

**William Townsend Family,
Letters, 1827-1899
MSC 133**

Introduction

This is a collection of letters, primarily from and to the many children of William Townsend (1780-1868) of Felchville, a village of Reading, Vermont, during the period 1827-1899. The collection covers a wide geographic area (from Vermont to the Confederate South to gold rush California) and a great sweep of 19th century events (the oldest correspondent was born in 1807 and the youngest was born in 1835). The writers were mostly quite articulate, and though they often stuck to fairly mundane personal topics, there are often interesting nuggets where they expressed opinions on what was going on in their state or country. Miss Bessie K. Meacham donated the collection to the Vermont Historical Society in 1964. Miss Meacham created an index to the collection that is on microfilm (Microfilm 75). The letters are stored in one document storage box (1 linear foot).

Biography

William Townsend, the patriarch of the family, was born in Lynnfield, Massachusetts, September 8, 1780. As a young boy he moved with his parents to Reading, Vermont, in 1785. He spent his life as a farmer in Reading, except between 1836 to 1857, when the family moved to a farm in Norwich, Vermont. On January 1, 1806, he married Susanna Smith (born 1783), of Wilton, New Hampshire. She died in 1820, and was the mother of the first ten children. William's second wife, Hannah G. Bigelow (born 1794), of Reading, was the mother of the last eight children, and a few of her letters are included in the collection. She died at age eighty-nine in 1884. William died in 1868.

The eighteen children of William were Elmer (1807-1871); Albert (1810-1845), who died unmarried in Carthage, Mississippi; his twin Alfred (1810-1871); Aurelia (1811-1891), who married the Reverend Horace Herrick; William (1814-1864); Dennis (1817-1874); Frederick Van Alstyne (called Alstyne) (1824-1893); Isabella (1827-1895, married Henry Waterman; Van Buren (1831-1898), who died in Tampa, Florida; Villette Pizarro, sometimes spelled Valette (1832-1903); Marquis Derelius (1835-1922), who died in Conneaut, Ohio; Eliza (1821-1911), unmarried, living in Reading and Norwich; Orson (1808-1865), married to Harriet M. Holt; Susanna (1813-1874), married Ezra Fay but divorced and then lived at home; Edwin (1816, died at age six months); Adin (1819-1823); Francis Torry, called Torry, (1829-1907); and another child born and died the next day in December of 1822 and named Susanna also.

Organization

The collection has been organized in chronological order for each of the main writers, eleven in number (Elmer, Albert, Alfred, Dennis, Valette, Isabelle, William, Alstyne, Van Buren, Marquis, Aurelia), though within each sub-group may be found letters from the wife or child of the writer, or notes added on by other members present at the time of writing. Most of the letters were sent back to the family home at Felchville (Reading), Vermont, and for a time to Norwich, Vermont, when the family moved there. They are mostly written to their parents, or to their sisters who remained at home.

Scope and Content

Elmer wrote the first group of letters, between 1827 and 1870, all from Boston, where he was a businessman, financially the most successful of all the children. He started as a clerk in a cotton goods firm, first just for board, then for a dollar a week plus board. By 1828 he was at a different store, with a salary of \$15 a month plus board and washing. By 1832 he is a partner at the firm of J. Forbush & Company. Most of his letters are offering financial support to his parents, sending sums to his siblings, often in quite large amounts (\$50, \$100, \$800 to help buy the new farm). He sends pins home to brother Alfred, costing him \$1, telling Alfred to sell them at double the price but to polish them as they will then bring a better price. He offers to fund half the education costs of a sister in 1829, wants another sister to go to a local academy and he will pay. He urges another brother to go to Cape Cod for his health and Elmer will pay. In 1840, when brother Dennis leaves Dartmouth for financial reasons, Elmer regrets he wasn't informed so he could have helped cover the costs. His letters are not only dealing with his financial support but also have a heavy content in advice, extolling the need for a good education, working hard, warning his sisters to watch their reputation. He sends home books, even groceries to help out the parents. He helps his brothers Orson and Alfred find jobs in Boston. "Knowledge is Power" is his slogan. He takes French lessons at evening school, attends the Boston Lyceum for lectures and its library. By 1836 he is living in Louisburg Square in Boston. His letters often report on business matters, the hard times of the 1837 depression (though he also says he is worth \$60,000). He marries in 1833, and they have at least two children, but they evidently both died in 1845 as his letter home on May 25, 1845, speaks with passion of those two deaths. This is the first letter that isn't all business and advice. His December 14, 1864, letter attacking the Canadians for discharging the St. Albans Confederate raiders is the first real reference to current events. The letters have virtually nothing about his personal or family life. They are heavy on financial aid and advice, the benefits of education, and in so many ways show his generosity, but they don't seem to show great warmth. In any case, he was far and away the great financial "success" of the children, and the one they often turned to when in financial distress.

