

Good afternoon! I am Karen Board Moran and this is my friend Emily Thomas from the WWHP. We have launched an exciting adventure into the past to find all the letters written by and to Abby Kelley Foster. We are here to share some letters we've found that might be of interest to you.

Today, I'm wearing bloomers in honor of Abby's long fight to wear more comfortable clothes. She would wear an outfit like this—without the lace collar probably—to pick apples on her farm. Some women wore them to woman's rights conventions. The women decided their words and thoughts weren't being heard when people made so much fun of their outfits.

Can you imagine Emily climbing up a tree dressed in her corset --HOLD IT UP, long skirt and many layers of petticoats?! We're both very happy to put on our jeans after every program we give about the 19th century and thank reformers like Abby.

Emily go to projector

How many of you have ever written a letter to your mother or received one?

Pause

How many of you have sent or received a telephone call or email to your mother instead?

Pause

Well, imagine living about 150 years ago when there were no telephones or computers. The wonder of communication in those days was the magnetic telegraph, but most people could not afford to use it, and the messages had to be very brief.

You're probably saying, "so why do I have to write a letter when my mom lives with me?" But others of you might understand because your mother might travel on business or you live with someone other than your mother.

That's the way it was for a young girl called Alla 156 years ago TODAY. She was born Paulina Wright Foster on May 19, 1847. That was the same year the United States began to use actual postage stamps on letters. She had dark hair and wondrous long dark eyelashes. (254)

2

Since your school is named for her mother, can anyone tell us something about Abby Kelley Foster? (Ask members of audience who raise hands to stand and tell what they know, then segue into the facts.)

Abby started out as a teacher, but soon felt she had to commit herself to love God and his attributes of mercy, truth, and justice. Basically, she just wanted people to be kind to one another so she dedicated her life to the causes of peace, abolishing slavery and gaining woman's equality in education, government, health and work. In her day there were over 3 million black slaves in the south. You young ladies would not be allowed to control your own money or even learn the same subjects as the boys in most schools. You were expected to be ladylike AT ALL TIMES and never speak out about your opinions.

3

Just before she moved to Lynn, MA to teach in a Quaker school, Abby heard William Lloyd Garrison speak about the American Anti Slavery Society he started in 1831. She joined the organization and decided to stop teaching children to become a paid lecture agent for the society. These abolitionists wanted to abolish-- or end immediately-- slavery in the United States which was increasing because more help was needed to grow cotton. You might remember how the Founding Fathers thought slavery would gradually die out, but they never imagined the invention of the cotton gin to clean the seeds out of the cotton nor the huge textile industry.

She felt it was her mission to educate people in the north about the evils of slavery. Abby sold many subscriptions to Garrison's newspaper, the *Liberator*, and to other antislavery newspapers and books, as well. Whenever she come into a new town, her most important task was to start up local antislavery club that would carry on the fight once she moved onto another place. This strategy would build a strong network to lobby Congress to pass a law to abolish slavery. The society expected people to encourage their churches, schools and businesses to pressure the government to stop allowing one human to own other humans--as if they were just another horse or ox.

It wasn't long before she became one of the leading fundraisers for the cause even though many people called her names and threw eggs or garbage. It wasn't because she was speaking against slavery, it was because she was a woman speaking in public before promiscuous audiences—men and women in same room.

Have you ever heard of the runaway slave Frederick Douglass?

He was a powerful abolitionist speaker who worked with Abby sometimes.

Because she was a white woman with a black man, he reported she was “pelted with foul eggs and no less foul words from the noisy mobs which attended the meetings” (142).

Once an egg struck her in the face and she cheerfully reported, “fortunately it had a chicken in it and did not besmear my face!” (251)

People came to hear her speak with no notes for 2 to 3 hours at a time night after night until she had a small group of supporters. Her goal was to convince her listeners to make themselves responsible for bringing about change in the United States—even though they lived far away from slaves.

Massachusetts had ended slavery back in 1783, but almost everyone used products made by slave labor like cotton clothes and sugar. Northern mills bought cotton to produce cloth and traded slave shoes and hats made right here in Worcester County!

It was a difficult and often lonely path she chose to follow, but there were others who believed in her cause and she had a vast network of friends who kept in touch by letter as she traveled by wagon, carriage, stage coach and train from New England west to Ohio and Indiana—and eventually as far west as Michigan.

Abby fell in love with another radical abolitionist, Stephen Symonds Foster. He promised to treat her as his equal they could both to continue their antislavery work. After a long courtship, they married just before Christmas in 1845 while in lecturing in Pennsylvania. (12-21)

After saying yes to Stephen the next most difficult question was, Would Abby stay home when she had a baby? All of your parents had to decide how to answer this question, too. It was a serious dilemma for this woman who was so persuasive a speaker and organizer trying to end slavery and gain rights for women as soon as possible. Most people thought it was her job or role to stay home and be a good mother rather than use her skills to make America a better place.

