

**Guide to the
Sarah E. Prescott Letters
1843-1854**

Accession Number: 2006-013

Special Collections
Tuck Library
New Hampshire Historical Society

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Collection Overview

Title: Sarah E. Prescott Letters

Bulk Dates: 1843–1854

Accession Number: 2006–013

Physical Description: 1 box containing 17 folders

Provenance and Acknowledgements: The Society received the Sarah E. Prescott letters in 2005. The bulk of the collection (some 52 letters and a newspaper clipping) was a gift from the Colby-Sawyer College Archives, New London, NH.

Access Restrictions: No restrictions

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Summary:

This collection is composed chiefly of correspondence to Sarah E. Prescott from friends and former school mates, arranged somewhat chronologically by correspondent.

Biographical Note

Sarah Elizabeth Prescott was born in August 1828 in Deerfield, NH, the third daughter of Abraham¹ and Sally Prescott. Abraham, founder of the Prescott Piano Company, was a devout deacon in the First Baptist Church and was also an advocate of the temperance movement along with Franklin Pierce. Sarah's four brothers joined their father's firm in the manufacture of musical instruments, such as viols, organs, and pianos, at 132 Main Street in Concord, NH. When Abraham retired in 1850, he left the business to his sons. He later died in 1858. The piano business was in bankruptcy in 1917 and dissolved. Yet, the business had enjoyed success mainly because of the quality of the instruments produced. Today a Prescott Piano has many admirers and any Prescott instrument is considered a rare, valuable item.

¹ Sarah's father, Abraham, should not be confused with Abraham Prescott who murdered his employer's wife in Pembroke, NH in the early 1830s—a groundbreaking case that allowed a defense of insanity. Deacon Abraham Prescott, however, did testify at the murder trial, stating that the defendant Abraham Prescott was a distant cousin whose brother was also "touched in the head."

Sarah's father, Abraham Prescott, married a distant cousin, Sally Prescott of Deerfield. In 1834, when Sarah was six, her family left the Deerfield farm and moved to a home on South Main Street in Concord, adjacent to the Abbot-Downing carriage works. Sarah's youngest brother died in 1837. The next year, when Sarah was ten, her mother died. In 1844 Sarah's youngest sister died, the same year in which her father Abraham remarried.

Sarah Elizabeth Prescott graduated from the New Hampton (NH) Female Seminary, (1841 to approximately 1844) ranking among the highest in her class. Sarah's sisters, Hannah, Mary Jane, and Abigail also attended New Hampton Seminary. After graduation, Sarah became a teacher of Latin, Universal History, and Italian at that institution from 1846 to 1852. Until her marriage in July 1853, Sarah taught for a short time in North Carolina. Her husband, Reverend Henry Foster (b. 1817), a veteran of the War of 1812, had been prepared at the New Hampton Literary and Theological Institute and graduated from Brown University in 1845, ordained as a pastor. After serving as pastor in Massachusetts and Rhode Island between 1855 and 1866, he served in Newport, NH where he and Sarah and their two children, Charles and Esther, remained for six years. The family then moved to North Bennington, Vermont in 1872.

Their son Charles (b. 1855) was educated at New London (NH) and at Colgate, Hamilton NY. He was also at the Harvard Dental School, Boston. Their daughter Esther Maria (b. 1859) was educated in North Bennington VT and studied music at the New England Conservatory of Music, Boston.

Sources

Abraham Prescott of Deerfield and Concord, Mildred Crockett Tunis (1973). NHHS Collection.
Abraham Prescott: or Bass Viols and Parasols, Samuel R. Ogden, (January 1966). NHHS Collection.
History of Newport, New Hampshire, Edmund Wheeler (1879). NHHS Collection.

Scope and Content Note

The collection is comprised of approximately 52 letters sent to Sarah Prescott during an eleven-year period, most of which were during her student and teaching days at New Hampton Seminary and before her marriage in 1853. The letters are from Sarah's friends, either former schoolmates or teachers, some happily situated, some seemingly not. All letters exhibit a genuine fondness for Sarah, containing numerous questions of her interests and requests to hear more from her.

