Thomas and Charity Rotch

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The Quaker Experience of Settlement in Ohio in the Early Republic 1800-1824

By

Barbara K. Wittman

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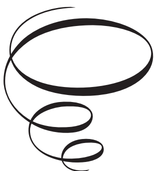

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FOREWORD

While teaching American History at University of Akron, Ohio, the Directors of the Massillon Public Library, (Massillon, Ohio) graciously provided access to a vast collection of previously unexamined women's letters written to or by Charity Rodman Rotch, (1766-1824) who migrated to the Ohio frontier with her husband, Thomas Rotch (1767-1823) in 1811. Both were members of the Society of Friends and hailed from prominent New England families, he being the grandson of Nantucket whaling merchant, Joseph Rotch (1704-1784) and his wife, Love Macy (1713-1767), while her family dates to Richard Borden (1595-1671) and his wife, Joan (Fowle) Borden (1604-1688) who migrated to the colonies in the seventeenth-century from Kent, Great Britain. While Thomas Rotch's commercial activities linked him formally with the wider economy of the Atlantic world in ways easily recognizable to historians, less recognizable are the ways in which Charity Rotch's relocations from New Bedford to Connecticut and finally, the Ohio frontier in 1811 broadened and redefined her world. While the quantity of records and letters contained in the Thomas and Charity Rotch Archives dealing with the Rotches measures about twenty linear feet very little scholarly analysis has emerged that tells the story of what Thomas and Charity Rotch accomplished as settlers in one of the most dynamic periods in the whole of Ohio history. A debt of gratitude is owed to two people, Ethel Conrad, former Director of the Massillon Public Library who ordered the collection in the 1980s and 1990s, and published "Touring Ohio in 1811: The Journal of Charity Rotch" in *Ohio History* (1990), and *Invaluable Friends: Thomas and Charity Rotch* (1991), a chronological study in book form based on her research of their settlement in northeast Ohio. A second scholar to whom a debt is owed is James Scott Engler for his Master's Thesis research, "Independence and Integration in Frontier Ohio: Thomas and Charity Rotch and the significance of cultural origins, social imperatives and economic opportunity in the settling of the Old Northwest." (2004).

My work is somewhat different than theirs. The research that frames this work argues that Quaker women resettling west of the eastern United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries remade familial and community relationships by way of voluminous correspondence with female kin. Such correspondence in concert with the unique meaning that

Quaker religiosity lent to notions of community and continuity in this period resulted in women being newly positioned within their families and communities in ways that scholars, assuming that all women experienced a decline in authority and autonomy as a consequence of their isolation in nuclear families on the frontier have so far failed to appreciate.

Letters disclose the vocabulary and cultural grammar that women used to explain the transformation of their life experiences, including the reframing of their affections, their motivations and their relationships in light of their changed circumstances as settlers. In communities where kinship networks, religion, and a highly structured church hierarchy reinforced each other, letters provide evidence of the Quaker principle of spiritual equality that expected women, as well as men, to participate fully in the development and reform of their faith communities. Women lessened the strain of relocation by locating their families within a web of connections that strengthened the integrity and the social cohesion of their communities. Perhaps even more historically significant is the extent to which the Quaker epistolary tradition was crucial to the development of a widely dispersed network that held Quaker families and communities together across geographic boundaries.

Evidence drawn from letters written by and to Charity Rotch chart her active roles in gendered spaces, in “a community of letters,” where she exercised what she believed to be her right and responsibility as a Quaker women, that of shaping and sustaining the faith community from one generation to the next. As a strong spiritual leader and role model for women Friends everywhere her letters traveled, she seized opportunities to build bridges across communities where values did not always mesh, to offer intellectual stimulation and purpose, and to remind women of the centrality of their faith in their lives and of their responsibility for sustaining their faith in their communities. Quaker women had inherited empowered positions within a hierarchical family structure that privileged men’s public and community status while also providing a way to women to express their concerns and opinions and proclaim their solidarity as a group. In this period women understood their letter-writing as a crucial vehicle by which they could satisfy their spiritual mission as women. They wrote often intensively of their progress in the search for a stronger personal faith, and as a form of discipline meant to instruct others and ensure the writer’s place in family memory. The effect of their voluminous and dedicated correspondence with one another goes beyond these intentions to include a changed Quaker frontier family and community culture within which women as correspondents wielded a new and

different sort of influence than they had practiced in the locales of their birth.

I owe much gratitude to friends and colleagues whose interest in this topic and its completion generated discussion and avenues for further learning and analysis. First, my dissertation advisor Tracy Jean Boisseau, critically read and reread the original drafts of my research and commented constructively throughout, and to her, I am profoundly grateful for believing in the project and supporting my reception of the University of Akron Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Research, 2008.

