

## Acquiring epistolary literacy in nineteenth-century New England\*

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of “epistolary literacy”, or the skill of letter writing, was first applied by Susan Whyman in *The Pen and the People* (2009) when analysing the letters of English families from the period 1660-1800. The present study applies the concept to nineteenth-century New England, and presents five case studies of families from different socio-economic backgrounds in order to study the question of how they acquired epistolary literacy. Since letter writing was not taught in schools, this paper investigates other means that were available to people eager to communicate with distant relatives and friends. Three possibilities are explored: the use of letter-writing manuals, the example of letters received, and practicing the skill through letter writing itself. The various skills identified in the letter collections, linguistic as well as epistolary, collocate with the

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\* This paper is based on a PhD project carried out by Bas van Elburg under my supervision at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics between 2008 and 2021. The completed manuscript of the thesis did gain formal approval by the official examination committee instituted by the University of Leiden, but was never submitted for the purpose of obtaining the PhD degree. If it had been, it would have become available to the academic world as a published book. To ensure that the work done within the project should not be entirely wasted, I decided to present the main findings from van Elburg’s study in this article. In doing so I based myself on his selection, transcription and analysis of the epistolary material which he studied in the context of socio-economic and educational developments in nineteenth-century New England, but placed and interpreted his findings within the context of my own extensive research on Late Modern English letters and letter writing. At times this led to a slight rearrangement of his material into a perspective that was more fitting to a sociohistorical linguistic analysis than the approach originally taken by van Elburg. Van Elburg has granted me permission to make use of his work for publication purposes (personal communication by email in February 2022), and he read and commented on the paper before it was submitted for publication.

families' different socio-economic backgrounds. While the most highly placed family could draw on a teacher-caretaker's efforts to assist their children in communicating with their parents, the family at the lowest end of the social scale struggled with the need to acquire sufficient epistolary literacy to be able to stay in touch. One of the families, whose main proponent emigrated to Peru and lost his native language in the process, shows how their Spanish-speaking descendants used letter writing with American relatives both to acquire this skill, and to regain a command of English.

Keywords: epistolary literacy, letter writing, nineteenth-century New England, socio-economic stratification, letter-writing manuals, emigration, language loss.

## 1. Introduction

During the period covered by his book *Literary Publishing in America 1790-1850*, William Charvat notes, New England had "the most extraordinarily concentrated book-buying and reading public in the whole country" (1959: 30). At the time, according to Charvat, the area boasted many district schools and academies (1959: 32), which not only brought literacy to a great many people but also illustrates the importance New Englanders attached to education, their own and that of their children. This possibly accounts for the popularity of Noah Webster's *Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (Part II, 1784) around that time; the grammar was published in many editions and reprints throughout New England and adjacent states down to the early 1840s (Alston 1965; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1996: 15).

While teaching literacy, or the ability to read and write, was the responsibility of elementary schools, in whatever form they took at the time (see e.g. Butts – Cremin 1953), acquiring epistolary literacy was a different matter. "Epistolary literacy" is a term coined by Susan Whyman in her book *The Pen and the People* (2009), which studies the development of the letter writing skills among members of lower and middle-class English families from the 1660s down to 1800 on the basis of unexplored letter collections from a variety of archives across the UK. Her book demonstrates that letter writing during this period was not a skill that was limited to the upper regions of society. Even parents from the lower social classes stimulated the acquisition of epistolary literacy among their own children as an important means to get on in society. Eventually, letter-writing manuals became available, but Whyman (2009: 30) shows that letter writing as a skill was largely passed on from parents to their children rather than acquired directly from books. This was also one of the conclusions drawn by Frances Austin (1973) on

the basis of her analysis of the Clift family correspondence, which covers the period 1792-1846 (Austin 1991), and my own study of the language of Jane Austen's letters similarly suggested that Jane Austen never had a letter-writing manual at her disposal: an inventory of her father's library did not include a single item of this popular text type (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2014: 9). Like the working-class Clifts, Jane Austen acquired the skill of letter writing through extensive epistolary communication within her family, as well as from practice. Analysing the language of her letters I discovered for instance that her letter writing style changed over the years in subtle but linguistically important ways. She thus gradually learnt, for instance, that usage of flat adverbs, as in example (1), was less appropriate to an epistolary style, no matter how informal, than as a means to characterise colloquial language in her novels (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2013):

- (1) we had an **exceeding** good ball last night (Jane Austen to her sister Cassandra, 9-10 January 1796; ed. Le Faye 2011; bold used for emphasis throughout this paper).

The present study addresses the question of how epistolary literacy evolved at a time and place different from those analysed and described by Whyman (2009). It does so by focusing on nineteenth-century New England, where acquiring a solid education was considered of great importance, as noted above. I will do so on the basis of an analysis of the letters of five families from the region. Letter writing, or indeed the teaching of composition writing in general, was not part of the school curriculum at the time, and only grew in importance once the pedagogical ideas of the Swiss educationist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1826) began to gain recognition in American schools; the subsequent increase in attention to writing instruction in the schools, according to Schultz (1999: 6), was a "tremendous pedagogical innovation". Pestalozzi's ideas spread from the 1830s onwards and eventually led to the implementation of common schooling – common, that is, in primarily addressing white children (Kaestle 1983: 176). Before the 1830s, the acquisition of epistolary literacy thus largely took place outside the schools, and the analysis presented here will illustrate several means by which this happened. While letters by ordinary people from the eighteenth century are not easily available according to Dierks (2009: xvi), the situation for the century following that period proved to be more favourable. Hewitt (2016) argues that the eighteenth century was "the golden age of the letter for Europe", and this was true for England as well (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009: 1), but in North America "letter writing first truly flourished" only a century later

(Hewitt 2016: 1). This is largely due to the fact that the Industrial Revolution started later in America than in England, so that significant infrastructural improvements which eventually facilitated better transportation by road, waterways and rail happened only later. These developments caused an increase in geographical mobility (Henkin 2006: 23), calling for a need to stay in touch by correspondence. During the same period, moreover, and profiting from better means of transport, the postal system greatly improved (Henkin 2006: 22), which consequently facilitated as well as encouraged letter writing as a social activity.

