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The Stearns Sisters

**Letters from the Antebellum, Civil War,
and Reconstruction Era**

Mary Frances Stearns Root, Abigail Stearns Austin, Amelia Jones Stearns, Emma Stearns Danielson, and Others

The Stearns Sisters' Family Letters from the Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction Era

[South Carolina and New England](circa 1820-1880)

\$35,000

A comprehensive collection of an extended family's correspondence consisting of over 400 items, including 350 holograph letters, the vast majority of which were written by women during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Almost all of the letters are addressed to Emma Stearns Danielson (b. 1842), the youngest of three sisters in the Stearns family from Killingly, Connecticut. Over 130 letters were written by her elder sisters Frances and Abigail Stearns (about 65 letters each), and 40 were written by their sister-in-law Amelia. All three were graduates of Mary Lyon's renowned Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, who dedicated their lives to being teachers rather than "to please the other sex." Of particular historical importance are nine long letters by Frances that provide a stirring and meticulously detailed account of her work as a teacher among the first liberated slaves of the Civil War. Of less historical note but equal importance are the bulk of the letters which provide a remarkable women's view of New England life at the height of the great abolitionist and educational reform movements of the mid-19th century.

Much of the correspondence dates from the Civil War period, and it includes nine historically important letters (31 pages of approximately 6000 words) written by "Fanny" Stearns (Mary Frances Stearns Root) during her year in residence as a teacher on a cotton plantation at Beaufort on Port Royal Island, South Carolina. She and her husband, Rev. Augustine Root, were among the first Northern civilians to arrive in the area at the end of 1862, after Union forces had liberated the Sea Islands in Port Royal Sound between Charleston and Savannah. The plantation owners (referred to in the letters as "the secesh") fled to the mainland, leaving behind 10,000 black slaves. Soon after their arrival, Augustine was appointed Superintendent of three plantations under Brig. General Rufus Saxton, military governor of the Department of the South, as part of Saxton's "Port Royal Experiment" to help the newly freed slaves become self-sufficient.

The letters describe in great detail Fanny's experiences living with and teaching the freedmen, many of whom had joined the first colored regiment (1st Regiment, S.C. V). They also contain her vivid, eyewitness accounts of several skirmishes between Union forces and the "Rebs" (who had retreated "but 2 miles away to the main"), and of many important battles, including the first battle of Charleston Harbor (April 7, 1863), and both Union assaults on Fort Wagner in July, immortalized in the movie "Glory." Of particular importance are her astute, carefully observed descriptions of the white Union soldiers and Negro soldiers, and their mutual relations both living and fighting together.

Here are two representative examples, the first from a March 13 letter to Emma:

"... Mr. French brought out to our place seven negros. They took our boat when it got dark and started for rebel land. They are smart, brave men and were going with muffled oars just to float with the tide across, they know of a marsh where no picket would guess anybody would land ... they know their paths through the county 15 miles to a place where they will burn a very important railroad bridge, which if they do, they will accomplish what our army here has made three ineffectual attempts to do, once with 4000 men. ... In this region if they [Union forces] had only been willing to avail themselves of the help of the blacks who know every path through the woods so well and every place where a canoe can get ashore, affairs in this state at least would have worn quite a different aspect. The powers that be are beginning to learn some lessons from the

wiser rebels who make good use of their negros, tho' they can't trust them ... The [Negro] pickets patrol on our beach within speaking distance from our home every night. They are guarding all points with more care lately, as the rebels may grow desperate and attempt some raid. ..."

And this second excerpt from an April 7 letter to her brother:

"... Shouldn't you think we would feel bad to be guarded only by negro troops? We love to see the white soldiers, (at least the good ones and there are many noble men among them) but I think most of us would just as [prefer] to be guarded just now by the colored regiment as any one of the others – Those talk so even who used to look down a good ways upon a "nigger soldier." They have the finest set of officers of any regiment here perhaps, and this is great security. The discipline among them is very strict, that is another good thing. But still farther, they have a great deal of pride. They are rising very fast in the esteem of the white soldiers especially, since they took Jacksonville and afterwards fought side by side with white troops, and they would fight hard to keep up their good name."

In other letters written during the operations against Charleston, Fanny describes the deployment of several regiments, the morale of the soldiers, and several naval engagements involving Union "ironclads" and "Monitors" [April 11]: "... Before I was up we heard one gun and thought first it was the usual sunrise gun. But other and heavier reports followed shaking our windows and whole house. Pretty soon we could see that the firing was by or else upon a gunboat in the river but two miles from us. Pretty soon the flames spring up on the boat and it was evident by the rapid explosion of shells that the magazine had been fired into. Every time a shell burst we could hear the rebels hurraing ..."

