

Letters from Amberson Valley

Among the manuscript material at the Conference Archives is a remarkable collection of 25 letters from the 1860's. They were written by Miss Martha McNeal (1842-1876) to her fiancé Thomas Appleby (1843-1930), while she was away teaching school and he was trying to establish himself in the village of Mount Union. The letters are noteworthy not only for the general insights they provide into nineteenth century Central Pennsylvania, but particularly for the spiritual insights they provide into the lives of two decidedly Christian Presbyterian young people intersecting with the piety and revivalism of the Methodist Episcopal, Methodist Protestant, and United Brethren denominations.

Apparently Thomas was a born organizer, as his later business success proved, for he saved and numbered the letters. *The Chronicle* presents the 25 letters in three articles, each with its own endnotes. The letters are followed by a brief epilogue.

The first article includes letters #12 and #67, written in fall 1866 and spring 1868 while Martha was teaching in Monroe MD and Shade Valley PA. The second article includes letters #105 to #118 [missing #113], written in the fall of 1868 while Martha was teaching Amberson Valley. The third article includes letters #121 to #131 [missing #128], written in the spring of 1869 while Martha continued teaching in Amberson Valley.

These 25 letters were somehow separated from the main body of Thomas Appleby's personal correspondence, the bulk of which is now housed in the *Appleby Family Papers* collection as part of the Women in History Project in the William L. Cements Library at the University of Michigan. This collection includes 327 items, mostly personal correspondence from 1864 to 1870. The following background material was prepared to describe the letters housed in Michigan, but it also prepares the reader for the letters appearing in the three articles in this volume of *The Chronicle*.

Martha Skinner McNeal (known to her friends as Mattie) and Thomas Alexander Appleby grew up together in the town of Shade Gap, Huntingdon County PA. Thomas, born May 2, 1843, was one of five boys – with the following brothers.

Daniel Curtlet Montague Appleby (1/17/1840 – 2/3/1905)

John Scott Appleby (6/26/1847 – 1/25/1912)

James Y. McGinnis Appleby (6/26/1850 – 6/25/1907)

George Sharrer Appleby (6/17/1853 - 1930)

The family had long been in Pennsylvania, beginning with John Appleby, who settled near Shade Gap around 1782. Tom's father, John (born October 17, 1813), died from being kicked by a horse on July 14, 1856, but Tom's mother, Priscilla Montague (June 26 1815 - June 20, 1892), kept the farm going successfully. Tom's grandfather, Daniel

Montague, who owned a mill in nearby Shade Valley, apparently helped in raising the children.

Tom worked in a store in Shade Gap before he volunteered to fight in the Union Army, joining Co. K, 202nd Regiment, from September 5, 1864 to August 3, 1865. His brother Daniel also joined the army (Co. I, 149th Regt., from August 19, 1862 to June 24, 1865). After returning home, Tom briefly was a "Professor" at Milliken's Bend Seminary, in Saxton, Bedford County. In 1866, he returned to store keeping and worked as a clerk for Grishinger and Rouse in Shade Gap.

Around October 1867, Tom decided to join his brother Dan and Captain Brice X. Blair (the captain of Dan's Civil War regiment) in Mount Union, Huntingdon County, and become a partner in the firm of Blair and Appleby. They dealt in dry goods and groceries. Dan, who was wilder and more adventuresome than his brother, decided to sell his share of the company to Tom and Capt. Blair in December of 1868, and eloped with his girlfriend and cousin, Margaret Alice (Allie) Montague on May 25, 1869. Dan and Allie settled in Quincy, Illinois, where he had a clothing store and a wholesale shoe business in Illinois, Missouri and Kansas. Back in Mount Union, Capt. Blair left the company and Tom became partners with Mr. Etnier in the fall of 1870. Tom also served as the Postmaster of Mount Union from 1869 to 1885.

Mattie McNeal, born April 23, 1842, was the third child of James McNeal and Mary Glenn McNeal. James McNeal (3/23/1808 – 2/20/1884) was the son of Robert McNeal and Catherine Campbell. Mary Glenn (5/11/1809 – 1/29/1890) was the daughter of Hugh Glenn and Mary Mustard. They had five children besides Mattie as follows.

