

New book uncovers the remarkable words, life, and natural world legacy of Epping teacher Mary Folsom Blair (1881-1973)

Mary E. Folsom Blair was just a name on a listing sheet when Primack bought her former property in 1974 in Epping, NH. But he soon began to pick up snippets about this longtime teacher, active Quaker, and early advocate for outdoor education, including from former students who recount how Mary led miles-long walks through the woods to “Arcady,” her lakeside bungalow, which still stands, its walls covered with the fading names of some of these century-plus ago visitors.

Over the years, Primack managed to track down the most complete and pure record of Mary: her journals, which she began in 1897 at the age of 15, and a trove of letters to and from her. The result is *‘Put It Down on Paper’: The Words and Life of Mary Folsom Blair – A Fifty-Year Search* (Loom Press, July 2022).

Mary’s first journal entries recount carefree youth -- long skates along frozen rivers, outings on her “wheel.” As their author grows, the writing reflects the struggles of a talented and creative mind frustrated by gender and other restraints of her time, professional and personal. Mary also writes eloquently of the natural world, an attachment she was determined to instill into young people. (Primack has assured that the forest and streams along which Mary once walked will be forever protected by transferring his land as a life estate gift to the Southeast Land Trust of New Hampshire.)

Quaker Mary Folsom – her lineage traces to the Folsoms of Exeter, of which Epping was part until 1741 -- eventually married French-Canadian Catholic Edmond Blair, spending the last 50 years of her life living with him in her childhood home. But before Edmond – her “hero” on ice -- Mary’s heart went to two women, both of whom left her for men they met at, unfair fate, Arcady.

Mary spent the last decades of her half-century classroom career, which included teaching in Stratham in 1905, in the same rural schoolhouse that she attended as a girl. She was no typical teacher, either of her time or of today. Former students recall her life-shaping influence in and out of the classroom, from her passion for nature to the historical pageants she produced to her dedication to the well-being of her students as their small rural town faced the Depression and other challenges.

Primack usually writes in the third person, but this book is also about his own quest, from locating Mary's writings to how, even now, he keeps finding dots to connect. As historian Brenda Wineapple writes, "'*Put It Down on Paper*' is the charming, poignant tale of author Phil Primack's unflagging search for the woman who would otherwise have been lost to history—and of that woman's fortitude, passion and commitment."

Over a long journalism career, Primack has been a reporter for weekly and daily newspapers and has written for *The Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, *the Nation*, and many other publications. He has also been a speech writer, policy adviser, and carnival worker (the latter led to his well-reviewed book, *New England Country Fair* (1982), about which Studs Terkel wrote, "Phil Primack captures the fine feel of small-town Yankee America gently showing off."). He splits his time between Medford, MA, and Epping.