In addition to their teaching duties, Augustine and Fanny assisted the freedmen in their domestic relations (performing marriages, providing new housing, etc.), and in their transition to economic independence, including the purchase of land. They traveled back North periodically after Augustine's formal appointment ended in September 1863, and returned to South Carolina in November, again working as teachers, until 1866, not long after President Johnson ended the Port Royal Experiment and returned the land to its previous white owners.

Fanny refers to her work in South Carolina in other letters written to Emma from New England. In a January 11, 1864 letter she writes: "We like to labor for the contrabands and shall very likely go to Virginia or some other place again soon – Our negros were very much attached to us as they are to any who are kind to them and it was not a pleasant thing to part from them. But they are far on the way to taking care of themselves, are buying land and putting up small houses for themselves. How much we have enjoyed this year with them – the first year of their freedom."

In addition to Fanny's letters written in situ from South Carolina, are the bulk of the letters in the collection remarkable for their female view of New England life at the height of the abolitionist and transcendentalist reform movements. These include another 50 letters by Fanny (b. 1833), 60 written by her older sister "Abbie" (Abigail Selah Austin, b. 1827), 40 by Amelia, and several others by their close friends and relatives, plus ten letters from Emma's father written to her mother while they were courting in the early 1820s. Together they are a chronicle of the hardships faced by so many exceptional women of the time, who

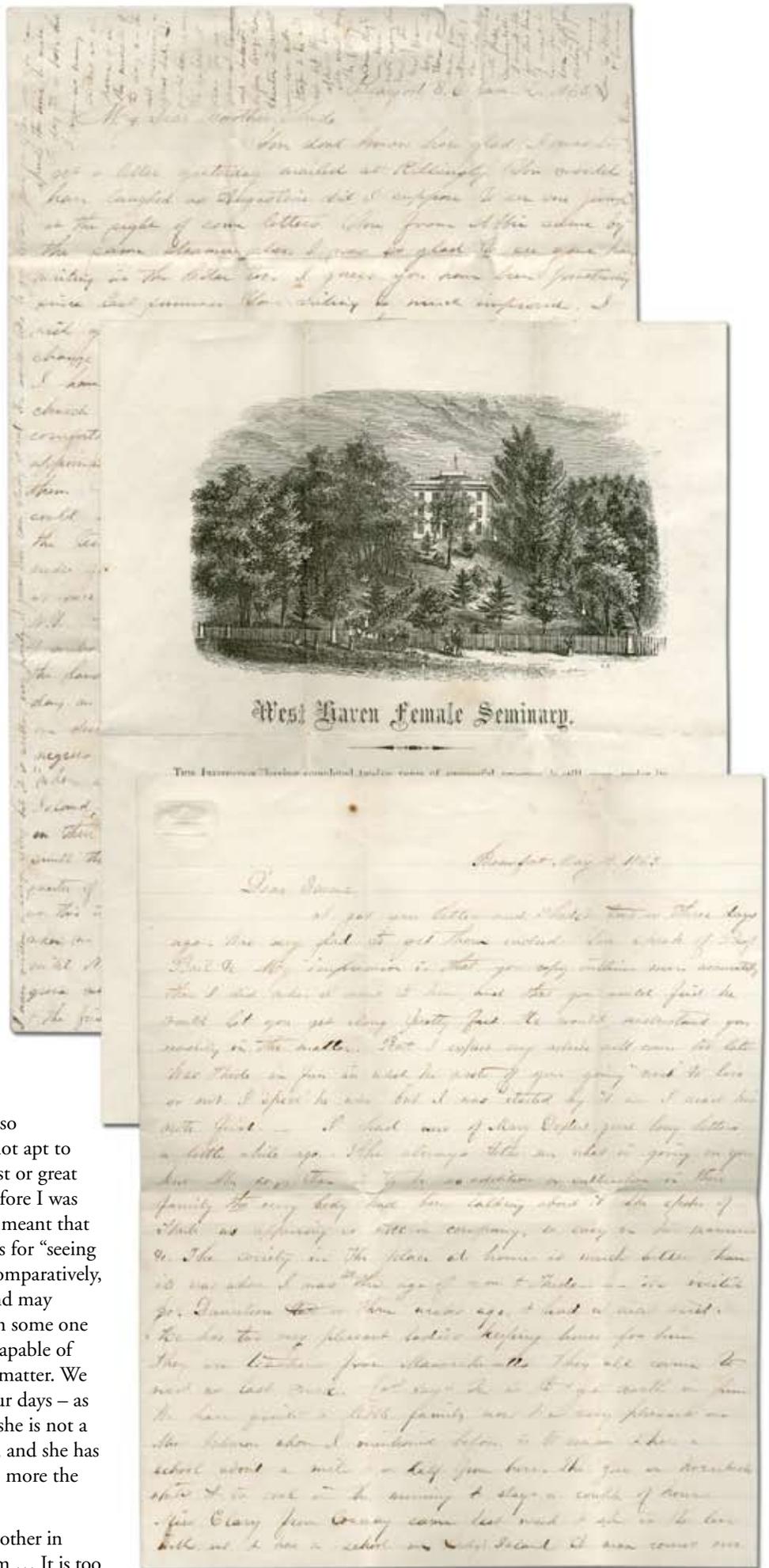
struggled both to fulfill their traditional familial duties, and their intellectual and social commitment both to the abolitionist cause, and to New England's great educational reform movement that aimed to provide educational and economic opportunities to girls (referred to as "scholars" in the letters) from poor and middling backgrounds.