Robert McNeal (7/21/1833? – 6/28/1897)

Mary [a.k.a. Dutton, and Mollie] Mustard McNeal (10/20/1836 – 11/25/1917)

John Alexander Appleby McNeal (6/30/1839 – 3/10/1851 scarlet fever)

Catherine [Kate] Campbell McNeal (8/21/1846 – 4/13/1902)

David McNeal (born 1853, apparently died in infancy)

Mattie's father ran a farm outside of Shade Gap and Mattie grew up quite close to her siblings, especially her sisters. All three girls were well-educated and literate, and both Mattie and Kate taught at various schools. From September 1866 to March 1867, Mattie taught in Boonsboro, in Washington County, Maryland, returning home during the summer. After that her teaching jobs tended to be closer to home and for shorter periods. In October 1868 Mattie left Shade Gap to teach in Franklin County, Pennsylvania, but she did not enjoy the experience much and left early in March 1869. Once back home, she exclaimed, "I am happy as a lark, lately released from prison" (1869 March 31). She also completed the end of the term at school in Mountainview, teaching for less than a month.

Though Mattie and Tom had known each other growing up, they did not seriously begin courtship until 1866, after Mattie left for Maryland. At the time, Tom had several other prospects, including a girlfriend from school, Annie Kelly, who signed one letter "Your devoted lover" (1865 November 28), and Mattie McKibbin. In 1866, Mattie McNeal and Tom even discussed, half in jest, which of the two women Tom would marry.

On Christmas, 1867, Tom and Mattie McNeal made a promise to each other to marry, evidenced by Mattie's comment a year later, "this evening in the anniversary of

our, what shall I term it - engagement?" (1868 December 25). Tom officially asked Mattie's father for his permission to marry Mattie in a letter dated October 11, 1869. In the latter part of 1869, Mattie became ill with some sort of inflammation and infection of the face and neck, delaying their wedding. Finally, on October 27, 1870, Tom and Mattie married.

Six years after their wedding, in a letter to her sister Kate, Mattie complained that "I have a boil on my leg, not on my leg, either, but that is as near as I can come to telling where it is," and feared it was "scrofula" (tuberculosis of the lymph nodes) (1876 April 11). Possibly as a result of this, Mattie died on October 28, 1876. Kate, who had not yet married, commenced to take care of Mattie and Tom's children, a son, John Chalmers, and a daughter, Mary Katherine. On May 14, 1878, Tom and Kate married. They had children James Donald, Martha Priscilla, Robert Charles, Janet Lucille, and Nellie Ross. Kate died after an illness On April 13, 1902. Tom lived almost another 30 years, dying on July 12, 1930.

Scope and contents

This collection of Appleby family papers, which consists of approximately 327 items, documents the social life of rural Pennsylvania immediately after the Civil War as described by young people of marriageable age. In addition to documenting the re-entry into civil society of soldiers after the war, these papers show the writers' fascination and absorption with personal relationships, particularly with members of the opposite sex. Because young people were writing to other young people, they were more honest in reporting the social and sexual activities of their peers.

The courtship letters between Tom and Mattie comprise the majority of the collection (roughly 184 pieces). There are about twice as many letters from Tom as from Mattie; unfortunately, the two wrote many more letters not included in the collection and there are large holes in the correspondence. All of their letters date between 1866 and 1870. The other letters in the collection are nearly all directed to either Tom or Mattie. Other letters to Tom include courtship letters from Annie Kelly during the war; courtship letters from Mattie McKibbin slightly after the war; letters from his brother, Daniel C. Montague Appleby; letters from Mattie's sister Kate; official and business letters; wartime letters from his grandfather, Daniel Montague; and wartime support letters from various girlfriends and acquaintances. Other letters to Mattie include letters from her sisters Kate and Dutton; letters from her mother, Mary; and letters from her girlfriends.

Tom Appleby was a morally upstanding, attractive young man, so courtship and marriage played a large part in his life after the civil war. His first girlfriend, Annie Kelly, was younger and more naive than Mattie. She supported the war effort in theory, and hated "copperheads," but was terribly unhappy about Tom's decision to volunteer for the Union Army. She encouraged Tom not to serve again when his term was up: "I never want to see you going drafted while there is any honorable way of getting away with it" (1865 April 8). Even before the war Tom's romantic interests were shifting to Mattie McKibbin, as evidenced by a letter from his brother Dan, which mentioned that Tom was escorting Miss McKibbin (1862 August 27). On May 9, 1866, a disgruntled Annie

wrote Tom, "it might perhaps be interesting for you to know that your humble friend is still in existence." Although unhappy, Annie accepted Tom's informal breaking of their courtship, and she did not write him again until 1868, when she gave the news that she had married David Willes on April 28.