Albert's letters, covering 1827-1844, show a very different person. While Elmer wrote clear, well-worded letters, Albert faced many spelling challenges. Words such as "verry", "iff", "slaying" (for sleighing), "perfectly" fill his letters. Albert evidently was a heavy drinker in his early life. His July 6, 1840, letter describes his drinking troubles and

his siblings often make reference to it. Albert starts as a tailor, in Windsor, Vermont, but evidently gets into heavy debt, and when he leaves the state he owes a large sum in Bellows Falls, and later writes that he won't come north till he has paid off his debts. He moves to Washington, D.C., then Georgia, where he settles in the "gold region or Cherokee (sic) Nation", seeing Indians in their native state, and giving good descriptions of poor, quarrelsome, hard-drinking, hard-fighting gold diggers. By 1840 he is in Carthage, Mississippi. Evidently tailoring was his life-long profession. As Elmer was always advising hard work and more education, Albert advises sister Aurelia not to work too hard, not to be so tough on herself, though at other times he parrots some of Elmer's wisdom word for word. Albert never married.

Alfred's letters, covering 1827-1874, are most interesting. He worked in Boston thanks to Elmer finding him a job by 1827, but he was plagued with ill health, perhaps tuberculosis. By 1831 he was in Windsor, Vermont, as a tailor's apprentice. His January 11, 1833, letter to his parents spoke of Albert's poor behavior and business failure in Bellows Falls. Later, in 1835, when he and Albert were in Georgia, he wrote his sisters telling them not to mention Albert's past problems. Then in 1836 he wrote a long letter home about Albert's wild dissipation and the fact he had given up trying to correct him. He wrote well of the hostility of the Indians in western Georgia, and the Seminole uprising in Florida. By 1837 he was in business in Carthage, Mississippi, and spoke of what a sorry lot the whites were, with their knife fights, etc., and how peaceable the Choctaw were, though liquor-prone. He had mood swings, from feeling business would prosper to discouragement after the depression of 1837-1838, and his being swindled by his partner. Evidently brother Albert lost money when Alfred failed. His first trip north was in 1844. A May 6, 1845, letter described Albert's death. These twins must have had a rocky relationship! By Christmas of 1845 Alfred had married the seventeen-year-old sister of Albert's widow, though another source had said Albert never married. By 1851 he had moved to Texas, farming on property of his wife's family, owning a slave family, expecting to restore his economic status. By 1853 he had moved to Louisiana, always optimistic for the future but always facing hard times. Often he wrote north of how he would send financial aid, but not yet. A November 21, 1853 letter spoke of the treatment of slaves, that they were mostly content, that he hoped slavery would end but was sure that the Abolitionists were wrong in their approach. His letter of April 8, 1861, explained why he was opposed to Lincoln, wanted Bell and Everett elected, but that he would support the Confederacy in spite of the hard economic times. Evidently there were no exchanges of letters north during the war, for the next letter was in June of 1865, asking his parents if they were still alive. In August of 1865 he said he had just learned of his brother William's death, the year before, even though both lived in Louisiana. He spoke of the poverty William's family faced, as much of their wealth had been in slaves. By 1868 he had moved to Texas again, to farm, with his son attending Baylor, but the last letter, from his daughter and wife, describe his death. He had a long but not very successful career. In this folder is included a letter from his stepmother about Albert's death.

Dennis wrote letters from 1835 to 1868; some of the letters from the 1850s are copies of originals at the University of Texas. Dennis attended school in Greenfield,

Massachusetts, at age 18, and later in Plainfield, N.H., and at his sister Aurelia's urging he took Latin, to enable him to attend college. He attended Dartmouth but left for financial reasons. He worked at his brother Elmer's store in Boston. He taught school, both in New England and Louisiana, the latter in part for his health, which always seemed questionable. His letters were well written, very clear, though there seemed to be great mood swings, evidently reflecting the state of his health. At one point he was running a school in Louisiana, but by 1850 he was in Illinois, newly married. He was in California by 1853, speaking of the gold strikes, the characteristics of the Chinese, the wonders of high-speed communications. (In 1862 he received a telegraph message from the east and compared it to the 168 days it had taken him to cross from Chicago to the west coast ten years earlier.) He was running a store in 1853, would become the postmaster of Fiddletown, California, and would teach, as well as do some photography. He voted for Douglas and Johnson in the 1860 election, but was satisfied with Lincoln, and wrote a good letter explaining why he felt the Union cause was just. He advised brothers William and Alfred to keep a low profile in the south during the war, assuming they would be pro-Union as well. He received no news from his southern brothers during the entire war, and indeed received his first post-war letter from Alfred in 1867, when he learned that William was living in absolute poverty. In 1863 he moved to Volcano, California, to teach and become county commissioner of schools. He wrote two letters in 1868 from Felchville, Vermont, giving details of his business ventures in manufacturing the folding globe he had invented, which he hoped to sell to schools and for home use. (In 1869 the University of Vermont awarded him an honorary A.M., presumably for the contributions he made to education through his globe.) Many of the letters in this collection refer to the globe enterprise, brothers hoping it would bring fortune, and sisters helping to sell them.