Though six years apart in age, Fanny and Abbie both graduated in 1853 from Mt. Holyoke, renowned at the time for its advanced, scientific curriculum, its systematized domestic labor, and its religious atmosphere. Both became teachers at all-female schools in New York, New England, or Ohio, and were known for being highly educated, cultured, and independent. Both also married late, Abbie in 1859 and Fanny in 1860, and neither had children. Their sister-in-law Amelia (who was married to their brother George and had two children, Ella and George), also was a highly educated graduate of Mt. Holyoke. She tutored female scholars at her home in Latin, French, and Drawing. Emma's other correspondents include both Ella and George, and several other close relatives and friends.

Another strength of the collection is its extensive scope in time, covering a thirty-year period from the 1850s through the 1870s. The letters can thus be read as a comprehensive interrelated diary of each of the women's activities and family life. They are united in their meticulously observed descriptions of teaching scholars, of their constant and various labors for their extended families and others (informed by a deep faith in the New England Protestant ethic), gossip and politics (including several references to men drafted, wounded, or killed during the civil war), and their philosophical speculations on marriage and relations between women and men, especially on the importance of education as the best, and often only means for young girls to win economic independence. Fanny and Abbie often refer to their colleagues from Mt. Holyoke Seminary as "Holyoke girls," and Amelia, in a 1863 letter advising Emma on whether she should "see the world" before getting married, writes:

"... It is a fact that persons brought up as we were, i.e. so industriously – obliged to labor for some object – are not apt to take a season of recreation or rest easily ... It was no rest or great pleasure to me that six months that I spent out west before I was married ... I don't think Mr. Austin [Abbie's husband] meant that he thought you too young or green to be married ... As for "seeing the world" – very likely they think you, being young comparatively, hardly know yet whom you prefer to spend life with and may become in love with some one else, when you have seen some one else! ... The fact is – I think you a very sensible girl – capable of judging for yourself, and I trust your judgment in this matter. We all shrink from having you obliged to work hard all your days – as farmer's wives sometimes do – but as my mother says (she is not a farmer's wife) 'one cannot work more than all the time, and she has always done that.' So have the majority of women. It is more the kind of work than in the amount."

She concludes the letter with news of friend: "Carrie's brother in Harvard University was drafted! It is a great blow to them ... It is too



early to know if my brother is drafted. I do hope not. My cousin Wm. Pease died of fatigue after that terrible march made by Sedgwick's corps to reach Gettysburgh. My nephew who was wounded in the side last summer – has now had two fingers shot off from his right hand at Gettysburgh ...”

The correspondence from several relatives and friends further documents the day-to-day life of this close-knit family during the Civil War and Reconstruction years, with several contributions from family members living away from home (including Abbie, who was married to a gun

powder manufacturer with plants in Ohio and Michigan), as well as those residing in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. A remarkable collection that provides a predominately female view of the period, housed in a contemporary wooden truck with part of its original deer hide present. Probably worthy of publication, a description of this length is insufficient to convey the depth and texture of this textually significant correspondence, overwhelming created by educated women, and illuminating their daily lives. A detailed list of correspondents, including selected transcribed letters, is available. [BTC#382468]