Other members of the Department of History and Department of Sociology, University of Akron, (Ohio) including Professors Constance Bouchard, Walter Hixson, Kevin Kern, Lesley J. Gordon, Kathryn Feltey, and Cheryl Elman, Kym Rohrbach and J. Wade Wilcox offered invaluable insights, advice and support that were critical for the completion of this project. Thanks also to Don Applyby and Shelle Davis, University of Akron Library, Massillon Public Library Directors, Camille Lesley and Sherie Brown, and to Jean Adkins, Jessica Watkins, Maryellen Hawthorn, Janice Amstutz, Mary Anne Potts, Cynthia Murphy, Randy Bleigh, and Phillip Sager of the Ohio Historical Society. Research was supported by the University of Akron, Department of History Little Fellowship, and the Massillon Public Library. In England, I am also grateful to Tricia Mitchell and Tony Byrne in Dorchester, Nigel Foster, and colleagues and friends during writing up and research at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge including Janet Todd, Alison Vinnicombe, Caroline Sier, Jane Renfrew, Natasha Squire, Hilda Davidson, Lucy Cavendish and Cambridge University Librarians and Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle who supported this work and helped put the building blocks in place for its completion. Thank you: always a pleasure to see and an honor to know all of you.

INTRODUCTION

'HAVING BEEN NEAR MY DEAR CONNECTIONS'

In November 1791, Charity Rodman Rotch wrote to her sister, Elizabeth,

> I am convinced my dear sister that true friendship requires not the aid of outward eloquence to render its communication acceptable; & I feel a secret satisfaction in the confidence thou so tenderly expresses; however unmeritedly it might other ways have been bestow'd, I believe thou may safely rely on it.[1]

As letters written by Charity Rodman Rotch (1766-1824) and mailed to locations on the east coast from her home on the Ohio frontier attest, Quaker women like many women settlers in this period counted their female kin as their closest confidantes and kindred spirits, despite the distances that emigration and relocation created between them.

After Charity's marriage in 1790 to Thomas Rotch (1767-1823), the youngest son of Nantucket merchant, William Rotch (1734-1828) and his wife, Elizabeth Barney (1735-1824), the couple joined family already established in New Bedford, Massachusetts before relocating to Hartford, Connecticut in 1800, and to the Ohio frontier in 1811.[2] Strained by distance and emotion, Charity's correspondence during her relocations reveals a depth of emotion both honest and frank, and yet more studied and deliberate that replaced nuanced face-to-face exchanges that she enjoyed prior to her separation from her New England kin.

Such letters permit scholars to focus upon the significance and the construction of relationships that were conducted at great distances. The richness and extensiveness of letters written to and by Charity invite readers to rethink key assumptions regarding the experiences of frontier women, including how writers carved out lives of meaning for themselves and the cultural grammar that they used to discuss the contours of their emotional and intellectual understanding of their experiences as female settlers.

Insufficiently examined assumptions regarding women's pioneering experiences have long undergirded historians' views of the frontier in American history. While William R. Taylor and Christopher Lasch argued that geographical separation destroyed the extended family network and adversely affected women in the course of migration, the letters of Charity Rotch and her kin circle belie this too easily arrived at assumption about women's lives and settler family dynamics.[3]

I would argue that letter-writing was saturated with a particular sort of cultural power for those women who became the primary correspondents within their nuclear families. The heightened meaning attached to religious community and the spiritual obligations linked with family ties made the mechanisms by which ties were maintained or newly cultivated of great importance to Quaker families and communities that experienced dislocation and separation. As chief family correspondents, Quaker women consolidated their position within geographically scattered family networks as well as within their nuclear and marital relationships by taking control of communication between kin, a kind of kinwork to which distance lent new power and significance. Charity's closest confidante, her sister, Hannah Rodman Fisher underlined words that had special meaning for herself and for her absent sister, newly settled in Ohio country in 1812.

> I have long felt in Debt to my absent, Present sister, for though absent in body thou art present in mind. Please write to me soon as I am frequently enquired of concerning you.[4]

The evidence supplied by correspondents and their letters supports the argument that dispersal reshaped the contours of familial connections and had a marked impact on female ties of kinship. This study reveals that although geographic distance delimited women's relationship to family, it did not eliminate the major function of kinship networks between women related by blood and marriage. The correspondents of the Rotch and Rodman circle, both men and women, often read and re-read each other's letters for advice, much sought after information of the near and wider world, and for spiritual counsel in times of trial and tragedy.[5] 'Among those who came in, was W. Wharton to whom I delivered thy message and read part of the letter.'[6]

In addition to revealing a wealth of information about Charity Rotch as a female settler in the early national period, letters and the act of writing letters were capable of generating collective meaning and promoting strong bonding between women. From the inception of the Society of Friends in the seventeenth century, Quakers constructed an organized system of communication that united Friends and their moral concerns

over vast distances. Not only did the inclination to settle in already established faith communities lessen the trauma of migration for Friends, more importantly, dispersal created new roles for women and lent new significance to their roles as guardians of their children entrusted with ensuring that the faith passed from one generation to the next.

The language of women's letters, at once intimate and expository is a point of entry into their direct thoughts, their daily lives, and their changed social relations over time. An abundance of archival letters suggests that a virtual community was forged in correspondence between kinswomen separated by geographical distance and by the experience of pioneering. Charity's sister wrote in June 1813. 'I desire not to be kept ignorant of your troubles. But let me know the Truth.'[7]

Elongated distances between families underscores the particular value and strengthening force that letter-writing had on women's friendships and kinship ties. Letter writing in the nineteenth-century was widely viewed as the prerogative and the duty of women who were responsible for maintaining interconnections with their kin outside of the household. Before envelopes came into general use, letters were written on a single sheet of paper, folded, addressed and posted. Some letters were filled to capacity, notes and scribbles might take up any available space on margins. In some cases, a sheet might be turned to one side where conversation continued over previous writing. After filling four sheets to capacity, Mary Rotch located a space at the very top corner of her letter with just enough room for a final note, 'farewell my beloved, I have wrote myself out of paper!'[8] Archival caches of letters written by and between women were occasions for intimate commiseration, and also suggests that it was women, rather than men who controlled the flow of communication between family members separated by distance.

