

Letters by Betsey Wheeler, written while attending the West Brookfield Female Classical Seminary.

Transcribed, edited and annotated by Martha DeWolf, 2012.

The Bullard Family Papers

In 1984 the Old Sturbridge Village Research Library acquired the extensive Bullard family papers from the Bullard Memorial Farm Association of Holliston, Massachusetts. The collection represents a cross section of rural life from the end of the 17th century through the early twentieth century; the published index of the collection alone is over three hundred pages.¹ The collection includes diaries, daybooks, ledgers and receipts as well as volumes of correspondence by various family members. So far as I have been able, I have identified the people referenced in the letters which follow; however, in spite of copious genealogical information available, some of the names are lost to history. For those, the flexible reader can only suppose and rely on the descriptions, or lack thereof, provided by the letters' author, Betsey Wheeler.

(M. DeWolf)



West Brookfield Female Classical Seminary 2012.

During the spring of 1826, twenty-one-year-old Betsey Wheeler from Medway, Massachusetts, was enrolled by her parents at the West Brookfield Classical Female Seminary. Established sometime prior to 1826 by the Reverend Joseph I. Foote, Jess Bliss, and Allen Newell, the school was located on South Main Street in West Brookfield, Massachusetts. The school year was divided into two terms of 25 weeks each. The first term commenced on the first Wednesday of May, while the second term started on the first Wednesday of November.²

On May 20th, 1826, Betsey wrote to her older brother Abijah, who lived in Cambridge.

... As Mr. Ellis is going to Medway, I readily embrace this opportunity to thank you for your letter which, I assure you, was perused with much pleasure.

¹ Stevens, Daphne; *Bullard Family Papers, Holliston Massachusetts, Bullard Manuscript Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Library*; 1990.

² Buxton, J. A.; *West Brookfield Ma - 1660-1960*; 1959.

www.writing.com/main/view_item/item_id/1226082-West-Brookfield-MA-1660-to-1960.

I think you succeeded very well indeed and with some practice will become quite proficient in letter writing. Let me advise you my dear Brother to recur often to this pleasant and yet unpleasant task. It is unpleasant [MS torn] from a sense of my inability for writing and yet when [separated by] distance from friends, it is a source of great pleasure that we are favored with this privilege of communicating our ideas to each other.

In pursuing the paths of literature, there is no study perhaps more important than that of composition, as there is no situation in life in which we are not called upon to write. And, as frequency of writing is perhaps the best method we can adopt for our improvement, is it not a duty, brother Abijah that we exercise our minds in writing, often?

We are required to write every Wednesday afternoon. I think the course which is pursued here, renders the task more pleasant than it usually is in schools. Reverend [Eliakim] Phelps relates to us some history which furnished thought for language and is an exercise for the memory. [We] have had the history of the first settlement of Brookfield, and that of the Sandwich Islands [the Hawaiian Islands]. We sometimes choose a theme for ourselves.

Reverend Eliakim Phelps was the fifth pastor of the West Brookfield church. He was born in 1790 in Belchertown, Massachusetts and graduated from Union College, Schenectady. He resigned his ministry to become (briefly) the principal of West Brookfield Female Classical Seminary on March 21, 1826.³

As I have before written respecting my situation here, I shall only add that I continue highly gratified. From your partiality to study you will infer that I am enjoying a high degree [of] happiness and this I assure you is the case and find “that pleasant indeed are the paths which lead to polite literature”.

I am very much engaged in my studies and find them very interesting and shall leave them with reluctance.

I have written to parents, which letter you have probably received before this. I conclude you had not when you wrote, as you said nothing [MS torn] in that letter I requested to stay longer than this term and as [I] received no answer I shall introduce the subject again.

I am particularly desirous to stay longer, as I shall be engaged then in study and think the advantages of next term will be much greater than they have been this, as a course of lectures will be delivered on Chemistry, Geology, Astronomy, Botany and Philosophy by Professor Cotting, who is highly recommended. I expect the lectures will occupy about six weeks of the next term and will be highly useful. I do hope to stay. Do intercede for me dear Brother and I will do the same for you.

