Martha Ballard is known today because of her extraordinary diary, which gives us a rare insight to the life of the average midwife and woman in 18th century Maine. Born on February 20, 1735, Ballard grew up in a moderately prosperous family in Oxford, Massachusetts. Her father Elijah Moore was a farmer and innkeeper, and her mother Dorothy Learned was a house mother, who could neither read nor write. Both her grandfathers and father were town selectmen and militia officers. Her younger brother Jonathan Moore was the town of Oxford’s second college graduate and the librarian of Harvard College. Her brother-in-law, Stephen Barton, was a physician. Historians believe Ballard learned her trade from an older midwife in Oxford. This shows a lot about history. Women were seen lower than men, by only men being able to be educated.

Martha would grow herbs, make medicines, made and fixed clothing, did housework, treated the sick, and birthed babies. Martha did not let blood, use opiates, or set bones like the male physicians. She used natural remedies usually made from herbs grown by
herself to treat patients. Being a female midwife was widely accepted, and sometimes they would work with male physicians. To learn more about the human body, many dissections were conducted.

In 1754, Ballard married Ephraim Ballard. He was a miller and surveyor. They started out in Oxford, Massachusetts. Mr. Ballard tried to set up an inn in Fort Halifax, Maine, by using the land of Sylvester Gardiner, a Boston loyalist. The Revolutionary government considered him a Tory and his land was taken, forcing him to move to Augusta, Maine. There he rented out sawmills and gristmills, and finally brought his nine children and wife Martha to live with him, gaining back peace with the Revolutionaries.

In January 1st of 1785, Martha Ballard was fifty years old when she began writing her on her diary. Martha Ballard was a rural Maine midwife who kept an extensive diary between 1785 and 1812. Every day for twenty seven years she recorded her daily events. Over the course of three decades, Ballard kept a meticulous, near-daily accounting of her life spanning over 10,000 entries. She always began by writing the weather and the date. Her daily writings were short and choppy. Then over the time it began to get fuller with more details. What began, most probably, as a record of her midwifery and healing work, grew into a remarkably steady account of both the ordinary and the extraordinary events in her life.

Martha Ballard's massive but cryptic diary was handed down through her daughter Dolly's family as a pile of hand-made diary booklets. Remarkably, none were lost. When a great great-granddaughter of Martha's, Mary Hobart, graduated from medical school in New York in 1884, Dolly's daughters gave her the diary. Mary Hobart had the scrambled leaves of the diary put in order and bound in homemade linen covers. And at the end of her career, in 1930, she donated the diary to the Maine State Library, where historian
Laurel Ulrich found it fifty years later.

In July 1982 E. Wheaton of the Maine State Archive photographed Martha Ballard's diary, creating a microfilm copy. For the first time the diary was widely available for study, and the original was protected and preserved. But two kinds of problem make the microfilm difficult--sometimes impossible--to read. First, the diary's condition at the time it was photographed--faded and varied ink, tears, stains, and tape--decrease legibility. Second, the microfilming process itself added flaws--shadows, glare, and improper exposure compounding the problems.

By May of 1809, Martha’s focus is mainly on her garden, the preparation that went into it, and what happened to the produce that came from it. Grandchildren are now old enough to help her with the housework, and the number of deliveries she attends has increased dramatically. Though Martha seldom mentions deep friendships in her diary, she relies heavily upon her connections to people in her community. One of the most significant elements in her diary is her chronicle of neighbors she visits with and those who visit her. The interaction itself, not the reason for the visit, is what matters to Martha, and sometimes she makes no mention of why the visit takes place.

Her midwifery is the greatest example and facilitator of these connections, giving a wide variety of people a reason to reach out to Martha and ask her for help. Martha is a popular midwife, and her delivering and nursing take her to most of the community. When the Purrinton murders strike the community, Martha focuses on the neighbors’ actions instead of on the crime itself and describes how together they deal with the dead and help the survivor. When Martha becomes increasingly homebound, her isolation from the rest of the community bothers her a great deal, and she begins deliberately passing along the produce from her garden in an effort to
reach out to the community once again.

The women in the Ballard household produced textiles during the years before the girls married. They grew and harvested flax. The family’s sheep gave wool. All the women in the household spun and prepared yarn and thread for weaving. The girls learned to weave. Weaving gave the girls a useful skill and also contributed to the household income. Martha did not weave, but the girls wove while Martha was off practicing her midwifery. Sometimes they bought cloth and thread, and they bought raw cotton by the pound. Which tells us how women worked and they would work in their houses all their life. While the men would work outdoors.

The actual diary booklets are small enough that Martha Ballard could have tucked one into her bag or pocket when heading out to deliver a child or tend to a sick neighbor. Ballard diary was even old when she began writing on it. The diary suggests, however, that Martha probably wrote most often at home by candlelight when the rest of the family were asleep. On May 11, 1797 as an example, Martha wrote “it is now 11h Evn, my famely have been in bed 2 hours”. When she would began her writings she would include the time and date, and a lot but yet short details.

The diary is considered of many events that happened to Ballard. For example Ballard would write about her midwifery events. She would write the many details that would happen in her everyday life. She wrote her lettering in cursive. Which is quiet hard to read and understand since she also didn’t know how to spell many words right. The diary’s format translates quite nicely into creating a list of lists – the “main” diary being a list of all the entries, and each entry being a list in and of itself.

The diary is consist of events put together as lists. Martha Ballard set them up like that so it could be easier for her to find what she had wrote in a specific day or year. The
advantages of setting up the data in a list structure is the ability to access these specific pieces of information easily and to compare them across entries. Just incase she wanted to go look back into her writings and see what she said and the exact date. This was such a great advantage, not just for Ballard but also to everyone else who had looked into her diary.