In this collection, unfortunately, Sarah's voice is not heard. From the letters, however, we can see that Sarah is faithful in replying to her many acquaintances, while seemingly leading an active, busy life. During the brief eleven-year period, some information can be gleaned that reveals the context of female life during this time. The mid-nineteenth century was an era of reform movements with the growing realization of women's rights (the Seneca Falls Convention and the writings of Margaret Fuller), of the question of slavery (the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), and of, perhaps, the beginnings of Abraham Lincoln's interest in political office. These topics are touched on lightly and almost imperceptibly in some letters, mixed in with informal chat. What is surprising is that the women seem to travel, usually within the northeast region, with ease and with frequency. Train travel seems common, especially trips to Boston, and the women in these letters are not as home-bound as expected. What is not surprising, considering their education, is that there is a considerable influence of religion in their lives.

Contents

Folder 1. Martha E. Sanborn Correspondence, 1843–1844. (5 letters)

Martha Sanborn of Epsom, NH, a schoolteacher, is rather mocking of the small village, saying it is non-literary and dull, and she is lonely for her old friends to visit—claiming that she has received no word "from a Prescott" in six weeks. She wishes Sarah's father well on his new marriage and the new half-sisters that Sarah has acquired. Martha writes to Sarah who is in both Concord and New Hampton, NH.

Folder 2. Sarah H. Sleeper (Mrs. J. Jones) Correspondence, 1846–1950. (5 letters)

Folder contains letters from Sarah Sleeper, former principal of the New Hampton Female Seminary and instructor in literature and moral science (1839–46).

Letters are from Bangkok Siam (China) where Sarah Sleeper (Jones) and her husband Reverend Jones are missionaries. She describes her house and servants who know a little English. Says she and her husband are living a civilized life; the people there, although they dress very differently, know something of the "courtesies of life." She is enjoying her life, teaching and distributing books. The folder also contains a broadside/handout with Chinese characters and a Biblical scene, "Forgiveness." Sarah Sleeper states, "A woman alone, unless she has very manly qualities, will not accomplish great things."

Folder 3. Sarah E. Richardson Correspondence, 1846–1852. (11 letters)

Folder contains letters from Sarah E. Richardson, living in Manchester, NH, who was a classmate of Sarah Prescott's at New Hampton. The letters are composed mostly of friendly chatter about schoolmates, friends, acquaintances, and family. In the earliest letter, Sarah R. is surprised to hear that Sarah P. is teaching at New Hampton and she has a hard time imagining it. She seems to be aware that Sarah P. has a "beaux" at New Hampton (perhaps her future husband Henry Foster?).

In the last letter (1852) Sarah R. inquires about the circumstances of Mrs. Jones's (Sarah Sleeper—see Folder 2) husband's death. She also mentions surprise and sadness that Sarah P. is no longer living in New Hampshire and is residing at such a distance (North Carolina).

Folder 4. Harriette E. Brett Correspondence, 1845–1852. (7 letters)

Harriette, Sarah Prescott's friend and former schoolmate, is living now in Boston and Cambridge, MA. The letters tend to be dispirited in nature. Although Harriette chats about news of family and friends, she recounts her illnesses, suffering, and ill health. She feels lonely, "entirely forgotten," and resigned to her "hard lot." To break the monotonous silence, she keeps birds in her Boston home and doesn't venture too far away from home. A later letter, however, written when she is in Contoocook, NH for the summer seems more cheerful.

Harriette mentions her fears that a distance is growing between her and Sarah Prescott. A letter in 1852 mentions the death of Sarah's sister.

Folder 5. Caroline Bartlett & Julia Bartlett Correspondence, 1848–1849. (2 letters)

Caroline Bartlett is a former teacher of mathematics and philosophy at the Seminary. Julia Bartlett was a classmate of Susan Prescott's (1843). Both letters, written from Milford, NH, mention the school "Report" that Sarah is working on.

Caroline declines an invitation to contribute some writing to the report, saying she is a bit "rusty". Both mention in their respective letters their "beloved" Miss Sleeper (See Folder 2) who has "gone to carry the glad tidings of Salvation to the poor Siamese." The letters contain talk of other schoolmates, and they congratulate Sarah on prospering at New Hampton.

Folder 6. Miranda W. Sherman Correspondence, October 20, 1849. (1 letter)

Miranda (Warner) Sherman, of Dover, NH, graduated from the New Hampton Seminary in 1844, and was a teacher of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy in 1846-48. She had also been a former roommate of Sarah's.