Among other major factors that encouraged letter writing during the nineteenth century by people from all walks of life there was the Civil War (1860-1865), when military service took many men away from their families. Many of their letters were preserved, as in the case of one member of one of the five families studied here, who served as a lieutenant in the Union Army, and for whom as many as thirty-three letters from his relatives have come down to us. The American whaling industry, which developed separately after a period of intense collaboration with the British (1817-1842) came to an end (Davis et al. 1997: Chapter 12), also it took men away from home, while trade between America and the former mother country sometimes caused entire families to spend large parts of their lives at sea; this indeed was the case with another family studied here. Communication with the home front was complicated because letters could only be dispatched when a ship was in port. And while nineteenth-century America witnessed the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from various European countries, such as the many families who left Ireland after the Great Famine (1845-1849), there were also Americans who emigrated themselves, either as adventure seekers or for economic reasons. Over the years, as we will see, such people kept in touch with their relatives at home, and in doing so, as Raymond Hickey puts it, they “took their native variety of English with them” (2019: 5). Once settled, however, and after growing families of their own, their native variety dwindled and was sometimes lost altogether. We will see an example of the desire among descendants to revive their parents’ former skills in English to be able to communicate with distant relatives in the US and even to explore the possibility of returning to their ancestor’s home country. This inevitably involved acquiring epistolary literacy *in English* as well.

The need to maintain contact with family and friends was thus a major motivation for people to engage in letter writing during the nineteenth century, and many correspondence collections have come down to us for analysis. The importance of studying emigrant letters has recently drawn

the attention of scholars of Late Modern English (see various papers in Hickey 2019), as such letters provide important insights into how the English language developed worldwide, and how other Englishes across the world emerged. All these letter writers needed to possess epistolary skills, which differed depending on when and where they had acquired such skills. The present paper deals with the question of how epistolary skills developed at a time and in a place – nineteenth-century New England – where such skills were not formally taught. Presenting five case studies, it focuses on a variety of American families that are all in one way or another representative of the socio-economic developments outlined in the previous paragraph. That these letters have survived is no coincidence, since they symbolised the tangible results of continuing relationships with distant relatives. But that these letters are available for analysis is something we owe to efforts like those of the Mystic Seaport Museum, situated in Mystic Seaport, a small village on the coast of Connecticut with a history of shipbuilding that goes back to the nineteenth century. Affiliated with the museum is the G. W. Blunt White Library (BWL), which houses a wealth of documents that are all related to the shipping industry.<sup>1</sup> All letters are reproduced on the BWL website in the form of digitised images, and are freely available for research.

The past twenty-five years has seen a surge of scholarly interest in letters and letter-writing from the Late Modern English period, particularly from a sociolinguistic perspective. Examples are the collection of papers by Marina Dossena and myself, called *Studies in Late Modern English Correspondence: Methodology and Data* (2008), Raymond Hickey's *Keeping in Touch: Emigrant Letters across the English-Speaking World* (2019) already mentioned, and various articles in the recently published *Intra-Writer Variation in Historical Sociolinguistics* (ed. by Markus Schiegg and Judith Huber, 2023). In my own work, I have particularly focused on individual letter writers like, most recently, Jane Austen (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2014), while other scholars, like Anni Sairio (2009), have studied letter writers in the context of their social networks. In this light, it is of interest to mention the recently launched Mary Hamilton project,<sup>2</sup> which is already producing valuable results. All this type of research is being done within the context of what is known about letter writing practice from the period,

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.mysticseaport.org/> and <https://librarytechnology.org/library/1297> for access to BWL.

<sup>2</sup> Made available online in 2022, it is called "Unlocking the Mary Hamilton Papers: A Window onto Eighteenth-Century Life, Literature and Language" (<https://www.maryhamiltonpapers.alc.manchester.ac.uk/>).

as analysed by Whyman (2009), but also before that, as discussed in the various contributions to the collection of studies published by David Barton and Nigel Hall, *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (2000). Previously, there was the pioneering work by Frances Austin on the language and letter-writing practices of a single English working-class family from the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, the Clift family referred to above. The present paper aims to help widen the interest in the language of the period by demonstrating the sociolinguistic potential of hitherto unexplored resources held by such institutions as the Mystic Seaport Museum with its phenomenal G. W. Blunt White Library. The five case studies presented here will hopefully stimulate more research into the enormous array of private letters available there.

## 2. Selecting the letters

With BWL thus being a treasure trove for Late Modern English scholars, historians and historical sociolinguists alike, a selection was made of family letters that would be suitable for analysis. One New England family was suggested through Grover (2001), which deals with a number of Quaker families involved in the whaling business as well as the abolition movement; BWL contains a considerable number of private letters of one family, called Morgan. The Morgan collection includes in-letters, i.e. letters addressed to Charles W. Morgan (1796-1861) and his wife Sarah Rodman (1793-1888), as well as out-letters, letters addressed by the Morgans to a variety of correspondents.<sup>3</sup> In the course of his life, Charles Morgan, according to the BWL website, became a wealthy businessman, and his life has been documented in studies of New England merchant families like Grover (2001).

To supplement accounts from relatively highly placed members of New England society, like the Morgan family, with those from letter writers further down the social scale, other letter collections were selected from the BWL website. The need to focus on a wider variety of letter writers is stressed by Marina Dossena and Gabriella Del Lungo Camiciotti in their book *Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe* (2012) for studies that aim to offer a more socially

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<sup>3</sup> For the terms “in-letters” and “out-letters”, as well as for an excellent introduction to the materialistic aspects of eighteenth-century letter-writing practice, see Baker (1980: 123).