Pioneering created an opportunity for women to carve out and expand new roles within the family, one that allowed them to shape and exert new control over long distance relationships. For many women, personal correspondence constituted a repository of communal memory and a spiritual and emotional haven in a private space that allowed an exploration of female identity and women's domestic culture. Letters, like networks of interactive relatives and friends, intertwined and coordinated, supported and sustained women joined by blood, marriage, class, work, region, and religious culture. Friends also saved private and personal papers and letters stretching back decades and generations to retain memory of ancestors to provide spiritual guidance for offspring, and to memorialize particularly pious individuals.[9] Letters built a protective hedge around familial ties and conserved deeply-held beliefs and values in

a fast changing world.[10] At the same time, letters were a physical reminder of one's belonging in a larger landscape of ideas. Michael O'Brien wrote,

> To write letters and get replies was to register membership in the wider community of mind. Indeed the most avid correspondents were often those most insecure about their intellectual standing, people who needed a physical reminder that they belonged on the landscape of ideas. A letter admitted distance, but built a bridge.[11]

The research presented in this book supports this argument and further suggests that pioneering women who shared strong religious beliefs were all the more likely as well as culturally and psychologically equipped to sustain and nurture familial and even extra-familial ties to their points of origin.

This work examines an aspect of frontier history that has in great part formed a basis of assumptions about the American pioneering experience, but has suffered from a dearth of qualitative analysis. Frederick Jackson Turner's narrative of the frontier as an open wilderness that encouraged a rugged individualism and shaped the American national character has been inundated with criticism by historians of the New Western History who have argued that numerous factors, economic, cultural, social, political and physical played equally significant roles in the creation of the west.[12]

The Ohio country of 1811 was such a frontier characterized by contact, interaction, and conflict, where people entered into complex relationships and communities across contested borders and geographical boundaries. These processes would disappear by the early 1820s as public land was bought up, cleared and turned by the plow for commercial agriculture.[13] Within this context, this work examines the migration and settlement of New England Friends Thomas and Charity Rotch. We attempt to hear their voices, and through their words and letters understand something of their inner consciousness and how their views evolved, who they were, what they wrote and read, what they thought was possible, and how they imagined their place in rural Ohio of the early nineteenth-century.

For Thomas Rotch, a member of a distinguished family, a merchant by training with a restless curiosity and a talent for making money, Ohio was a land of fresh opportunity with commercial potential for farmers who could own land and control their own agricultural means of production. His story is part of the agrarian myth of ordinary people who entered the wilderness with blinding optimism and ambition to create a peaceful and productive life.[14] For his wife, suddenly adrift of social relations and the

traditional women’s sphere, the implications of settlement were far less clear and not as well defined.

The letters examined in this study compel historians to consider the strategies that women employed to stay interconnected and interdependent, and to recreate community and reinvent what ‘family’ meant during a time of dispersal and emigration. Quaker women in particular used their diaries and letters to invent new cultural spaces, to create a women’s culture and to find a language to evaluate daily occurrences and new situations in which they found themselves. While the lives of Quaker and non-Quaker female colonizers showed remarkable parallels, historians would be amiss not to include religion along with class, gender and race in their analysis of the frontier experiences of women. In part due to their high rates of literacy, but also as a function of their identity as a religious minority within the American polity and their political convictions that often placed them outside general Protestant female institutions, Quaker women perhaps more than members of other religious denominations wielded the pen strategically and forcefully to recreate female community and preserve family memory. Steven M. Stowe observed in his study of the lives and letters of women in the American South,

> Letters often were the substance of relationship otherwise strained by distance, gender differences, or emotion. Such letters existed as a bond and a commentary on the bond.[15]

The Letters

In the course of migration to Ohio country in 1811 until their deaths in 1823 and 1824, Charity and Thomas Rotch preserved an extraordinary cache of family letters, memorabilia, testimonials, and business accounts numbering hundreds of pieces probably for several reasons. For Quakers, letters provided an accounting, a record, and a spiritual legacy, and served as an emotional storehouse to be read and relived by subsequent generations of family.[16] Thomas Rotch preserved over six hundred business letters averaging one to five pages in length, his account books from Bedford, his farm and business records from Hartford, Connecticut and daybooks that document the extent of his commercial activities in New England and Ohio, plus two hundred twenty-six letters from immediate family including his father, William Rotch, Sr. (1734-1828), his brother, William Rotch Jr. (1759-1850), brother-in-laws, Thomas Hazard, and Samuel Rodman (1753-1835), and his wife’s sister, Hannah Rodman Fisher (1764-1819).[17]

Charity Rotch's correspondence, limited to only sixteen letters in her hand is among the shortcomings of this study, making it difficult and challenging for historians to evaluate her ideas, her inner life and her private sentiments that emerge alongside the many factual gaps in her story. With the exception of a travel journal written during her initial fact-finding journal through Ohio in early 1811, she did not keep a diary of her innermost thoughts, at least one has never been found. Her extent letters probably represent only a small portion of the letters that have found their way into archives that she must have written.