John Ruggles Cotting (1784-1867) was born in Acton, Massachusetts. He was educated first at Harvard and then at Dartmouth medical school, and ordained as a Congregational minister about 1810. He continued his studies, taking up chemistry. During the war of 1812, he was employed to manufacture chemical compounds “never before made in this country.” After the war, he left the ministry and became a professor of chemistry and geology at Amherst College and other academies, including the West Brookfield Female Classical Seminary. In 1835, he moved to Augusta, Georgia and as the State Geologist carried out an agricultural and geological survey of Burke and Richland counties. His report, published in 1836, contained among other things, analyses of cotton lands and a table of fifty-seven genera of fossils. His survey of the entire state was halted in 1837 for lack of financial support, and his extensive collection of plants, minerals, and fossils were then distributed among various colleges. His maps were so finely executed, that the Russian Czar requested copies for the Royal library at St.

³ Dunham, Samuel; *An Historical Discourse Delivered At West Brookfield Massachusetts*; 1865.

Petersburg. Dr. Cotting published an *Introduction to Chemistry*, used for several years at Harvard (1822), the *Synopsis of Lectures on Geology* (1825), and a work on *Soils and Manures*.⁴

Betsey continued her letter,

Mr. Fisher and sisters were here the fore part of this week. He is anxious to have me stay longer and I suspect he sees more of my ignorance as he said more about my staying than he has before. They are journeying to Vermont and expect to reach home election day.

Betsey is here referring to Willard Fisher, her future husband, and his two younger sisters, Eliza and Nancy who were from Franklin. With a return date of “election day”, they were not expecting to return from Vermont before winter. Prior to 1845, each state was allowed to choose for Election Day, any of the 34 days before the third Wednesday in December. Since 1845, Election Day has remained the first Tuesday after the first Monday, in November.

Betsey continued;

I conclude brother Lewis will visit there when he is up; they will expect him after they return. Should like to have brother Lewis visit here when he is up. I am so very pleased with this place that I think he would be, and with the country generally. If I were in Lewis's place, I would be a farmer rather than be confined to his store.

I wish your employment would admit of your coming here, for I should like to talk with you about our ride to Framingham, which was three miles & c.

Mr. [Ellis] has commenced his professional studies and we have the pleasure of dining with him every day. We have, occasionally, a social walk in company with him and two or three other collegians. I believe the Medway beaus must give up all hopes of Lydia⁵ and Amanda, for two young Doctors are very much pleased with them. But enough of this 'til I see you.

I was happy to hear by Mr. [Fisher] that Mother has recovered her health, and the rest of the family are well. I hope Mother will not work too hard; she must take her work gradually and not think of doing more than she is able.

Tell Abigail, that I will relieve her from her work when I come home, and that she may visit sister Eliza. Have not heard from sister [Eliza] since I came here. I have written to her.

I hear the Sabbath School has commenced with you and that the teachers, as well as the scholars, get lessons and should think it very useful. I hope you and sisters attend, and will gain that instruction which will not only promote your usefulness in this life, but prepare you for happiness in a future world.

Do you not often think, my dear brother, of the importance of obtaining religion and the danger of putting it off 'til a more convenient season?

I think much of it and hope, from the interest which our friends feel for us, that their instructions and warnings will not be in vain; we are daily admonished [by] the sudden deaths which occur of the necessity of being prepare for death and that now is the accepted time. We have no promise of a future. I hope brother Abijah we shall not continue to neglect this important subject.

Give my love to Grandparents and tell Grandmother Lovell that I have not forgotten her - wish that I would write to her, but have been so engaged in my studies that I have found no time.

This term closes the 23 of June, and the examination will take place on that day. If I can't stay longer than this term, brother Lewis will tell Mr. [Fisher] when he goes there. I expect he will come after me. I hope to stay at least six weeks longer.

⁴ Appleton's *Encyclopedia of Biography*, 1887.

