

“My Own My Everloving Arvilla”: Correspondence Brings Life to History

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Personal correspondence brings life to history. Access to personal correspondence significantly aids historians in understanding the history of a people in a certain time and place. Completing transcription and annotation on personal correspondence gives us an exceptional perspective of a time, place, and people.

Overview

This independent study succeeds the Spring 2019 transcription project that focused on the courtship letters sent from Henry Clark, of Richville, New York, to Lucelia Arvilla Mills, of Rensselaer Falls, New York. The collection of original letters, spanning the years 1868-1873, also includes some correspondence from family and friends, sent from as close as Heuvelton, NY, and as far away as Oberlin College, in Ohio. Carol Opdyke, descendant of Henry and Arvilla Clark, shared these documents with the class of five students, each of whom transcribed specific letters. Together, class members gathered to discuss the body of work and consider areas of interest to be researched.

By transcribing the twenty-seven remaining letters, reviewing and editing each previously transcribed letter in the collection, standardizing the work of five people, researching, and annotating, I was able to carry this project a step further while engaged in this independent study.

Words seldom heard these days, but found in the letters:

Upbraiding, *n.* A charging with something wrong or disgraceful.

Discommode, *v.t.* To trouble; to put to inconvenience.

Heretofore, *adv.* In times before the present; formerly.

Hector, *v.t.* To threaten; to bully.

Noah Webster’s 1828 *Dictionary of the English Language*

Transcription

The transcription process is exciting and laborious. Because a transcriber reads and transcribes original letters not usually previously documented, there is a thrill in the unknown. However, sometimes handwriting can be indecipherable; some words may remain forever a mystery. The work is worthwhile, however, because readers learn firsthand about the lives and history involved.

Procedure

1 Letters not yet addressed from the previous course were transcribed.

2 Spring 2019 students’ transcription work was reviewed. This involved reading each scanned document, comparing it to the students’ interpretations, and fixing any problems, if necessary.

3 The editorial method and apparatus used by Glenn LaFantasie in *The Correspondence of Roger Williams* served as a model for transcription and annotation decisions, offering ideas about arrangement, form, indecipherable passages, annotation, and other concerns such as dealing with idiosyncratic spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

4 Following LaFantasie, I created an editorial policy of arrangement and format for the letters and standardized them, as each student previously had edited somewhat differently.

5 Research on questions that arose or on background that could be supplied was completed. Sources included census records, books about family ancestry (such as Roselle Theodore Clark’s *My Children’s Ancestors* from 1913), and old newspapers.

6 Annotations were added to the standardized compilation of transcribed letters.

Difficulties in transcribing:

The conventions of punctuation and capitalization were seldom used by Henry, so it was hard to know where sentences began and ended. Libby Bellinger, a schoolteacher working in Heuvelton, NY, had a very flat cursive handwriting, which proved hard to follow. In some letters, there were words that I just could not figure out, even considering context.

Delights in transcribing:

Reading scanned versions of the actual letters brings an intimacy that the transcribed and published word does not offer. However, a typed transcribed letter is much easier to digest because readers need not work so hard to determine meaning.

Difficulties of annotating:

It is challenging knowing where to stop. Because this study has a limit of one semester, I cannot follow every interesting detail I would like to pursue. There are questions to which I will likely never know the answers. This frustrating feeling is a common one among historians.

Delights of annotating:

After laboring through the transcription process, annotation feels like a reward for the effort. For example, after transcribing letters written to Arvilla by Cousin Julia, I was able to locate a photograph of this cousin. I found advertisements for bakeries in her home of Passaic, NJ, where she likely purchased the cookies, crackers, and bread she was eating on her “piazza” the afternoon that she read of Arvilla’s engagement to Henry.



