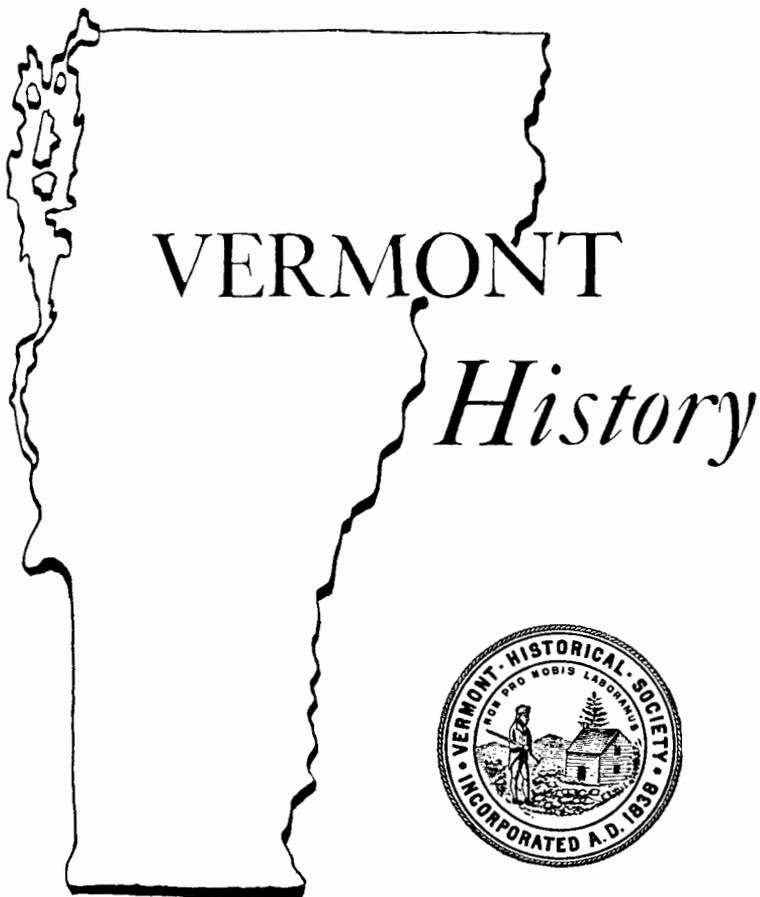
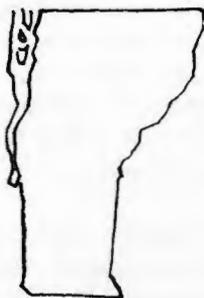


SUMMER 1982

VOL. 50, NO. 3



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Mary Fletcher, with great foresight, provided the funds to construct a hospital and endowed its operating costs in a period when the public still viewed hospitals as places for strangers and paupers to die.

Humanities' Needs Deserve Our Fortune: Mary Martha Fletcher and the Fletcher Family Benevolences

By LILIAN BAKER CARLISLE

Mary Fletcher Hospital formally opened for the inspection of the general public at 10 a.m. on January 27, 1879. After addresses by numerous dignitaries, Dr. William Carpenter, president of the Board of Hospital Trustees, tendered Miss Mary Martha Fletcher's "regrets that the condition of her health prevents her presence on this occasion; she extends all her kind wishes."¹ The occasion marked the culmination of the dream of three members of the Fletcher family, none of whom could attend to savor its reality. Her parents, Thaddeus and Mary L. (Peaslee) Fletcher, endowed many public institutions, and after their death Mary continued this work. In 1885 University of Vermont President Matthew H. Buckingham, who knew Miss Fletcher well, understood that she would prefer an eulogy which did "not say much about me," but would "Give to my father and mother the honor of endowing the Hospital. It was their money, not mine that I gave. I wish to be remembered hereafter simply as one who had an obligation and tried to fulfil it; as one who had a work to do and tried to do it as well as a poor sick woman could."²

Thaddeus Fletcher, born in 1801, lived and worked in Essex Center, Essex Junction, and Jericho.³ He opened a general store built in 1819-20 by B.B. Butler at the junction in Essex Center. Fletcher borrowed \$400 from his brother, Paris, and commenced a mercantile business, which prospered so well that he soon purchased a building lot and erected a residence and larger store. His home was on the southeast corner of the common, and it later became the parsonage for the Universalist Society.⁴