⁵ Lydia Daniels Lovell, born 1810. She was the daughter of Michael and Cate (Daniels) Lovell. *Medway Vital Records to 1850*.

I should like to have you send Adam's Arithmetic by Mr. Ellis [when he comes] and should like some apples, but don't know as it would be best to trouble Mr. E with them. Give love to all my friends. Do write often and Sisters must write. I shall write to them next.

*Yours with sisterly affection
Betsey R. Wheeler*

A month passed before Betsey wrote to Abijah again, on June 16th, 1826;
... *We are highly favored with the calls of our Medway friends when aroused from our slumber this morning, the first person we saw was Mr. Holbrook standing by the side of a bell opposite the house. He called in to see us and told us how much business he is doing and I believe all the news. He said Mr. LaCroix was married and the Education Society met in Medway this week. Mr. Holbrook says great doings for old Medway to see so many clergy [MS torn] there. It must have been an interesting day I think.*

Jameson wrote of Mr. Holbrook; "George Holbrook, son of Daniel and Esther (Hall) Holbrook, was born April 28, 1767 in Wrentham, Mass. He received a limited education in the public schools; and while young was apprenticed to Paul Revere, of Revolutionary fame, to learn the machinist and clockmaker's trades. After serving his full time he began manufacturing bells in Brookfield, having learned the art from an old English Encyclopedia; was very successful and built up a large business. Meeting with financial troubles in 1813, he removed to Laconia, N. H., then [to] Meredith Bridge, where he carried on a farm. Happening to be in East Medway in the year 1816, and knowing that a bell was wanted for the new church just completed, he agreed to cast it and did so in a shed ... It was a novel thing and people came from many towns to see the sight. The bell was a good one, however, was raised on the church and served for many years. This was the first bell cast in Medway and is the date of the establishment of the Holbrook Bell Foundry in this place⁶. Major Holbrook received his title as an officer of the State Militia."⁷

Betsey continued her letter impatiently;

Why have you not written to me, to say whether I can stay next term or not? I have expected to hear every day. If [I] do not stay, I ought to have written to Mr. [Fisher] before this, to say when this term closes.

I conclude I shall stay, as you have not written.

I received a letter from Lewis this week, said he heard I was to stay a part of the next term. He wrote that [he] had dissolved co-partnership with Mr. B. He is quite unfortunate, I think, but hope he will be more prospered.

Lewis Jr. had been in partnership with Mr. Bardwell for only nine months.

Has sister Eliza been at all since I came here? She has not written to me since I came here. Do you know the reason why she has not? I wish she would write. I should think it quite a privilege to receive her affectionate advice while at a distance from home.

Mr. Packard was ordained on Wednesday in Spencer.

James Draper wrote in his History of Spencer (1860); "Rev. Levi Packard is son of Mr. Levi Packard of North Bridgewater, and was born in that town, February 4, 1793. He was graduated at Brown University in 1821. He completed his Theological studies with the Rev. Jacob Ide of Medway. Was married to Miss Clarissa Sandford,⁸ daughter of Mr. Philo Sandford of Medway, August 16, 1836."

⁶ No longer extant.

⁷ Jameson, E. O.; *History of Medway Mass.*; 1886

⁸ E.O. Jameson spells the name *Sanford*.

Betsey continued,
The ladies wished to have me go, but I did not think it best as the examination was so near.

Since commencing this, I have received an affectionate letter from Sister [Eliza]. She writes that she has not been very well this summer.

Eliza was three months pregnant with her third child by June of 1826, and may have been suffering from morning sickness. Again, Betsey prodded her brother;

I wish you would write about my staying next term, for if I do not, I wish to write to Mr. [Willard Fisher]. I suppose he is expecting a letter, but if I stay, shall write before vacation.

Lydia & Amanda send love to you. My love to the family, Grandmother Lovell and all inquiries.

In haste,

Your affectionate sister,

Betsey

On July 3rd, Betsey Wheeler wrote to her brother Lewis Jr., from West Brookfield;
... As I have always improved my opportunity in writing to you; I shall not neglect the present by Mr. [illegible] but very briefly relate to you the manner that I passed vacation.