Letters received by Arvilla came from:



Jennie and Mother Mills



Flora Murdock



Henry



“E”

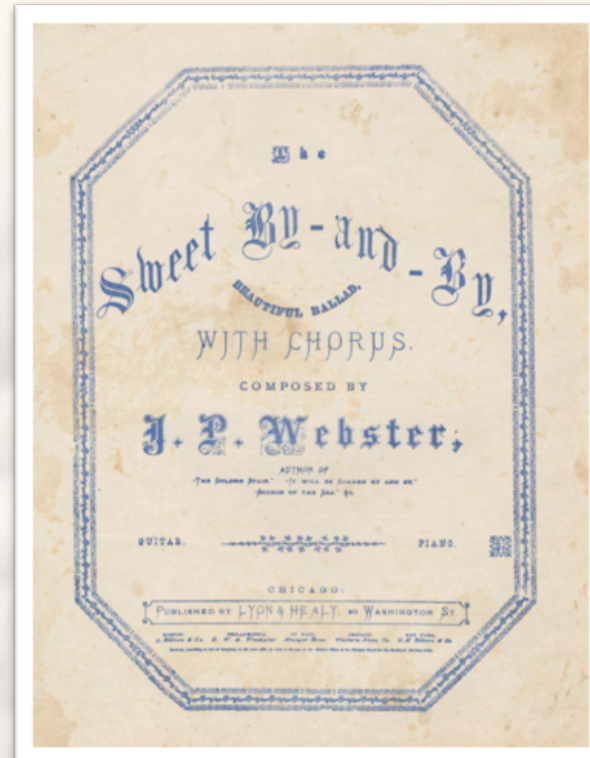


Julia Sheldon

Results:

The study was fruitful, as there was much to be learned from the letters and researching the details of the letters. Here are just a few connections and discoveries that I made.

While boarding away in Gouverneur for school, Arvilla’s mother and sister, Jennie, plan to send her a newly made dress, material for a hat, and money for books. “We also send you the music, and the words for “Annie darling” and my scarf...” Jennie Mills 1868-10-22



Henry thought he could sing best when singing “Sweet By and By,” a Christian hymn recently released in 1868! “I wish you could be here to go with me we would sing as we did out to Gouverneur thanksgiving sit by the stove all the time...I could sing better especially if they would sing the sweet Bye and Bye.” Suitor Henry Clark 1871-12-14

Though to date, I have only Henry Clark’s sister Sarah in a youthful photo, photographs were the rage, and fourteen photographers are listed in the *Saint Lawrence County Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1873-4*.



“Went up to the village and had my picture taken in a group of 5 each of us had a picture...” Schoolteacher “E” from Pitcairn 1870-06-12

“I suppose you sent your picture expecting mine in return. I am most ashamed to send such a ...profile but it is all I have at present.” Suitor Henry Clark 1871-07-10

“...four of us girls are going up to Paterson some day soon & have our picture taken in a groupe & I think I will have some of mine taken then.” Cousin Julia Sheldon 1872-01-07

“...the only thing that I can think of is the song that you sang to me just before I came away We parted by the river...”

“I wish you would send me that pease of music till I learn it and then I will send it forth We parted by the river...” Suitor Henry Clark 1871-12-13