Letters written to Charity Rotch lend themselves to partial evaluation of her opinions and how her ideas might have impacted her circle of writers. Of her known female correspondents, fifty-two women posted two hundred thirty-nine letters between 1776 and 1824. Of this number, eight of her closest intimates wrote one hundred fifty-nine letters between 1795 and 1824.[18] There are also letters from women outside of the immediate family circle including New England friends, Patience Graham and Rachel Todd with whom Charity shared confidences, opinions and insights over several decades. Yet another category of letters were those composed by individuals who occupied a time-sensitive space in her life including Philadelphia physician, Benjamin Rush and William Wharton, a suitor of Deborah Fisher, the daughter of Samuel Fisher and Hannah Rodman Fisher of Philadelphia. The establishment of the Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania in 1881 was an outcome of the 1817 Fisher-Wharton marriage.

Throughout this work, I would hope it is clear to the reader that discrete readings of letters suggests that women recognized the significance of gender in their lives as they defined themselves collectively as women. The vocabulary and the cultural grammar they used to reinforce kinship ties was crucial to building and maintaining their faith communities over extended geographic distances. As members of the Society of Friends, women forged particular sorts of relationships through correspondence which itself meant something particular to them as a consequence of the unique meaning that religiosity lent to notions of community. Although individuals might read letters alone, more commonly reading was a companionable activity for families who gathered together, especially in times of illness, or emotional and spiritual trial to read and re-live important personal relationships together.[19] Private correspondence in addition to testimonials, poems and objects of ordinary and everyday life such as remedies and recipes were treasured mementos of shared identity and culture.[20] While the extent, variety, and intimate nature of this collection of letters are an invaluable window into the lives

of both men and women settlers, this collection of documents also constitutes a memorial to a family connected by kinship and religion regardless of distance and the mechanism whereby their past was bound to their future.

Before the 1970s, few scholars took note of the historical nature of women’s letters, diaries and journals. It was not until feminist historians insisted on the gendered nature of experience and until the history of ordinary people and ‘everyday life’ began to be written that women’s letters would come to be seen as historically significant. In the 1980s, the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman and other scholars interested in the exploration of women’s experiences recognized the importance of exploring more fully the religious and personal aspects of women’s lives including their close friendships. Faderman, for example, claimed that friendships between women were universally accepted and “signified a relationship that was considered noble and virtuous in every way.”[21] Many women felt that what they needed was a mate with whom they could share their joys and their struggles, “to spend their lives with a kindred spirit had been the dream of countless romantic friends in the nineteenth-century.”[22] Truth be told, husbands here not always likely candidates for such relationships.

Recent studies by historians have produced a framework for how women’s letters might be understood. Dena Goodman argues that letters and letter-writing for women were protected private spaces that ensured confidentiality and transparency. Women became conscious of themselves as gendered subjects through the act of letter-writing, an activity that encouraged them to reflect on their own life experiences and to express and articulate their ideas in a private forum. Goodman wrote, “Privacy was not aloneness, but control over who could enter and the power to remove oneself from the power of others.”[23]

For Quaker women, letter writing served an additional purpose, that of religious instruction.[24] From their beginnings in the seventeenth-century, Quakers believed that God had ordained that each individual should be instrumental in the salvation of others. Friends were encouraged to record their spiritual experiences in journals and letters that would be copied and repeatedly circulated as a source of spiritual instruction.[25] Richard Brown believes that for many women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, “It was religion and piety, not politics that supplied understanding and a sense of order.”[26] In their private social and cultural life, Quaker women, writing for and to their co-religious used their letters as a focus for their spiritual challenge.

In addition to accounts of family news, letters contained expressions of spiritual truth that the writer hoped would open the way to a fuller spiritual self-knowledge.[27] Letters documented the writer's moral and spiritual journey and often contained biblical references that co-religious understood. In her study of historical Quakerism, Carole D. Spencer points out that the Bible as sacred text of the Quakers was not an external authority but an internalized authority. "Quakers lived, breathed and were infused by the words of Scripture. It was the foundation of all their theology and spirituality."[28]

The conviction of being in the Light also shaped individual and collective Quaker identity. For Friends, the sense of community with family connections and kin obligations and responsibilities weighed more heavily than individualism.[29] David Booy explains, "Perhaps more than most people, Quakers did achieve through their faith a stability of self and an identity that was clearly defined, focused and understood."[30]

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg also insisted on the social acceptability of intense, passionate and intimate attachments as an integral part of women's relations with each other particularly in societies where gendered roles appeared crystallized. She wrote,

> The ties between mothers and daughters, sisters, female cousins and friends, at all stages of the female life cycle constitute the most suggestive framework for the historian to begin an analysis of intimacy and affection between women.[31]

In disentangling commonly accepted blurring between sexuality and identity, Smith-Rosenberg argued for the existence of and significance of intense emotional relationships between women, an affection described by William Rounseville Alger as a personal passion, "that exalted the soul, instead of inflaming the senses."[32]

It is true that Quaker women's friendships like other women's ties and attachments were an integral part of their relations with each other. Their intimate friendships and connections formed part of the larger pattern of community life that was based on the bond of shared religion as well as a moral journey. The letters of the Rotch and Rodman women examined in this study support the contentions of feminist historians, and permit a deepening of our understanding of the precise mechanics of women's culture by illustrating the extent and ways that women formulated notions of kinship and community via correspondence. Correspondence produced by women Friends also permits us to reconstruct the cultural and social setting that encouraged their emotional relationships and their exploration of their female sensibilities.

