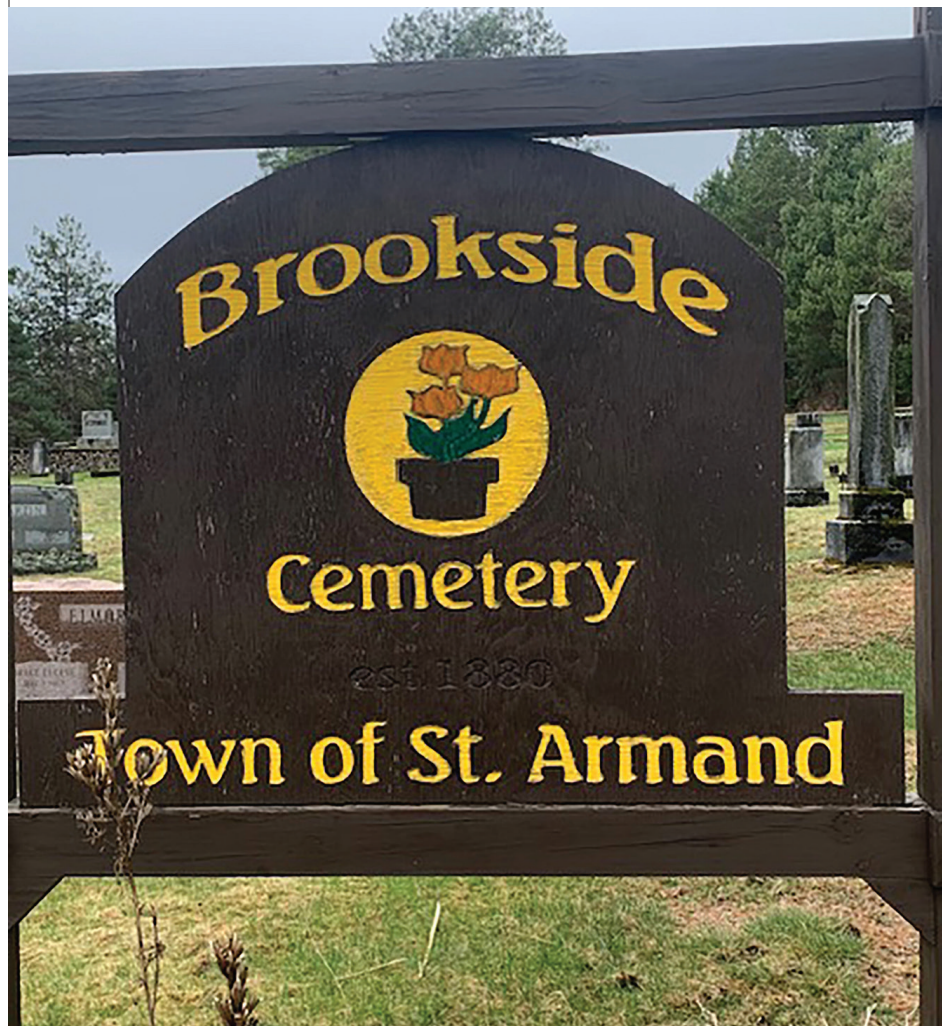
Soon after, I did just that. As I performed “Lydia” in concerts, in and out of the Adirondacks, it soon became my most requested song. A common comment I heard from folks was, “I like that song. Have you heard of this [other] remarkable woman?”

People all over the Park told me stories of intrepid women who stepped outside their appointed roles and had great impact on their communities. Sandra Weber showed me her research on Esther McCombs, the first woman to have a high peak in the Adirondacks named for her. Monica McGaughey shared her research on Mary Brown, the widow of John Brown, the abolitionist. Fran Yardley told me the story of Martha Reben, the tuberculosis patient who camped out on Weller Pond for several summers. Performing these ballads, I began to realize their impact on the perception of women’s roles and contributions in the Adirondacks.

Each new story discovery creates a unique songwriting challenge. Recently, Curt Stager

shared some research he did on an African American family that settled in the Adirondacks in the 1800s. I agreed that it was remarkable that two widows of brothers named Hazzard would manage to keep farms going for years after their husbands died. I read through Curt’s research, based on census rolls, deeds, cemetery records,

military records, and also Amy Godine’s *The Black Woods*. A song about these widows would have to answer two questions. Why does it matter? In other words, how can this song surprise, or make listeners feel something about the subjects? And how can the lyrics reflect the women’s perspectives and express their authentic voices?





