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“A Broad, Generous Stream of Love and Bounty”:

The Concord Sewing Circle and the Holley School for Freedmen

Mary Lamb Shelden

Following her trip in October 1875 to the Women’s Congress in Syracuse, Louisa May Alcott spent November and December at Dr. Miller’s Bath Hotel in New York City. There, she spent time with Sallie Holley (1818–1893), who was a frequent visitor at the Hotel. The two spent six weeks “go[ing] about together”: on Thanksgiving Day, they took a carriage ride together in Central Park; another day, they went to tea at the home of a cousin of Holley’s.¹ Holley was among the “notables” Alcott remarked on in her Journal, along with Henry Ward Beecher, Bret Harte, Ann Booth, and Moncure Conway. Alcott said of her time with Holley, “She tells me much about her time with the freedmen, and Mother is soon deep in barrels of clothes, food, books, etc., for Miss A. to take back with her [to New York for shipment to Virginia].”² For many years after their New York City visit, Louisa and her mother, Abba Alcott, and a circle of their friends continued to send material donations to the Holley School; school founders Holley and her partner, Caroline Putnam (1826–1917), wrote letters of thanks in reply, carefully detailing the use of donated items. Holley’s and Putnam’s letters of thanks to Concord draw a vivid picture of life in one of the earliest and longest-lived black schools in Virginia.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois argues that the earliest period of Reconstruction had done “three things worth doing”: relieved a great deal of suffering, moved former fugitives back toward the farmlands, and, “best of all,” inaugurated the exodus southward of “Yankee Schoolma’ams”:

The annals of this Ninth Crusade have yet to be written—the tale of a mission that seemed to our age far more quixotic than the quest of St. Louis seemed to his. Behind the mists of ruin

¹ Louisa May Alcott, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeline B. Stern (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. lii, 200–202, 205–08. See also Sallie Holley to Louisa May Alcott, January 14, 1882, Alcott Family Additional Papers, 1707–1904, bMS Am 1130.15 (165), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

² Louisa May Alcott, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeline B. Stern (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 196–99.

and rapine waved the calico dresses of women who dared, and after the hoarse mouthings of the field guns rang the rhythm of the alphabet.³

In searching out sources for this history, much of which still is “yet to be written,” one can hardly find a likelier candidate than the story of the Holley School for Freedmen. Established in Lottsburg on Virginia’s Northern Neck, the school had a long life as an independent, co-educational, and sometimes integrated private school from its founding until Putnam’s death in 1917; after the death of its founders, the Holley Graded School, as it became known, was one of the very few public schools for blacks in the region.⁴



Sallie Holley (left) and Caroline Putnam, founders of the Holley School for Freedmen in Lottsburg, Virginia. Reproduced by The Salisbury Association, Inc.

I first came to this history while reading through the Alcott Family Papers at the Houghton Library of Harvard University, where a file in the collection contains seventeen letters written by Holley and Putnam to their Concord benefactors. Holley and Putnam were Oberlin alumnae and abolitionists who, following emancipation, continued their partnership in reform by taking up the new cause of educating the former slaves of Virginia’s Northern Neck. The intended audience for their letters was Louisa May and Abba Alcott and, by extension, the sewing circle in Concord of which they were members. Cogent and writerly, the letters offer a uniquely authoritative and fascinating view of daily life at the Holley School; additionally, two letters contain the narrative of Winnie Beale, a former slave and one of the school’s neighbors, spoken to Sallie Holley by Beale and transcribed by her.

According to their biographer Katherine Lydigsen Herbig, Holley and Putnam met in the 1840s at Oberlin College, where they were among the college’s first generation of women students.⁵ After Holley’s graduation, the pair took up the cause of abolition in the public forum, joining the speakers’ circuit in the 1850s and publishing correspondence from the field in abolitionist presses

³ W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; rpt., New York: Bantam, 1989), n.p.

