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Author: Mary Susan Curtis (1846-1913)

Transcription of cross-hatched letter, 1871 Dec. 17, written from Limestone Springs, S.C., to Mr. Rest F. Curtis of Cambridgeport, Massachusetts.

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Background

Mary Susan "Sunie" Curtis was the daughter of Rev. William E. Curtis (1817-1873) and granddaughter of Dr. Thomas Curtis (1787-1859), co-founders of Limestone College in Gaffney (Spartanburg County, S.C.) The recipient of this letter, Rest F. Curtis (b.1850), was the son of Rev. Thomas F. Curtis (1815-1872), the grandson of Dr. Thomas Curtis, and a cousin of the author of this letter.

Summary

Love letter written during Reconstruction era by Mary Susan Curtis of Limestone Springs, S.C., to her cousin Rest Fenner Curtis of Cambridge, Mass.; topics discussed include her sister Lila's broken engagement due to the alcoholism of her fiancé; Curtis apologies for any misunderstandings in her last letter; discusses the fact that in the Episcopal Convention, "a new book for this form of worship has been adopted, called the Union Prayer book instead of the Episcopal or Book of Common Prayer" [possibly a reference to the Oxford Movement and the contemporary controversy between High Church and Low Church factions within the denomination].

Curtis informs Rest that she has not written of the family's troubles because she knows that she "could not by writing make [him] understand all, through which [they] have passed, all have suffered, unjustly suffered," and that two of her brothers were driven from them and a third prevented from coming to visit; also tells of her father's plans "to reopen the school" [presumably Limestone Springs Female High School].

(NOTE: Mary Susan Curtis wrote this letter in a "cross-hatched" fashion in which she wrote a sixteen page letter on eight sheets of stationery. This common 19th century practice saved paper and postage. However, cross-hatched letters appear virtually illegible to many twenty-first century readers. South Caroliniana Library thanks Kathryn Graham for her transcription of this letter and her research that determined the author of this formerly anonymous item, who signed her letter only with the initial "S.")

[Envelope postmarked Spartanburg, S.C.:]

M^r Rest F Curtis
22 Inman St
Cambridgport
Mass

[Inside flap:]

Ill send the liss[t]
of birthdays in my next
shall I put – June – Dec 1 –
I caught myself saying just before going to bed
“Bless his dear heart he does love me” Wont that check
any troubled feeling that my letter may
have caused –

Limestone Sprs.
Dec 12th 1871
Tuesday Eve.. 7o'clock

Your letter was only received this noon my dear boy so you see I only wanted an excuse for writing as this promptness in replying proves. You will get tired of such frequent messengers wont you? This is No 4. within a fortnight is it not? Perhaps the earnest manner in which you begged me not to send letter for letter only, made these fingers more willing this evening tho there are many things that I have to say and first I must speak of that which is nearest my own heart and of which you too probably have thought much for my last letter must have prepared you in a measuse, at least, for it I refer to our dear L's engagement, poor child she has had to break it

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off - oh lest you dont know how it
has crushed her. how it has changed
her. you could not believe her the same
bright joyous girl you left a few months
ago. all the joy seems to have gone out
of her young life - it would make
your heart sad to see her move about
the house so silently, with every mark
of the deepest suffering imprinted on
the once very laughing face & yet the
calmness and self-possession which she
has manifest after the first two days
of intense suffering proves more determina-
tion of character than any of us thought
that gay giddy child possessed - It was
a struggle for many days between love for
him and her duty but mail after mail
brought increasing proof of his great
sinfulness in first drinking & then basely
deceiving her. I use the word basely but it
is with no feeling of unkindness to the
poor erring one - on Thursday last a letter

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from him acknowledging that he had
taken "One drink, no more." & fully explain-
ing that - but poor fellow - in his intense
love for her & eagerness to possess the
treasure so nearly his he was not truth-
ful. I cant understand him. I cannot
believe him so base as to write her in
the penitent manner he does not half
meaning it, & yet I know that for
more than two months he has been a
perfect "sot" and even with those around
him who begged and plead with him
not to touch it do you remember my
talking to you about him the last evening
you spent with me when we were out
walking, and my telling you I was
afraid he lacked principle - oh Rest
I'm Afraid I was right. only think of
its being within eight days of the appo-
inted day and her letter cancelling the
engagement will not be received until
Thursday Morning and he is to leave
that night. every mail brings her letters