Om 1857 Dennis sent his sister, Susan, a photograph of the frontier town of Fiddletown, California. The photo is with the letter in MSC 133:07.

Valette's letters were written between 1855 and 1890, and were mostly short, full of economic and health woes. In 1855 he was building sawmills in Iowa, but then settled down in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he was gardening, and tending boilers in a mill, though that seems to be an on-again, off-again job. Many of the letters in this folder were written by his wife or his daughter, who attended Wellesley College for a time, and they stressed the poor health of Valette and the economic hardships the family faced. In 1881 Valette was named postmaster of Quinsigamond, Worcester, Massachusetts. Included in the folder is a biography of Valette, written by his daughter after his death.

The folder containing Isabelle's letters also contain many additions from her husband Henry Waterman. This collection was microfilmed (VHS-246). The letters cover the 1862-1895 period. In 1862 they were living in Polk City, Iowa, where Henry joined Company B, 23rd Regiment of Iowa volunteers, and in 1864 he was serving in a hospital in Keokuk, Iowa. Henry wrote well, with enthusiasm. He built houses, went into the building supply business. By 1872 they were in Milford, Nebraska, evidently partly farming, a crooked partner having ruined the building company. Poverty followed them everywhere, and ill health, and Isabelle is often in low spirits. In 1877 they wrote

of the damage done by grasshoppers in Nebraska, where they finally owned their own farm. She had 35 globes on hand to sell. By 1887 they had left Nebraska to move to Mapleton, Kansas. In 1892 Henry was assisting in producing a Populist newspaper, *The Lantern*. The folder contains a few later letters, from their offspring. In general this collection deals with health issues, hard times, apologies for not writing sooner or better, but there is not much about what is going on in the world around them.

William's letters covered 1832-1864. In 1832 he worked as a bookkeeper for Elmer in Boston, and wrote home about Alfred's bad behavior, with liquor and debt, and wrote of Albert being a drunk. He condemned the anti-slavery speakers of Boston for causing trouble, though he wanted slavery abolished. He seemed to have had a born-again experience, for suddenly his letters, often quite long, were all full of religious topics, pushing morality, temperance, church attendance. He described life in Boston in the 1830s quite well, though he felt the theaters were dens of iniquity. In 1836 he quit the business world and decided to become a minister, moving to Marietta, Ohio by 1839 to teach and serve as a minister. He taught in Missouri, spoke of going south to teach, but in 1842 he and Dennis were running a school in Burlington, Iowa. When the school failed, he followed Dennis to Louisiana to teach. He married in 1843, but she died, and by 1845 he had a new wife, was on the way to having nine children, and he was growing cotton, teaching, and running various music schools. He owned slaves, and in 1848 wrote a glowing letter about how well slaves were treated by good masters. In an 1861 letter he railed against "Black Republicans," saying the South would never give up, that God supported the south, and wrote quite eloquently justifying the southern cause. There are a few letters from his widow, written between 1864, when he died, and 1874, speaking of the great poverty the family faced.

Alstyn's letters were brief, to the point, clearly written, giving much practical advice about where to put money, mortgage matters, etc. He evidently helped his sisters living at home take care of money matters. He lived in Springfield, Vermont, working in the machine shop business, probably as a laborer, at one point making lathes. He described the economic hardships caused by the Depression of 1873. His leisure time was taken up with gardening. This folder contains five letters written by his wife, Aurelia.

Van Buren's letters cover 1857-1898. The letters start in Worcester, Massachusetts, though from their content it is clear he had been to Iowa and Florida. There is a long letter, undated, from his wife to Vermont describing the Orlando, Florida, area and the joys and hardships of farming there, with a short post-script from Van Buren. In 1872 he was working in a wire mill in Worcester, living with his wife's family, and dealing with uncertain employment. He, also, tried to sell the globes produced by Dennis, made boats to sell for Lake Quinsigamond, without great success. Poor health was a constant in his letters, displeasure with his mill job, and his desire to move south and escape the diseases of the north. He sold his Iowa land and in 1878 left for Florida, where he opened an orange grove on 40 acres in Maitland, Florida. One year later he and his wife were back in the mill in Worcester, having over-extended themselves in building their Florida house, resulting in the sale of some of their land. Many of the letters were

written by his wife, with Van Buren adding a few words. By 1885 he was back in Florida, living in Tampa, extolling his good health and the virtues of the Florida climate. His wife wrote two long letters about spiritualism, meeting dead relatives, etc.

