



North Country Notes

Issue #402

Fall 2008

William Swetland—Man of Eloquence and Passion

by Ada and Kenneth Bills

William Swetland was a noted attorney, businessman, and resident of Plattsburgh during the 1800s. In 2005, CCHA received a generous donation of a collection of letters and papers that had belonged to Mr. Swetland. This collection has recently been catalogued and indexed as a community service project by Elder Kenneth and Sister Ada Bills during their tenure in Plattsburgh as senior missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We have delighted in becoming acquainted with this man, his family, and a few business associates, along with enjoying a unique glimpse into their history.

Scholarly biographies of Mr. Swetland have previously been published, of note the 1997 *Antiquarian*, therefore the focus of this article will be to share some of the eloquence and passion of Mr. Swetland plus a few others as revealed in excerpts and transcriptions from the collection. The items we selected convey this intent, but became too lengthy for publication in the newsletter, therefore we share a modified version and invite all to visit the CCHA website (www.clintoncountyhistorical.org) for the expanded version plus additional notes.

This donated collection will be housed in Special Collections at the Feinberg Library, SUNY Plattsburgh where it will be available to the public, with ownership being retained by the Clinton County Historical Association.

The Swetland and Kirtland families had relocated from Connecticut to Granville, New York around 1800. After graduating from Middlebury College,

Vermont, William returned to Granville and studied law under Zebulon Shepherd from 1808 to 1811. During this time, his friendship with Henrietta Kirtland blossomed into deep love. Before their marriage in November 1811, they experienced lengthy separations from each other. She traveled to Connecticut in particular to visit family, while he obtained a law partnership in Plattsburgh. He was an avid writer with beautiful script until constrained by health impairment in the latter part of his life. Henrietta was not a frequent writer for reasons that are not entirely clear, though she did have extended periods of illness, and her penmanship was to say the least lacking.

Letters in the early 1800's were written, then folded and sealed with the recipient's address on the outside. William had asked Henrietta's father to provide a cover letter on the first page of his letter to avoid the impropriety of writing to a young lady directly.

North Granville, Dec 20, 1810

My very dear girl,

I begin my letter on this page of the sheet intending to call at your house this evening, and persuade your father to write on the first page so that the letter may be directed to you by him, with his name on the outside as postmaster. One reason for this proceeding is that I expect to tax your patience with a very long letter, containing two or more sheets closely and finely written (meaning by finely written in a small character). Now Dear Girl do not be alarmed, you may have your own time for reading the letter, I will not compel you to go through with it at one sitting.

William Swetland, cont.

The resulting letter was long indeed, ten pages of passionate prose and yearning.

North Granville, January 15, 1811

My very dear girl,

Had any person told me a month past that so long an interval would have elapsed between my writing to you, as had transpired since I wrote you last, I should with indignation have declared them to be false prophets—told them they were liars—but what I would never have previously believed has in fact come to pass—thus blind and ignorant are we short sighted mortals of future events—(Well done, there is a grammatical error I perceive in my first sentence, but I'll be hanged if I will alter it now—so criticize my dear if you please, but hush ye, let love dictate the criticism)

He justifies the delay in writing with a discussion of his work schedule and chastens her for failing to write to him.

It is now 3 months since you left Granville and I have received but one letter from you. Now say my dear girl, I appeal to you, is it kind when you know with what ardor I grasp at every thing from your hand and what a severe and almost insupportable trial your absence occasions to my feelings.

Henrietta did respond occasionally to William's pleading for letters from her, though she thought some of his demands were a bit excessive.

Fairvale August 2, 1811

My dear sir,

Give me the happiness of thinking that your heart is too kind to cherish resentment at the late date of this letter. That I am obliged to plead guilty to the charge of negligence to you is not a small mortification, but don't think too seriously of so very a trifle as a poor letter from me, not so soon received as it should have been. I am confident

that, had I the power of giving you a polite and elegant account of all my reasons and excuses for not writing sooner I should obtain a generous pardon my dear friend.

