Winter 2005

A Woman's Voice From the Old Northwest: The Correspondence of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler: Review of *Remember the Distance that Divides Us: The Family Letters of Philadelphia Quaker Abolitionist and Michigan Pioneer Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, 1830-1842*. Edited by Marcia J. Heringa Mason.

Kendra Clauser-Roemer

*Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit)

Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit), [Reading and Language Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit)


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/283](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/283)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
A Woman’s Voice From the Old Northwest: The Correspondence of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler

Kendra Clauser-Roemer


From Philadelphia to Lenawee County, Michigan Territory, Remember the Distance that Divides Us offers the correspondence of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler (1807–1834), her family and friends. Remember the Distance is the first publication of Chandler’s writing since Benjamin Lundy published her essays and poems in 1836 shortly after her death. An active abolitionist and author, Chandler wrote for the Genius of Universal Emancipation, an early antislavery newspaper edited by Benjamin Lundy. In 1830 Elizabeth, her brother Thomas, and her aunt, Ruth Evans, moved to Michigan territory. The letters begin 12 February 1830, as the three prepare to migrate west. They continue beyond Elizabeth’s death in November 1834, ending with correspondence between Thomas and his Aunt Jane Howell.

“When I first met Elizabeth Margaret Chandler,” writes editor Marcia J. Heringa Mason in her acknowledgments, “I knew immediately that others should meet her, too” (ix). Mason’s enthusiasm for Chandler is obvious through her decision to produce a mostly comprehensive work, to use diplomatic transcription, and to include a detailed introduction. “The others” to whom Mason desires to introduce Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, are less clear. Mason’s sparse explanation of the evolution and process of the edition, in addition to her choices in the front matter and appendices, appeal to different audiences. Justification for her decisions could provide insight into her intended audience.
The purpose of this volume is not detailed in the editor's notes. Mason became familiar with the collection as she prepared her dissertation of the life of Elizabeth Chandler. The Elizabeth Margaret Chandler Papers and Minnie C. Fay Papers, both located in the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, comprise Mason's source texts. Other than excerpts included in her dissertation, no other author has previously published these letters. Mason excludes family letters written from 1793 to 1808, which are not pertinent to the story of the Chandlers in Michigan. Her other exclusions are letters between Elizabeth and Anna Coe along with a few other notes, which Mason finds "irrelevant." Such a vague justification immediately makes those excluded letters more intriguing. Because the edition includes 515 pages, prudent editorial selection is understandable. The remaining correspondence comprises not only Elizabeth's letters but also a large quantity from family and friends. Most of the letters assist in creating a complete picture of the lives of Elizabeth and her family. The letters are grouped thematically in chapters based on important events in the family. A chronological list of letters in the table of contents or as an appendix would have been a useful tool to readers.

Mason offers no rationale for the front matter and end matter. She states in the editor's note that her endnotes will "identify places, events, and unusual phrases," while names appear in a biographical directory. Using a biographical directory is helpful in family letters due to the large number of names mentioned. In addition to the directory (Appendix 1) and endnotes, Mason includes a forty-two page introduction, an epilogue, a bibliography, an index, and four additional appendices. The appendices include poems by and to Elizabeth Chandler (written previous to her relocation to Michigan), a recipe for honey tea cake (attributed to Chandler, but published in 1910), and an inventory of Minnie C. M. Fay's household effects dated 29 October 1935. Although the recipe, inventory, and poems are interesting within themselves, other than her poems, the inclusions seem superfluous.

Mason's process, working almost entirely on her own, is briefly sketched in her acknowledgments. Thanks to the generosity of friends and library/historical society staff, Mason finished this project without the assistance of a paid staff. She mentions transcribing and utilizing a scanned version of the manuscript to "reinvent it" (x) after a computer disaster. She does not mention any assistance with proofreading before the final version. Including those experiences could have provided useful tips for other independent editors.
The editor’s notes, including mostly a description of the apparatus, are less than a page and a half. The choices for editing the text are typical for documentary editions of early nineteenth-century writers. Spelling errors are maintained unless the editor was “convinced the writer would also have corrected” (xiii). These changes are made silently. Modern sentence and paragraph structure are imposed for readability. Brackets are used to indicate illegibility, as in “my fears were raising phantasms of evil {} our distant friends” (174), and to provide clarifying information to names, places, and abbreviations, as in “Amor [Chandler]” (79). These brackets are the only indication of any changes made to the text. The format of the letters is standardized, beginning with a heading that includes correspondents, location of author, and date. Closures and signatures in a uniform style complete each letter while postscripts appear afterward. Mason’s editorial choices allow for better readability.