inclusive view of developing epistolary traditions. Thus letter collections from two middle and two somewhat more lower-class families were selected from BWL: letters from Aaron H. Wood and his wife, the Fish Family Letters, the James W. Egleston Papers, and letters from William Douglas Goldsmith and relatives. The Wood family, whose history has been described extensively in Dooling (2014), has its origins in farming and the building trade; their letters are of interest here because of Aaron H. Wood's (1836-1895) ambition to have a career at sea, something he achieved largely through private study. The letters analysed are out-letters from Aaron and his wife Isabel Pearse (1842-1903) written during their seafaring trips to relatives at home. Members of the Fish family, like Nathan G. Fish (1804-1870) and his son Simeon (1837-1906), were connected with Mystic's shipbuilding industry (BWL website);<sup>4</sup> only the letters addressed to Simeon were selected for analysis, most of them written by relatives while he was away from home. James W. Egleston (1816-1875), whose surname is occasionally spelled "Eggleston", likewise had his origins in the building trade (his father was a stone cutter). Leaving home at the age of sixteen, James spent a short time at sea, upon which he emigrated to Peru, where he settled and had a family. From Peru he kept in touch with his parents and siblings in Connecticut by letter, while his Spanish-speaking children and grandchildren later corresponded – in English – with their American relatives. Both sets of letters were analysed for this study. The Goldsmith letter collection in BWL is of interest because it includes letters written by William D. Goldsmith (b. 1824) to his sister Mary (1830-1914), whose education was of great concern to him, particularly her developing epistolary literacy so they would be able to communicate with each other directly. Though William and Mary, both of them orphans, were not from New England but from Louisiana, the letters, as their envelopes show, were sent to an address in Mystic, where Mary was living with her adoptive family. This explains why the letters eventually ended up in BWL. Like Aaron Wood, William Goldsmith was largely self-educated, though to a much lower degree.

Table 1 presents an overview of the selected letters, and attempts a general social classification of the five families concerned. This classification into differing socio-economic categories reflects the assumption that more affluent people would have greater means of educating their children before the days of compulsory education (cf. Carr 2003: 51), which might at

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<sup>4</sup> Efforts were made to ascertain the life dates of all letter writers and their families; occasionally, however, such biographical information could not be retrieved.

the same time have encouraged their letter writing activities. Before the rise of equal educational opportunities for all, according to Carr et al. (2005: 5), “[literacy often developed outside school, at work and at play, and at a range of other sites, including the family home, community settings, lyceums, and Sunday schools”]; this would have included acquiring epistolary literacy as well. As Hall (2000: 88) argues with reference to the situation in England, “the development of mass education”, alongside the effects of the Industrial Revolution, the growth of the railway system and cheaper postage, “contributed to letter writing becoming more widespread”. Much of this applies to New England as well. Evidence of the socio-economic status of some of the families is, however, largely circumstantial, and not always easy to interpret. Because the letters analysed are private, and more often than not communicate information *in medias res* rather than giving the type of full context that would benefit interpretation by outsiders, they typically lack information that would serve a more precise classification; this is particularly true for those families that have not been the subject of previous historical study, i.e. the Fish, the Egleston and the Goldsmith families. The attempted categorisation should therefore be seen as relative rather than absolute in the sense of the rather more rigid class division that characterised Late Modern England (cf. Garrard 2002).

Table 1. Letters analysed for the purpose of studying the acquisition of epistolary literacy

Letter collection	BWL source	Letters analysed	Dates	Type of letters	Social status
Charles W. Morgan	MS Coll. 27	55	1810-1866	in-letters	Higher
Aaron H. Wood	VFM 1496	26	1873-1895	out-letters	Mid
Fish family	MS Coll. 178	97	1849-1886	in-letters	Mid
James W. Egleston	MS Coll. 276	47 25	1832-1862 1862-1889	out-letters	Lower
William D. Gold-smith	VFM 1691	20	1838-1849	out-letters	Lower
<i>total</i>		270	1810-1895		

The classification in Table 1 was informed by the following considerations. Towards the end of his life, Charles W. Morgan bequeathed a thousand dollars to a Quaker Academy of which he was one of the founders (letter by Edmund Rodman and Thomas A. Green to Sarah Morgan, 15 September 1866). By modern standards, this was a considerable amount of



money,<sup>5</sup> and by donating it to an educational institution he demonstrated the importance of acquiring a good education. What is more, he and his wife were able to afford employing a schoolteacher to look after their children during a prolonged period of absence from home (see Section 3.2). Both facts, moreover, demonstrate their affluent status in life. Aaron H. Wood and his wife and the Fish family were classified as occupying a middle position in society compared to that of the Morgan family on the one hand and those of James W. Egleston and William D. Goldsmith on the other. Aaron H. Wood, despite his family background (see above), married a schoolteacher and eventually became a ship-owner, which according to Dooling (2014: 125) earned him a relatively respected position in society. Nathan Fish, Simeon's father, had been a ship's captain, and later became a shipbuilder, while Simeon went to sea at the age of 19 or 20 and later enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War. Evidence of these various career paths in Simeon's life transpires from the correspondence with his parents, as in the following passages from a letter by his mother Emeline (1805-1871) and one by his father written five years later:

- (2) If we had known what would be **the decision about the Ship** we should long ere had a box of goods making its passage towards you we have shirts and stockings all ready Your Pa says he can so direct them that you will receive them. (Emeline Fish to Simeon Fish, 29 January 1857).
- (3) I hope you <sup>will</sup> be able <sup>to</sup> fill your place with fidelity and be useful in whatever circumstances or condition you may be placed. at any rate look after **the men of your company** consider it your business to care for them conduct yourself with dignity & kindness towards them they <sup>have</sup> placed you in a respectable and responsible position & have a claim on your attention. (Nathan Fish to Simeon Fish, 18 November 1862).

The forms of address on the accompanying envelopes show that Simeon had been given the rank of lieutenant, even though he had no previous military experience. That he was not enlisted as a common soldier very likely reflects his middle-class background.

<sup>5</sup> According to the CPI Inflation Calculator, the equivalent of this sum today would be \$32,853.30 (<https://www.in2013dollars.com/>, date of access 31 May 2022).

By comparison, James Egleston's early career as a sailor (see above) puts him into a social category different from that of Aaron H. Wood. His failure to make a fortune in Peru would not have earned him a higher position in American society either. His disappointment about his failed ambitions is evident from a letter to his father from 1845:

- (4) I am **disgusted with this Country** (although it is the place to make money) for Political Revolutions succeed one another the same as one year succeeds another (James Egleston to his father, 18 January 1845).

As for the Goldsmith family, much about their history is unfortunately unclear, which makes it difficult to classify them socially. William and his sister Mary never appear to have featured in any sociohistorical studies (unlike the Morgan and Fish families), so all we know about them and their position in society derives from their letters. After being orphaned, they appear to have been raised by different families, and while by 1854 Mary was married to a certain Nelson Lamb according to the last letter in the collection, her brother seems to have become a gold digger in California – not a social position that is comparable to those of any of the men described above:

- (5) You need not write to me as I shall leave Galveston in a few days for California a **"Gold Digging"** and I hope with the Blessing of God to return in a year or two if successful (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 29 January 1849).