She continues to assure him of her regard, and reminds him of their previous experiences together. The greater portion of the letter tells of her travels to New York and Troy, being with her sister Lucy, suffering from a bad cold, sailing along the Hudson River, and other family and travel related details.

By the fall of 1811, William had secured his first law partnership and had moved to Plattsburgh.

Plattsburgh, September 7, 1811

My dear Girl,

Believing, fondly believing that you will be anxious to hear from me, I seize the first opportunity although I have but a moment to write. I am under the necessity of writing to John C Parker on business, my intention is to send by the steamboat which passes here this day, and enclose this letter in the one to him. You need not feel unpleasantly at this proceeding, Parker will not mention the circumstance, he is very friendly to me, besides remember he and I are brother Masons—they never betray each other.

I had a safe passage and a very pleasant and expeditious one—pleasant excepting I could not sleep, the beds were so full of bugs. I placed 3 chairs and tried to sleep on those but succeeded poorly—at 2 o'clock at night I arrived at Cumberland Head—found the stage from Plattsburgh waiting—got into it and arrived at my office between 3 & 4 o'clock—thus making but about 20 hours from the time I left your house till I opened my own office door—a distance of more than 100 miles.

He continues his letter and with passion states he is more certain than ever that his future happiness can only be assured if she is with him.

William Swetland, cont.

Plattsburgh September 14, 1811

My only dear Girl,

I wrote you last week in very great haste, and am compelled to do the same this week for the stage starts in a short time to meet the steam boat at Cumberland Head. I am very much vexed at his circumstance for I am anxious to obtain time to sit down and write you a long letter accordant with my own feelings without interruption and embarrassment.

But this week I have been much engaged and yesterday was what is called in common parlance "general training" here and I served all day as a soldier—was much fatigued and am in the "dumps" (pure yankeeyism) [sic] today in consequence.

This day very busy in preparing papers to send to Albany and New York by the bearer of this. So you see my dear, dear girl you must excuse me for haste, inelegance, or even nonsense, as you perceive I had rather write you under all these disadvantages than not to write you at all.

Separated, as unfortunately for my feelings and happiness we now are, I am exceedingly solicitous to maintain the only intercourse in our power, and it is a high gratification to me to commune with you in this way—to write to you—a great pleasure to reflect that you will soon be reading what I am now writing—that your eyes which have often been turned upon me with fascinating tenderness will ere long be wandering over this very line and those identical letters on which I am now looking and which my pen is now forming.

Well I am wretchedly provoked—here are almost a dozen people in the office—I have been called away three times whilst writing the four last sentences. How can one write or think or feel in such a tumult?

But write I will. There now a moment's peace I hope. I've just told a man I am very busy indeed and cannot attend to him—hold your

tongues there every rascal of you in the office—say not a word to me—I am in better business now than listening to your trash—I am holding counsel (in imagination) with one whom I would rather see one moment than every one of you with your pockets filled with gold to give me for a fee.

Oh, Henrietta, tell Lucy that Purdy was here yesterday training—tell her moreover he has become a Sergeant already—yes sergeant of a military company in Champlain—tell her moreover the company is a set of ill looking chaps—that there are scarcely 3 decent men in the company besides himself—that all the other officers are such dunces that he has to take the command.

Ask her if she does not feel herself of more consequence already because Mills is Sergeant. Look at her now and see if she does not hold her head higher and pucker up her lips some. Tell her to throw off her old apron—put by her spinning wheel and slick up a little seeing she has become a sergeant's deary. What a sad thing it would be now tho if he should feel himself of so much importance to say nothing more to her. Promotion has a dangerous effect upon young men—apt to make 'em giddy a little—what danger then may not be apprehended when an ambitious is raised to the high rank of Sergeant of such a company.

Give my love to Lucy and to the family—tell the huzzy to write to me—it would gratify me much. I suppose however she will not for I suspect I do not hold a very favorable station in her heart.