This work as a multi-facetted story attempts to do several things. First, Chapter One brings the New England Rotch and Rodman circle of women into historical light and illuminates the significance of family and kinship for the creation of a woman-centered culture. Analysis is directed at the economic activities and changed roles of Charity Rotch’s mother, Mary Rodman, widowed with seven children in 1766. The service industry and the economic activities of women in Newport, Rhode Island, before and after the Revolutionary War were linked to and dependent on the expansion of trade in the colonies. This chapter challenges and complements existing historiography and supports the view of scholars who have argued that women constructed a broad range of social relationships with others with whom they shared the same faith, family, financial resources, commercial life, and business interests.

Chapter Two explores Quaker marriage alliances that linked families of the same class and faith into networks of wealth and power. We are introduced to Charity Rodman before her marriage in 1790 and slowly get to know something of her aspirations and ideas and what she may have anticipated for her future.

Chapter Three focuses on the Rotch family and their dominance of the shipping and whaling industry in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I explore the roles of kin and the polarizing forces that perhaps played a role in Thomas Rotch’s decision to break with his powerful family in 1800 in order to pursue a different course for himself and his wife beyond their reach.

Chapter Four follows Thomas and Charity to Hartford, Connecticut, one hundred thirty miles to the west of New Bedford. Although Thomas Rotch remained partially invested in his family’s business, in truth he was struggling to find his own way forward. The Embargo Acts of 1806 and 1808 which halted imports of fine wool from abroad quite possibly was the opportunity he had been waiting for and the calling for which he had been training all of his life. Rotch bought up newly imported merino sheep, set himself up as a sheep farmer and established a small woolen mill to meet the internal demand for fine woolen cloth. But as land prices for expansion increased in Connecticut, another option presented, that of westward migration across the mountains to the warmer Ohio Valley, better suited for his wife’s delicate health, where land for sheep farming was plentiful and inexpensive. For Charity, relocation westward marooned in the wilderness presented different challenges and most notably, the breakdown of valued female connections. But her choice in the matter was limited: she would relocate and then only reluctantly, not because she wanted to but because social expectations left her no other option.

Chapter Five examines the settlement of Quakers west of the Alleghany Mountains as a significant event in the history of American Quakerism. I present evidence that new female migrants to the frontier clung to traditional notions of respectability and true womanhood not out of a sense of passive endurance, but rather to control their circumstances as 'good women' and 'civilizers' in the untamed wilderness.

Chapter Six considers Thomas and Charity's differing perceptions of the frontier and the challenges that they faced during the early stages of settlement in Ohio. Kendal, the settlement founded by Thomas Rotch in 1812, is the ideal place to look for evidence of women's rural history. This study attempts to bring Charity's frontier experience into sharper focus in order to understand something of the new and complex opportunities she faced, and to evaluate whether she believed that she shared in the freedom, equality and social and political opportunities that the frontier offered her husband. I examine letters as records of the emotional and spiritual lives of the Rotch Rodman women who selectively chose other co-religious to share their temporal and spiritual lives and concerns.

Chapter Seven reinterprets the lives of frontier women through their letters, their belongings and their estate records. I attempt to assess their legacies, accomplishments and achievements and the place of religion, domesticity and kinship in their lives.

Chapter Eight in closing argues that Quaker women with shared religious beliefs and spiritual needs utilized certain strategies to encourage interconnections and interdependence. Women recognized that biological realities bound them together in physical and emotional intimacy, and their letters and letter-writing allowed them to recreate a women's culture that shaped and controlled long distance relationships.

For Quaker women, letters as a unique form of culture meant something particular to them as a consequence of the meaning that religiosity lent to notions of community. Feminine religiosity linked women's lives and shaped them as a group in distinctive ways that permit historians to answer the questions: how did the outlook and world view of these women evolve during the course of their lifetime as writers, did they make reference in correspondence to their subordination as women, how did they understand their subordination, and how did women negotiate the limitations imposed by their gender and class. Entrusted with the task of preservation of their families, Quaker women with a long tradition of writing for public and private consumption carved out a measure of power to determine familial relationships as a result of being correspondents in a situation in which letter writing was the primary way to re-secure and reconstitute family ties.

As instruments of spiritual authority charged with communicating God's message to the world, women used their letters, diaries and testimonials to promote a message of resistance to the male dominated hierarchy to a wider audience, and to express their concerns and proclaim their solidarity as a group. Correspondents also used letters to establish a spiritual legacy of 'good Quaker womanliness,' to be revisited by the next generation of women Friends as they explored social and political activism and justice issues in public life.

Writing also created an interactive and collaborative subculture that strengthened ties of kinship and provided women with emotional support and social resources within the larger community of Friends, perhaps as a practical alternative to unequal power sharing relationships with men. Women wrote for intensely spiritual reasons, to document their progress in the search for a stronger personal faith, and as a form of discipline to instruct others and to ensure the writer's place in family memory. They believed that divine guidance compelled them to follow the dictates of their conscience. This research provides evidence for an emerging feminism that provided women with the tools to maintain their position within the Society of Friends, even in the course of the Society's own internal evolution and change.