Though with only twenty letters the Goldsmith collection is the smallest of the five case studies presented here, it is nevertheless of considerable interest with respect to the question of how epistolary literacy was acquired. Despite his lowly position in life, William strongly believed that his sister's developing epistolary literacy would be an important asset for her in life, and very likely it was.

As example (3) illustrates, all letters were transcribed as closely to their originals as possible, including superscripts and other self-corrections. Self-corrections are "the result of afterthoughts upon reading over the letter or of revisions during the writing process" (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2014: 84), and their occurrence suggests care at producing a neat version of the letter. Another example is from a letter by Sarah Morgan to her husband Charles:

- (6) Benj<sup>n</sup> [Benjamin] & Hannah <sup>with their only son</sup> had just got settled at housekeeping and were looking forward to a winter of comfort and

greater happiness than they had enjoyed for many years (Sarah Morgan to Charles Morgan, 23 November 1855).

Example (3) also shows that as late as the early 1860s, long <s> was still in use, something in which New England epistolary practice does not differ greatly from that of English letter writers (Fens-de Zeeuw – Straaijer 2012: 333). Emeline Fish, for instance, like her husband, still used long <s> during the early 1860s (*businefs*, *usefulnefs*, *kindnefs*). In 1855 Sarah Morgan, however, no longer used it (*happiness*) as example (6) shows; this may reflect on the different ways in which she and Nathan Fish and his wife had learnt to spell, even though they only differed some ten years in age. But Frederick Egleston, James's son, also still wrote *businefs* in a letter from 12 April 1866 to his aunt Ellen in Connecticut. Possibly, he copied the usage from the letters of his grandparents, with whom he corresponded. This shows that tracing the development of particular linguistic features is complicated when different generations of letter writers follow the example of older members of the family – willy-nilly in Frederick's case, due to his father's emigration and the family's resulting language loss (see below).

### 3. The letters analysed

As shown in Table 1, the letter collections selected comprise either in-letters (Morgan and Fish) or out-letters (Wood, Egleston and Goldsmith). The senders and recipients of the letters were either relatives or friends: selecting relatively close correspondents ensures access to the most informal letters available, which is important from a linguistic perspective (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1987: 23-24). But such letters also provide the best possible material when studying how people learnt to write letters, especially when we are dealing with communication between parents and children, as we will see below. More formal letters will not yield a great deal of such private information. Accordingly, the letters analysed reflect the following relationships:

Morgan family – 55	From husband to wife (15) and wife to husband (16)
<i>In-letters</i>	From siblings or cousins (4)
	From their children (3)
	From a niece (1)
	From a nephew (2)
	From friends (14)

Wood collection – 26 <i>Out letters</i>	Husband (8) and wife (18) to husband's brother and his wife
Fish family – 97 <i>In-letters</i>	From Simeon's father (18) and mother (9) From Simeon's sisters (19) and brothers (46) From Simeon's cousin and a friend (1 each) From Simeon's daughters (3)
Egleston letters – 47 + 25 <i>Out-letters</i>	James to his parents (23) and sister Ellen (21) James to another sister and two brothers (1 each) To Ellen: James's children (13) and grandchildren (9) To Ellen: James's sister-in-law (1) and another relative (2)
Goldsmith letters – 20 <i>Out-letters</i>	William to his sister (17) Letters between relatives/friends (3)

Given the scope of this paper, only those letters that are relevant to the topic concerned will be cited.

All five letter collections include references to the postal system of the period as well as to other major socio-economic and political developments of the time, such as the Civil War, the educational system, the growth of the whaling industry, the effects of the ongoing Industrial Revolution and the emergence of a market economy. For this reason, those letters that have not yet been the object of sociohistorical study, the Fish, Egleston and Goldsmith letters, are worth further analysis, particularly since these families reflect the experiences of less highly placed people in society. Here, the interest lies in their contents only from the perspective of how the letter writers acquired the kind of epistolary literacy that enabled them to set up and maintain contact with distant relatives and friends. This might have come about as a result of explicit teaching in the schools, through access to letter-writing manuals, by being exposed to letters to and from family members, or, simply, through practice, something for which at times considerable encouragement was needed, as will be seen below. But as already mentioned, letter writing was not as a rule taught in school, and since we do not find any references to such instruction in the letters analysed, I will focus only on the role of letter-writing manuals in the acquisition of epistolary literacy (Section 3.1), and on the actual practice of letter writing within the families and in which certain family members played an important role (Section 3.2). The example of letters received within a family played a significant role in this process as well.

### 3.1 Letter writing and letter-writing manuals

Letter-writing manuals largely taught by example: they included practical information on how to address different kinds of correspondents, though many of them traditionally also included sections on English grammar (Fens-de Zeeuw 2008; Yáñez-Bouza – Rodríguez-Gil 2013: 145). Primarily though, they presented sample letters to show how, for instance, to write “A Letter from a Son to his Father”, “A Letter from a Youth at School to his Parents” or a letter from “A Brother to a Sister”. These examples are from *The Instructor; or Young Man’s Best Companion* (Fisher 1735?), a popular letter-writing manual that was originally published in England but that soon became available on the American market as well, where it appeared with the adjective *American* added to the title (Monaghan 2005: 391).<sup>6</sup> Such sample letters could be copied with minimal changes by someone not yet experienced enough to compose letters of their own. The letter collections studied here do not include any references to letter-writing manuals, but there is evidence that some writers did not make use of them, while others do show a certain amount of familiarity with the material the manuals contained.

To begin with, the letters in the five collections are so personal that the possibility of borrowing entire letters from a letter-writing manual can be ruled out. What is more, quite a few letters are rather haphazardly punctuated, while several even lack punctuation altogether, so this reflects the practice of the writers themselves as well. Examples (2) and (3) from the Fish family collection illustrate this. Other examples are given below:

- (7) I wrote you soon after Mr Goldsmith Died he had nothing to leave me and I did not expect any thing for he done a greate deal for me (James Egleston to his sister Mary, 9 May 1846).
- (8) my love to David tell him to be a good boy and keep his nose clean tell him to write me a letter as I want to see if he knows how to write (James Egleston to his brother Joseph, 9 November 1849).
- (9) I have the pleasure to inform you of my good health allso pa and ma (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 13 December 1839).