Plattsburgh October 13, 1811

My dearly beloved girl

I intended to have attended church this forenoon, but being rather dilatory in preparing I perceived that it was time for the first service to be almost concluded before I was ready. "I will not attend church this forenoon" said I to myself, "I am ashamed to go in so late when I reside so near." I had just opened the door to go out as I said this. I immediately closed it again and returned into the

William Swetland, cont.

office. "Well what will you do till afternoon service commences?" was the next mental question. "Why" said inclination, (my feelings in an instant springing into pleasurable life as she said it) "you shall employ the time in writing to the dearest being you have on earth." The subject was no sooner proposed than determined upon. So here I am, seated in my office entirely alone, executing the said resolution, and in so doing am engaged in the most pleasing employment possible whilst separated from you, except it be that of perusing a letter written by your own dear hand (and the latter by the by is an employment you take good care I shall not be engaged in very frequently, and lately not at all).

He continued his letter, mentioning he had received one from Lucy, and would omit the remainder until after the mail arrived the following Tuesday.

Well my dear, Tuesday has arrived—and so has the mail. It came about 12 o'clock—several hours later than usual. I became impatient and fretted all the day—went frequently to the door and looked down the street in which it passes to see if I could discover it—at length it came—filled with hope and anxiety I went immediately to the post office—the boy was opening the mail and undoing the packages. A counter separated me from him. "If you find any letters directed to me, said I, throw them to me without waiting till you open the whole mail." "I will," he replied. Several were thrown me as he proceeded gradually—but they were directed to "Sperry and Swetland." Alas, thought I, these are not the ones I wish. I waited half an hour or more with great impatience (for the mail was large) attentively watching the boy as he opened the packets. At length he finished unclosing them. "Are there no more letters for me?" asked I. "No Sir" "Have you opened all the packages?" "Yes" I exclaimed—"is it possible—I can't believe it—I

will examine myself"—I immediately sprang over the counter and began looking over the letters. "It is against the law, Mr. Swetland", said the boy, "for others to be handling the papers while the mail is opening." "I cannot help that," I replied, "against law or not, I will satisfy myself, for I believe you have overlooked one." I continued my search in vain. I found no letter on which I could trace the well known and welcome writing of my dearly beloved girl, after searching thoroughly. I in truth sorrowfully left the office, sadly disappointed and with keen sensations. I mention these things, my dear girl, as absolute facts, that you may perceive of how much importance it is to my feelings to receive a letter from you.

He concluded a lengthy letter, then added another half sheet with several questions, in part seeking to ascertain her feelings toward him and was there possibly someone else in her life as implied in the letter from Lucy.

William to Henrietta

Plattsburgh, October 28, 1811

Monday night. I have had an excessively fatiguing day and have been standing on my feet examining witnesses and speaking from 9 o'clock this morning till a few minute since-am so hoarse I can hardly speak-was scarcely ever more exhausted-was up last night preparing for this day's services till past one o'clock -tis now nearly eleven at night. But not withstanding this excessive weariness and oppressive fatigue I cannot induce myself to retire without first writing a few lines addressed or intended for you whether they ever meet your eyes or not-for never has my mind been so much agitated, -my feelings so agonized-never have I suffered so much on your account, as at this moment.

It is now two months nearly since I left you—since with a lacerated heart I parted from her my soul adores and still adores—and not a syllable have you written me. Am I justified in being uneasy or not? Are my apprehensions groundless?

William Swetland, cont.

His lengthy letter continues to describe his feelings, and anxiety at waiting for the weekly mail delivery. He then commences with a dialogue he has had with himself of late between his feelings of jealousy and the reasons for same, justified or not.

William and Henrietta's long distance courtship did end well, with their marriage in Granville. After a few weeks of wedded bliss, William returned to Plattsburgh via Connecticut to visit family members, leaving Henrietta in Granville.

His first letter was written from Beeman's Tavern in Poultney.