As members of powerful and accomplished New England families, the Rotch and Rodman women faced their elder years fully integrated into their culture rather than segregated from it. The strong ties to family that they themselves had initiated, encouraged and controlled over generations withstood physical separation and assured them of continued responsibility, respect, and influence as parents and senior members within the nuclear family. In prioritizing the creation of their histories, Quaker women's deliberate preservation of correspondence linked correspondents together and shaped individual and collective identity and family memory.

This study supports the argument that religion and religious ties linked women to each other and shaped them as a group in distinctive ways that set them apart from men. While historians Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880,* (1979), John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail,* (1979), Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (1982), Sandra L. Myers, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (1982), and Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (1981), and *The Female Frontier* (1988) have focused on the activities of women as they moved beyond traditional gender roles as travelers, farmers and homesteaders, most historical accounts of frontier women fail to account for the influence of religion which in many cases endowed women with a

powerful voice in their communities. While the lives of female colonizers show remarkable parallels, evidence and analysis presented from archival research will expand our understanding of how gender and religion, as much as and in ways distinct from class and race also shaped the experience of women in the course of migration to the frontier.

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Notes

[1] Charity Rotch letter to Elizabeth Rodman, December 12, 1791. (Friends Historical Society, Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania). The Thomas and Charity Rotch Papers are archived in the Massillon Public Library, Massillon, Ohio. In the 1930s, Mrs. Horatio Wales, the last private owner of the Rotch farmhouse (Spring Hill) found hundreds of letters and documents in barrels in an out-building known as the 'wool house' on Rotch homestead property. She brought the collection to the attention of Ethel Conrad, Director of the Massillon Public Library who catalogued and archived the collection in its entirety in the 1980s and 1990s. The Rotch archives are concerned with settlement history of Kendal, (Ohio), settler society, agriculture, economy and commerce between 1811 and 1824, while the Wales Family Papers document further developments in the area between 1823 and 1910 as the early Kendal settlement was incorporated into the town of Massillon. Letters and documents of both families (Rotch and Wales) measuring twenty-two linear feet conservatively are arranged alphabetically by correspondent into incoming and outgoing, personal and business correspondence, notebooks and daybooks. There are many other categories that directly pertain to Rotch business interests in New Bedford, Hartford and Ohio. I have accessed only around fifteen to twenty percent of all documents; thus this study is not comprehensive and is far from complete. About 2,500 of Thomas and Charity Rotch's letters have been transcribed and are available for use by scholars and the public at http://www.massillonmemory.org.

[2] Conrad, *Invaluable Friends*, 25-37; James Scott Engler, "Independence and Integration in frontier Ohio: Thomas and Charity Rotch and the significance of cultural origins, social imperatives, and economic opportunity in the settling of the Old Northwest." MA Thesis, Kent: Kent State University, 2004.

[3] Taylor and Lasch, "Two Kindred Spirits,"33.

[4] Hannah Rodman Fisher letter to Charity Rotch, 7th mo. 31, 1812. Box B-247-26.

[5] See select letters, Quaker Letters and Epistles, Box F-14-1 through 37; for example F-14-8, Copy of a letter from Mary Paisley to Sarah Beale, Lancaster 2nd mo. 11, 1749; Extracts of a letter from Sarah Tuke (Afterwards Grubb) when about 20 years of age. Transcribed by Hannah Coffin for her Friend Charity Rotch, 7th of 5th month, 1810. Box F-14-25.

[6] Hannah Rodman Fisher letter to Charity Rotch, Philadelphia 3rd mo. 27, 1812. Box B-247-25.

[7] Hannah Rodman Fisher letter to Charity Rotch, Cliffts, 7th mo. 14, 1813. Box B-247-29.

[8] Mary Rotch letter to Charity Rotch, New Bedford, 10 mo. 17th, 1813. Box B-297-7

[9] Mary Rodman letter from Samuel Rodman, 10th mo. 14 1793. Box A-10-2.

[10] Holton, "Family Memory," 158.

[11] O'Brien, *Intellectual Life,* 105.

[12] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 1-38; P.N. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987);

M.P. Malone, "Beyond the last frontier: Toward a new approach to Western American History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (Nov. 1989): 409-436; D. Worster, *New West, True West: Interpreting the region's history, Western Historical Quarterly* 43 (April 1987): 141-156; P.N. Limerick, C.A. Milner II, and C.E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991); William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (1987): 157-176.

[13] Hurt, *Ohio Frontier,* 372, 373.

[14] Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," 7-13.

[15] Stowe, *Intimacy and Power,* 4.

[16] Newman, "Quakers and the Family," 434-444; Wulf, "Of Old Stock," 305-307. Friends saved records of births, marriages and deaths to reaffirm kinship ties including earlier connections to transatlantic ancestors. Wulf writes, "Kinship ties remained a crucial source of material and cultural support and a wellspring of identity. Genealogical efforts were important acts of cultural production and an overlooked source of evidence about how the writers tried to understand themselves individually and collectively."

[17] See Boxes A-29 through B-224. See Thomas Rotch Daybook, Box H-21. Rotch kept duplicate copies of some of his business correspondence in his Daybooks. In 1816, he corresponded with 80 persons. Over time, his practice of recording every business letter in duplicate fell off, perhaps because time simply would not permit.

