

# GERMANTOWN CRIER



HISTORIC  
GERMANTOWN  
Freedom's Backyard

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Volume 70 Number 1 Spring 2020 \$10

**Louisa Alcott Born in Germantown**  
Author of "An Old-Fashioned Girl" Which Begins Today in  
The Bulletin Moved to Boston When a Child



Orchard House, the Alcott homestead at Concord, Mass. It is the house described in "Little Women" as the home of the March girls, and is preserved today as a literary shrine. Below—Louisa May Alcott, at 22, when her literary career was getting under way.



**GERMANTOWN** was the birthplace of the author of the most popular books ever written for girls.

Louisa May Alcott, who wrote "Little Women," "An Old-Fashioned Girl," "Little Men," and other books, was born November 29, 1832, in a house at 423 Germantown av., the site of the present Masonic Hall.

Her book, "An Old-Fashioned Girl," begins today in The Bulletin.

Louisa May's parents were of New England "F Yankee" stock. Reuben Haines, a trustee of the old Germantown Academy, was responsible for bringing the Alcott family to Philadelphia.

Louisa's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a teacher whose ideas were far in advance of his time. In Boston he had founded an "infant school," said to have been much like the present day kindergarten. Reuben Haines prevailed upon Alcott to come to Philadelphia to establish a similar school.

Just two years ago, in November, 1937, the centenary of Louisa May Alcott's birth was celebrated, with activities centering at Orchard House, in Concord, Mass., where her early life was spent.

written while she was recuperating from illness.

Her "Hospital Sketches," written from a journal she kept during her Civil War service, and letters to the home folks, was her first real literary success.

Though success came gradually, it was real and worthwhile when it arrived. Louisa was able to make her family comfortable, to give her younger sister (the "Amy" of "Little Women") the education in art which her talents warranted, to travel abroad and finally to care for the two children of her oldest sister and the baby of the youngest, all left motherless by death.

Louisa May Alcott died on March 6, 1888, of complications arising from a cold she caught while visiting her father. He was failing rapidly, and died just before Louisa, though the knowledge of his death was kept from her. Her beloved "Marmee," her mother, who figures so charmingly in "Little Women," died in 1877.

**Patron Dies**  
When Amos Bronson Alcott and his wife, Abigail May, established themselves in Germantown in 1831, it seemed as though the troubles of the visionary school teacher were over. The school opened, pupils arrived, and success seemed around the corner.

But in October, 1831, Reuben Haines died suddenly. The school was plunged into financial difficulties, the parents withdrew their children. The Alcotts had no money with which to continue the enterprise. The first daughter, Anna Bronson (who became the "Meg" of "Little Women") was born May 30, 1831, and in November, 1832, there was the second daughter, Louisa.

**Move to Boston**  
Forced to give up the school, the Alcotts removed to Boston. The earliest anecdote about Louisa concerns that journey. Dressed in Sunday best, she was suddenly missed on the boat. A frantic search ensued. She was finally discovered in the engine room, grumpy but happy.

**MR. ALCOTT** was never to achieve financial success and as Louisa grew older she took upon herself the support of the family. Her first literary endeavor began with a poem written at the age of eight, entitled "To the First Robin."

**Served as Nurse in Civil War**  
Contrary to the story of the Alcott family as recorded in "Little Women," her father did not go to war. But Louisa did. She volunteered as a nurse in the Civil War, served six months at Union hospital in Georgetown, was stricken with fever and sent home.

The attack of fever was responsible for the many ailments from which she was to suffer in later years. "An Old-Fashioned Girl" was

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# GERMANTOWN CRIER



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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Historic Germantown tells the stories of American liberty and the everyday people who fought for it, reflecting a neighborhood of independence seekers and community builders. Historic Germantown is where one of Philadelphia's Revolutionary War battles was fought, where the first-ever American protest against slavery was written, and where one of the few remaining houses on the Underground Railroad still stands. Historic Germantown's mission is underpinned by the idea that the organization is ultimately only as strong as the community in which it resides, and that a vibrant organization can help contribute to the vitality of the old German Township.

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Newspaper clippings capture the essence of Louisa May Alcott's life, as found in George Clarence Johnson's scrapbook, *Pictorial Germantown Road and the Vicinity & Some of its Inhabitants*, Volume I.

Germantown Historical Society.

# The Alcotts In Germantown

*By Judith Callard*



A young Louisa May Alcott, as shown in a newspaper clipping in George Clarence Johnson's scrapbook, *Pictorial Germantown Road and the Vicinity & Some of its Inhabitants*, Volume I. Germantown Historical Society.

