

Manuscripts and Local History

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This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian at Sam Houston State University. Today I'm talking about manuscripts and local history.

Many people who are only casually acquainted with the world of libraries and literature surround the word "manuscript" with an almost mystical aura; the assumption is often that material is of great value—even clothed with a "thou shall not touch" reverence. In fact, the word is a Latin construct that simply means "written by hand." All of us are surrounded by manuscripts such as grocery lists, parental reminders, and (hopefully!) love letters. Though our esteem for words of Latin origin tends to make us reserve "manuscript" for writings of some degree of permanence, it is nevertheless true that manuscript collections are quite common and variable in appeal. By that I mean that the same collection of papers that evokes enthusiasm and delight in one person might seem a candidate for the circular file to another. All those disclaimers are simply a basis for the point I wish to make that personal documents—particularly letters—are the raw stuff of history. Letters between celebrated individuals might affect whole nations, but even letters between ordinary people living in small towns can reveal more about life in a particular time and place than a pile of scholarly tomes. This trait can be illustrated by one small group of letters which is housed in the Thomason Room here in Gresham Library.

The most vivid first-hand description of major 19th century events in Huntsville was provided through letters by Margaret Thornton to various cousins in England, her native land. I should say "that we know of" to cover all bases, since there might a box in someone's attic that has 1,500 pages of diary entries on significant happenings in those far-away times. If such a treasure box ever does turn up, I hope the finder will notify me or some other appropriate person.

Before I go into the contents of these 13 letters by Mrs. Thornton, let us consider some of the other sources for our knowledge of early Huntsville. The earliest account, oddly enough, is by another Englishman, William Bollaert, who also created the first image of Huntsville that still exists: a simple sketch of a cluster of log structures surrounded by a few pine trees. Bollaert traveled throughout the Republic of Texas from 1840-44, and mentioned a number of sites in what is now Walker County. Other interesting descriptions were collected by D'Anne McAdams Crews in *Huntsville & Walker Count, Texas*, the most amusing of which is "Around the Square in 1862 with a Barefoot Boy." The most literary description of early Huntsville is by John W. Thomason, Jr., describing the HS of his youth in the earliest years of the 20th century, a generation after Margaret Thornton's last letter.

The notable difference (and great importance) of the Thornton letters, however, is that they were written shortly after the exciting events described, not recalled in tranquility many years later. Charles Taylor Rather's recollections of "the barefoot boy" were actually written when he was in his 80s! A recent contribution to wider knowledge of early Walker County life is a long novel by John Warren Smith: *No Holier Spot of Ground*. It is based entirely on county records and oral traditions, and alerts its readers to the wealth of information contained in the so-called "shucks" (that is, supporting documents) that accompanied legal cases; the language and situations that are revealed in legal documents, however, have to be fleshed out in the novel and are therefore another degree away from the immediacy of Maggie's letters [as we are pulled into the letters, the more intimate nickname seems appropriate]. In short, there are a number of sources that enable one to get the sense of life in Huntsville in its first half-century, but the Thornton letters are also unique in that they focus on major happenings that occurred over a considerable number of years.

The Thornton family came to Huntsville sometime in the 1840s, probably at the time the penitentiary opened in 1849, as F.D. Thornton, Margaret's husband, was employed as a carpenter there. The family was listed in the Census of 1850

(that was Texas' first formal census) and continued to appear through the Census of 1880. There are only a few tantalizing references to them in the published histories of Huntsville and Walker County, but it is apparent that they were well-established citizens: Margaret Lea Houston, as early as May 28th, 1850, writes to Senator Sam that she has been offered \$1.25 per day for the labor of their slave Albert by Mr. Thornton, whom she had just paid "\$40 for completing the shed." [Mrs. Houston was certainly the most prolific letter-writer from Huntsville whose epistles have survived, but they are amazingly short on events outside her home and farms, religion, and relations, as well as covering a much shorter period of time.]

F.D., Margaret's husband, was a Mason, and was serving as Treasurer of Forest Lodge in 1861 (he would therefore have had the onerous task of dealing with the rapidly devaluing Confederate dollar), and the history of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Huntsville notes Mrs. Thornton and family as members, not surprising since she was born into the Church of England. One of her fellow Episcopalians was George Robinson, editor of the *Huntsville Item*, another English Huntsvilleite. From the text of the letters, one knows that the Thorntons acquired property, as is documented by a statement in the Eastham family article in the *Walker County History* which was published in 1986: "Byrd Eastham bought 41 acres of land in 1874 for two hundred and twenty-five gold dollars, from Margaret and F.D. Thornton. This land adjoined the corporate limits of the town of Huntsville. On this property, Byrd built a lovely plantation home..." Two things should be noted in that brief passage: if you pronounce the street and the prison as "East Ham," instead of "E'sum," it shows you do not know your Huntsville history, and the reference to 225 gold dollars is meant to impress you as a very large sum that close to the end of the Civil War. Records also show that SHE sold the Episcopalians the lot for their first church, for \$150.00. The Thorntons lived on Main Street (later Ave. K, and later still University Avenue) next to the Presbyterian Church. Mr. Rather, in that humorous account of Huntsville in 1862, mentions the family—commenting on what became of the children—since they lived so close to the Square (actually right across the street from the house of kinfolk; John Henry Rather was still living in the old Rather House when I came to Huntsville in 1973—the site is now Rather Park—and he was reputed to take pot-shots at homeless people who tried to take refuge in the apparently abandoned house).