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full of his unchanged love, thus keep-
ing her grief ever fresh. ours has been
a sad sad household, for aside
from our deep sympathy for Lila we did love
him very very dearly - my very love for
him prevents any feeling of unkindness

and oh so earnestly in my every prayer
do I ask Him who can reclaim the
vilest sinner to reclaim this poor erring
wandering one. - What do you make of it
my boy, what think of it. Has L. done
right or had she better have risked her
influence as his wife saving him, oh tis
so hard to know, those only who have suffered
like her can know how hard - how much
I have longed for my dear boy in the
last week. Ive lived over so much of
the past that Ive been scarcely less
sad than L. has been - Please wen you
write to the Smyth's mention this to
them (I mean about L.) they must know
it and twill save me the grief of writing
it - every thing they kindly selected was very
pretty & L. was very grateful. Dont let L. suffer

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in their estimation.

I'm afraid my last letter well provoks
you a little I was sorry after sending
it that I had not waited until I heard
from you again, and had I done so it
would never have been sent, however, its
done now and I cant recall it, but if I seemed
unkind forgive it please it was only my
love for you that made me so anxious &
now about a remark in the letter which yours
of this noon was an answer to - you seem
to have misunderstood my meaning. I see
tho. that it was my awkward way of ex-
pressing myself. "I perhaps differ from
most persons in believing there is but one
right way" I meant to imply that I did
not believe that - altogether, on the contrary
I think that as each person believes, to
him or her that is the right way as much
as the way I believe to me the right way-
do you understand now - You must know
that most Baptists, at least, differ from
one there - If you had remembered my views

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on the Communion question you perhaps
would have understood me - Just here I'll
answer your question about reading by
the Calendar in Prayer book. If you have
kept up at all with the Episcopal
Convention, you well know that a new
book for this form of worship has
been adopted, called the Union Prayer book
instead of the Episcopal or Book of
Common Prayer - some of the leading points
in their doctrine have been changed too

and the very and indeed only ones in which I differed in the least from them is that of "Infant baptism" & "Apostolic successor" both have been abolished. Children are consecrated to God, publicly, in infancy (what I have always believed ought to be done) and baptised when they arrive at years of discretion upon a profession of faith - all are considered ministers who feel themselves called of God to that divine office - now am I not just the best little Episcopalian - there are

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some other changes, also, tho not as important as these I speak of. now my inclination is to get one of the Union Prayer books and use that next year, it brings in the books Rev. & Job which the old Prayer book did not. the only ones however that are left out. Dont you like even the old Calendar tho in fact Ive become as attached to the old form of worship tho I did differ in some points I feel a regret in giving it up for that which shall so perfectly agree with me and then too my boy has been reading with me as long in the one I now use, and I own when I think he may not do so when I get the new book I cling to the old one with increased tenderness I wonder sometimes if the affection for you and the remembrance that you are reading with me and thinking of me on prayer ought to be with me so much during the hours set apart for those duties, sometimes I fear that the very remembrance of it brings too much of pleasure. What think you?

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And now my precious boy, I speak to you of that which I seem to have been so reticent about. I perhaps have been wise so than I intended, for many reasons, I know could not by writing make you understand all, through which we have passed, all have suffered, unjustly suffered - these too - I fared I might in an unguarded hour say something that would wound you - and everything that shall ever in any way tend to do that I always most carefully and still I thought I had written enough to let you know in a measure, at least through what we were passing. You cannot wonder that after having two brothers driven from us and a third prevented from coming to us for

a little visit, after a years absence that
I felt bitter and feared to touch upon the
subject for fear of saying something that
would perhaps even provoke you ansk[?] me
I cannot make you understand all
Rest I wish I could - it was chiefly for

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for that reason that I hoped you would see M^f Kirgmin, he
has seen both sides of the thing and stands ungoverned
by party spirit and tho an officer of the Fed. army in the
late war, he won my respect and admiration and I felt
sure that you would appreciate all he told you, you do
indeed, as he told me, get very "mixed up accounts" - I
only wish there was more truth mixed with it - through the
papers - I dont mean this cuttingly or unkindly, I say it earnestly -
I wish it for your sake and my sake - I've sometimes thought
that I would send you a Southern paper occasionally perhaps

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you would like to see what was going on but again I've feared
you would misconstrue no not that, at least I don't believe
you would intentionally misunderstand is more what I mean
my motive and so I concluded perhaps twas best not to do
so. Now my darling boy have I been hasty in any one
word, forgive it if so I would not even have touched upon
a subject which still awakens much of sorrow, had you
not asked it both in this letter & your last, not that I
am unwilling you should know all but only because I cannot
tell you all in writing & I fear a part will not be understood
as you fully understand my motive now in saying so

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little and yet in that very little, I seem to have wounded
you in some way, in which of the two letters received where your
letter was written was it. Am I not right Rest - you see I need not
your telltale face - always - to know what impressions my
words or actions make. I dont think you feel or at least did
not when you wrote this last time the same affection for
me that you have always felt ever since you left me
until within the last few weeks - Isn't it so my boy. I'd
rather you'd be candid with me. Why didn't you speak if
I wounded you have I such a very unforgiving disposition.