⁴ Katherine Lydigsen Herbig, *Friends for Freedom: The Lives and Careers of Sallie Holley and Caroline Putnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977), pp. 364–83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–58.

such as *The Liberator* and *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Holley was a public speaker against slavery; Putnam traveled with her, made their arrangements, and went door-to-door distributing anti-slavery tracts in the towns where Holley spoke.⁶ During the Civil War, they tried life together at the farmstead of Putnam's family in Farmersville, New York, but ultimately they found the small challenges faced by that community less compelling than battling slavery.⁷ While casting about for what to do after the war, Putnam established the school in 1868; Holley joined Putnam in 1869, and she purchased land for the school.⁸ The pair spent the remaining years of their lives together engaged in the education of the former slaves of Lottsburg and the surrounding region. All told, Holley and Putnam spent forty-five years together as lifelong partners in the causes of freedom and social progress.

Holley and Putnam were acquainted with Samuel J. May, Louisa May Alcott's maternal uncle, through their shared work in the abolitionist cause; Holley also came to know Bronson Alcott and, no doubt, the entire Alcott family in this way as well.⁹ Although they likely had met earlier, Holley and Alcott apparently became friends in November 1875 during their time in New York City. Soon afterwards, Alcott's mother took up the cause of the Holley School in earnest, inspiring women in their social circle to do likewise in an organized and ongoing fashion. The work of these women on behalf of the Holley School was, as it was for Holley and Putnam, an extension of the work they had done before the war to help bring about the end of slavery and during the war to support the Union.

Description of the Projects

Extant at the Houghton Library but as yet unpublished are the seventeen manuscript letters from Sallie Holley and Caroline Putnam to Abba and Louisa May Alcott written over the eight years between 1875 and 1883, during which time Abba and, after her death in 1877, Louisa recruited from their neighbors in Concord, Massachusetts (especially from the sewing circle that included Ellen Emerson, daughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson), support for and donations of material goods to the Holley School. Other than a meager stipend earned by Putnam as Lottsburg's postmistress, Holley and Putnam's only means of

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 164–76.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 173–74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 218–42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96; John White Chadwick, *A Life for Liberty: Anti-Slavery and Other Letters of Sallie Holley* (New York: Putnam, 1899), p. 203.

7/10/1883 Winnie Beale's Story L
 I was gone ten years and have been every which way just like a pig. ADDITIONAL
 George Richardson got me sold. His child died, and he said I was
 wanted at his house - I was hired out to Sam June, and the first I knew I was
 starting to the Spring with my bucket on my arm to fetch water to cook some
 hominy my Isaac had brought a present for me - Mrs June said, "Winnie
 there's somebody at the gate." I went to see who it was - He was
 Wm George Shirley, the Sheriff - He said, come along, Winnie, I've come
 for you - without telling me a word what for? I had to go, walking beside
 him, he on horse-back - He took me straight to the jail in Keokukville
 opened the door and told me to walk in, still not a word why I was put
 there - a white man, a kind of father man was in there too - I staid
 five days, when trader Lewis Dix came and carried me in his wagon to
 Merry Point in Lancaster County, or Rappahannock river - 45 miles -
 nothing was told me yet what for? I staid at his house two days -
 they had great big byllers - big as inside my hand - but I could n't
 eat - "there's your house!" "your house it is, 'em!" he said when the
 steamboat come along - "my heart lumps it up, I felt I was almost
 choked - Lewis Dix went along with Mary (William Middlebury's sister)
 and some others - a little girl so high too - we walked a mile to the cart in
 Fredericksburg - there was the trader John James from Salisbury Tenn.
 he met us and took us to the cart and said "go in" and hit down -
 cushioned seats but they was miserable seats to me, I could n't cry
 - my heart was so big (holding up her doubled fists together) - I've seen
 birds fly but the cart can out em! The travel looked like Madam's jail,
 I couldn't em, nor see 'em well! I was took with the rest to Richmond jail,
 where I staid three months lacking three days - Ed. Stokes was the jailer,
 I helped scour and wash and iron in the yard as the others did, and
 got paid my share - I had a trunk paid a dollar and a half and had
 seven dollars when John James took me with him to Salisbury Tenn.
 - sometimes by river and sometimes by land - I staid there the making
 of two crops of corn - I eat of them both - there's where I first got
 killed up with the hot sun - I never see a pine tree while I was gone.
 The first Saturday I takes me up and John James asks where I was
 going? I said, to get light wood (light wood) there was n't any there -
 there were great heavy black stones in the cedar woods - I had to lift and carry
 them to make some with - they pulled my g-t out - nobody here ever
 could believe what I did - John James' Mist' wanted my trunk
 and he said it was his, he tough't it and was going to take it away from me
 and give it to her - And because I said, it was mine, I tough't it with my money
 and Ed. Stokes knew I did - he stripped my back and said "there's at a
 pin scratch on it - nobody has ever whipped you, I've put my mark on it"
 he cut me up with a bull whip - O it was awful! John James was
 going to devote his money on me - He paid \$350 for me - He took me
 to Savannah Georgia where a man wanted me to raise poultry, he
 said he would give \$300 - He's John James said, should n't