At last we come to the letters themselves. The last two letters chronologically are from other members of Margaret's far-flung clan in Australia and New Zealand. We know from the letters that she had a brother in the Northeast of the U.S., and possibly a sister as well, so her family is a good model of how Great Britain came to populate colonies and former colonies all over the world. For such a number of years, the letters are few, and one wonders whether all were saved, or just the more interesting; considering the time and cost factors of the mail in those days, and the busyness of Margaret's life in an area only recently removed from the frontier, I suspect that what exists at SHSU is most of them, at least from 1867 on. Surely there were some letters from the late 1840s until the beginning of the Civil War, but they apparently were not kept or were accidentally destroyed (a likely possibility—FIRE—is the theme of two of her letters).

I have not indicated how these letters came to be in Huntsville now if they were mailed to England more than a century ago. It all began with another letter, from a little old lady in a small English town who wrote to the Mayor—a frequent addressee when one has no idea who would be the best person to approach in some unknown place (for example, I have a letter in the Thomason Room from a former German prisoner in Huntsville's P.O.W. Camp to the "Lord Mayor of Huntsville"). Back to the Mayor passed on the letter from England to the eminent historian, Dr. Joseph Clark, who gave the official word of nearly anything of importance in Huntsville in the years from the late 'teens until his death in the 1960s. The letter informed him that her family had preserved some letters which were written by a relative two generations back that should be of great interest to the people of Huntsville. An Englishman who had spoken on the campus of Sam Houston State was delegated to examine the letters, and when he confirmed that they were indeed authentic and interesting, Dr. Clark made haste to arrange some payment for the descendant, and get them to Huntsville (we still have the wrapping papers!). Rather surprisingly, perhaps owing to the death of Dr. Clark and a change in the directorship of the library, the letters slipped into obscurity and were not transcribed and cataloged until fairly recently. This sort of thing happens frequently with manuscripts, which is why important ones turn up all the time pertaining to the lives of presidents, kings, and famous writers of centuries past; you too might find something extraordinary—just watch "Antiques Roadshow" on television.

The first letter we have, dated October 2nd, we know to have been written in 1867 because the major subject is the disastrous yellow fever epidemic which LITERALLY (that is, 130 deaths in a probable 1,300 total population) decimated

Huntsville's population. Margaret and her youngest daughter, Minnie, had been in England visiting relatives—that was the first chance they had to get there after the Civil War, of course. She alludes to a letter she posted from New York as soon as she had crossed the Atlantic—that letter does not survive—and then launches into a detailed description of what long-distance travel was like in those days. Her passage through customs was marked by her conning the inspector to overlook dutiable items by mentioning her Masonic connections. This betokens a sauciness in her personality that pervades the letters and survives in anecdote as well: Judge Benton Randolph's memoir relates that he boarded at Mrs. M.L. Thornton's house on Main Street when he was studying law at Austin College—which was located in Huntsville in those years, not Sherman as it is today—and he says she told him that she had never seen an honest lawyer (he was quick to tell her, "You are looking at one now"). Her trip to Texas from New York, following right on the trans-Atlantic passage, is quite an odyssey: steamer to New Orleans, where she bought papers that informed her that the epidemic in Galveston was proportionally as bad as in New Orleans (where it had been killing 1,500 people per week). She took a ferry to cross the Mississippi River, where she took a train for Brashear City (which is now Morgan City), the western terminus of that railroad, where she took another steamer for Galveston (which seemed deserted, everyone trying to avoid the plague), where she caught a train to Houston overnight, then another to Navasota, where she got the stagecoach for Huntsville. Around 30 miles from Navasota (she does not mention the name of the town, but it was probably Montgomery), they were forced to get out of the stage and walk in the rain and mud around the town to the other side, as they had been exposed to the "Yellow Jack" (of course the stage drove right through town, with who knows what mosquitoes lurking within!). They had no idea how the disease was carried in those days, not until the early 20th century actually. She gives a detailed account of deaths with many names—as if she wished to fix it in her own mind (as her relatives would not have known these people).

Another letter, January 16, 1870, is chiefly notable for its mention of the talk of building a railroad to Huntsville. As you may know, the main line passed by on the east, but a branch line (the notorious Tilley's Tap) was built from Phelps to Huntsville at greater cost than the bonus to the railroad to divert the main line. Her next letter of July 17th, 1870, also mentions that "it is expected that the Great Northern Rail Road will run through or very near the place."

March 1st—the year 1871 is obvious from the context—deals mostly with the martial law that Walker County was under at that time. Her account of Governor Davis' (a radical Republican governor) action is quite vituperative, with many details of the actions that precipitated it, though oddly enough she does not mention the shoot-out in the Courthouse that was the immediate provocation (I guess she thought that would weaken her case!). Some family details of note are that "I have a small milliner's shop and we have two young men Professors in the College boarding with us"—that would have been, again, Austin College, predecessor to SHSU on this location. She also initiates an exchange of flower seeds from Texas to England.

