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I

‘One of the happiest creatures on earth’ (1789–1806)

If you had visited the quiet New England town of Bradford at the turn of the nineteenth century, you could not have missed the Hasseltine household. On summer evenings lights would blaze and music would sound out until late into the night. The generous and affable John Hasseltine had built a room in his spacious home in which to hold parties for his five youngsters and their friends. John and Rebecca were hospitable and, with four eligible daughters, their home was a social centre of the town. Like most families in Bradford, they attended the Congregational Church which stood at the centre of the community—geographically and psychologically. But religion was fairly undemanding; the main business of life was enjoyment.

Ann, sometimes known affectionately as ‘Nancy’, was born just before Christmas in 1789. The youngest of John and Rebecca’s five children, she was doted on by the family, and an especial favourite of

her warm-hearted father. Lively, adventurous, cheerful, determined, highly intelligent—she was not in the least overshadowed by John, Rebecca, Abigail and Mary. She had a wonderfully happy childhood, and by her early teens she was sparkling, popular and very attractive, always in demand for parties and other social events. As one friend said, ‘Where Ann is, no one could be gloomy or unhappy.’ She maintained a pattern of prayer and dutifully attended church, but despite considerable academic promise her main concerns were friends and socializing. Ann confided in her diary that she often thought herself ‘one of the happiest creatures on earth’.

And then, in May 1805, a new teacher arrived at Bradford Academy. He was intensely serious. He believed in heaven and hell. Unless the youngsters in his charge were converted they would be eternally lost. Ann began to find the assumptions upon which she had based her life challenged. By the spring of 1806 a number of the eighty or so lively young people at the Academy had professed conversion. Their intensity of inner experience was profound. Many recorded these experiences in private journals; some exchanged lengthy and serious letters with other young people who had been similarly changed. Parents too were converted. A revival was taking place.

Events that summer in the peaceful New England town were just a cameo of what was taking place through towns and villages up and down America. Later, the great number of conversions and the huge increase in people formally joining the church would become known as the ‘Second Great Awakening’. The colonies had witnessed the first ‘Great Awakening’ during the mid-eighteenth century, but it is estimated that in 1800 only 6.9% of the population were formally linked with a church.¹ At that time the population of the thirteen states was probably not much more than five million. Independence