Miranda's letter is cheerful; she tells of her marriage since leaving New Hampton and describes the "small, plain" ceremony. Also tells of her wedding trip to Salem and Saratoga Springs, New York to visit family, a trip in which she observes the Champlain canal filled with boats and rafts.

Of their former classmates, Miranda mentions Sarah Skinner (see Folder 12) and Cornelia and Lucy Fletcher (see Folder 15).

Miranda describes in detail their new boarding rooms to Sarah, including how they are decorated and furnished. She seems to take pleasure in her domesticity.

Folder 7. Executive Committee, NH Board of Institutions, 1850 (Cummings, Worth, Gault). (copy of 1 letter/notice)

The Committee announces the resignation of Miss Martha Loring as principal and recommends Sarah Elizabeth Prescott as Principal ex-officio. Also mentions the expelling of Martha Garland.

Folder 8. Lizzy M. Bruce Correspondence, 1850. (1 letter)

A letter from Lizzy Bruce in Cambridge, MA asks Sarah many questions about other schoolmates at New Hampton and asks especially about Miss Loring's resignation. Mentions Sarah Skinner leaving school at New Hampton (see Folder 12).

Folder 9. Charlotte J. Wilson Correspondence, 1850-1851. (1 letter)

Charlotte writes from Keene, NH and talks about her return trip home to Keene from New Hampton during spring flooding. The road (railroad?) she traveled ran along the Connecticut River; the water was very high, and she expected the railroad car to be overturned.

Mentions that she is presently reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and enjoys it very much. Wants to read more from Harriet Beecher Stowe. Calls herself a "boring friend".

Folder 10. Newspaper Article, 1851 - "New Hampton Female Seminary".

Newspaper article about exercises held by the New Hampton Ladies' Literary Association. The author of the article is against women's rights conventions, and is happy that the girls at New Hampton are being sensible about this.

Folder 11. Martha Frances Loring Correspondence, 1850. (copies of 5 letters)

Martha Frances Loring was principal and teacher at the seminary and resigned in 1850.

In her first letters, before her resignation, Martha Loring chats about happenings at the New Hampton school and repeatedly asks Sarah to return. Mentions that Sarah Skinner (see Folder 12) has left New Hampton because of illness. Also says that Lizzy Bruce (see Folder 8) is not remaining after this term (1850). Talks about expelling Martha Garland.

In the following letters, from Utica, New York (after resignation from New Hampton?), Martha Loring asks many questions about the pupils and whether they miss her. She will be glad when the year 1850 is over. Mentions Sarah's soon-to-be husband "Mr. Henry".

Martha Loring seems to enjoy living in New York state, calling Ithaca a paradise and Aurora a beautiful agricultural capital. She mentions a "Mr. Lincoln who is popular and much admired, is welcomed at firesides."

Martha Loring's letters in 1851 are from Albany, NY and her attitude about the North Hampton school have abruptly changed. Martha congratulates Sarah on leaving New Hampton to teach in North Carolina. Says Sarah is better off, that New Hampton was not good for anyone with refinement. Reveals that she had to "labor hard" while there. She has now accepted a teaching position in Albany at a Female Seminary where she has to work very little and feels better off than when she was at New Hampton.

Mentions that she has read of a big fire in Concord, NH, perhaps referring to the fire at Sarah's father's piano business. Last letter mentions "Mr. Lincoln" again, that he, wife, and child are stopping by on their way to Massachusetts.

Folder 12. Sarah R. & Maggie Skinner Correspondence, 1852. (2 letters)

Former schoolmates of Sarah's, now living in Hudson, New York, the Skinners are surprised by Sarah's move to North Carolina. They chat about their present school, classes, and teachers in New York. Mentions that Lizzy (Bruce?) has gotten married. They ask Sarah to stop on her way back to Concord, NH, that she could take the railroad from there to Worcester, then to Nashua and Concord.

Folder 13. Mary E. Huntley Correspondence, 1852-1853. (2 letters)

Mary resides in Brooklyn, New York, but her first letter reveals that she is spending the summer in the country (upstate New York?) and her husband is there only for weekends. She speaks of having a daguerreotype taken of her 2-year-old son. She is interested to know the books that Sarah is reading and mentions that she herself is reading the writings of Margaret Fuller.