The letter of November 19th can be set in 1871 owing to a reference to the marriage of Princess Louise and the Marquis of Sorn (she meets our stereotype of the British by being fascinated with "the Royals"). The sort of detective work that we see here, looking up marriages in reference books and historical events, is the kind of work that makes manuscripts a fascinating subject. Maggie indicates that her house has become a way-station for English who happen to be in the vicinity, and she remarks on one down-and-out who had become discouraged in Texas that "this is no country yet for Factory folks" [she came from the industrial north midlands of England, and so she knew whereof she spoke].

November 23, 1873, has interesting disease news. Huntsville had to live down a bad health reputation; well into the 20th century, the university catalogs were emphasizing the "healthy environment." Just look at this one sentence in that letter: "You will see by the papers what a plague the yellow fever has been in Texas, but we've not had a case in Huntsville this summer, but nearly everyone has been sick with bilious fevers, or **dengue**, or typhus, or something else." She also has election news; one of her cousins that received letters from her was her favorite cousin Harry, who was very much a political enthusiast. "We are now all in excitement about the coming election, and we expect it to be the death of the radical Republicans and the beginning of the return of better times. I've not seen as much interest taken in the election since Texas has been in the union. It would amuse cousin Harry to hear each party abuse and show each other up."

The letter which is headed "J 14, 1877" (one knows it is January, because she speaks of a "cold and gloomy day") is an interesting odds-and-ends letter that deserves a few mentions. She mentions that her daughter, Minnie, had an

invitation to a ball in Galveston, given by the Lone Star Rifles—it must have been a successful outing because she wound up married to a Galvestonian and lived the rest of her life there. She also mentions that Minnie's a very pretty girl, very smart and bright, and she wants her to go back to England to get some **acculturation**, but she'll go when her older lawyer brother can take her. Some family news that she slips in is commenting on one of her uncles, who left out of his will the children of siblings: "I received a letter from one of Uncle James' daughters a long time since, telling me of the death of her father. She also told me of Uncle Joe the financier's death, and they did not leave her or anyone else a penny, but gave all they had to Uncle George. I'm rather surprised at him keeping it, as Uncle Joe was not his own brother. What was his reason for not feeling as liberal as Uncle James did toward his brother John's children? I often think of him and wonder if he has a soul in that poor body of his or is one of Darwin's monkey cousins; I have a perfect contempt for the man." This kind of topical reference is laced right through her letters; this was shortly after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, which obviously she was talking about, as well as everyone else in the literate world.

Her letter of May 9, 1878, describes a bad fire that I have not found mentioned elsewhere—which is not very surprising in view of the frequency of fires in the 19th century—but it was quite dramatic, she said, "the fire was in the Oddfellows' Hall two doors from us, with a high wind blowing toward our house. In a half hour, not a stick was left of our house, or any of the outbuildings. The Presbyterian church stands on the southeast corner and the Episcopal church on the southwest corner of our block; they both caught fire but were not damaged much. The fire crossed the street from our house and burned every house in the east and north of that block. Our furniture and the goods out of the store were burned up in the street; by seven o'clock we had neither shelter nor a change of clothes." One of her chief regrets is that her large picture of Queen Victoria, "Her Maj" as she calls her, was out in the street with her crown torn off: "I hope it is not ominous." Even the picture of her beloved daughter Minnie had gone up with the photographic gallery, which was on the southeast corner of the square, also burned.

January 5th, 1879, comments on receipt of "the beautiful papers you've sent us"; she looked forward to these elaborate, special supplement papers in England, mostly concerned with Royals and gossip and the society and so forth. "We have nothing like them in Texas but I will do the best I can. I will send you the Galveston News that is the largest and best paper published in Texas. Dear cousin, if you think we have no use for warm clothes here, you are mistaken; I had to thaw the ink that I write with, and I'm sitting with my back close to the fire and my feet and hands so cold I can hardly hold the pen." The winters in the 19th century were much more severe than the present time, as anyone who has read Civil War accounts knows. She also makes a timely (to us now) reference to the Afghan War. The British were involved in two Afghan Wars which were total disasters, and she says, "I suppose you Englishmen who always make peace with honor have by this time taken them all that is in Afghanistan under the protection of her most gracious Majesty"—that actually was very far from the case.

I'll move on to the last letter that we have, which deals with the founding of Sam Houston State University. It was dated June 11th, 1880. "When the Normal School was located here, the local Board came to us and asked us to employ help in furnishing the house, and they would fill it with boarders, so we had to go in debt to finish it and furnish it, but we are paying up quite fast." Her house, as you will remember, was burned down in the fire, and they were much in financial problems for some time. Thus we conceived the school that she was so elated about, now Sam Houston State, whose location here was the other great event in Huntsville history besides the placement of the original penitentiary. Thus Margaret Thornton's time in Huntsville spans those two creations that have made Huntsville what it is today.