6

Stephen and Abby bought a farm about a mile down the road from your school at the bottom of the hill where the airport is today. It was known as "Liberty Farm" because runaway slaves sometimes hid there. It still stands on Mower Street. When Alla was born, Abby became a loving mother while her father lectured out in Ohio.

7

While Alla napped, Abby avidly read the *Liberator* and the *Anti Slavery Standard*. She gathered facts for future lectures and caught up on her correspondence with her network of antislavery friends. It was most important she keep the local antislavery societies active to keep building the pressure for change.

Not all mothers could just stay home with their babies. Abby knew there were multitudes of broken-hearted slave mothers whose children were often sold off to another plantation worried Abby. By the time Alla was almost two years old, Abby could no longer allow herself the luxury of staying home with her child. Since Abby could draw bigger crowds than Stephen—and more of the headlines in the press--, they decided he would take over as househusband and run their Stephen's sister, Callie would come to take care of the baby while Abby would go on an almost two year lecture tour. They would have to keep in touch by letter!

8

Little Alla told her aunt Callie to say that “she don't wet her pantalets”, but when Callie reminded that she does sometimes, Alla said, “[I] must not any more” (254) To catch some time with her, Abby booked a room for Alla and Callie during Fair Week in Boston in 1849 when a bazaar was held to raise money to pay the lecturers.

Soon after both of Alla's parents went on the lecture circuit to eastern NY, but her father returned to “Liberty Farm” in time for spring planting. This time her Aunt Ruth came to care for Alla and keep their house, but complained in a letter to Abby,

“[Alla] wants to run everywhere [her cousins do] & eats everything & she gets as dirty in one day after having on clean clothes as a little Paddy [negatively comparing her to an little Irish immigrant].” (Ruth Pollard to AK, 28 July 1850, AAS). Alla was used to the freedom of the fields and barns. Before she could read, she knew the names of the garden and wild plants and helped feed the chickens, cats, dogs, and an occasional orphaned calf. I didn't bother Abby for she had had the freedom of her childhood farm, too.

9

On August 15, 1850, Stephen reported on their daughter,

“...I do not wonder that you want to see her for I think her truly an interesting child. Sarah says she is the easiest managed of any child she ever knew. I am sure she is unusually reasonable for one of her age. ...An incident occurred a few days before she left, which was a pretty good test of her submissiveness. She had named to me several things which she wished me to buy for her, and among them was a harmonica, and a little churn for which she was particularly earnest. I replied to her that I would be glad to get her all the pretty things she wants, if it were in my power; but that I had but little money, and must therefore buy those things only which are needed most.

The next day, as Call[ie] had [Alla] in her lap talking about her journey, she said she perceived [Alla] looked very sober, and that something was resting very heavily upon her mind. [Callie] accordingly inquired what it was that troubled her. Alla instantly *burst into tears*, and explained “*I wish my father would get me a harmonica!*” But she never mentioned the subject to me again after my first answer, till the morning before she left, when, as I was starting for town, she inquired, if I could not get her a harmonica. I got the harmonica and wagon, and received for them a whole wagon load of kisses. She was careful, however, as she always is, to save some “for mother”. I am struck with the fact that she always insists on your right to an equal part of every thing which I possess, if she attaches any value to it. One would almost think her specially commissioned to look after your rights, in your absence.

I would write more, but it is late, and I expect to...send [this] early in the morning. Yours mailed at Salem[, Ohio] I received yesterday. I need not tell you I had become impatient, at the long delay. Do write oftener, and I will remain ever- your very affectionate – S.S. “

That October Abby came home for the first National Women's Rights Convention she helped organize in Worcester in 1850, but was back on the road in three weeks.

Although Abby was away from home, the frequent letters helped the family support each other and they all waited anxiously for the next letter. From her grandparent Foster's farm in Canterbury, New Hampshire, Alla wrote to her mother through the pen of her aunt Callie.

January 27, 1851

My Dear Mother,

Grandfather has just returned from [Sunday] meeting, and brought me a letter from you. [Callie] was lying in the lounge so I took it to her and sat down by her side to hear what you had to say to me. I was very glad to have a letter from you and I always am. And now the first thing I wish to say to you is, that I want you to come to Canterbury, and father too. I want to live with you all the time.

But I can't go to Worcester and leave Callie. And then grandfather and mother could not do without me. I am of so much importance that grandmother can hardly spare me to go out to make a visit, but I do go some times....

I wish I had my ball here, for I don't have enough to do. Can't you send me something that is new? How do the little girls amuse themselves where you are?

Grandfather and mother are well as usual. Grandmother says she shall not let me go to see you again but when you want to see me you and father must come here. I want you to write me again soon.