Tom's second girlfriend, Mattie McKibbin, was wiser and probably older than Annie Kelly. Mattie turned down a suitor, "Frank," and her letters reveal the pressure on women to marry. She wrote to Tom on February 14, 1866, "He (Frank) is the same man who less than one year ago went to tell McKibbin's favorite daughter that she was the very star of his existence and also wondered how I could refuse, or rather slight, the undivided love of a man of his years for the friendship of a boy." Mattie, who was older than Tom, felt awkward about her age, and was uncomfortable turning down the suitor, but obviously hoped that Tom would consider her for marriage.

Like Mattie McNeal, Mattie McKibbin taught school and wrote intelligent, thoughtful letters. When no marriage proposal came from Tom, Mattie McKibbin became jealous of Mattie McNeal. Mattie McNeal, on the other hand, could not believe that Tom was not seriously involved with Mattie McKibbin. Tom declared in one letter to Mattie McNeal that he was fed up with women in general and sarcastically concluded, "Oh but after all women are a good institution, and have good hearts (i.e. when they have any at all)" (1867 November 26). In his letter of 1867 December 12, Tom tried more seriously to explain his relationship with Mattie McKibbin, stating that he felt they corresponded "as brother and sister." Mattie McKibbin probably did not agree with him, but she did set her sights elsewhere, and in January 1868 married a Mr. Lefferty, ending her somewhat tempestuous relationship with Tom.

Although Tom had several girlfriends, he was fairly conservative in his thoughts and actions. Both he and Mattie McNeal felt a certain intellectual and moral superiority over some of their companions. Mattie turned down a date in Maryland because he was "as dumb as -- well a mule...I want somebody along who is intelligent" (1866 October 28). Tom agreed with her, stating, "I know it is a pleasure indeed to talk to an intelligent, sensible lady, on subjects scientific or intellectual" (1867 December 4). Tom felt that he should not allow his emotions to overwhelm his intellect, especially with love: "So I get in love, step by step and don't plunge head over heels in a day or week" (1867 November 5). Additionally, Tom did not believe he should have more than one girlfriend while in a serious courtship: "That where there is an engagement; or an intention to bring on an engagement; that it is unwise and impolitic to receive the attentions of another" (1868 January 12). Mattie agreed with Tom's caution against yielding to the emotions of love: "Hope neither of us may love an imaginary being of our own fancy, but each other as we are, with many faults and failings" (1869 July 25).

The two young adults focused more on morality as they became involved in evangelical Christianity. Both Tom and Mattie were Presbyterians, though Tom often went to Methodist services. Mattie once went to an immersion baptism ceremony, although she was not sure what she should make of the ritual: "I though it was quite gay to see the gentlemen dive under, but when it came to the ladies it made me shudder" (1866 December 8). Both Mattie and Tom decided they wanted to make a public declaration of their faith in Christ. "The greatest desire of my heart is that I may love and serve God acceptably," Tom wrote Mattie (1868 January 5). Mattie agreed, but showed

a considerable amount of self-deprecation, stating, "I do so much want to be a Christian, a child of God but I am so sinful, so unworthy, and deserving only God's wrath and curse" (1868 June 4). Tom, too, felt that he was lacking in goodness, but both persisted in their religious search, with guidance from the minister of the Presbyterian Church in Shade Gap, Mr. W.C. Kuhn.

If Tom was unhappy about his own impure thoughts and actions, he was doubly unhappy about his brother, Daniel. Dan was in many ways Tom's opposite. He was frivolous, carefree, and a womanizer. While in the army, he wrote, "I have one or two sporting women, but I want one of respectability to go to church with" (1865 March 24). Dan retained his wild ways while working with Tom in the dry goods store in Mount Union.

Both Mattie and Tom disapproved of Dan's behavior. As Tom experienced his religious revival and Dan became more seriously involved with his cousin Allie, Tom's disapproval grew: "I fear his precepts have not always been the most wholesome. He seems restrained by nothing save the restraints of society, and these he violates behind the curtains" (1868 February 16). Allie's mother disapproved of their relationship, so Dan and Allie arranged "clandestine meetings," which Tom found disgusting, while Mattie expressed disapproval or fascination. In her letter to Tom on April 10, 1869, Mattie was impressed and almost jealous of the disobedient behavior of Dan and Allie: "Dan and Jim brought them [Kate and Allie] home the old lady never dreaming that Dan was within 300 miles of her daughter. ha! ha!" Yet in her next letter, possibly because she was rebuked by Tom, Mattie wrote, "I don't approve any more of Allie's style than I do of Dan's" (1869 April 14). In May 1869, Dan eloped with Allie, heading west to Quincy, Illinois. The last letter from Dan (1870 January 21) described how he developed close business contacts and personal friendships with the Jewish community.