In the second letter addressed to "Mrs. Sarah E. Henry," Mary is surprised that Sarah is in Tyringham, MA (where Sarah's husband, Rev. Foster Henry, is a Baptist minister) and talks about the difficulty of "severing home ties." Yet, she adds, as a minister's wife, Sarah must make sacrifices and feels that Sarah will perform her duties well. Mary mentions that she is having problems with live-in help, that a girl she employed suddenly married and she has since had to "part with her". Mary is pregnant with her second child. Her letter reveals that she is happy with family life, and is anxious for her husband's return from traveling.

Folder 14. Alice T. Griggs Correspondence, 1853. (1 letter)

Alice writes from Worcester, MA. She wishes Sarah well and believes she will make a good minister's wife. Alice feels her house is now "desolate" after the sudden death of her father.

Folder 15. M. Cornelia & L. Helen Fletcher Correspondence, 1853. (1 letter)

Mary Cornelia Fletcher was a teacher of vocal and instrumental music at the Seminary in 1846–48.

The women identify themselves as cousins of Sarah's and both Helen and Mary Cornelia write to Sarah in one letter. They describe their recent journey home by railroad after visiting with Sarah in Concord, NH where they learned of Sarah's forthcoming marriage to a minister. Helen narrates the trip as an adventure, recounting the steps taken to complete the journey—how they changed cars in Nashua to go to Groton, MA where they then caught a train from Boston and proceeded to Bellows Falls, VT. They did not, however, reveal their final destination, whether further into Vermont or New York, but gave the letter's place of origin as "Home."

Folder 16. Martha (Sanborn?) Pearsons Correspondence, 1853. (4 letters)

Martha writes from Worcester, MA. In an early letter, Martha explains that her delayed letter-writing is because of her domestic duties and her troublesome baby. She wishes Sarah success in her teaching. Mentions wanting to write to Harriette E. Brett (see Folder 4).

In a later letter, Martha says she has heard no word from Sarah's father's family, and if Sarah does not reply to this letter, she will trouble them no more. Mentions the death of Marie (?), which compels Martha to think of her own mortality. She advises Sarah to be the model minister's wife, yet surprisingly adds what appears to be an affront: ". . . you who have been so unfaithful, are not the one to preach _____ and fidelity to me." Yet, later in the same letter, Martha regrets her words and asks for Sarah's pardon.

In another letter Martha still talks unhappily of a reunion with all in heaven, or the "better world." She hopes to see and visit with Sarah again, but adds pessimistically, "should I live to see that time."

Folder 17. Mary Jane Prescott² Correspondence (to Sarah and Abbie Prescott), 1850 and 1854. (copies of 2 letters)

The first letter (1850) is from Mary Jane to Sarah. Mary Jane is Sarah's older sister who attended the New Hampton Seminary and apparently is presently a teacher of Moral Philosophy and French at the Seminary. She writes that she is lonely without Sarah. Talks about Mary Garland's death (Martha Garland's sister [see Folders 7 and 11]) even after taking an "ice water" treatment. Mrs. Jones (see Folder 2—Sarah Sleeper) has been caring for Martha Garland and her mother in their grief. Says that Mary Garland's body was placed in a coffin at noon and kept in a parlor until the next morning when it was taken to Boston for burial. Mary Jane refers to their recent trip to Canada. Reveals Sarah's successor at the New Hampton School who will probably room with Mary Jane. They are looking forward to the students' arrival at the school on the stage. Letter chats about school news and mutual acquaintances. Also Mary Jane mentions that she will be going to live abroad for awhile, but cannot seem to get excited about it.

² In 1858, Mary Jane, like Sarah, marries a minister from Connecticut with an impressive background. He is a pastor in New London until 1868 when they move to a southern state for Mary Jane's health. Their one child dies in infancy. Abigail is married in 1856 to a dry goods dealer first in Concord (NH) and then in Hopkinton. He dies in Hopkinton leaving one daughter who was born in 1857.

The second letter (1854) is from Mary Jane to her younger sister, Abigail Prescott, who also attended New Hampton Seminary. Mary Jane is now a principal as well as teacher at the female department of the New London (NH) Literary and Scientific Institution. Mary Jane mentions taking a walk to Pleasant Pond to visit one of her "young ladies" who has been sick. Talks about her own home and furnishings.