[18] Female correspondents and their relationship to Charity Rotch, number and dates of letters she preserved: from Lydia Rotch Dean, sister of Thomas Rotch, 18 letters, 1795-1817; Sarah Rotch Arnold, niece, 14 letters, 1804-1824; Hannah Rodman Fisher, sister, 44 letters, 1791-1824; Anna Hazard, sister, 21 letters, 1804-1824; Elizabeth Rodman, sister, 10 letters, 1802-1810; Mary Rotch, sister-in-law, 12 letters, 1808-1821; Sarah Fisher, niece, 13 letters, 1814-1824. Close female friends, Maria Imlay, 6 letters, 1808-1813; Patience Graham, 5 letters, 1811-1823; and Rachel Todd of Connecticut, 27 letters, 1807-1823.

[19] Steedman, *Dust;* Holton, *Quaker Women,* 158.

[20] Holton, *Quaker Women,* 2.

[21] Faderman, *Surpassing the Love,* 16; Smith-Rosenberg, "Female World," 1-29; Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 197-206; Norton, "Paradox of Women's Sphere," 139-149; Rayna Reiter, editor. *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York, 1975. More recent, Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn., 1981); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1981, chps. 4, 5; Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women: Essays.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

[22] Ibid. 205.

[23] Goodman, "Letter Writing," 19.

[24] Healey, "Building, Sustaining," 1-13.

[25] Steere, *Quaker Spirituality,* 24; Ann Bull letter to Charity Rotch, March 17, 1814, Box B-238-2, an example of a multi-authored letter describing a visit with Comfort Collins, aged 101, an active itinerant ministry in the late eighteenth-century.
[26] Brown, *Knowledge is Power,* 187.
[27] Bauman, ibid. 61; Skidmore, *Strength in Weakness,* 17.
[28] Spencer, "Holiness," 154.
[29] Gundersen, *To Be Useful,* 4.
[30] Booy, *Autobiographical Writings,* 9.
[31] Smith-Rosenberg,ibid.1-29; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct,33-76* Smith-Rosenberg argues that rather than enduring isolation and oppression, middle class nineteenth-century women formed relationships that sustained them throughout their lives. Close female friendships were accepted, encouraged, and within a "women's culture," women exercised female agency and autonomy. Whether relationships were sexual as well was not significant. Critics point out that the concept of a distinct "women's culture" overemphasized agency and autonomy at the expense of structures of power and inequality that also shaped women's lives in the nineteenth-century. See Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 512-29 and Ellen C. DuBois, Man Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980): 26-64; Hilda Smith, "Female Bonds and the Family, "Continuing Doubts," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter,* 15 (February 1987): 13-14; Hilda Smith, "Female Bonds and the Family: Recent Directions in Women's History," in *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship,* ed. Paul Treichler. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 272-91. For debate on the ambiguity in Smith-Rosenberg's analysis of same-sex passion see Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men,* 1981.
[32] Alger, *Friendships of Women*, 120.

CHAPTER ONE

'A TRULY VALUABLE FAMILY': KINSHIP, PIETY, AND THE BUSINESS OF MARRIAGE

Charity Rodman, born in 1766 was the youngest of seven children of Mary Borden (1729-1798) and Thomas Rodman (1724-1766) of Newport, Rhode Island. Her family was old stock, part of a thriving Quaker mercantile community in which matters of faith, family, and business overlapped to fuel Newport's economic growth.[1]

Founded by William Coddington, a magistrate of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1639, Quakers began arriving in Newport in 1650 and by 1700, they made up half the town's population. Friends established a Yearly Meeting in Newport in 1676. Economic power in large commercial New England towns was broadly based and theoretically did not permit concentrations of political power in a few families.[2] But in Rhode Island, political leadership for most of the eighteenth century rested in the hands of Friends. Most Quaker wealth in fact was concentrated in Newport until the Revolutionary War ruined income and property values in that town.

From the time of his arrival from Barbados in 1675, Thomas Rodman (1640-1727), a physician, positioned himself in spheres of influence and power within the political, social, and religious structures of Quaker Newport, holding the powerful office of clerk of the monthly, quarterly and Yearly Meetings of Friends of Rhode Island for thirty years.[3]

As clerk of the New England Yearly Meeting until 1718, he chose committees and framed the order of business of the meeting. With other members of the spiritual grandees in leadership positions within their meetings, Rodman occupied a spacious home on the corner of the Parade and Thames Street opposite Washington Square.[4] His sons, Samuel (1703-1749), and Thomas Rodman (1724-1766), Charity's father, chose the sea as a profession as owners, managers, and agents of property and ships.[5]

Basking in commercial prosperity, by 1761 Newport was a major port city and urban center of international trade with sixty shops in addition to numerous warehouses and rum distilleries. The town's citizens were

interconnected in relationships that worked to the benefit of all.[6] Newport's fine sea breezes attracted wealthy families from the West Indies and the Carolinas who came to the town to escape the sweltering summer heat and the 'sickly season.' As part of the annual migration from country to town, Elizabeth Evans explains,

> Women frequently packed their silver tea service, climbed into carriages and rode over unpaved streets, past exquisite gardens and avenues of trees, to a cliff over the Narragansett Bay, where, sitting in elegant laced gowns, they gossiped over teacups.[7]

As with other Newport merchants, Barbadian planters and English and African traders, Rodman family wealth was connected to the sea, the agrarian economies of the southern colonies, the import of slaves, and commodity production for Atlantic commerce. David Richardson wrote,