The examination was a week ago last Friday, and although stormy and unpleasant it did not prevent company. A large number were present and the examination was considered very good. I had several letters to write, but other engagements prevented my writing them all. Give love to Catherine, and tell her I shall write her soon.

I enjoyed the vacation very well, went on last Wednesday to visit Mr. Baster and had a pleasant visit. I felt almost at home when there. The rest of [the time] was mostly spent in company.

Saturday, quite a number took a ride to visit a Rock House, about four miles from here. It was really a curiosity. I can well say that I never saw rocks and hills before I came here.

The farm where Betsey had grown up was fifty miles closer to the ocean than where she was at school in West Brookfield. Medway and Holliston are located in what is the western periphery of the coastal lowlands of eastern Massachusetts. It is a gently rolling landscape and at night, you could see the lights from the neighboring farms. West Brookfield, at 640 feet above sea level, is situated in the eastern uplands of Massachusetts; the southernmost end of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. By the nineteenth century, the primeval forests were gone. Even in the central part of the state, as Betsey surely observed, the prospect to the horizon was bare hill after bare hill of fields and livestock pasture, sprinkled with farms, dotted with woodlots and in the valleys, the ubiquitous mills. The Rock House, as explained by the West Brookfield Historical Commission, is “[a] massive, cave-like rock shelter, exposed after the glacial retreat 10,000 years ago, [which] served as a winter camp for Native Americans. By mid-1800’s, it was part of a farm owned by William Adams”.⁹ Currently owned by the land conservation non-profit Trustees of Reservations, the Rock House Reservation is nearly two hundred acres of trails and woodland, open to the public. Their website describes “Its location near two long Native American footpaths [which suggests] that it may also have been a trail camp and meeting place.”¹⁰

Betsey continued;

⁹ www.westbrookfield.org/rockhouse

¹⁰ www.thetrustees.org

Mr. W. has been telling what splendid times you are to have in Medway tomorrow. Quite remarkable is it not? I have just received an invitation to pass the evening at Captain Rogers near here, where some fireworks will be exhibited. I presume you will enjoy the day much. Mind pronunciation now!

A farmer gentleman came into the Seminary who brought his 'darter' to attend school. He said she took quite a notion to her books but never went from home much and that he wanted her to get 'larning' enough to keep an everyday school and be fit for a farmer like himself. He said he did not know much about books - only to dig 'taters'. He said much more which I cannot [relate] now. We were quite amused and I write this for your amusement. I think you had better not make it public.

We are all well and happy to stay and are expecting much from the lectures which commence next Tuesday. My love to all the family and inquiries. Do write when you can. I can stay to write no more.

Your affectionate sister

Betsey

On August 6th, Betsey, wrote home from West Brookfield to her parents, doing her best to convince them to let her stay at school;

... An unexpected opportunity presents itself of conveying you a few lines which will introduce to you Deacon [Josiah] Cary, the gentleman with whom we board.¹¹

He is going to Medway with Miss A. Harding who is obliged to return home on account of her health. She has been quite ill and unable to pursue her studies. It is therefore thought best for her to leave. She is a lovely girl. I think I never become so attached to anyone in so short a time as I have to her.

It is possible that Betsey was referring to Abigail Harding, born in Medway in 1816. She was the daughter of Theophilus and Lois Clark Harding, however, at the time, she would have been only ten years old, so the identity of "Miss A. Harding" is not entirely clear.

I received brother Abijah's letter and was a little disappointed to learn that I cannot stay the whole term. But, as you think it best for me to come home, I shall say no more.

Unable to contain herself, she carried on;

I should like, however, to have you conclude otherwise, when you have seen and conversed with Deacon Cary. He attends the lectures. He is an excellent man, and I feel much attached to him and family.

I have talked with [Reverend] Mr. Phelps about our leaving. He says that for our own good, he wishes us to stay, and thinks our friends will never regret it if they conclude to have us stay as the most interesting lectures are yet to come and those which are intimately connected with the domestic concerns of life.