Poultney December 6, 1811

My dearest and only beloved girl, nay more, my own dear wife and lovely partner of my bosom,

Mr. White (Wilson) who brought us here intends returning this evening to Granville. So he told me just now. "I will write my love," said I to myself. "Landlord give me pen, ink and paper if you please." So here I am writing to one who holds the nearest and dearest place in my heart—one who is the sole sovereign of my affections. My heart is a "little kingdom" to be sure, but such as it is, my dearest, you reign absolute monarch and hold undisputed dominion over it.

He continues with more description of his travel.

William writes to Henrietta after his arrival back in Plattsburgh.

Plattsburgh December 17, 1811

Plattsburgh—yes Plattsburgh—thank heaven, I have it in my power to write from Plattsburgh. Columbus and his men did not experience greater satisfaction when they first discovered land in America and first set their feet on the long wished for shore, than did I when I landed at Plattsburgh—"after numerous perils by sea and land." The fact

is we had a very unpleasant, tedious, and in several instances, hazardous passage from Burlington to this place. But suffice it to say, I am now safely here, a narrative or journal of our passage I presume would not interest you—and besides I have not now time to give it. But, stop a moment let me begin my letter in the middle, or rather let me address it in a manner confoundably [sic] to the dictates and wishes of my heart; in a manner that thrills my heart with pleasure—

My dearest and dearly beloved wife,

Yes let me write those epithets and that title, for here in "my lonely solitude" to write them and read them afford to my feelings as great a luxury as they enjoy—and that it is in my power to write them may heaven accept my gratitude."

We hope you enjoy this small foray into the past when paper, pen, and ink were often the tools used to express feelings of passion, and produce gems to be treasured and preserved.

As mentioned before, the complete article was too long for our newsletter. The entire text of the full article, some 9,000 words, is coming soon on our website at:

www.clintoncountyhistorical.org

December Program

Our Monday December 1st program will feature Barb Stadnicki discussing *Caring for Quilts*. She will also do informal appraisals of antique quilts that same evening. Program 7 pm, refreshments follow. This is the last program until spring.

New County Historian Hired

Welcome to Anastasia Pratt, Ph.D., as the new Clinton County Historian, appointed by the County Legislature following the retirement of Addie Shields. Anastasia, or Stacy to acquaintances, graduated from Peru H.S., P.S.U.C., and University of Michigan, and is currently an Assistant Professor at Empire State College here on the Plattsburgh

campus.

She will be in the County Government Center Historian's office (Suite 105, 137 Margaret St., Plattsburgh NY 12901) on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. The phone is 565-4749 and email is pratta@co.clinton.ny.us.

Updated Town, Village and City Historian

The municipal historians in Clinton County in 2008 are:

Town of Altona- Loyola Coolidge, 77 Station St., Altona, 12910 (maplecrest@earthlink.net)

Town of Ausable- Ms Robie Scott, 1894 Rt 22, Keeseville, 12944 (scottdr@charter.net)

Town of Beekmantown- Addie Shields, Town Hall Spellman Rd West Chazy, NY 12992

Town of Black Brook- Mrs. Doris Akey, Box 533, Ausable Forks, 12912

Town of Champlain- Roy Clark, 121 Clark Rd., Champlain 12919 (histchamp@primelink1.net)

Town of Chazy- Robert Cheeseman, P.O. Box 219, Chazy, 12921

Town of Clinton- Diane Lagree, Town Hall, 576 Rt 189, Churubusco, 12923

Town of Dannemora - Roger Bigelow, P.O.Box 658, Dannemora, 12929

Town of Ellenburg- Hilda Danforth, 805 Bull Run Rd, Ellenburg Depot, 12935 (hkd27@juno.com)

Town of Mooers- Carol Nedeau, 85 Tappin Rd, Mooers, 12958 (mooershistorian@primelink.net)

Town of Peru- Ron and Carol Allen, P.O.Box 182, Peru, 12972 (rallen@charter.net)

Town of Plattsburgh- Arnold Jubert, 22 Kimberly Lane, Morrisonville, 12962

Town of Saranac- Jan Couture, 9 Parson Rd, Saranac, 12981 (saranachistorian@yahoo.com)

