

The Shaw Letters – a Real Team Effort

By Peg Eddy, #792

It's amazing how projects are born and grow. Recently, VT-FCGS President Sheila Morris was given about 50 letters by a friend who discovered them in her home. They were VERY old, dated between 1819 and 1843. They were also fragile and quite difficult to read, given the faded ink and old-fashioned penmanship, so over several months we painstakingly transcribed them. They were long, detailed, and to our modern ears accustomed to brief tweets and texts, quite flowery and verbose. However, they provided an interesting peek into the lives, times and concerns of the writers.

The letters between 1819 and 1823 were written by George Bradford Shaw (born 1800), a young UVM-trained lawyer practicing in Danville and Susan Maria Griswold (born 1799), a young woman friend living in Burlington. In February 1823, George and Maria were married in Burlington and their daughter, Maria, was born in September 1824. Tragically, the baby died on February 21, 1825, followed by her mother on February 27. We do not know the cause of their deaths but they are both buried in Danville's Green Cemetery.

There is a gap of several years here, but in 1830 George married Nancy Howard Bigelow in Keene, NH and most of the rest of the letters are theirs. George and Nancy had at least 7 children:

1. William Goodhue Shaw (1831- 1892) married Mary Alice Bissell in 1870
2. George Norman Shaw (1832 -)
3. Maria S. Shaw (1834 -) married Charles Merrick Gay in 1859
4. Mary Elizabeth Shaw (1839 – 1840) unmarried
5. Fanny Elizabeth Shaw (1841 – 1906) unmarried
6. Frederick Shaw (1845? -)
7. George Bigelow Shaw (1845 – 1892) unmarried

After reading the letters, we decided we should try to find some living descendants to share them with ... and we were off and running! This is when we discovered that working your way DOWN a family tree, i.e., trying to find all the descendants of a couple, is surprisingly difficult. Perhaps it's because we're so accustomed to tracing a family back in time that going in the other direction just feels wrong! However, we persevered and thanks to the work of many folks, some members of VT-FCGS, and some from the Waterbury Historical Society we have now managed to identify a few living relatives of George Bradford and Nancy Bigelow Shaw (Hooray!) and continue to search for more.

Please stay tuned for the next chapter in this story, when we hope to report that we've actually contacted the descendants we've identified. Just to give you an idea of what the letters look like, on the next page is an excerpt of one of them.

The gentlemen and ladies of Burlington almost without an exception, have done their utmost to celebrate the anniversary of Independence. My father Mother and Sister were of the number with myself, and we had a fatiguing day of it I assure you.

An hundred gentlemen and an hundred & thirty ladies embarked on board the Steam Boat Phoenix at eight o'clock in the morning, saluted by the firing of cannon on the shore, and returning it in regular succession from the Boat, attended by loud cheers from both shore and boat — forming a scene truly patriotic. The day was pleasant and we had a most delightful sail or ride. A plentiful dinner was prepared by the Captain, ^{and} when in view of ~~the~~ ^{Crown} Point we partook of it; the sight of which gave additional pleasure to our enjoyments.

We had expected to have gone as far as Tiandaroga but the Captain disappointed us — The Boat touched upon the shores of Essex North-west Bay Addison and Charles P. Thore.

We reached Burlington just as the sun was setting and a most beautiful prospect was presented to our view —

We were all completely exhausted with fatigue when we arrived home, and retired with the satisfaction of having spent nearly all our strength in celebrating Independence.

I have not time to tell you every thing concerning our sail —

This letter from Maria to George dated 8 July 1822 describes her 4th of July celebration in some detail

Transcription:

“The gentlemen and ladies of Burlington almost without an exception, have done their utmost to celebrate the anniversary of Independence. My father mother and sister were of the number with myself, and we had a fatiguing day of it I assure you.

An hundred gentlemen and an hundred & thirty ladies embarked on board the Steam Boat Phoenix at eight o'clock in the morning, saluted by the firing of cannon on the shore, and returning it in regular succession from the Boat, attended by loud cheers from both shore and boat – forming a scene truly patriotic. The day was pleasant and we had a most delightful sail or ride. A plentiful dinner was prepared by the Captain and when in view of ~~West~~ Crown Point we partook of it; the sight of which gave additional pleasure to our enjoyments.

We had expected to have gone as far as Ticonderoga but the Captain disappointed us – The Boat touched upon the shores of Essex Northwest Bay Addison and Charlotte.

We reached Burlington just as the sun was setting and a most beautiful prospect was presented to our view.

We were all completely exhausted with fatigue when we arrived home, and retired with the satisfaction of having spent nearly all our strength in celebrating Independence.

I have not time to tell you everything concerning our sail – The amusements engaged in by many, the toasts drank by all, and many other things I must omit to mention. One circumstance however more and then I'll have done. We were favored with the society of several ladies and gentlemen from Montreal and Rutland who came expressly to join us in our pleasure party. Among the number from the North was Mr. Gates and daughter who is about twenty years of age, whom he has lately taken under his care.

We are all in usual health and send much love to our dear George.

*Affectionately your's[sic]
Maria*

P.S. Tell us soon George how you succeeded in your Oration and how you enjoyed the day. My love to your Sister when you see her again.”