> Many of the wealthy in pre-revolutionary New England whether slave owners or not, derived significant portions of their wealth, directly or indirectly, from trade with slave-based economies such as the Caribbean sugar islands. It was the slave economies of the European powers in the Caribbean and South America that continued to exercise the most powerful influence over New England's trade in the decades immediately after 1783.[8]

Africans in bondage imported into Newport were sold to Virginia and Carolina plantations in exchange for rum and molasses from the West Indies, food supplies from other coastal ports and imports from England. Ship building, fishing and coastal trade from the St. Lawrence River to Trinidad, to and from England and Africa were behind much of the growing wealth of the northern colonies including Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Virginia Bever Platt writes,

> A slaving captain was not hard to find in Newport, for slavers had been sent from that port for more than a half-century by such owners as Abraham Redwood, John Bannister, Samuel and William Vernon, and even the Quaker Wantons.[9]

Between 1750 and 1760, Friends who opposed slavery on moral grounds attempted to persuade slaveholding Quakers to stop buying slaves. But the Society did not call for Friends to free their slaves or face disownment until the 1770s.[10] As Philip Curtin pointed out, trade was often divisive and varied widely. For example, a ship from New England sailing to Jamaica with a cargo of horses and fish might sell its cargo for

bullion 'derived from smuggling slaves into Spanish America.'[11] There were no illusions about slavery and the complicity of Newport merchants in the trade: the core of the town's economic life and wealth was concentrated in the hands of politically elite merchant families who were directly involved in the vast sugar, molasses and rum trade plus shipbuilding, all of which were dependent on the traffic in slaves.[12] Charles Rappleye wrote,

> The very streets of the town were paved with proceeds from a duty on imported slaves. Return cargoes of chained and miserable slaves were a common sight on the docks and at the main market, just off the waterfront. Early Quaker abolitionist John Woolman was shaken by the scenes from the waterfront during a visit to Newport in 1760, recording in his journal, "My appetite failed, and I grew outwardly weak".[13]

After the Revolutionary War, a state law required gradual emancipation but the exact number of slaves, often uncounted in the Newport census to avoid taxation (as taxable property) is unclear. In his study of slavery and trade in New England ports, Richardson wrote,

> Detailed evidence regarding the scale of New England's total involvement in the slave trade is unavailable, but it is generally accepted that the overwhelming majority of voyages before 1776 were probably dispatched from Boston and Newport.[14]

During Captain Thomas Rodman's absences at sea, his wife, Mary Borden Rodman whom he married in 1750, as 'deputy husband' could legally expand the range of his commercial activities in any form of labor to support her family. By law she was defined as his legal dependent and any earning garnished by her in trade became his on his return.[15] While women may have gained autonomy as 'deputy wives,' many continued to subscribe to the cultural imperative of female dependence on men. Mrs. Rodman could assume control of his estate in order to keep his property in the family. She could take court action and enter into contracts, and as manager of her husband's business affairs, if she had a talent for business, she probably gained experience and expertise in handling his affairs.[16]

While departing husbands might advise their wives to depend on male relatives for advice and assistance, expectations were that as his agent, she would share in the management of his property. Although gender relations were asymmetrical, women who handled their own household financial affairs experienced a dramatic change in traditional roles as they assumed male roles in the expanding market place.[17] With her husband's approval,

a wife might take on numerous tasks that furthered the good of their families.

For women left to fend for themselves while their husbands were at sea, this sudden independence could be a dangerous step for some women and a strong incentive to earn a living for others. While wives could recover debts, rents and profits of spouses absent for three or more years, a woman without family connections was at a financial disadvantage until her husband was declared dead or missing at sea.[18] In late eighteenth century whaling and shipping communities, women left on shore commonly formed mutually supportive interdependent economic relationships that enmeshed them in the broader community networks that made survival possible.[19] Lisa Norling wrote,

> Through sharing activities and concerns the women onshore sustained a dense web of relationships that bound together a community extended over thousands of miles and years of separation.[20]

Little is known about Thomas Rodman, described as a handsome, elegant man of good stock and pedigree, 'noble and a model for manly beauty,' Master and joint owner with Sol Townsend and wealthy slave merchant trader, Jacob Rodriquez Rivera (1717-1789) of the schooner *Eagle* bound to Hispaniola in 1764.[21] Even less is known about his yearly income or the style of life attached to his income. Rodman perished before his time at the age of forty-two on route to Jamaica on November 16, 1766, leaving his widow with the difficult task of raising a large family 'and without very much means.'[22]

Deeply troubled in the aftermath of her husband's death, Mary Rodman wrote to her daughter. 'To recount my various exercises & trials since my last to thee (in parting with a kind good husband) would only give thee pain.'[23] In light of his frequent separations from family and the dangers of oceanic travel, Rodman drafted a will which entitled his widow to a third of his monies according to law in the event of his death. Mrs. Rodman received £237.10, while her only son, Samuel received £159.10, and daughters, Anna, Hannah, Mary, Charity and Elizabeth, who normally received their bequests in goods or monies rather than land, received between £37 and £178 each.[24] The provision of one-third of a husband's personal property and real estate according to law was not meant to encourage the economic independence of his widow. Rather, it ensured that women did not become dependent on town charity for support.[25] The tradition that identified women through their relationship with the husbands preserved patriarchal relationships, but this practice also disadvantaged daughters and left women in poverty and without means to