First leaf, narrative of Winnie Beale, a former slave and neighbor of the Holley School, transcribed by Sallie Holley September 16, 1883. MS Am 1130.15 (165). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

subsistence was the food they raised in their garden and the barter of donated goods such as those they received from Concord.

Written by an outstanding pair of ambassadors for their school project, the letters are a treasure-trove of information not otherwise available in the historical record. They tell us something important about life in Concord, and especially about the existence of a community of women in the post-Civil War Abolitionist/Transcendentalist circle doing progressive work there on behalf of emancipated slaves and, by extension, in Concord in support of expanded rights for women. Referenced variously in the letters as the “sewing circle,” the “Freedmen’s Aid Society,” the “Ladies Benevolent Society,” and the “Union Bible Society,” this circle of women put women’s traditional work (e.g., charity and needlework), as well as non-traditional work (e.g., Alcott’s published writings) into the service of this progressive cause. The sewing sessions were, in obvious ways, beneficiaries of the kinds of “Conversations” made accessible for women by Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.¹⁰ The letters also tell us about life at the Holley School: about its charter and mission, its unconventional pedagogical methods (greatly influenced by Bronson Alcott’s theories of education),¹¹ and its treatment at the hands of its white neighbors; more

¹⁰ For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s wife, Lidian, was a participant in Fuller’s Conversations and in activities of the Concord sewing circle. Fuller adopted the term “Conversations” from Bronson Alcott’s events of the same name, and from his moniker for his dialogic practices at the Temple School in Boston. Bronson was an early supporter of Fuller’s events, which also evolved in part from Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s discussions for women on historical topics, and which Peabody helped arrange. Peabody and Fuller had both been assistants at the Temple School and had observed and recorded Bronson’s conversations with children there; these observations later saw publication as Alcott’s controversial *Conversations with Children on the Gospels* (2 vols., Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1836–1837; New York: Arno Press, 1972). Fuller was a frequent visitor in the Alcott home, and versions of her life story sometimes made an appearance in Louisa’s later fiction. For an account of Fuller’s conversations, see Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), pp. 386–87; for her friendship with the Alcotts, see Madeline Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: A Biography* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), pp. 24, 137, 157.