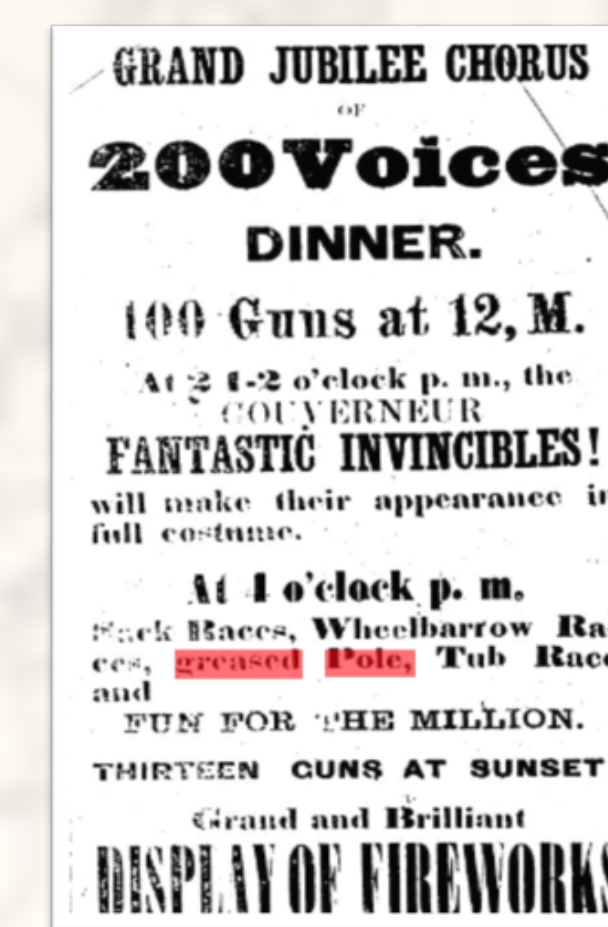
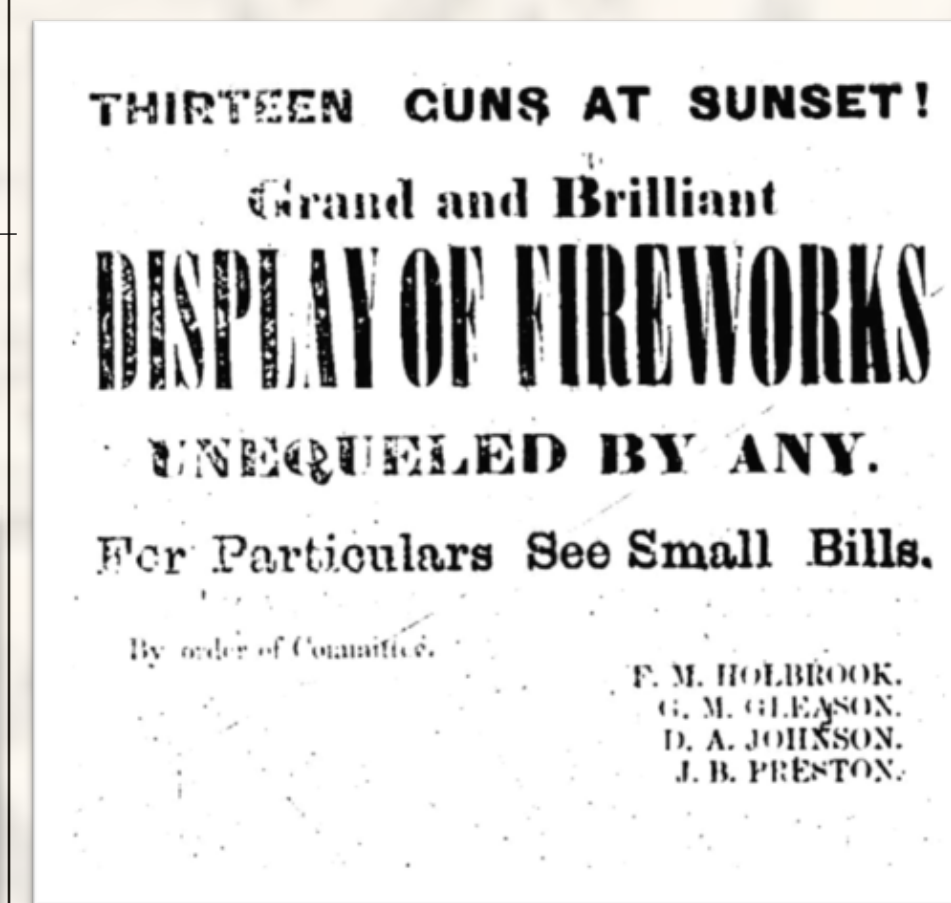
Trains were key in keeping connected: “I will meet you at the depot Friday Morning dont fail to stop...” Henry 1870-12-10 “If you think you can come up on the afternoon train Wensday just drop a line back on the train tomorrow afternoon...” Henry 1871-11-27