In 1828 Thaddeus married Mary Laurence Peaslee of Gilmantown, New Hampshire. Born in 1810, Mary came from "good blood" according to her obituary. Her brother, Hon. C.H. Peaslee, twice served in Congress as a Representative from New Hampshire and was Collector of the Port of Boston, a "man of ability, who, but for failing health which sent him South for a milder climate where he died, would have stood high among New England's great men." Another brother, Dr. George L. Peaslee, practiced medicine in Auburn, Maine.⁵

The Fletchers had five children. The first son, born June 21, 1829, died two days later, even before he received a name. The first daughter, Mary Martha, was born September 19, 1830, in Jericho, Vermont. Next came Ellen, born September, 1834; then Anna Elizabeth, born in 1836, who died in 1844. The fifth child, a boy named Andrew Thaddeus, born in 1843, also died in 1844.⁶

While in Essex, in 1840-41 Thaddeus won election to the State Senate on the Whig ticket.⁷ His family name was well known throughout Vermont. His brother, Paris Fletcher, seven years older, was the "richest man in Addison County" when he died in 1880, aged nearly eighty-six. He lived in Bridport, served in the legislature, and was president of the Middlebury Bank for twenty years.⁸ Another brother, Col. Frederick Fletcher, lived in St. Johnsbury. His obituary described him as a "fine military man."

On February 1, 1850, Thaddeus Fletcher paid William E. Crooker \$2,000 for two pieces of land in Burlington on North Prospect Street and built a home for his family on that property.⁹ Although Fletcher continued to prosper in his mercantile business, the bulk of his fortune came from wise investments "out west."¹⁰ By the time he moved to Burlington, he was semi-retired and a very wealthy man.

In 1870, according to the manuscript of the United States Census, Thaddeus owned real estate valued at \$70,000, which included mortgages on several properties, in addition to his own home, and personal property valued at \$300,000. The household included Thaddeus, his wife, and daughter Mary, who by this time was forty years old, Henry Murphy, a fifteen-year-old laborer, born in New York, and Anna O'Connor, a fifteen-year-old Irish-born female domestic.¹¹

Mary L. Fletcher, as an advisor and counsellor to her husband, helped in the accumulation of the fine estate he left; and no one could know "how far her influence moved him to the generous gifts he made during the last years of his life." Certainly Thaddeus Fletcher trusted her judgment, as he made her the sole executrix of his estate and gave her complete control over the Fletcher family fortune.

In the last year of his life Thaddeus gave \$10,000 to the Home for Destitute Children and a gift of \$10,000 to the Essex Classical Institute.¹²

In his will, signed September 30, 1871, he noted that he was "in ill health, but in my own apprehension of sound and disposing mind and memory." He left "all my estate and property to my beloved wife, Mary."¹³

With Thaddeus Fletcher's passing, the Fletcher family consisted only of the two women, both sickly and confined to their home. They shunned society, lived frugally and became near recluses. About 1873 Michael Kelley came to live with them as a man-of-all-work, taking care of the garden, tending the cows, chickens and horse and serving as coachman. Kelley, born in Limerick, Ireland, came to America when he was twelve years old and was thirty-six when he came to live with the Fetters. The 1880 census lists his occupation as "carriage maker." The Fletcher household consisted of these three members until Mary L. died. After that only Mary Martha and Michael lived at 179 North Prospect Street.¹⁴ All the while, however, mother and daughter planned for further benevolences which would make the Fletcher name a revered one in the Burlington community.

Mary Martha Fletcher was born in Jericho, and little else is known of her childhood. She probably attended the district schools in Essex. Perhaps she attended the Essex Classical Institute. At the age of fourteen during a very impressionable period, in one year both her eight-year-old sister and her baby brother died. Her companion at home became her sister Ellen, four years younger. Both girls were in delicate health, and Ellen was considered the more vigorous of the two.