¹¹ Bronson Alcott was persuaded to the educational precepts of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) who, believing in the innate intelligence of human beings and the importance of direct experience, developed a method known as the “object lesson,” wherein an object placed in the classroom formed the basis of a dialogue with students who used their sensory experience of it to test their ability to discern its history and importance. Pestalozzi also rejected corporal punishment, arguing that the classroom should be like a nurturing family, wherein affectionate feeling fostered better learning. Both the object lesson and the rejection of corporal punishment are mentioned in the letters. For more on Pestalozzi’s influence on Bronson, see John Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 26–27, 35; see also Wesley T. Mott, “Education,” *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 157–59.

generally, they also provide first-hand portrayals of rural life in Virginia during Reconstruction. And even as they tell us something about Holley and Putnam's life together in this long last chapter of their companionship and work for racial and social justice, the letters introduce us to the lives of the school's scholars and former slaves: the young daytime students who attended the graded school, the adult students who undertook their remedial education at night and in Sunday School, and the former slaves among the school's neighbors who attended community events held there and sometimes told the stories of their experiences under slavery.

When I interviewed for my current position at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I made note of the fact that Lottsburg was only an hour-and-a-half away from Richmond. I first made my way to the Holley School site and the Northumberland County Public Library in the Fall of 2007, just after moving to Richmond. At the site where the Holley Graded School building stands, on the grounds of the old Holley School for Freedmen, an historical marker indicated that a black Board of Trustees still retained the deed for the site. But I would not have the opportunity to return to Lottsburg until after my first year of teaching at VCU. The following August, I went to the Northumberland County Public Library in Heathsville and asked the very helpful librarians there about how to find the executive board members alluded to on the historical marker. A small miracle occurred when the library's director, Jayne McQuade, gave me a few names and helped me look up phone numbers. At the end of my first visit, I made contact with Porter Kier, who, as I later learned, had gotten the school on the National Registry of Historic Places; he gave me a few more names of people to whom I should talk and numbers to call. I had made a start—toward what, I was not yet sure, but my instinct told me it was important that the people of Lottsburg still understood the importance of the school and knew where to send me.

Although at first my attention was primarily focused on the letters, and I thought my journey to Lottsburg would merely help gain me a working context for the letters project, I soon came to see that the history of this later school—Holley Graded School—possesses a history worth telling in its own right. Thus, I enlarged my research into two scholarly projects: an edition of the letters, complete with a historical introduction and annotations, and a complementary digital project that will disseminate oral histories I am now soliciting from members of the Holley Graded School's Board of Trustees, alumni, friends, and neighbors.

Textuality and Orality

From the beginning, I was focused on the responsible transmission of the Holley-Putnam epistolary archive: the textual project presented itself first;

it seemed to me inevitable and sufficient; and presently it remains my primary concern. When I first located the letters, I was an Editorial Assistant and then Assistant Editor at *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* project, where I was steeped in the text-focused culture of manuscript transcription and documentary editing. One of the original NEH grant-funded projects, the Thoreau Edition bears the seal of the MLA Committee on Scholarly Editions. As a team, we were engaged in providing editorial support for various volumes being prepared from manuscript: journal volumes in different phases of editorial production (*Journal 6–Journal 8*), and Robert N. Hudspeth’s early work on the projected three volumes of Thoreau’s *Correspondence*. I was a committed participant in the multiple close readings we did of transcriptions against manuscript photocopy, manuscript on microfilm, and sometimes of previous editions; we frequently worked as a group, in concert. I had also participated in transcription “perfection” against the original manuscripts. To say the least, I was trained in the care of textual transmission.

I was working at the Edition when I received a small grant from my home institution, Northern Illinois University, which funded research expenses related to my dissertation on cross-dressing in nineteenth-century American novels. With the grant in hand, on the recommendation of Elizabeth Hall Witherell, Editor-in-Chief at the Edition, I traveled to the Houghton Library to spend time with the Alcott Family Papers on the chance they might shed light on Louisa May Alcott’s treatment of cross-dressing in her fiction. I had, through the auspices of the Edition, traveled with colleagues to the Morgan Library to proofread transcriptions of Thoreau’s *Journal* against manuscripts housed there, so I had experience with this kind of work. Although I was not at all sure how useful a trip it would be—indeed, I found little at the Houghton to help me in my dissertation research—when I stumbled onto this cache of letters, I sat up and took notice. After skimming the contents, I was sure I had an object of study that would be of interest to scholars in the fields of Education, History, American Literature, African-American Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, LGBT Studies, and American Studies. In grease pencil in the corners of some of the manuscript pages a distant, unknown reader from the past had written, “KEEP WITH CARE.” I very much agreed with that person’s sentiment; in the margins of my notes, I wrote this instruction to myself: “Order microfilm.”