A visit to the Brookside Cemetery and Hazzard gravesites. We think Julia is buried next to Charles. There's just a small stone that says MOTHER.

the song as Julia Hazzard speaking to her late husband, reminiscing about their early days, and giving him the news that she had decided the farm to their grandchildren. Julia could never vote, but by giving at least 40 acres of land to her grandson, she could pass on generational wealth and gain the franchise for him. For that, she must have been very proud.

When telling the stories of Adirondack women, I try to have the melody and chord structure of the song reflect the personality of the woman and the character of her life. The Hazzard widows' stories were poignant, but also triumphant. Likewise, the chords alternate between major and minor, with emphasis on an A major chord in the chorus, in which Julia proclaims, "We Hazzard widows *own* the land we're farming." She went from being enslaved to being freed, to marrying a Union soldier, to moving north, and owning land in the Adirondacks. I hope this song portrays her as a diligent, devoted wife, mother, farmer, and citizen.

Fran Yardley, my astute storyteller friend, once told me, "Never let the facts get in the way of the truth." How accurate are my song lyrics on the Hazzard widows? No one knows, but I have the audacity to give voice to yet another Adirondack woman, and I hope that it will spark someone to tell some other remarkable woman's story. ▼

One method I have used to steep myself in a woman's story is to read her writing and get a sense of the cadence of her language. Since these widows were listed as illiterate in the census rolls, there was no writing to access. I noted that Blacks and whites together started a cemetery in Bloomingdale, New York, and that was where the Hazzards were buried. One cool, cloudy afternoon, I went to Brookside Cemetery and found Alexander's gravestone first, then his widow Mary Elizabeth's nearby. Down the hill and over a few rows, I found Charles Hazzard's grave and a small headstone next to it that just read "MOTHER". Standing over the grave, I pictured Julia Hazzard sitting by

her husband's grave, while her sister-in-law visited her husband's grave not far away. I began to imagine what would have been important to this Black woman, who had grown up in South Carolina, most likely in enslavement.

One of the hardest aspects of turning history into a song is to whittle down the big picture, with all its meaning and context, into a snapshot of a person that will make people want to learn more. We know from the deeds and census rolls how much land the Hazzard brothers owned on two adjoining farms and what crops they raised. I've tried to raise tomatoes in our sandy soil, so I know it is difficult with our short growing season. I conceived

Peggy Lynn is a singer/songwriter/historian based in Lake Clear in the Adirondack Mountains. Her song, "The Hazzard Widows" will be included in a new album titled *Love is Gravity*, to be released in June 2025. *Breaking Trail: Remarkable Women of the Adirondacks*, co-authored by Peggy and Sandra Weber, has been reissued in an updated version by Purple Mountain Press in 2025. Peggy Lynn's music and concert schedule can be found at www.quercusmusic.com. Photo by Elaine Derby.



“The Hazzard Widows”
Words and music by Peggy Lynn

They said Mister Gerrit must be crazy to give three thousand Black folks enough land,
So we could farm and vote and raise a family; raising crops in Adirondack sand.
Your father had his plot near Timbuctoo; you and Alex brought us North to Bloomingdale.
We grew taters, oats, and hay; coyotes stole the lambs that strayed,
But we had enough for taxes without fail.

**Oh Charles, I sit by your grave here at Brookside;
Marylizbeth grieves your brother up the hill.
We Hazzard widows own the land we’re farming,
And God willing, our family always will.**

I recall our first meeting down in Beaufort; thrilled when a Union soldier asked to dance.
Though I was just a laundress for the army, small sparks grew to fire a romance.
When we learned your Regiment was leaving, you asked me to marry right away.
You promised when the war was over, we’d bring my daughters North and there we’d stay.

**Now I sit by your grave here at Brookside;
Marylizbeth grieves your brother up the hill.
We Hazzard widows own the land we’re farming,
And God willing, our family always will.**

This land beside the river is still fertile; young Charles is strong enough to take the plow.
I won my widow’s pension in 1900, that and weaving cloth make ends meet somehow.
Though I can’t read the deed to our grandchildren, I proudly scrawled my X to make it so.
I pray they’ll carry on here in Saint Armand, and that blessings for them will overflow.

**Now I sit by your grave here at Brookside; I know I’ll rest beside you ‘fore too long.
We made a good life here in the mountains and the Hazzard family found where it
belongs.
Our Hazzard family sings a freedom song.**

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