In 1846, while still residing in Essex, Mary Martha and her sister Ellen enrolled as first-year students at the Burlington Female Seminary, located on lower Church Street. The Rev. J.K. Converse, who had served as minister at the First Congregational Church in Burlington from 1832 until 1844, directed the private school. Pupils entering the seminary were expected to have acquired "a knowledge of reading, spelling, English grammar, geography, and the fundamental rules of arithmetic." Mary was sixteen, and Ellen at twelve was the youngest age at which the seminary accepted students.¹⁵

The first year course of study included a review of English grammar, arithmetic, history of the United States, beginning Latin, ancient geography, plus a review of modern geography and beginning algebra. Students had daily exercises in reading aloud and had to hand in a written composition every two weeks through the term. Students studying music, drawing, and French were expected to spend four years to complete an extended course of study. Basic tuition for each eleven-week quarter was \$5. French cost an extra \$3.50, and drawing and painting in oil and water-colors required an additional \$4. Music students paid \$10 extra per quarter. Board, including fuel, lights, and washing, came to \$25 per

quarter. Two pupils from the same family, as in the case of Mary and Ellen Fletcher, rooming together received a reduction.¹⁶

Mary's formal schooling ended in 1847 after only one year at the seminary. The catalogue listed Ellen as a pupil in 1850-51 and again in 1851-52. Both girls were remembered by their associates as "extremely delicate in health, unusually shy and reserved."¹⁷ Ellen, "the strong one," died of consumption on September 23, 1857, and was buried from the house on North Prospect four days later.¹⁸ Ellen's death must have been a great emotional blow to Mary, for the two sisters had been close throughout their lives.

In 1873, two years after Thaddeus Fletcher's death, Mrs. Fletcher and Mary made their first joint gift from the Fletcher fortune to the City of Burlington. Mrs. Fletcher contributed \$10,000 for books and Mary gave \$10,000 to establish a library upon condition that the city provide and maintain a suitable building.¹⁹ They made an additional gift of \$4,000 to print a catalog of books before the opening of the library, known as the Fletcher Free Library.²⁰

Before his death Thaddeus had discussed founding a hospital, and the two women continued with the plan. But Mary L. Fletcher would not live to see this plan come to fruition. One August morning in 1876, while engaged in household duties, assisting in the ironing for her small family, death came suddenly from a stroke - apoplexy, as it was often called in those days. Her laudatory obituary described her as one who maintained privacy and who influenced the world through her husband and family. "She made no display of her wealth, was liberal, generous, free-hearted, never expending more freely than she would have done if she had simply been the owner of a cottage and a few hundred dollars . . . believing in and living the simpler and purer ways of her ancestors."²¹

Mary Martha Fletcher, now forty-six years old, was completely alone, the sole remaining member of the Fletcher family and sole heir of a substantial fortune of more than \$400,000.²² Mary had little time to mourn the death of her mother, and she knew it. The year her mother died, Dr. Henry Ingersoll Bowditch of Boston (son of Nathaniel Bowditch and president of the American Medical Association in 1877) examined Mary Fletcher and diagnosed her illness as a "slow and lingering form of consumption, which having existed for 20 years, might hold out for as many more, though liable to a fatal termination at any time from any untoward circumstance."²³ This knowledge possessed Mary with the urgency to finish plans for founding and endowing a hospital in the name of the Fletcher family, a project already twice frustrated by death.

She turned to her family physician, Dr. Walter Carpenter; to her friends Matthew H. Buckham, President of the University; and the Unitarian



Mary Fletcher Hospital ca. 1888
Courtesy of Medical Center Hospital of Vermont

Church minister, the Rev. L.G. Ware (both already serving as Trustees to the Fletcher Free Library); and to her legal counselor, Judge Torrey E. Wales. Within two and a half months of her mother's death, the Vermont legislature passed an act of incorporation for a nonprofit public hospital in Burlington, and Governor Horace Fairbanks signed it into law on November 18, 1876. The Fletchers' idea to support a hospital came in an era when, according to Dr. John Brooks Wheeler who joined the hospital staff in 1883, "people had not [yet] become hospital-minded," when the hospital made the public think of the "dread of experimentation."²⁴

Dr. Carpenter took charge of the project and formed a Board of Directors which he led as its President. The directors purchased the Moses