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<sup>6</sup> The database Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) includes an American edition, already published in 1748 in Philadelphia. Fens-de Zeeuw (2008) provides a detailed comparative analysis of the contents of selected popular English and American letter-writing manuals from the Late Modern English period.

Capitalisation was likewise often irregular, as in (7) but also in (10). Verbs would not normally be capitalised at the time when capitalisation practice was at its height (see Osselton 1998).

- (10) Capt Morgan has gone to Jamaica. I **Expect** he will soon be back as he has been gone a long time (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 18 July 1840).

Exceptions are the Morgan letters and those of Aaron and Isabel Wood. The difference in attention paid to punctuation and capitalisation thus correlates with the letter writers' social background, since the Morgan family was more highly placed than the other families studied here. Isabel Wood, moreover, had been a teacher before her marriage, so she must have been familiar with the rules of punctuation professionally.

The spelling errors we find in James Egleston's letters, as in (11) and (12), may be explained similarly: going to sea at the age of sixteen, as mentioned in Section 2, would have caused a lack of interest in academic matters like correct spelling.

- (11) I have now by great casualty met a young man **beloning** to East Harfford Marten L. Roberts who says that he will see this forwarded which I trust he will as perhaps you have not recieved the others that I have wrote. If you should call upon him he can tell you all particulars respecting me as I have had a long conversation with him to that effect **sufice** to say that I am now after many ups and downs turned Sugar Planter. (James Egleston to his father, 18 January 1845).
- (12) I now take this **propper** Opportunity to write to you Concerning my affairs. I am now in good health I hope you the same. (James Egleston to his parents, 2 August 1833).

At the same time, the errors may have been due to haste, as indeed James writes in a letter to his parents:

- (13) you must excuse the mistakes my **being in Great Haste**. (James Egleston to his parents, 2 August 1833).

Other forms found represent contemporary spelling variants rather than mistakes (Osselton 1998), such as *allways*, found in letters by James Egleston as well as William Goldsmith:

- (14) and **allways** thought if the **all wise** disposer of events should permit us to see that time which thanks be to Him has come to pass. (James Egleston to his mother, 18 February, no year mentioned).
- (15) I am very glad to see the greate improvement you have made in writing. your writing is quite plain. I hope <sup>you</sup> will take pain and try to learn all you can as you never can learn too much, and it is **allways** of use to you" (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 17 February 1843).

The variant is only recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) down to the eighteenth century, but the context of (14) suggests what may have given rise to the spelling concerned. Neither James Egleston nor William Goldsmith appear to have had much formal education, but despite these unusual spellings their letters show that these men were far from illiterate. Awareness of the need to spell correctly may be seen in the following self-correction in a letter from the Fish family collection:

- (16) The<sup>ir</sup> visit was town talk. Their mother could trust no one (Susan Fish to her brother Simeon, 31 December 1862).

Other evidence that confirms that the letters were from the hand of the authors themselves rather than being cloned from a letter-writing manual is the occurrence of instances of what in Standard English today would be considered faulty grammar, such as the use of *done* for *did*, *you was* and *have wrote*:

- (17) I wrote you soon after Mr Goldsmith Died he had nothing to leave me and I did not expect any thing for he **done** a greate deal for me (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 9 May 1846).
- (18) I was glad to hear that **you was** well and learning but am sorry to hear that you are by Captain morgan account very mischivious (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 22 October 1838).
- (19) It gave me great pleasure to hear that **you was** enjoying good health. (James Egleston to his parents, 10 February 1847).
- (20) I have almost given myself up to despair as to ever writing again to you as I **have wrote** almost innumerable letters to you and have never had the peasure of hearing from you nor any other of the Companions

of my Childhood and I think that this will be the Last time that I shall write to you (James Egleston to his father, 18 January 1845).

In the course of the English standardisation process, such grammatical features were relegated to dialect grammar, and they still characterise many non-standard varieties of American (and also British) English today (see Wolfram 2004: 144 on *done* as a past tense form and *you was*, and Tieken-Boon van Ostade – Kostadinova 2015 on participial forms like *have wrote*). Today, they receive considerable criticism when encountered in writing or even in relatively informal spoken English, and letter writing-manuals from the period would not have contained such forms. Actual errors are *greate* in (17), the absence of genitival marking in *Captain morgan account* and *mischivious* in (18), and *peasure* in (20) – compare James Egleston's use of *pleasure* in (19).

But there is some evidence showing that some of the letter writers may have had access to a letter-writing manual after all, either directly or indirectly, and this evidence derives from the use of letter writing formulas. Letter writing formulas, opening or closing ones, functioned as anchor points for less experienced, lower-class letter writers with the help of which they could start and finish their letters. Frances Austin (1973, 2004) analysed this phenomenon in her study of the letters of the Clift family, a poor, working-class family from the late eighteenth, first half of the nineteenth century that originated from Bodmin, Cornwall, in England. Though most members of this family were barely literate, they kept in touch by letter, and many of their letters have come down to us (Austin 1991). Austin identified a use of epistolary formulas that appeared to derive from sample letters in letter-writing manuals, and she discovered that the family did indeed possess a copy of one. One such formula is *I take this opportunity*, which is often used to start a letter, though with slight variations. Austin also found the formula in sailors' letters, so this may be how formulas like this crossed the Atlantic, if not directly through the publication of letter-writing manuals in nineteenth-century America.

The formula already occurred in example (12), in a letter by James Egleston to his parents, and other instances are:

- (21) **I now take the present opportunity** to inform you that I am well and hope you the same. (James Egleston to his father, 15 July 1835).
- (22) **I take the opportunity of a few leisure moments** (and how could I employ them better) to write to you by Mr Woods who returns to the USA by the ship Erie. (James Egleston to his father, 2 March 1848).