Brother [Sewall] Harding called to see me last Thursday. He was in the stage and going to the springs in New York for his health. He says stay, by all means, during this term. And this way, my friends all advise me.

Betsey checked herself and continued;

But do not think me still urging you on this subject, for I think I have already said enough and should not have mentioned it again, were it not that Deacon Cary calls on you and will perhaps say something on the subject. Lydia, Amanda and Ama (unless their friends conclude to

¹¹ Dunham, Samuel; *An Historical Discourse Delivered at West Brookfield*; 1867

have them stay) will probably come home next week. I think I shall stay a week longer, for it will be more convenient for me to come later than when they do.

I should like to hear all the lectures, which will continue until the 5th of September. The term closes the 21st of September. If you prefer it you can pay Deacon Cary for my board and save the trouble of sending more than the tuition.

Brother Lewis writes me that [he] has turned apothecary. I hope he may be prospered in his business; he has been so unfortunate. I can stay to write no more. My love to all friends and hope you are all well.

In haste,

Your affectionate daughter,

Betsey R. Wheeler

Will Aunt Richardson be in Medway at the time I come home? If she is not I shall come through Millbury.

Apparently Deacon Josiah Cary was so persuasive that Lewis Wheeler Sr. relented, and when Deacon Cary returned to West Brookfield, he relayed the welcome news to an undoubtedly anxious Betsey, that she was allowed to stay at school until the end of the term. With relief, on Wednesday evening, August 6th Betsey sat down to write to her parents;

... Thank you for your interesting letter by Mr. Phillips, and also for the apples, which I assure you were very acceptable as we have not much opportunity to get fruit here. I conclude you have fruit in abundance and melons as usual. Have insisted in eating one this evening which is the first I have seen this year.

It was with pleasant intelligence that I am to continue through the term. Perhaps my dear parents may think I have urged the subject too much, and if so, I hope they will excuse me, but I trust they will never have cause to regret my staying.

I am sorry to have Amanda leave at this time; the lectures being very interesting and this evening it was particularly so. It was on oxygen and nitrogen gases and many beautiful experiments were exhibited.

Yesterday Mr. Phelps and Mr. Cotting with quite a number of the ladies, including myself, attended the examination of Monson Academy.

My friends may think it rather foolish in me, but I enjoyed the day very much and think I was amply compensated for going. Monson is quite a pleasant place. The advantages of the Academy, for gentlemen, I should think very great, and from what I can learn, as good as any in this vicinity. Think it will be a good school for you, should you go from home next winter. I will make further inquiries. Had the pleasure of an introduction to Mr. Tenny of Sutton and was much pleased with him.

Possibly Daniel Tenney, born 1792.¹² She continued her letter by defending herself to her father saying,

I intended to have the money which I brought with me last, and fear Father will think I spend too much; but he will recollect that he gave me only seven dollars & a half. From that I had the stage fee to pay, and have had some books and other necessary articles to purchase, which has taken the most of it. I am under the necessity of getting me a pair of shoes, and must therefore request you to send me two or three dollars as soon as you can, either by mail or private conveyance.

Why has not sisters A & B written to me? They are old enough to commence writing and think it would be an advantage [to] them.

¹² <http://www.suttonmass.org/cem>

Abby and Bethia were thirteen and eleven, respectively.

Catherine has written Lydia that there is a dancing school in Medway¹³ and requested her advice about going. I hope my sisters have no inclination to attend. I should be sorry to hear they are attending a school from which they would derive no lasting benefit, but rather have a tendency to unfit their minds for their studies during the season.

But I need not say more, for I presume sisters A & B would wish to spend their time and money more profitably than in attending a dancing school.

I received a letter from sister Eliza yesterday, [and] was happy to hear that my friends are all well and by your letter, to hear from Mr. Adams and dear little Francis. It is now late in the evening & must therefore say goodnight. My love, affectionately, to all. Do write me every opportunity.

Your affectionate sister

Betsey

¹³ There is currently no information regarding the “*dancing school*” in Medway.