Catlin property, thirty acres of choice land, gardens, orchards, lawn, groves and pasture on Colchester Avenue, with a gift of \$25,000 from Mary Fletcher. The main residence was torn down, other buildings were auctioned off - a house for \$200 to Fred Hadley, the ell of the house to Michael Kelley for \$86, who also purchased the horse barn for \$44, another barn for \$38, and the coach barn for \$11. All buildings had to be removed from the property immediately.²⁵ Under Carpenter's direction and with the participation of the medical faculty from the University of Vermont, construction of the hospital began in the spring of 1877, and the work continued steadily to completion in January, 1879. W.P. Wentworth of Boston, a well-known, Vermont-born architect, had drawn the plans; the Hon. Nathaniel Parker supervised the construction; local tradesmen and craftsmen furnished nearly everything from the stone and brick work by Guy N. Willard to the beds and bureaus made at the Burlington factory of Joel H. Gates.²⁶ The land and the building which together cost \$75,000 and an endowment of \$110,000 - the annual income of which (more than \$7,000 in 1879) was to be used with patient payments for the operating expenses - constituted the largest public beneficence ever recorded to that time in the State of Vermont.²⁷

As soon as Governor Fairbanks signed the Act of Incorporation, Mary Fletcher made her will. She left her home and the furniture in it to her uncle Peaslee, her mother's brother, and \$10,000 to Michael Kelley, her faithful servant. She established an endowment of \$500 with Green Mountain Cemetery to maintain the monument and coping of the family burial lot, and she left the residue of her estate to the hospital.²⁸

Mary would live six more years after the opening of the hospital, and those years allowed her to participate in the establishment of the Mary Fletcher Training School for Nurses. President Matthew Buckham of the University of Vermont, in his address celebrating the opening of the school, asserted that "a school of nursing was in fact a part of the plan of the Hospital from the beginning, and was, in the mind of the Founder, one of the reasons for endowing it." He noted that the very first school of nursing had been established but a decade before at Bellevue in New York City, that only a score of other schools had been organized in connection with functioning large city hospitals and that the Mary Fletcher school of nursing was the first established in the United States in connection with a small town hospital. Twelve students enrolled for the first session on May 2, 1882.²⁹ The Directors of the hospital and members of the medical faculty attended the opening, but Mary Fletcher's health prevented her witnessing the inauguration of this new program.³⁰ (Only one record of Mary Fletcher ever attending any community event exists. The Burlington *Free Press & Times* records her presence at an entertainment

for the patients at the hospital. Dr. Wolfred Nelson, a traveling lecturer, delivered a travelogue on "London, Its Sights and Statuary" in the large hall of the main building of the hospital.³¹)

Mary's time was running out. Though her health was failing, she had one more beneficence to accomplish. She wished to endow a room at the hospital with a gift of \$5,000 for the use of the poor of the First Congregational Church - the church she and her mother before her considered their church home - although the church register does not indicate that they had ever formally joined.³² On February 16, 1885, the hospital directors notified First Church that Mary had endowed a free bed to be called by the name of First Church or such other name as the church should designate. Three days later the church formally accepted with gratitude the endowment and stated that the room would thereafter be known as the "Bethesda" room (House of Mercy), a fitting name to combine with Mary and Martha, the two friends of Christ, and the given names of the benefactor.³³

Early in February of 1885 Mary had caught a severe cold, and her lungs became congested. On the 24th Dr. Carpenter, then seventy-six years old, called to see her about two o'clock in the afternoon. He realized at once that she was close to death. In an article published in the University of Vermont alumni magazine, John B. Stearns of the class of 1891 related the story of Mary Fletcher's last day as Dr. Carpenter had told it to him. Stearns lived next door to Dr. Carpenter, and as a teenager often accompanied Dr. Carpenter on his house calls.

"Sensing the severity of her illness from the demeanor of Dr. Carpenter, Mary asked him:

'Doctor, am I near the end?'

'Yes.'

'Will I live until night?'

'I am afraid not.'

Then she said, 'I want to die in the hospital.'"

It was a cold day, snowing hard and the doctor had only his one-seated sleigh. Mary was a woman of iron will, though wasted body, and she said:

"Doctor, you must take me to the hospital at once. I am determined not to die until I get there."