If we look at the dates of these letters, 1833, 1835 and 1848, we see from the expansion of the formula in (22) that in the course of time James learnt to express himself more freely; in other words, his epistolary literacy had grown in the intervening years. Ten years later, he dropped the formula altogether. *Writing a few lines* is another conventional opening formula according to Austin, and we find it not only in James Egleston's letters, but also in those of William Goldsmith:

- (23) I now sit down **to write you a few lines** to let you know that I am in good health except my leg which is some lame. (James Egleston to his parents, 1 October 1835).
- (24) **I write you a few lines** to let you know that I am well and hope this may find you and mrs Morgan and family all well (William Goldsmith to his sister, 29 January 1849).
- (25) **I write you a few lines** to let you know that I have not forgotten you and hope **these few lines** may find you in good health (William Goldsmith to his friend Ebenezer Morgan, 7 March 1844).

The formula is usually followed by the words *to let you know*, as in the above examples.

Examples (12), (21) and (23)-(25) continue with what Austin (1973: 328) calls "the health formula", which obviously contained essential information to be shared between distant correspondents, and another example from the Goldsmith letters is example (9) above. Its opening, "I have the pleasure to inform you", is unusually formal in a letter from a fifteen-year-old boy to a sister who was only nine at the time, so he must have picked it up somewhere. His reference to his parents as "pa and ma" in (9) is more in line with his age (and hers), as is his spelling of *allso* already discussed and his abrupt phrasing. The health formula is part of the letters of the more highly placed families in the collection as well, though their letters are usually preceded by a reference to having received the correspondent's letter:

- (26) **I have just received thy letter** and am glad to hear of thy welfare (Sarah Morgan to Charles Morgan, 18 June 1859).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Morgans were Quakers – hence the use of *thy* rather than *your* here (cf. Görlach 1991: 85 and Fens-de Zeeuw 2011: 103-108).

- (27) **I have just received a letter** from your Ma by [which?] I learn that you are all in tolerable health which I am glad to hear. (Nathan Fish to Simeon Fish, 18 November 1849).
- (28) **We have just received your good letter** (Hattie) of July 19<sup>th</sup> with five others (Isabel Wood to her brother- and sister-in-law, 5 August 1874).

It is a formula that James Egleston also eventually adopted, which confirms his increased letter-writing skills:

- (29) **I had the pleasure of recieving your letter** dated 18 Dec 45 and it gave me great satisfaction to hear from you all and that you was well. (James Egleston to his brother, 9 June 1846).<sup>8</sup>

Such increased epistolary confidence is also described by Frances Austin in her analysis of the letter writing habits of Julia Miles (1805-1852), the wife of the English poet William Barnes (1801-1886) (1990: 41).<sup>9</sup>

An opening formula that is more typical of less experienced letter writers according to Austin is the following phrase:

- (30) **I hold pen in hand** to write to you because I desire to inquire after your health. (Frederick Egleston to his grandmother, 8 December 1861).

Frederick was James Egleston's Peruvian son, born in 1842. He was Spanish-speaking, but the letter shows that he had learnt English as well – though not from his father, as he explained to his aunt Ellen:

- (31) In the letter above I have told you something about my improvements in English language Such a language as English is much necessary and it requires to be learned by practises. On that way I am learning it but still I subject myself to a good many trials. The first is keeping on writing and the second is to talk to English or American people nevertheless I believe that I want to spend a good time on learning it. I made a acquaintance with **a young fellow natural of Pennilvania** (United States) who got a good education in his own country and

<sup>8</sup> Note the spelling of *receive* in this example: not uncommon at the time, but “now” nonstandard, according to the *OED*.

<sup>9</sup> Analysing the language of the letters, Austin found that Julia Miles, though of higher social standing than her husband to be, was less linguistically literate.

whom I owe a good many favors and **taught me all which I know about English language** (Frederick Egleston to his aunt Ellen, 14 June 1862).

Because Frederick's mother didn't know any English, he was the one who kept in touch with his American relatives, informing them of the Egleston family's welfare:

- (32) Mother says that she wants to know you and as **it is difficult for her to write to you because she does either to write nor to read English** and that is the reason why she requests of me to tell you that she remembers you, your husband and children (Frederick Egleston to his aunt Ellen, 5 August 1862).

The formula in (30), according to Austin (1973: 325-326), does not have a letter-writing manual as its source but is typically found with members of the Clift family. As Austin argues, it was probably passed on from one generation to another. Perhaps Frederick copied it – as the self-correction in (30) suggests – from a letter he had received from his American grandmother.

Closing forms, too, are often formulaic, and we regularly find references to haste as an excuse for poor writing, as in example (13) – cf. Austin (1990: 40). The formula as such is not characteristic of the writers' social class:<sup>10</sup>

- (33) This very unintelligible letter is **written in great haste**. (Horace Fish to Simeon Fish, 18 June 1863).

Sometimes, the excuses give us little glimpses into the lives of the letter writers, as in:

- (34) **Benny stands right at my elbow** so that I cannot write. (Phebe Fish to her brother Simeon, 23 April 1863).
- (35) Hope you will excuse the many mistakes I make. **Oscar has so many questions to ask about the steamers** that I cannot have only a part of

<sup>10</sup> It also occurs in an out-letter from the Morgan collection that was not included in the present analysis (this study only includes the Morgans' in-letters – see Table 1): **"In great haste** which must be my apology for this writing" (Sarah Morgan to her son Samuel, 27 January 1850).

my mind on my letter. (Isabel Wood to her brother- and sister-in-law, 21 September 1879).

Benny must have been Simeon's little nephew, and about Oscar – eleven at the time and home-schooled on board the ship during his parents' Transatlantic voyages – Aaron wrote three years later that he was "old enough to need school & more to do than has now" (Aaron Wood to his brother and sister-in-law, 19 September 1882). Eventually, Aaron and his wife gave up their seafaring life, possibly settling down in California. References like those in (34) and (35) testify to full epistolary literacy with these members of the Fish and Wood families, since the writers did not need to resort to age-old letter-writing formulas in their letters.

Asking to be remembered to friends and relatives at home was common among distant letter writers. Austin found such closing formulas in the Clift family correspondence (1973: 345), and they occur in the present letter collections, too, with spelling errors and all:

- (36) **Remember me to all my friends relations** and believe **your afftionate brother** James W. Egleston. (James Egleston to his brother, 9 June 1846).
- (37) **Remeber me to all those** that appear to have any anxiety of feeling for me (James Egleston to his mother, 31 May 1846).
- (38) Give my love to all the children and **remember me to Bridget** (Nathan Fish to his son Simeon, 29 May 1851).