From your little daughter. [Scribbles her name]

Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave Abby a lot of nice paper to write to Alla. Mrs. Stanton chose to stay home with her family and use the power of her pen to write letters and newspaper articles in support of Woman's Rights from Seneca Falls, NY. Just before Alla's 5th birthday, we can tell Abby worried just like mothers everywhere and promised to come home.

"Did your father give you the maple sugar cakes which the Pete children sent you?__

And did your father get you a kaleidoscope [sic]as a present from me? If he has not ask him if he will do so when he goe's [sic] into town next.

I fear your clothes are getting ragged but I will fix them up when I come if your aunt can make them hang on so long.

Give my love to your Aunt Sarah your uncle Adams and your cousins __

Your affectionate

Mother." (April 17, 1852)

In the mid 19th century, children were still thought of as miniature adults—to be seen but not heard and to be trained by a wise application of the rod. Abby taught through affection and example and avoided physical punishment. Once when Alla was visiting her cousins, one of them asked, "Will your mother let you do this?" Surprised, six-year-old Alla replied, "My mother lets me do just as I please, If she wishes me to do a thing I generally do it." The cousin could not understand why a child could be so 'let' to do, nor could Alla imagine it any other way. (284)

To help Alla understand her work and absences, Abby explained about the slave children who were taken from their mother, explaining that her own mission was to preach to the “wicked” men responsible for slavery and to “make them good so that they would let the poor slave mothers go home.” If Alla also wanted “to help the world grow better,” she must learn “to be *very very good*” herself. (AK to Alla, 17 April 1853. whm)

Alla also understood her mother believed in woman's equality. Alla was puzzled because her bedtime prayer always ended with *Amen*. She asked her parents, “Ought they not to say *Awomen* sometimes?” 11

The following year Alla's parents switched roles and Abby stayed home with Alla, tending to the chores of the farm, while Stephen lectured. Then, in 1854, both Stephen and Abby went together to Michigan and Indiana. For a while, Abby was in Indiana alone, and wrote this letter to six-½ year-old Alla, who was most likely staying in Worcester at her Uncle Adams and Aunt Sarah Foster's farm.

{At a poor old house where the dirt falls from the rafters,
in the chamber where I write, in my paper.}

My very dear daughter,

I go into very queer houses in this new country sometimes. This is indeed a poor one, though not as poor as some others. There are but three rooms besides the pantry. So I have slept in the same chamber with a man and his wife, who have been here visiting and then a son of the family slept in another end of the unfinished garret [or attic]. But I could get along very well, only that I am dreadfully bitten by fleas. Ever since the weather has become warm the fleas have been fed upon me, you will find me quite thin. I cannot even sleep at nights with any comfort. Tell your father I have no desire to move west since I find how

many fleas they have. I would rather live in poor soil than have live creatures live in me.

But you must not think because the people sometimes have very queer old log houses that they are not good and wise. The people where I now am are very kind, and know a great deal more than some folks who live in very fine houses.

Yes, I find, occasionally, a little girl so good that I love her very tenderly. And we have good times together, and then I always think so much of you and say, O! How I wish Alla could be here. But I trust we shall meet very soon and then we shall be so happy.

Give my love to father, and Mattie and Callie and all of Uncle Adams family.

Your loving Mother

12

Her mother offer urged Alla to learn to write

My dear Alla__

I have been waiting very impatiently for a letter from home. For more than four weeks and none has yet come, unless your father has got one since I left him two days since__

We meet again tomorrow, so I will get a letter ready to send you and mail it after we meet, whether he has got a letter or not. He has been so impatient that he has half determined at times to start (directly home). I think you must learn to write so that we can depend on you to write us more frequently. (Convis)_Dec. 7__'5[3]

Like many parents away from their children, Abby sent gifts that might interest Alla, like a "pretty" California gold quarter dollar and a subscription to the *Little Pilgrim*, a new children's magazine that promised "pure morality with pure literature." Alla carefully printed her replies with the help of her cousin Emma, including reports on farm news—especially the harvest of peaches, plums and strawberries. (291)

13

Alla also kept a journal where she noted that she rose at six, making two beds and sweeping the chamber before breakfast, then helping her Aunt Sarah with butter and jelly making. She raised canaries, had her own garden plot, and wrote stories that her parents thought, "first rate." (316)

Her father gave lots of instruction with his love in his letters:

"It speaks well for your industry [and] scollarship that your school report has nothing but Es [excellents] upon it. Your Mother will always be very happy to sign such reports.