What I did not expect was that, over time, as I completed my dissertation and began to work with these letters, I would come to see the importance of somehow working orality into the mix, however I decided to present the letters to the public. As I repeatedly read and studied the letters, it became clear to me that they were written for an audience larger than the addressees. Frequently in them, Holley and Putnam make direct reference to members of the Concord

sewing circle other than Louisa and Abba; with each additional reading of them on my own, I began to hear the letters read aloud before an assembled group. My prior work with the Thoreau *Correspondence* team proved especially instructive for this aspect of my project; at the Edition, I had learned to think about letters as fundamentally different from most historical texts: not as a printed historical record merely, but as a form of non-traditional pre- or micro- or meta-publication enacted by the reading of texts aloud. This critical lens is available for consideration of all nineteenth-century American correspondence, but acutely so for women letter writers of the age, since so many women never imagined that publication was a possibility (or perhaps even desirable) for them—and because the letters were evidently written to be read aloud before an assembled group, rather than by an individual sitting alone, and were therefore practiced as a kind of theatre. Some years before my work at the Thoreau Edition, Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy's *Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* impressed upon me that Alcott often wrote letters home with the intention that they would be read aloud to the whole family. Finally, the wider audience expected for their letters by nineteenth-century women was clarified for me when I was a co-presenter with Helen R. Deese, Mary De Jong, and Sandra Petrulionis in a session on women's letters and reform at the 2006 Society for the Study of American Women Writers conference in Philadelphia.¹² Only when we gathered together and compared notes about our respective projects on women's correspondence did I begin to appreciate fully the cultural life and intellectual force letters represented for women. Letters provided a safe haven for nineteenth-century American women caught between the private sphere to which they were assigned and the public sphere they were typically discouraged, if not prohibited, from entering. Women letter writers and their readers might have been contemplating public life or eschewing it, but either way, they looked for an intellectual community in a world that too often denied them the very fact of their intellect. Thus, I decided that women's letters such as those by Holley and Putnam to the women of Concord needed to be understood as both oral and communal documents.

Then there was Winnie Beale's narrative, transcribed twice by Holley and included in two of the letters—embedded in the narrative of one and enclosed in another—relating her experiences under slavery and following emancipation. In

¹² Deese, De Jong, and Petrulionis have each authored or edited book-length works drawing significantly on women's letters: see Helen R. Deese, *Daughter of Boston: The Extraordinary Diary of a Nineteenth-century Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Earl Yarrington and Mary De Jong, eds., *Popular Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Literary Marketplace* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Holley's transcription of Beale's narrative I saw both a danger and an opportunity. The danger was that, in transmitting it, I would re-inscribe a Euro-centric colonialist perspective by simply transcribing Holley's transcription. Holley, a sympathetic listener who for six years had already lived among the former slaves and been immersed in their culture at the time of the first transcription, had probably developed a good ear for the black speech of Virginia's Northern Neck. Even so, she had grown up in a white culture that transcribed and marked black speech in exaggerated and sometimes bizarre flourishes of spelling and punctuation, and this showed in passages such as her transcription of Beale's narration of her arrest by Sheriff George Shirley and her subsequent journey to Richmond:

