

Margaret Johnson ~ My Father



Bernard Aubry Hilliard

My father was the youngest of five children in a Quaker family in a southern New Jersey small town. I don't think I can write about him without writing about his family. He and his three brothers lived together on the top floor of the house in the middle of Salem amid the accumulation of young men at the turn of the century — a treasure trove to my sister and me after they all moved on. There was a bicycle with a huge front wheel and a small rear wheel hanging on one wall. I always wondered how one could get on it, let alone ride it. There were fencing foils and Indian bows and arrows and paint pots left behind by the *Lenni Lenape* who had lived in the area. A collapsible top hat for the dandies.



House in Salem NJ

My grandfather and his brother founded one of the two banks in town and my father worked in it all his life in one capacity or

another — from errand boy and janitor to President and Chairman of the Board.

Even as a small child at the time, I felt the tension in the house during the 1929 crash, with my father spending very late nights making sure the Federal Reserve Bank in Philadelphia would lend the bank the money necessary to withstand a run on the bank. He was successful and I was told years later, when I was working in a large bank in Philadelphia, what a very good banker he was.

My father and one of his older brothers, George, lived together for a number of years in a cottage on the shore of the Delaware River. Then he met the woman he subsequently married when they were both 39. It was a very happy marriage, until she developed cancer and died,

I was 15 at the time; my sister had married and now lived in Vermont, so my father and I had a couple of years together before I went off to boarding school. He got trapped by a predatory widow who thought he must have lots of money. When he told her didn't, she didn't believe him and when she realized he was right, she made life very difficult for him.

I loved him dearly and was saddened by his troubles but unable to help him, he died at age 74. I still miss him and his quiet sense of humor.



Lenni Lenape

- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenape>

The Lenni Lenape, also known as the Delaware Indians, are an Indigenous people of the Northeastern Woodlands. Their historical territory included parts of present-day New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware. The name "Lenni Lenape" translates to "Original People" or "Real People".

Salem NJ

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salem,_New_Jersey

Salem is a city in and the county seat of Salem County, the most rural county in the U.S. state of New Jersey. The name Salem, for both the city and county, is derived from the Hebrew word shalom, meaning peace

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Theo ~ Some observations on "My Father"

Margaret presents her father as an archetypal figure: the self-made man who rises from errand boy to bank president, surrounded by artifacts of adventure and history—fencing foils, Indian relics, a penny-farthing bicycle.

His late marriage at 39 brings profound happiness, shattered by his wife's cancer. Then comes the predatory widow, a classic antagonist who mistakes his modest banker's life for wealth and torments him when disillusioned.

The story has Shakespearean contours: a good man's rise, a period of joy, then a villain's entrance that undoes his peace. Margaret, powerless at 15 and soon sent to boarding school, can only watch her father's decline—loving him but unable to shield him from a manipulative outsider who destroys his final years.

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Claude ~ Some Observations

Claude is a popular Artificial Intelligence (AI) program

Question: Tell me three interesting things about Margaret's "My Father" story

Claude replied:

Here are three particularly interesting aspects of Margaret's "My Father" story:

The treasure trove attic room - After the father and his three brothers moved on, they left behind a fascinating collection on the top floor: a penny-farthing bicycle (with the huge front wheel), fencing foils, Indian bows and arrows, paint pots from the Lenni Lenape who had lived in the area, and a collapsible top hat for "dandies." This creates a vivid sense of accumulated adventures and different historical eras all layered together in one space.

His heroic role during the 1929 crash - As a banker, Margaret's father worked through very late nights to secure emergency lending from the Federal Reserve Bank in Philadelphia to prevent a run on their small-town bank. The fact that he successfully navigated this crisis shows both his banking acumen and the high-stakes drama that even small-town banks faced during the Great Depression.

The poignant late-life love story and its tragic aftermath - Both Margaret's father and his future wife were 39 when they met and married (quite late for that era), and they had a very happy marriage until she died of cancer. The story then takes a darker turn when he's targeted by a "predatory widow" who assumed he had money from banking, and when she discovered he didn't, she made his remaining years difficult.

The story beautifully captures both the sweep of American history and the intimate details of one man's life within it.