The doctor called Michael Kelley; they wrapped her in blankets; Kelley carried her in his arms from her bed to the sleigh. The doctor knelt on the running board and Michael drove the horse, "Whiteface", as fast as he could through the driving snowstorm to the hospital. They carried her to a room, and she died two hours later, surrounded by all the ministries she herself had created.³⁴

Dr. Carpenter was named executor of Mary's will; and the Probate Court of Judge Torrey E. Wales read it. The estate was a simple one to administer. All the assets were in negotiable form and consisted of cash; \$490 worth of gold; United States treasury warrants, \$13,500; various deposits in four banks; three notes; and \$150,000 in four percent United States bonds - in all a total of \$186,347.

The inventory of her household premises gave proof of her spare and simple lifestyle. The house and four acres of land was appraised at \$7,000. In her first floor bedroom the bedstead, washstand, bureau, five chairs, lamp, bedding, carpet and safe where she kept her securities were valued at only \$60; and the sitting room furnishings which included her "sick-chair" (probably a wheelchair) came to just \$125. The Fletcher silver was valued at only \$50, and the family jewelry consisted of a lady's and a gentleman's gold watch, two gold chains, two silver card cases and miscellaneous gold jewelry, to a total value of \$100.³⁵

At Mary's funeral at the hospital, President Matthew Buckham gave the eulogy. A great number of citizens — directors, officers, trustees and faculty of the University of Vermont and the medical college; members of the clergy, Fletchers and Peaslees, Michael Kelley, and other townspeople — attended. The remains, in a simple casket covered in black broadcloth, were placed in the reception room. Two wreaths of flowers lay on the casket. As they arrived, the mourners stepped into the reception room to "look upon the features, now cold in death, which familiar as her name was to all, many had never seen in life." Buckham concluded his remarks with a wish and a prayer that others would follow in her footsteps; that her example would lead others to look on life and its resources and opportunities as a trust to be discharged; that wealth might have a truer and deeper sense of its obligations so that the seeds the gentle hand of Mary Fletcher sowed might bring forth a hundredfold of such ministries and benefactions.³⁶

NOTES

¹ Burlington *Free Press & Times*, January 23, 1879, clipping pasted in the Mary Fletcher Hospital Scrapbook, kept by L.G. Ware, Secretary of the Board of Trustees. Most of the clippings in the scrapbook are undated; they are from the *Free Press & Times* and give a complete record of the founding of the Mary Fletcher Hospital and the School of Nursing. The scrapbook is filed in the University of Vermont Archives, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vt.

The author wishes to thank David Blow, Burlington historian, for informing her about the Mary Fletcher Hospital Scrapbook; Harriet Powell, Essex historian, for arranging for her to see the Minute Book of the

Essex Classical Institute, and Maxie Ewins, librarian at Fletcher Free Library for allowing her to Xerox Ben Lane's notes on the library.

² *Free Press & Times*, February 27, 1885.

³ Obituary of Thaddeus R. Fletcher, *Burlington Free Press*, December 16, 1871.

⁴ Frank R. Bent, ed., *The History of the Town of Essex* (Essex, Vt.: Town of Essex, Essex Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 42 and 88.

⁵ Obituary of Mary L. Fletcher, *Burlington Free Press*, August 30, 1876.

⁶ Information from monument in Green Mountain Cemetery, Burlington, Vt.

⁷ Obituary of Thaddeus Fletcher, *Burlington Free Press*, Dec. 16, 1871.

⁸ Obituary of Paris Fletcher, *ibid.*, March 5, 1880.

⁹ Burlington Land Records, Book 22, p. 157, City Hall, Burlington, Vt. The home still stands at 179 North Prospect Street.

¹⁰ W.S. Rann, ed., *History of Chittenden County*, Vermont (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Co., contains several mentions of the Fletchers; p. 507, the Fletcher Library, p. 574, Thaddeus Fletcher, p. 745, Biographical Sketch of Mary M. Fletcher, p. 246, portrait of Mary M. Fletcher, p. 247, Mary Fletcher Hospital, and p. 586, story of Essex Classical Institute. Among the forty-nine biographical sketches of prominent "men," Mary M. Fletcher is the only woman included; of the forty-five portraits, Mary Fletcher is the only woman.

¹¹ 1870 Manuscript Census Records, microfilm, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont.

¹² Bent, *Essex*, p. 88.

¹³ Last Will and Testament of Thaddeus R. Fletcher, dated September 30, 1871. Probate Court, Chittenden County Court House, Burlington, Vt.