Town of Schuyler Falls- Marvin Connor, 997 Mason St, Morrisonville (sfhistorian@charter.net)

Village of Champlain- Richard Fillion, Village Hall, 1104 Rt. 9, Champlain, 12919

Village of Dannemora- Walter (Pete) Light, Village Hall, 121 Emmons St., Dannemora, 12929

Village of Keeseville- James Blaise, Village Hall, 1790 Main St., Keeseville, 12944

Village of Rouses Point- Donna Racine, 3 Edgewater Dr, Rouses Point, 12979 (historian1933@aol.com)

City of Plattsburgh- James Bailey, 62 Prospect Ave, Plattsburgh, 12901 (baileyj@westelcom.com)

CCHA Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of CCHA is scheduled for Saturday November 8, 2008 from 1 pm until 4 pm at the Museum. The tentative schedule is as follows: 1 pm socialization, 1:30 pm program, 2:30 pm business meeting and election of trustees.

Our program will be new Clinton County Historian Anastasia Pratt speaking about *The Responsibilities of History*. Light refreshments will be provided and we hope you will all join us. Membership dues must be paid up in order to vote at the meeting.

Memberships, Donations and Other Support Received From March 1, 2008 through September 18, 2008

Adirondack Architectural Heritage, Adirondack Mountain Club-Algonquin Chap., Joseph and Janet Alexander, Donald and Madeleine Ambrose, Stasia Arcarese, Arnie's Restaurant, Ara Asadourian, James and Anne Bailey, John and Kathleen Banko, Cliff Barrette, John and Dorothy Barton, Thomas C. Beach, Jr., Sylvie Beaudreau, Marie Beemer, Donna Bell, Roger Bigelow, Bill McBride Chevrolet, Ken and Ada Bills, Howard Black, David and Carol Bodah, Ed Bohin, Allen and Isabel Bombard, Matthew and Stacy Bondurant, Robert and Helen Booth, Kit and Sally Booth, Thomas Braga, Brown Funeral Home, Ita Bullard, Arlene Buran, Edgar and Emily Burde, Joseph and Joan Burke, Bruce Butterfield, Calvin Castine, U. V. Chase, James Ciborski, Ralph Clark, Shirley Coffey, Jack and Debra Conroy, Linda Lee Coryer, Jan Couture, Luke and Lisa Cyphers, Dannemora FCU, Janet and Jerry Davis, James and Caroline Dawson, Conrad and Vreni DeBeaufort, John Dee, Janet Deeb, Suzanne DeForge, Mon. Lawrence Deno, Alita and Mark Desso, Steven And Deborah Dolgin, Ruth and Gerald Dominy, Robert Donlan, Barbara Dorrance, Julie Dowd, John Drown, the Estate of Harvey Duchin, Bernard Duquette, Ellen Eager, Steve Engelhart, Jack Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick Associates, Robert Garrow, Gina and Maurice Gilbert, Maurica Gilbert and Noel Sowley, Rod and Dodie Giltz, William Glidden, Jim Godfrey, Irving and Eleanor Goldman, Phil and Shirley Gordon, Robert Grady, Richard Gregoire, Robert Haley, Carol Hamilton, Ann Handley, Steve Harstedt, Roger Harwood, Rebecca Hayes, June Heming, Heritage Printing, Ellen Heyman, Patricia Higgins, John Homburger, Claudia Hornby, Sally House, Richard Jarrette, Theresa and Arnold Jensen, Charles Kaczor, Keeseville Pharmacy, Debra Kimok, Don and Peg Kinneston, Harold and Carole Klein, William Krueger, Dorothy Lacombe, Daniel Ladue, Ruth