Marquis wrote between 1862 and 1899, mostly from Conneaut, Ohio. In the Civil War he was stationed in Arkansas in 1862, and then moved to the Vicksburg siege. For months he serves as a sharp-shooter in that campaign. He had long medical treatment for an undefined problem which left him walking with a cane, and he was finally discharged in Ohio in 1864. There are five letters from Vicksburg, the last from the post hospital there, and then four from Ohio while waiting for his discharge. He was a partner of Townsend and Babbett, Dry Goods, in 1871, but by 1878 the business had failed and he clerked at \$1.50 day. In an 1876 letter he mentioned having met President Grant in Washington. He was active with the G.A.R., as Post Commander of the local unit and Assistant Adjutant General of the state G.A.R. His wife wrote a number of chatty letters to Vermont, frankly describing their hard times, of Marquis not being very businesslike but being a dear man. By the fall of 1879 he had accepted a job as salesman for a New York clothing company, the following year he was a partner in his old store, and his letters became much more up-beat. Some of the letters in this folder are from Carrie, who probably was his child from his first wife. Throughout the 1880s he was back on the road as a salesman, covering the Midwest to the Dakotas, east to New York and Pennsylvania, often he was away from home for months at a time. He was a staunch Republican, commenting each four years on the virtues of the Republican candidate. His wife seemed to be a perpetual invalid, yet he is seldom at home. He wrote good letters on the trials and tribulations of a traveling salesman, and most of the letters were written on hotel stationary. He fought long to gain his Civil War pension, and to get assigned postmaster, eventually being successful on both counts, though soon he was back as a salesman, and at the end was clerking again.

One folder contains a few letters from Aurelia, in the 1867-1875 period, three to Eliza from John S. McConnaughey, a soldier in the Union army, one of which describes the Battle of Antietam, and others written to Eliza from assorted relatives.

In the miscellaneous file are six newspaper clippings written by Horace Herrick (Aurelia's husband), describing the state of the economy and farming in Illinois, Ohio, and Nebraska in the 1870s, problems with grasshoppers, and the relative merits of farming in the east and the west. There are clippings from the Conneaut, Ohio papers of a proposed Civil War monument to be given the town by Marquis, and its dedication, an obituary for his wife, a notice of his 82nd birthday, and an extensive obituary for Marquis. Also in the folder are an 1879 G.A.R. program, a spiritualist letter signed by William Townsend to his wife and children, a program of religious services to commemorate the 125th anniversary of Vermont's entering the Union, the words and music of "My Old Green Mountain State," and the order of exercises for Dartmouth Commencement in 1878, when Amasa Watkins Townsend was a graduate.

In summary, these are interesting letters, dealing with very different personalities, from many geographic areas, but often discussing common topics. There is not a great

deal written on national affairs, nothing of international affairs, but clearly this was a family that felt affection for each other, for their parents, and great love for the home in Vermont they had left so far behind.

Related Collections

The VHS library has a 24-page pamphlet describing how to use Dennis Townsend's globe (Pam. Townsend, Dennis) and two copies of a flyer advertising the globe, one of which has manuscript notations probably written by Dennis (Small Bside 912 T663). A microfilm of a hand-written index on cards was created by the donor and is in the VHS library (Microfilm 75). Not all of the documents referenced on the cards are in the VHS library.

The VHS photo collection includes a half of a stereoview of a ca. 1876 family portrait of the Townsends of Felchville (F-PO-Townsend).

The VHS museum has one of Dennis's globes, patented in 1869 (ms. acc. no. 1989.3).

Inventory

- MSC 133:1 Elmer, 1827-1831
- 2 Elmer, 1832-1837
- 3 Elmer, 1838-1870
- 4 Albert, 1827-1840
- 5 Alfred, 1827-1844
- 6 Alfred, 1845-1874
- 7 Dennis, 1835-1868
- 8 Dennis, photocopied letters
- 9 Valette, 1855-1890
- 10 Isabelle, 1862-1880
- 11 Isabelle, 1881-1895
- 12 William, 1832-1839
- 13 William, 1840-1864
- 14 Alstyne, 1840-1892
- 15 Van Buren, 1857-1882
- 16 Van Buren, 1883-1898
- 17 Marquis, 1862-1882
- 18 Marquis, 1884-1890
- 19 Marquis, 1891-1899
- 20 Aurelia, Eliza, Hannah, and others
- 21 Miscellaneous

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townsend.doc