[4th page]

do I cherish unkind feelings, so long that you hesitated
to say all you wanted to I did'nt think the one or two
little minicle[?] or trod[?] - unpleasantness that crossed our pathway
while together left that impression of me. Did'nt I have
to scold somebody for being so unforgiving to himself ever
so long after I'd forgotten all about it, and in proof of that
forgetfulness had thrown my arms round him & kissed him
once-twice - oh ever so many times, and still he paced that
piazza as if on the "stool or repentance" with such a long
troubled face, I actually had to make him stop his walking
and draw me to him face me & tell me he loved me just as much

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as he had done before it all happened. I wonder if you did not put on a "mel[?] bit[?]," Just to make me give you a few extra kisses, as if I did not kiss you often enough without that long face to claim more - I tell you my boy I never voluntarily kissed any body else half so often as I did you in that fortnight - and now have I so said something to wound you ever so little it may be - and in spite of your trying to be your very self & seeming to care as much for me, the feeling seems its impress as you little thought to do - Now tell me am I not right? if we dont or did not not for awhile - Perhaps Ive found my old place again ere this love me quite as well - and I'm not there

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to put the brown head in my lap and talk it all over and draw you ever close to me & and hear you say you do love me just as much. I have needed you love more for the last week than ever before since I've known you - but my very absence must plead for premuch[?] From your letter I judge that one, at least of my letters have not been received, I wrote telling you of Fathers intention to reopen the school and that I was going to work for him, that Anne's engagement to M^r R. has been broken & she too probably will teach here also in the same letter I told you much about the other absent boys & answered a good many other questions about Va - Father & c I referred to the boys whom I said "Gone to other field of labor" Father was in Charleston at that time or in the Dist. rather - he is in Spartanburg now - seemed much

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brighter I thought until poor dear L's sorrow came, & that seems to have upset him again very much. Such a joyous gladsome birthday my precious boy did have, its worth being 21. not so much because of the presents tho they were all beautiful, but to know that so many love & think of you and I believe my boy knows how to appreciate it all - I should like to have stopped in just when I could have had a peep at your face, have watched the expressions of love and gratitude as they played hide & seek in your telltale face may your life be always as filled with joy and love do you know Rest that I think yours an unusually happy cheerful disposition. I do not mean to flatter & I would not have you look upon what I say as such - nor do I think that my love for you governs my opinion, indeed the very fact that I love you seems a more sure proof of what I say for as you already know

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I was not prepared to love you when you first came to us - but the "Lion of a Cousin" drew me to him bent over and kissed me, and all the love that my heart was capable of giving - you shall be the judge as to whether its much or little - went out to him "unasked unsought" - Minor cords These have indeed been in your life but they have served only to soften, not depress, your whole life, thus making your more lovable, the temptations that can come - seemed to have slipped by almost without your having know they existed - and holier influences, have left that impress, which makes all who know you love you & me to love you more than everybody else put together - Do you believe that last? I shall feel almost ashamed to send my little token of love, it will prove inferior to those already given I fear - Capt T's behavior explains why it has not been received long since - Ive written to a friend to see about it for me - These are one or two questions that I'll answer in my next probably, you'll understand then my reason for not doing so now - Now I must say Goodnight to my precious boy - Dont let anything I have said trouble you for a minute - perhaps after all its a fancy of mine together with the desire to have you tell me I am just the same tenderly loved "Little One" I've ever been - my very sadness added to it too probably - At all events Im going to bed blessing that you do love me very dearly - All well - I've been pretty well most of the Fall - God bless

[1st page]

Some gentle man wrote on your envelope in pencil "I know this is the letter you are wanting"

Signed E B B

[5th page]

my dear boy - I'll scarcely have time to send you a letter again before Xmas will I if not I'll write Xmas day
it will be no festive season with us this year the season is too closely connected with all

[6th page]

all of dear Lilas sorrow - Mother wishes very often you would come to see us she learned to love my boy
very much

Have I not filled up this paper - if I had known I was going to write

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so much I'd have taken another sheet. I guess you can make it out. Good Night

God bless my own precious boy ever prays your S