He took me straight to the jail in Heathsville, opened the door and told me to walk in, still not a word why I was put there—a white man—a kind of father man was in there too— I staid five days, when trader Lewis Dix came and carried me in his wagon to Merry P'int, in Lancaster County, on Rappahannock River—25 miles— Nothing was told me yet what for? I staid at his house two days they had great BIG oysters—*big* as inside my hand— But I couldn't eat— “There's your house”! “Your house is a coming”! He said when the steamboat come along— My heart loup-it-up, I felt I was almost choked— Lewis Dix went along with Mary (William Middleton's sister) and some others—a little girl so high too—we walked a mile to the cars in Fredericksburg— There was the trader John James from Nashville Tenn. He met us and took us to the cars and said “go in” “and sit down” Cushioned seats but O they was miserable seats to me. I couldn't cry my heart was *so big* (holding up her doubled fists together)—¹³

Although Holley's prose does not represent the worst example of such transcription, I approached her work with skepticism, for her spelling and punctuation sometimes marked Southern black speech as unusual, suggesting her own Northern white speech as the norm, and her parenthetical comments, intended to clarify a word's or an action's meaning, intruded into Beale's narrative. I required a better means to represent black orality in the project, but the solution could not result in my losing Beale's testimony; her experience merited preservation and distribution. As the project progressed, I wished that Winnie's story, if not written by her, could have been taped in the fashion of Allan Lomax

¹³ Beale's narrative is enclosed in Holley to Louisa May Alcott, September 21, 1883, bMS Am 1130.15 (165), Houghton Library, Harvard University. Text italicized here is underlined in manuscript. Parenthetical comments are Holley's.

or Zora Neale Hurston's later recordings.¹⁴ My dissertation on cross-dressing in nineteenth-century American novels gave careful consideration to Native-American and African-American trickster tales passed down through the oral tradition; these ultimately left an imprint first in captivity and slave narratives, and then in American novels that drew on such early-American historical genres. The dissertation prepared me to be thoughtful about the role of the written text in representing *itself* as important—about the cultural reverberation of authority around a written artifact. As Myra Jehlen has argued, when written and printed texts gained ascendancy in America as historically and legally authoritative, oral cultures in the colonies and the new nation were “inked over” and written out of existence, or onto the reservation, or into the silence of slavery.¹⁵

When I went to the Holley School historical site in Lottsburg to do research on its history, I found descendants of the school's alumni, who were themselves alumni, on the Board of Trustees charged with the school's preservation. I realized that as a white scholar I needed to get myself out of the way of this story as much as possible and invite these individuals to speak for themselves and on behalf of those who came before them. If, for example, there was anything left to be heard of the regional lilt of the Holley School's original black students, did it not stand to reason we might hear it in the speech of their descendants? In this respect, public radio's *Story Corps* and *This American Life* provided a more useful model for my project than any textual edition. I learned from documentarian Laura Browder about the Electronic Newsgathering (ENG) standards for audio-recording equipment and best practices for taking oral histories, and I made plans for an audio project to complement the letters project.¹⁶

Holley's and Putnam's letters address historical contexts in unique ways. Evident in them are the authors' interest in the literature and philosophy of their age, their commitment to various reform movements, and their sense of being witnesses to “history in the making” as it unfolded around them. Holley's liberal allusions to contemporary literature reveal her attraction to the literature

¹⁴ For online access to and information about Lomax's sound recordings and other archives, see the Library of Congress's webpage for the American Folklife Center: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/americansouth/americansouth.html>. For similar access and information about Hurston's archives, see the State Library and Archives of Florida webpage, Florida Memory: http://www.floridamemory.com/Collections/folklife/sound_hurston.cfm#.

¹⁵ Myra Jehlen, “The Literature of Colonization,” *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 11–168.