### 3.2 Practicing letter writing

While it is impossible to prove how James Egleston acquired his letter writing skills, whether from a letter-writing manual or by learning from the letters he received, as his son Frederick did (see example [30]), it must have been through continued practice that his epistolary literacy evolved over the years, and that he learnt to express himself more freely. Some of the letter writers among the families studied here received active help and were encouraged to apply themselves to the job of writing a letter so that they would be able to keep in touch with their relatives. This appears from the letters of Charles and Sarah Morgan's eldest daughter, Emily (1821-1861), Melinna Fish (b. 1869), and Mary, William Goldsmith's little sister.

There are three letters in the Morgan family collection that were written by a certain A. E. Brastow, who appears to have been a teacher but who has

otherwise remained unidentified. Towards the end of 1828, Brastow looked after the Morgans' two children, seven-year-old Emily and her younger brother Samuel (b. 1824), while their parents were away in New York, and she kept the Morgans informed of their children's well-being by letter. Some of her letters were unfortunately lost in the post, a regular mishap in those days, as we learn from the complaints of several of the letter writers in the collections. As Brastow wrote regretfully:

- (39) I understand that **but one of my epistles have reached you**. I have written & sent **four letters** to you. splendid productions they were. They had this redeeming quality in the eyes of a fond & anxious mother & this makes me regret most sincerely that **they have not reached you**, they contain a most favorable & true account of your dear children. (A. E. Brastow to Sarah Morgan, 14 November 1828).

Two of her other letters that did come down to us, dated 24 October and 3 November 1828, included letters in Emily's own hand, which, Brastow insists, were "entirely original and written **with but little direction** of any kind" (24 October) and "written **almost entirely without aid** this afternoon" (3 November). The letters show that even at a very young age, Emily knew how to write a letter, what formulas to adopt, and that she had to use capitalisation and punctuation:

- (40) My dear mother I hope you will come home. **Are you all well** we are all very well (Emily Morgan to her mother Sarah, 3 November 1828).
- (41) **your afetionate child** Emily Morgan (Emily Morgan to her mother Sarah, 3 November 1828).<sup>11</sup>

The contents of the letter are of a narrative nature that fits the girl's age: she informs her parents that "Miss Brastow has had the tooth ache because she went out without any thing on her head", reminds her parents to bring presents when they come home and tells them about visits she had made. Emily had evidently been well instructed in how to write a letter by her caretaker.

The need to practice letter writing and the realisation that epistolary skills will benefit from frequent practice are stressed throughout the Fish

<sup>11</sup> Note the spelling error in the second letter.

family correspondence. Father Nathan regularly admonished his children to engage in letter writing:

- (42) I don't hear particulars from [you?] unless I get a letter sometimes hear that you are well probably but I want Susan **to write occasionally** and John & Horace can write **it will help them to improve in writing**. (Nathan Fish to his son Simeon, 7 March 1850).
- (43) I want you to get in **the habit of writing frequently** it is quite an accomplishment to write letters with ease and facility I am now sorry that I practised so little when I was young practice alone makes perfect in anything. (Nathan Fish to his sons Simeon and John, 15 April 1852).

Simeon and John, the joint recipients of the letter in (43), were only fifteen and thirteen respectively at the time, but, as their father explained, being able to write a letter "with ease and facility" was considered "quite an accomplishment". Two years previously their older sister Susan (b. 1834) was already an accomplished letter writer, while ten-year-old Horace and John at the age of eleven still needed practice. Education was considered important in the Fish family, for the collection includes an undated letter from Nathan to his sons stressing the importance of acquiring "a good a knowledge of Latin [...] & French may be useful to you in business Geometry is certainly important astronomy and arithmetic also". To these subjects we may thus add letter writing as well. Simeon, apparently, passed on the need to acquire the skill of letter writing to his daughters Melinna (b. 1869) and Helen (b. 1877), for the Fish family collection includes letters which were written by these two girls at the ages of eleven and nine, respectively. Melinna's letter starts with acknowledging the receipt of her father's letter and apologises for not having written any earlier ("Dear Papa, I got your letter yesterday. I would have written before but did not have time"). She adds a last-minute message about the family's well-being:

- (44) I don't think of any thing else to write now. Love to all. **all well**. Linnie (Melinna Fish to her father Simeon Fish, 26 May 1881).

Helen's letter, dated 21 April 1886, was in Melinna's hand, but the collection also includes a letter in her own hand, written two years later when she was eleven, and thus more epistolary literate herself by that time. Within three generations, letter writing had become an established skill within the family, and the need to practice no longer needed to be explicitly stressed, as Nathan had done earlier.

Reconstructing the family history of William and Mary Goldsmith is complicated because of their different adoption histories. The earliest letter in the collection dates from 1838, when William was only fourteen and his sister eight. He urges her to keep in touch by asking her adoptive mother, a Mrs Morgan, a captain's wife (not related to the Morgan family in this study), to write a letter for her:

- (45) I have not heard from you for a long time and would be very much pleased to have a letter, **request Mrs Morgan to write**, and let me know how you are, and how you like mystic and the Family you live with and if you go to school and gain all the information you can (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 5 April 1838).

Five years later, Mary was thirteen and able to write to him herself:

- (46) I am very glad to see the **great improvement you have made in writing**. your writing is quite plain. I hope <sup>you</sup> will take pain and try to learn all you can as you never can learn too much, and it is allways of use to you (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 17 February 1843).

But though Mary's epistolary skills evidently developed to such an extent that brother and sister were able to communicate independently, contact remained irregular, as the following letter shows:

- (47) I should like to Know **why you have not wrote to me**, you mite ask me the same question, **the Reason I have not wrote to you** is that I have been waiting an answer to my last letter hope you have not forgot your Brother, no that canot be. (William Goldsmith to his sister Mary, 23 December 1845).