Acknowledgements:
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The Fourth of July in the 1870s was, as Henry termed it, “a large time.” Because Henry made much mention of it, in Ogdensburg in 1871 and in Gouverneur in 1872, I was prompted to learn more through old newspapers. Henry mentions that his sister Sarah will be one of the 200 voices of the featured Jubilee Chorus at the celebration in 1872. According to newspapers of the day, the Declaration of Independence was read, orations and prayers offered, the Cornet Band played, and a parade, which included Civil War veterans, marched through town. In addition, there was a 13-gun salute at daybreak, a 37-gun salute at sunrise, and a 13-gun salute at sundown. Fireworks followed. The traditional celebration of the Fourth also included amusements such as a tub race in the Oswegatchie River and a “greased poll” competition. The celebration was attended by more than 5,000 people.

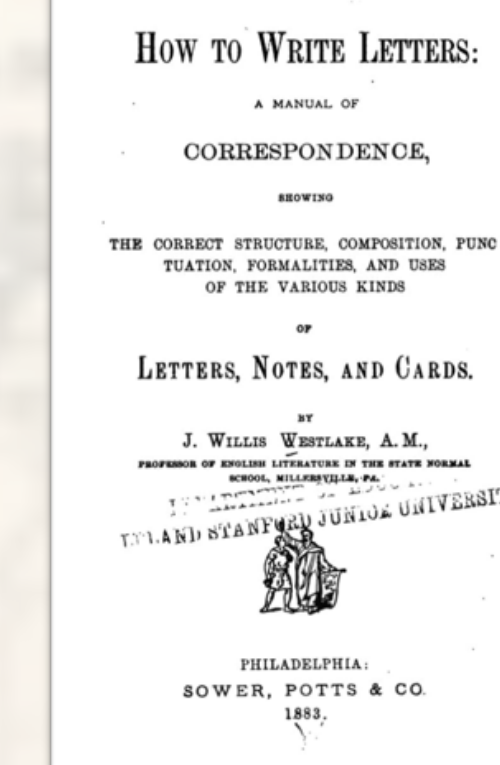
“I have seen large bills of their doings to Gouverneur and thought perhaps you would rather go thare they are going to have a large time thare the 4 th...” Suitor Henry Clark 1872-06-27



Conclusions:

There is much to be learned by the form and content of the letters. The process of dealing with every letter several times helped to familiarize me with the writers’ handwriting styles and thought patterns. The letters themselves mirror prescriptive literature of the times to a degree. Within the content, connections between people and community ties are revealed. This significantly increases the understanding of the history of a people, time, and place.

Prescriptive literature of the time gave guidelines which encouraged writing in a conversational style, preferably in black ink, never with crosses, which means writing over what has already been written, or vulgarities. Though vulgarities were never a problem, Henry was guilty in writing in very faint brown ink once and of crossing his letters to maximize his writing space.



“Brown Ink”



“Crossing”

In the 1870s, Saint Lawrence County was a very busy and close-knit area. Despite the seeming limitations of buggies and trains, with only letters or visits serving as personal communications, citizens were aware of what was going on and very active in their communities. Villages were bustling with businesses in the 1870s. Rensselaer Falls had a larger population in 1873, boasting 395 individuals, than the 311 residents it had in 2017.

I learned about many levels of connection and life in the 1870s. The Rensselaer Falls Congregational minister who united Arvilla and Henry in marriage was himself married to the niece of the De Kalb Congregational Church’s pastor’s wife. The DeKalb pastor’s wife was an aunt to Arvilla’s dear friend, Flora. Flora, in turn, while attending Oberlin College, was having Oberlin students to tea who hailed from Richville, NY. 13 young men from Richville were attending Oberlin that year.