¹⁶ For an example of Laura Browder's digital work, see the website for her project, *When Janey Comes Marching Home*: <http://janeycomeshome.com/exhibit.html>. For National Public Radio's *StoryCorps*: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4516989>. For Public Radio International's *This American Life*: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/>

of reform: Whittier's "Howard at Atlanta," Emerson's "The Problem," and Longfellow's "Evangeline" and "Footsteps of Angels." In one of her letters Holley offers Abba Alcott the following improvisation on Longfellow's "Footsteps of Angels" as an elegy for Abba's brother, Samuel J. May, after she received George B. Emerson's biography of May in one of Concord's donated barrels:

Tho' oft depressed and lonely
All my fears are laid aside
If I but remember only
Such as these have lived and died
He too would have rejoiced in our work and school here as you do.¹⁷

May had taken an interest in the school's success and had served, along with Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, and Samuel Sewall, as a bondsman for Putnam's position as Lottsburg's postmistress, in order to secure a place in the community for the school's founders.¹⁸ Holley's allusion to the Marchioness of Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* in reference to one of the school's neighbors, a black girl hired out to a poor white family, takes a similarly reform-minded approach by honoring the struggle of this local person of otherwise low stature.¹⁹ Histories and biographies are likewise referenced in the letters, often as part of the progressive curriculum of the school, where classes were regularly organized around the biographies and writings of Charles Sumner, John Brown, and Wendell Phillips.²⁰ Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Young Folks' History of the United States* is also mentioned in the letters; one copy was sent to Lottsburg in Concord's Christmas barrel for 1875, and, as Holley writes to Abba, another copy was contributed by Franklin Sanborn, Concord's schoolmaster, to a barrel that arrived in April 1876:

We feel the kindness of Mr Frank Sanborn to give you his copy of Col. H's U.S. History—to send our school— Now we have four. When our school was learning the Chapter on Colonial Days in New England we noticed the passage about "houses made of logs and one story high, with very steep roofs and fire places of rough

¹⁷ Holley to Abba Alcott, February 14, 1876, Alcott Family Papers.

¹⁸ Herbig, *Friends for Freedom*, p. 325.

¹⁹ Holley to Abba Alcott, February 14, 1876, Alcott Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²⁰ Holley to Abba Alcott, January 24, 1876, *ibid.*

stones and chimneys of sticks crossing each other smeared with mud”—excited no wonder or curiosity among the scholars! To their minds it was nothing quaint—old fashioned nor gone by— As Sam Blackwell one of our colored night-school scholars, said when Miss Putnam read him “Life of Frederick Douglass” “It is the most familiar book I ever heard”!²¹

History also occasionally makes a literal appearance in the letters in the shape of historic persons who turn up at the schoolhouse door, as happens when Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark fame visited the Holley School in his position as a county school superintendent:

The other day Dr Meriwether Lewis the County Supt. of Public Schools made a visit to our School! He seemed quite surprised to find so large a number of scholars and such a nice house— Said there was “not another like it in all the two counties, Lancaster and Northumberland”. Complimented the order and discipline— Spoke of the pictures on the walls of Charles Sumner—Whittier—Wendell Phillips Garibaldi &c—blackboard maps—desks & chairs &c Said there was no such well furnished school-house in all his rounds— He made quite an effort to praise the school—but we cannot rely on any statement he would make— He said *he* “did not feel towards this school as the others did” he “ought to feel interested in the education of the colored race for he was indebted to it for his own education” &c (meaning his father sold slaves to pay his school bills) And he looked as tho’ *we* must warm into irresistible admiration of such magnanimous sentiment—while really we felt a chill of horror at the awful confession!²²

Again and again, in the letters Holley’s and Putnam’s angle of historical perception is both useful and fascinating.

By contrast, the oral histories now underway reflect the transition away from the school’s mission and philosophy established by Holley and Putnam to those of a public black school of the South in the early twentieth century. Integrated student cohorts are, by then, a thing of the past, while corporal punishment, fiercely eschewed by Holley and Putnam, is already an established

²¹ Holley to Abba Alcott, April 2, 1876, *ibid.*

²² Holley to Abba Alcott, February 14, 1876, *ibid.* Text italicized here is underlined in manuscript. Parenthetical comments are Holley’s.