¹⁴ Vrest Orton, *Mary Fletcher Comes Back* (Burlington: Mary Fletcher Hospital, 1941), provides a brief account of the history, progress and future of Vermont's First General Hospital. An interesting and lively account of the hospital written prior to the fund-raising campaign to expand the facilities at the hospital. Some of the dates are not correct (Ellen died 1857, not 1855; Thaddeus died 1871, not 1873; the Mary Fletcher Hospital Training School for Nurses opened May 2, 1882, not March, 1882) but the writing is animated and graphic. Michael Kelly's (sic) duties in the Fletcher home are described on p. 10. See also 1880 Manuscript Census Records.

¹⁵ Female Seminary, Burlington, Vermont. Catalogue for the Year Ending August 1, 1846. The students' names and addresses of their residences are listed in this catalog. Mary and Ellen Fletcher's address is given as Essex, p. 7. The building now houses the Converse Home for Retired Ladies.

¹⁶ Female Seminary, Burlington, Vermont. Catalogues for the Years Ending 1850-51, 1851-52. These catalogues list not only the subjects but also the method of study, the religious order of the Sabbath (students were required to attend church twice; they could receive no calls; members of the upper classes recited a Sabbath lesson. The Bible was read daily.) In the 1846 catalogue there is a morbid "Note." During the previous term a pupil died of "quick consumption." She had entered the Seminary in 1844, but by March the disease had progressed so far that she had to leave school. She died on June 15. Because of the "healthiness of the location of the Seminary," such an event had occurred but once in ten years. Margaret Foster of Sudbury was 19 years old when she died. In the 1850-51 and 1851-52 catalogues Ellen M. Fletcher's address is listed as Burlington.

¹⁷ Rann, *Chittenden County*, p. 745.

¹⁸ Obituary, Ellen Fletcher, *Burlington Free Press*, September 23, 1857.

¹⁹ Burlington, *Burlington City Report* for 1873, pp. 112-113.

²⁰ Rann, *Chittenden County*, p. 508.

²¹ Obituary, Mary L. Fletcher, *Burlington Free Press*, August 30, 1876.

²² Orton, *Mary Fletcher Comes Back*, p. 13.

²³ Matthew H. Buckham, "Sketch of the Life and Benefactions of a Noble Woman," an undated *Free Press* clipping in Hospital Scrapbook, p. 24.

²⁴ Martin Kaufman, *The University of Vermont College of Medicine* (Hanover, N.H.; University Press of New England, 1979), p. 91.

²⁵ Hospital Scrapbook, pp. 1-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; and *Burlington Free Press & Times*, January 23, 1879.

²⁸ Last Will and Testament of Mary M. Fletcher, dated November 24, 1976, Probate Court Records, Chittenden County Court House.

²⁹ Hospital Scrapbook, pp. 18 and 21. Kaufman, *College of Medicine*, p. 92, indicates the first nursing class enrolled thirteen students.

³⁰ Hospital Scrapbook, p. 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³² Register of Members of First Church 1805-1925, First Church Archives, Burlington, Vt.

³³ Deed of Gift and Acceptance, with Resolution of the First Church dated February 19, 1885. Mounted in Hospital Scrapbook, p. 25.

³⁴John B. Stearns, "Burlington's Debt to Mary Fletcher," *The Vermont Alumnus*, Vol. XX, No. 7, April 1941, p. 58. This personal reminiscence of an observant Burlington resident of many years relates little-known facts about the Fletcher Free Library and material about the Medical College as well as the Hospital. He tells personal anecdotes of Dr. Walter Carpenter and Dr. Samuel White Thayer, both instrumental in the founding of the hospital. In 1872 Stearns moved next door to Dr. Carpenter's house on 223 Pearl Street. He accompanied Dr. Carpenter on his patient calls when he was in his mid-teens and relates in this article the eyewitness account of Mary Fletcher's death in the words of Dr. Carpenter, who with Michael Kelley was involved in her trip to the hospital the night she died.

³⁵Samuel Huntington and Elihu B. Taft, "Inventory of the Estate of Mary Fletcher, March 21, 1885," Probate Court Records, Chittenden County Court House.

³⁶Hospital Scrapbook, p. 25.