Early in their letters Tom and Mattie discussed politics frequently, although they were rarely in agreement. Tom was a moderate Republican while Mattie was more conservative, although she supported the Civil War. When she was invited to represent republican interests in Rohrsersville, Maryland, she declined. "I think they are radicalized," she wrote Tom on October 13, 1866, "I see negro equality exemplified very often, last Sabbath I saw a white man walking beside the blackest negro I ever saw. Suppose he was an abolitionist." The Civil War was discussed infrequently, with emphasis being on the effects of war and not on battles. Tom's heart went out to the mothers who lost their sons in the war: "It is indeed a sacrifice to give an only son to one's county" (1867 December 22).

Other topics they discussed were Tom's business and Mattie's school teaching, but they particularly enjoyed discussing their relationships and the relationships of other people. In their letters before 1868, Tom and Mattie write to each other in a teasing, somewhat guarded fashion. "I should like to say 'good evening Mattie' have a hand shake and just one sweet kiss. Of course I wouldn't get the latter," Tom wrote to Mattie on March 13, 1867. As they grew more at ease with each other, their letters became less guarded and more affectionate. Throughout their correspondence, Mattie never feared to speak her mind, and tended to be more forthright than Tom. When Tom offended her in his description of human nature, Mattie fired back at him, "Men do well term all

their weaknesses 'woman like,' when women would scorn to employ their minds for a moment with the narrow thoughts that men confine themselves to, not speaking of their degrading habits and vulgar speeches" (1870 January 4).

Mattie even felt free to ponder the differences between married and single life: "I often wonder which is happier, an independent maiden, or a loving and loved wife. But guess Paul is about right, in his conclusion that those who marry do well, but those who remain single do better" (1868 September 12). Despite her conclusion, she did long to marry Tom, and began to get impatient. When giving Tom her birth date, she complained it was "enough to shock the nerves of a delicate, sensitive spinster" (1869 April 10). Mattie brought up the words "spinster" and "old maid" frequently after she turned 26. In her May 3, 1869 letter Mattie asked Tom, "Shall the daisies bloom again before it is spring time?" It was a veiled reference to Tom claiming they would be married in the spring. Mattie's illness in 1869-1870 delayed their wedding, and at one point Tom was concerned that she would never recover. When she did recover, both looked forward to the happy date, although they tried to treat it with the seriousness they felt it deserved.

Mattie's sisters, Kate and Dutton, who wrote to Mattie while she was away teaching, offered their own views on marriage. Dutton, Mattie's senior by six years, was increasingly concerned with her single status. "I think on the whole an old maid is to be pitied, but instead of pity they may expect the sneers and jeers of the more favored ones" (1869 January 7). Kate, on the other hand, felt perfectly happy with her single status, and found suitors to be a nuisance. In one letter to Mattie [late 1867], she wrote that she had a "Drake" to keep her company, but also wrote, "I do not care for him at all ... but some of the folks think we are deep in love and I make them believe so all I can. I don't care I am going to leave this neck of the woods soon not to return." When Dutton, in a shared letter with Kate, wrote that she wished that "some sensible man" would court her or Kate, like Tom courted Mattie, Kate disagreed: "Now I for my part do not want any of the low-life creatures that call themselves: Lord's of Creation. Pretty Lords indeed! Staying out nights until 12 o'clock and then coming home to abuse their poor neglected wives" [October 1868].

Some time after Mattie's marriage, Dutton married James Elliot Harper. Kate, of course, remained single and did not leave Shade Gap as she had hoped. Before Mattie's death, she and Tom were friendly, exchanging letters and even visits, so it was natural for Tom to turn to Kate when seeking a second wife and mother for his children. The letters unfortunately provide scant information about Mattie's death or Kate's marriage to Tom.

[Editor's note: Following the publication of *The Chronicle*, the 25 letters McNeal-Appleby letters printed here-in will be given to the William L. Cements Library at the University of Michigan to be re-united with the main body of such letters and to fill in the gaps in their collection.]