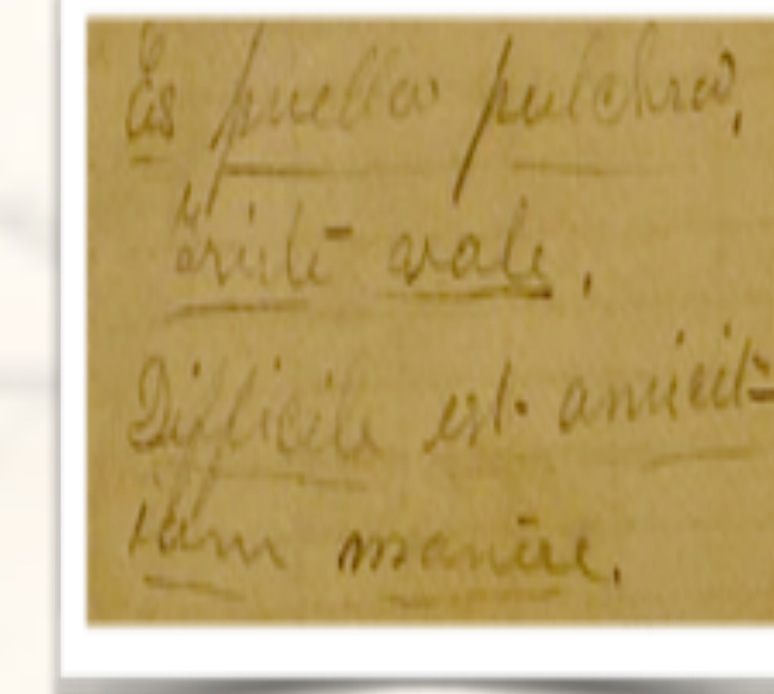
Church was a connecting point for the young couple, though Henry was still working through his own faith and looked to Arvilla as inspiration. Another common thread with many of the correspondents was the I. O. G. T. Lodges. According to William Watson Turnbull’s 1901 book, *The Good Templars*, The Independent Order of Good Templars was an International Temperance Brotherhood. The ultimate aim of the group was a sober world. Qualifications for members was belief in an Almighty God and a willingness to take the lifelong pledge of the Good Templars.

One of the yields of this study has been the ability for me to explore details of the era, such as the popular music. I asked my daughter to play some of the sheet music mentioned on her violin and guitar. It was beautiful. I could imagine Arvilla playing piano in the parlor and the lovely music drifting through the home.

On a personal level, people remain much the same through the years. There were people of industry and those seeking trouble, there were relationships of warmth, but also of strife. It is heartening that, in the end, Arvilla and Henry shared the joys and sorrows of life together. The couple remained married for over seventy years and raised 9 children, 8 of whom lived to adulthood.

Photo credits:
Carol Opdyke
Adirondack Museum
Northern New York Historic Newspapers
Geni and Joanne Tompkinson
Child’s Gazetteer and Business Directory for Saint Lawrence County
Westlake’s How to Write Letters
FindAGrave and JRobin
LaRue’s St. Lawrence County Almanac Vol.4
Library of Congress
Digital Commons at Connecticut College

Education- Flora Murdock, one of Arvilla’s friends from Rensselaer Falls, attends Oberlin College during the correspondence time. The university education this young woman is getting in the 1860s is expansive. Flora’s letters best follow the rules of convention concerning capitalization, punctuation and spelling.



Flora even adds a little Latin to Arvilla’s letter. “Es puella pulchra. Triste vale. Difficile est amicitiam manere.” “Es puella pulchra” translates to “you are a beautiful girl.” On page 9 of Albert Harkness’ *A Latin Grammar for Schools and Colleges*, under the heading for Neuters, I found this passage: “Words and Clauses used as undeclinable nouns: triste vale, a sad farewell; difficile est amicitiam manere, it is difficult for friendship to continue.” Flora clearly misses her friend.