The introduction is curious. Introductions can be challenging for editions on lesser-known individuals. Elizabeth and her family are unfamiliar to many readers, so background on this family is necessary. The Chandlers and their friends were Quakers and abolitionists. Mason devotes a large portion of the introduction to not only presenting a biography of Elizabeth and her family, but also explanations of general topics such as Quakerism, antislavery issues, contemporary Philadelphia, and women’s issues. The introduction provides details perhaps unfamiliar to a general audience, but the length of this historical background might deter many non-academic readers. The introduction is helpful, although information about particular family members is not always presented chronologically. For example, Mason begins the introduction with a synopsis of the history of the Elizabeth Chandler letters. She immediately moves to describe the life of Chandler’s great-niece, Minnie Fay, who donated the letters to the University of Michigan. Minnie Fay’s mother was also named Elizabeth Chandler, creating an initial sense of confusion. The introduction also includes much of the family history presented in the letters themselves. Perhaps a shorter introduction would permit the reader a base of information without anticipating the history found in the letters.

The use of endnotes in this edition is awkward. First, Mason’s choice of endnotes could indicate the desire to appeal to a popular audience, since their absence within the text adds to a popular audience’s sense of readability. However, since Elizabeth Margaret Chandler is a lesser-known figure, the audience for her letters is most likely to be an academic one. The edi-
tion’s publication by University of Michigan Press reinforces that conclusion. For academics, the usefulness of the text can be increased when the resources provided in the notes are easily accessible, as with footnotes.

Second, a few additions to the notes and index could assist the reader. If quotations cannot be confirmed, a note stating that the source could not be found can help an interested reader avoid lengthy research. One example is when Elizabeth quotes “one of the Michigan papers,” saying, “an industrious man who is able to purchase one of two lots of 80 acres may in five years acquire wealth” (5), but no mention of its location is given in the notes. Terms should be noted the first time they appear in the text, even if they are mentioned in a previous footnote. Jane Howell mentions “Drovers” on page 165, but no note is included. The index lists only pages 83 and 413n in the entry for “drovers.” The word on page 83 is “drove,” with a note on page 413. If a reader investigates the text from beginning to end, the definition of the word occurs before its use on page 165. However, if someone is perusing the book for information on drovers, their search will be limited. Mason’s use of partial notes may be due to the length of the text itself. Unfortunately, less is not always more.

The letters themselves are all inclusive of the daily lives of Elizabeth and her family. Elizabeth describes their first house as “the snuggest log house in Michigan” (34) and continues by relating the location of every piece of furniture in their new abode. Beyond personal lifestyles, the letters provide important details about the challenges of life in the “West” versus life in Philadelphia. Important particulars such as the funeral of Richard Allen, bishop of the Philadelphia African Methodist Church (53), and the destruction of Philadelphia Hall during a Female Anti-Slavery Society meeting (318–19) demonstrate the connection of the family to the abolitionist movement. As is often the case with personal letters, the correspondents typically assume one another’s attitudes toward contemporary issues, so discussion of topics such as the Chandlers’ antislavery activity in Michigan is slim. In comparison, Elizabeth, Thomas, and Ruth describe storms, wild animals hunting their livestock, and exaggerated reports of “the hostile attitude of the Indians under Black Hawk” (120). Their experiences include more than the challenges of wilderness living. Elizabeth mentions quilting sessions and tea with neighbors, in addition to attending Quaker and antislavery meetings.

Marcia J. Heringa Mason’s role as editor on Remember the Distance that Divides Us is impressive. Despite some small challenges with the introduction, endnotes, and index, the book is an interesting read and a useful tool to
students and scholars of the nineteenth century. Mason's choice to edit the writings of an antebellum woman, especially a woman in the frontier, is commendable. More editors need to follow her lead by exposing twenty-first century readers to the amazing voices of early nineteenth-century women, their families, and their friends.