part of school's culture by the 1940s.²³ Even so, themes such as blacks' betterment in social standing and the broadly elevating intellectual and economic impact of education for black citizens are evident in reports from the school's later alumni. According to alumnus Harold Blackwell, a descendant of freedman Glasgow Blackwell who gave the speech in 1868 welcoming Putnam as the school's first teacher, "One of the things I remember my parents telling me was . . . you're going to school to learn something, to get something in your head, so that you can do better."²⁴ As Blackwell's cousin and classmate Stafford Conley recalls:

Holley Graded School provided a place for African-Americans to get an education when there was no place, and the state was not going to provide facilities for us to get an education. . . . I think it wasn't until the '30s or '40s that the state provided some funds to keep the school open to pay the teachers to come here and work. And to say the least about separate but equal facilities, the facilities were separate, but they weren't equal. [But this place] is where we first started—it's like your first girlfriend. You always remember your first girlfriend. This is the first place where we got our taste of education, and it stayed with us. And the teachers were so caring, and they were concerned about us getting an education, so we could get off the farms and out of the crabhouses and fishhouses and the tomato fields, and go on and do other things with our lives.²⁵

The charge to students, as it was articulated first by Holley and Putnam, that they be "an example and encouragement to every scholar in school" and "a grateful and touching reward to their teachers," has obviously made its way down through the generations.²⁶ Indeed, such faith in education as a means to social and economic betterment contributed to the drive of local blacks to build the first schoolhouse and call a Yankee schoolmistress to serve the community's needs. Despite myriad past and present challenges to that mission—insufficient funding, incomplete and/or outdated materials—the spirit of progress and social reform remains to this day in the school's descendants, who have taken their Holley School education into every kind of contemporary calling.

²³ Harold Blackwell and Stafford Conley (President and Treasurer, respectively, Holley School, Inc.), interviewed by the author, November 14, 2009.

²⁴ Blackwell and Conley, interview.

²⁵ Blackwell and Conley, interview.

²⁶ Holley to Abba Alcott, December 27, 1875, Alcott Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

My complementary projects seek to fill several gaps in this amazing historical record. Extant biographies of Holley and Putnam—those cited above by John White Chadwick and Katherine Lydigsen Herbig—are admirable, and though both are grounded in Holley’s and Putnam’s correspondence, neither had access to these letters or to the Beale narrative contained in them, and thus could not tell the story of the School’s connection to the Alcotts or to the sewing circle in Concord.²⁷ And, as fascinating as is the picture of the Holley School that unfolds in these letters, so is the picture they suggest of the sewing women of Concord, whose work on behalf of abolition prior to the Civil War has been so well documented by Peter Stoneley, Sandra Petrulionis, and Elise Lemire.²⁸ Said Holley to Louisa in 1877: “What a broad, generous stream of love and bounty has flowed from Concord to us down here—since I had the pleasure of those six weeks in New-York with you!”²⁹ These letters and their complementary in-progress oral histories make clear that not only did the stream of influence from the women of Concord continue after the war, it outlasted their lives by many decades and is still felt today in the black community of Lottsburg, Virginia. To be sure, the story these documents will tell testifies to an impressive and lasting legacy of the Abolitionist and Women’s Rights movements in nineteenth-century America, but no less to the power of motherwit, collaboration, and tenacious dedication.

²⁷ An article by descendant I. B. Holley transcribes a related group of letters between Putnam and Ellen Emerson also related to gifts from the Concord sewing circle—but is missing this significant and much larger portion of the correspondence. See I. B. Holley, “Teaching Freedmen’s Children,” *New England Quarterly*, 74 (2001): 478–94.

²⁸ See Peter Stoneley, “Sewing in Concord,” *Women’s Studies*, 35 (2006): 397–412; Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, “Swelling That Great Tide of Humanity”: The Concord, Massachusetts, Female Anti-Slavery Society,” *New England Quarterly*, 74 (2001): 385–418; Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

²⁹ Holley to Louisa May Alcott, January 14, 1882, Alcott Family Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.