But it is not to make your mother or myself happy, or for the reputation of being a good schollar, that I would have you study, but rather because the knowledge you acquire will render you happy [and] useful in (future) life. Your letters give evidence of thoroughness in spelling which will be of great use to you through life. It is exceedingly perplexing to be obliged to write with a dictionary at [^](ones)[^] elbow. Now is the time, if ever, to make yourself a good speller, [and] writing is the best means of acquiring thoroughness in (this) department. I like the good, round, bold hand of your first letter better than the finer, more contracted one of the two last. If you learn to write with a bold hand, it will be very easy to contract it, at any subsequent time, should you desire to do so; but not so easy to change from fine to bold. If you have leisure at school, would it not be well to amuse yourself with your pen in acquiring a greater familiarity with its use in writing [and] printing? With experience, [and] a little praise you may become a beautiful writer.

But you must not write long at a time, as the hand does not move with precision, when it becomes weary.

I expected you to write us about the pears, but suppose you forgot it.

With a hoarse voice, worn out from her travels and lonely for her family, Abby remained at home for two years, avoiding speaking engagements and meetings and tending to the farm and hosting visiting abolitionists. In 1857, however, she was appointed General Agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society, being responsible for overseeing the work of agents in the field. She resumed a modest schedule of traveling and lecturing until Alla became seriously ill. She had a curved spine disease that threatened to cripple her for life. Alla was only eleven and Abby didn't leave Alla's side for a year. Alla would have to wear a back brace or surgical corset for the rest of her life and never grew very tall.

15

She could no longer run free on the farm. Eventually it was Alla's turn to leave home to go to the New England Friend's Boarding School in Providence, RI. She would always have a hump on her back, but her mind was strong.

16

Like your parents, Mr. and Mrs. Foster wanted the best education possible for their only daughter. Vassar College was one of the few colleges offering an equal course of study to women. In the fall following the end of the Civil War, Alla packed her trunk for Poughkeepsie, NY

Abby wrote almost every Friday and Alla replied regularly. Abby wrote to her daughter as to an equal, not a child, reporting on farm life, family and friends and less often about her reform work. Alla frequently wrote about her clothes and courses. She wrote, "English Literature drives me nearly frantic. I have [written] nine pages on Chaucer,...We have delightful experiments in natural Philosophy....German is no play."

Just before her 22nd birthday she asked for money—just like most students throughout history: Pokeepsie, May 3, 1869

My dear Mother__

...I fear my money will get rather low, and as I always like to have a little by me in case of necessity, it would be a good plan for you to send me two dollars in your letter if you think it safe. There is little danger of losing it, I think. You will wonder for what I spend so much money, I doubt not, and as do I, sometimes, but my account book tells the story. Every thing costs very high here. The paper for our botanical specimens (plants) will amount to \$1.50, and half of it I had to purchase a few days since.

It is too bad for you to be obliged to work so hard. I hope aunt [sic] Lucy and Flora are with you on this. Do get rested for the [annual American Anti Slavery] meetings, and let the cleaning go till your return.

__ It snowed here yesterday a little, so that the mountains are whitish this morning. __Tell Flora I will write her soon. __ Love to all, Affectionately, Alla

17

The following winter Alla wrote from Vassar and gives us a glimpse of how she feels about her parents dedication to making the world a better place(2-20-1870)

“I am so proud of you and father, that you are both so devoted, according to your strength, to all the reforms.

I am sure that I shall never do anything half so useful. But the children of good and great people are apt to ugly or forceless, and I think you and I should be thankful that I am not any worse.”

Alla was a serious student and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa when she graduated in 1872. She went on to Cornell University in NY to study history the first year it was open to women. She returned to Worcester to teach high school students while she completed her dissertation and earned a Master of Arts in 1876. (359)

While home, Alla acted as secretary to a lively Convention on Taxation Without Representation at Mechanics Hall in 1874. Since women could not vote, her parents refused to pay their taxes. Their homestead would be sold at public auction unless they paid taxes of about \$70. Friends finally paid the taxes.(368-9)

18

For a while Alla taught in Cincinnati, OH, but then moved to Roxbury, outside of Boston, to be closer to her aging parent. She also became her parents' representative at fundraising bazaars, social affairs and especially woman's suffrage meetings where they were trying to get the right to vote like many other "suffrage daughters" like Alice Stone Blackwell and Lillie B. Chace. (373-4)

Alla's letters in her mid thirties sometimes sounded as if she were the parent and Abby was the child as she recommended her mother gargle with hot water when she had a cold and suggested that she take up knitting. She described the lectures and concerts she attended.(Sterling 380)

19

Her mother's gentle but insistent teaching from by letter seems to have been successful, for as an adult Alla expressed no resentment at having been left by her mother. She only had pride in Abby's devotion and self-sacrifice. Alla told a woman's rights meeting after Abby's death, "Had she been less noble, less brave, less tender of her child, she would have remained at home to enjoy her motherhood at the expense of other mothers."

Abby once exclaimed 'The most precious legacy I can leave my child is a free country.'" (284)

Thank you for being such an attentive audience. Are there any questions?