Ladue, Constance Lalonde, Arthur and Rosemary LaMarche, Kim Larocque and Ken Herwith, Paul Leduc, William and Beverly Legee, Chantal Lefebvre, Brinley and Dorothy Lewis, Sonia Long, Sandra and Howard Lowe, Marshall Maynard, Patricia Maynard, Virginia and William McBride, Scarlett and William McBride, Jr., Agatha McDonald, John McGaulley, Elizabeth McKee, Jeannette McKinney, Meyer Drugs, Charles and Joan Mitchell, Nancy Montgomery, Gilbert Moore, John Moravek, Marilyn Morton, Ruth Mowry, Leigh and Stephens Mundy, Tom and Kathleen Murnane, David and Elizabeth Murray, William and Barbara Murray, Anna Nardelli, Merrie and Alan Nautel, Carol Nedeau, Alexander Nerska, Chris Neuzil, Sylvia and Warren Newman, John Nordhouse, Northern Insurance, Sam Northshield, Richard Oertel, Joanna and Jack Orr, James Papero, P.A.R.C., Patricia Parker, Victor Pawlewicz, Peru Pharmacy, Dennis Hulbert, Gordon And Sandra Pollard, Pearlle Rabin, Stan and Chris Ransom, Raquette Lake Navigation Co., Sharon Ratner, Charles and Jean Raymond, Marianne Rector, Geraldine Rickert, William and Bunny Rowe, Ira Rowson, John and Jean Ryan, Sample Lumber, LLC., Marion Schmitt, Kathy Schumacher, Paul Seifried, Samer and Beth Siouffi, Charles Smith, Gary and Ginny Smith, Curt and Michele Snyder, Fred Songayllo, Dr. and Mrs. Merritt Spear, Nancy St. Dennis, Ed Stansbury, Stewart's Foundation, Noel and Debbie Stewart, David and Sandra Stortz, David and Roberta Sullivan, Virginia Swift, Joseph and Alice Thomas, Town of Beekmantown, Town of Peru, Jamie Trautman, Lee Turner, Ultra Wave, Inc., Gary and Billie VanCour, George and Marcia Wagner, Marlene and Irwin Waite, Wal-Mart Foundation, Steve and Sue Welch, Kay Wellman, Phyllis Wells, Constance Wheeler, Peggy Whipple, Ann and Lynn Wilke, Robert and Shari Williams, William and Lucy Wilson, David and Prudence Withall, and Clinton County.

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
98 Ohio Avenue
Plattsburgh, NY 12903
Phone: 518-561-0340
www.clintoncountyhistorical.org

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PLATTSBURGH, NY
PERMIT No. 185

Board of Trustees

Roger D. Harwood-President

William Laundry-Vice Pres.

Sonia K. Long- Secretary

Maurica Gilbert-Treasurer

Alita Desso

Heidi Dennis

Julie Dowd

James Bailey

Jan Couture

James Godfrey

Richard Jarrette

Sandra Lowe

William Rowe

New in the Gift Shop

We now carry another book written by Vickie Evans, *My Duty is Here: The Civil War Journal and Letters of Rev. Francis B. Hall*, the companion volume to our recently published Palmer journals. The 80 page volume is priced at just \$15 and if you purchase both the Hall and Palmer journals together, there is a 10% discount. The work was published in 2006 by the Kent-Delord House Museum.

Champlain's Dream, the new release by David Hackett Fischer, Professor of History at Brandeis University and author of *Washington's Crossing*. Favorably reviewed in the New York Times recently, this sweeping biography of Samuel de Champlain explores his life and his dream of humanity and peace in a world of violence and cruelty. First edition hardcover October 2008, list price \$40.00, our price \$35.00.

Gifts in Memory of Josie Treggett through September 18th

Robert and Helen Booth, Florence Callahan, Heather and Joseph Casey, Betty Chase, James and Susan Chenevert, Alba and Terry Chilton, Barbara and James Chilton, Mary Jane Chilton, Sarah Chilton, Catherine Davenport, Margaret Hogan, Pamela Johnson, Robert and Elizabeth Kline, Janice Lavalley, Patricia Maley, George and Colleen Rabideau, Linda Rainey, Recording for the Blind, Barbara Rigaud, Barbara Rodriguez, Mr. and Mrs. Gaylord Rowe, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Trombley and Sherry and George Varin.