Unfortunately, none of Mary's letters appear to have come down to us, so it is impossible to assess whether her linguistic skills had become any better than her brother's, and whether their different social situations as they developed over the years might have been the reason for their eventual loss of contact. William's last letter to her dates from 1849, though the last letter in the Goldsmith collection, addressed to Mary's husband Nelson Lamb upon a request for information about her brother, described William as being "in good health and doing well" a year previously (William Hendley to Nelson Lamb, 23 May 1854). William was 29 at the time.

If the case of Melinna Fish discussed above illustrates the importance which letter writing had acquired in the course of three generations of the

Fish family, what we see in the Egleston family is even more striking. There were four generations of Eglestons who, after James's emigration to Peru, continued to communicate with each other. That they did so in English is not self-evident, for after settling down in his new country and starting a family, James claims to have given up his native language:

- (48) I must here tell you <sup>the</sup> same as all the rest that is that **scarcely or never writing English** except makeing Poetry and at that I am verry deficient, but **in the Spanish Language I verry often write** for a Public paper that is printed in Lima (James Egleston to his sister Henrietta, 31 May 1846).

Eventually, he even adopted a Spanish name, Santiago Flores. From the letter quoted in example (31), it appears that James's son Frederick, whose mother tongue was Spanish, no longer spoke fluent English, but that he had learnt the language from a friend. In the same passage, he explains that for him letter writing served as a means to practice his English. By writing letters to his relatives in Connecticut, he was thus not only developing his epistolary literacy, but it was epistolary literacy *in English* that he was seeking to acquire. Frederick's daughter Henrietta (b. 1870) continued the family tradition by writing to her great-aunt Ellen in Connecticut, who had been the recipient of her father's letters as well. Henrietta, too, wrote in English. One of her letters in the collection, written when she was only fourteen, shows her already as an experienced letter writer. Later letters suggest that she had fallen out with her parents, and at the age of nineteen she expressed her wish to go to America, invoking her great-aunt's assistance in that project. If she had managed to do so, it would have been thanks to the continuing importance attached to letter writing within four generations of the Egleston family that ties with the former mother country could be kept alive, combined with the determination of James's children and grandchildren to acquire epistolary literacy in the native language of their ancestors.

For the Wood family, the situation was different from that of the members of the three families discussed here since there was no need for Aaron or Isabel to improve their epistolary skills through practice; their letter-writing skills were already sufficiently established (like those of the Morgan parents). As a former schoolteacher (Dooling 2014: 122), Isabel was fairly well educated. Moreover, letter writing was an important means for her to pass the time while she and her husband were at sea. At times, as when her husband suffered from an eye problem, she even wrote letters for him in his name:



- (49) I am to **write his business letters** to day (dictated by him of course)  
(Isabel Wood to her brother- and sister-in-law, 27 May 1874).

Isabel's letters are of additional significance because they illustrate what life on board a ship was like for a New England family and the role that letter writing played in their seafaring lives. This was why she urged her brother- and sister-in-law to continue writing to them, even if only a few lines at a time:

- (50) I really thought that for some reason unknown to us you did not want to write. I do not doubt that you are real busy and in such cases **four lines would satisfy us**. just tell us how you all are and why it is inconvenient for you to write then we should feel satisfied for the time and hope for more when you were more at leisure. (Isabel Wood to her brother- and sister-in-law, 8 February 1874).

It also explains why the letters were preserved:

- (51) All of yours that we rec'd in S.F. [San Francisco] and many of our other letters [...] we quite **enjoy reading them over at sea** (Isabel Wood to brother- and sister-in-law, 12 April 1874).

Letters were not only written to maintain family relations, but also formed important reading material to while away the time.

#### 4. Conclusion

As case studies, the five sets of family correspondence analysed in this paper all illustrate different ways in which epistolary literacy was acquired – and maintained – at the time. What is more, these differences correlate with the families' social positions in life. For Charles Morgan and his wife, the most highly placed family in this study, it was self-evident that they were kept informed by letter by the woman they had employed to look after their children while they were away from home. This woman, a schoolteacher, encouraged their daughter, who was only eight at the time, to write to her parents herself, thus passing on the notion to her ward that letter writing was an important skill to have. Aaron Wood's wife was also a schoolteacher, and for her and her husband letter writing was a common activity, serving to pass the time on board ship as well as to communicate with relatives

and to conduct business; for their son Oscar, travelling with his parents as a child, epistolary literacy would consequently have been a natural part of his life. Simeon Fish's father emphasised the importance of particular school subjects in his correspondence with his sons, stressing at the same time that being able to communicate by letter represented a valuable accomplishment. Within the Fish family, this accomplishment was passed on from parents to children and grandchildren in turn, something which we also see within the Egleston family, for whom we have evidence of four generations of letter writers. For the Egleston children and grandchildren in Peru, moreover, letter writing also served as an important means to practice their English linguistic skills.

For William Goldsmith, a truly heart-breaking case, letter writing was the only means by which he could try and keep the tie with his far-away sister alive. His attempts in this respect date from when he was only fifteen, and were eventually rewarded by communications from his sister in her own hand. Both thus acquired the necessary epistolary literacy to keep their relationship going, though not for very long. Less than fifteen years later, all contact appears to have ceased. William's letters, as they have come down to us, and along with James Egleston's letters, also show the greatest amount of linguistic insecurity. In William's case, this appears to have been due to his lack of formal schooling, and in that of James, who was probably somewhat better educated, to the fact that he had emigrated to Peru and lived in a Spanish-speaking environment. James's children and grandchildren had to learn their father's language from others in order to be able to communicate with their American relatives, and, as his granddaughter Henrietta's letters show, to try and look for a better future in her grandfather's native country. It was her acquired epistolary literacy that enabled her to make this attempt. Both James Egleston and William Goldsmith, as well as James's son Frederick, made the greatest use of epistolary formulas, usage that can be traced to the influence of letter-writing manuals. Whether they actually drew on such manuals to develop their epistolary literacy is impossible to prove; they might equally well have picked up the formulas from letters they received. This is as far as the interpretation of the evidence presented by the five letter collections goes. For all that, it is clear that having or indeed acquiring epistolary literacy was regarded as an important skill among nineteenth-century New Englanders. The five families represent much larger epistolary networks than those consisting of the relatives and friends referred to in this study alone, so it is of considerable interest to know that there is a great deal more material to be analysed where these letter collections came from.

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