*Editor's note: The following article was originally printed in the 1996 issue of the Germantown Crier and has been "lightly" edited to conform to the Crier's current formatting. A series of images from the collections of the Germantown Historical Society are included in the following article replacing previous images, with those images remaining from the original article noted within the captions associated with each image. We are republishing this article in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution and in celebration of the accomplishments of women not just in Germantown, but everywhere.*

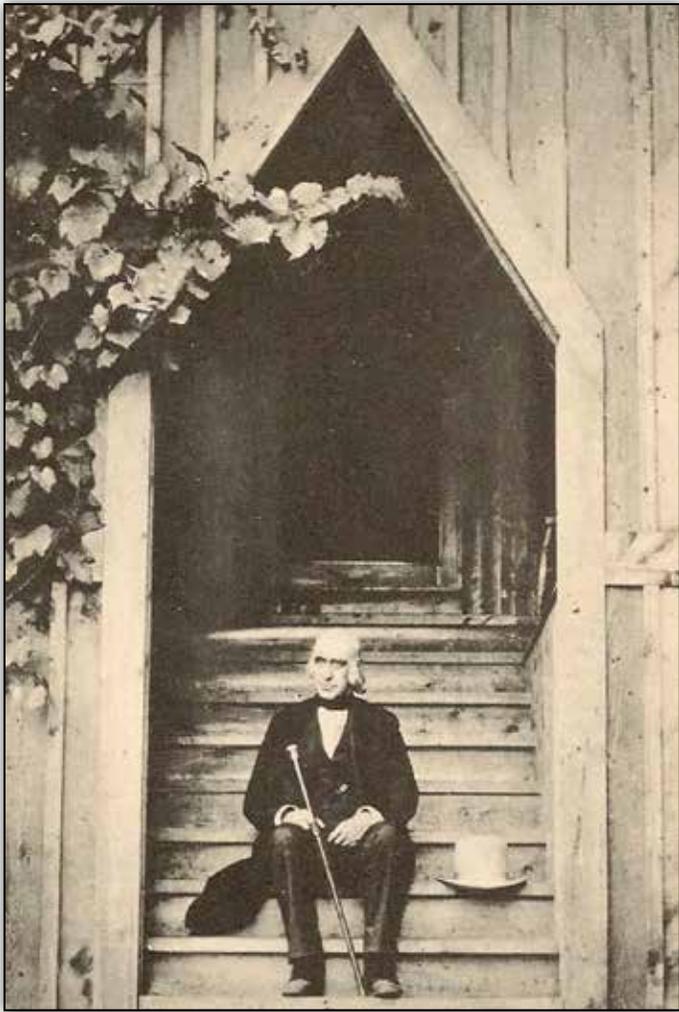
If it were not for Louisa May Alcott, her father, Bronson Alcott, would probably be little remembered. He is a footnote to her story, to the history of Emerson and the Transcendentalists, and to the history of education. He remains an interesting character partly because he documented his own life so thoroughly. Where his wife, Abba, asked her daughters to destroy her journals after her death, Bronson left thousands of pages of journals, mostly about his own philosophical development but with a lot of material about his family life, too. Bronson's journals were his attempt to secure his place in history, and in a strange sense, they have done so. All of Louisa May Alcott's biographers study Bronson's journals, because of what they reveal about Louisa's life and times.

The life of the Alcotts in Boston and Concord has been well documented, particularly their relationship to Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Hawthorne, and others. Bronson Alcott takes his place among that unusual, somewhat eccentric, group which surrounded Emerson. Emerson admired and sometimes despaired of Alcott, remaining a lifelong friend to him and his family.

Less well known, however, is the Alcotts' brief sojourn in Germantown and Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> They lived in the area for three-and-a-half years from the end of 1830 to the summer of 1834, and their two older daughters, Anna and Louisa, were born there.

All the major themes of their lives can be seen in this period. Experiments in education which start-

<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia and Germantown were separate townships within Philadelphia County until the consolidation of 1854. In 1831 some Germantown residents unsuccessfully pushed for a separate county, with Germantown as its county seat.



Bronson Alcott, shown in his later years in the doorway of The School of Philosophy, Orchard House, Concord, Massachusetts.

Germantown Historical Society.

ed hopefully soon petered out into failure and self pity. This was a reoccurring feature of Bronson's life, until he gave up on the hope of running a successful school (His last school closed in 1839). He was constantly torn between his desire to lead a solitary life of reading and thinking, and the practical needs of his family. Lack of income was a constant problem, and the family was mostly supported by family members. In Philadelphia and New England, the Alcotts enjoyed a close family life. There were periods of serious tension between the couple, but

they were devoted to their daughters and were both involved in their care. Bronson and Abba received affectionate support from family and friends wherever they lived, although those family members and friends were often frustrated and critical.

Whatever Bronson Alcott's eccentricities, he was on the "right" side of the major cause of his day, abolition, never doubting the justness of the cause, and showing courage in the demonstration of his beliefs. In 1830, he became a founding member of William Lloyd Garrison's "Preliminary Anti-Slavery Society." In 1839, he admitted a black girl to one of his Boston schools, refusing to dismiss her when other parents protested and withdrew their children.<sup>2</sup>

He was an agent on the Underground Railroad in Concord, along with members of the Emerson and Thoreau families, and opened his home to a slave escaping to Canada in 1847.<sup>3</sup>

Louisa's mother, Abigail "Abba" Alcott, like her brother, Samuel J. May, was a long-time abolitionist and an early member of the Female Anti-Slavery Committee in Philadelphia; hence, Louisa and her sisters grew up in a circle where to be against slavery was the norm. In the wider society it was not, and those who opposed slavery sometimes faced violence. Both Garrison and Abba's brother were attacked by mobs during their abolitionist crusades. Yet the Alcotts never wavered in their commitment and willingness to take a stand.

Bronson was also on the "right" side, from a modern perspective, in his views on education. A man who was regarded with suspicion in every school he taught in, in New England and in Pennsylvania, he knew instinctively as well as from his own schooling what many educators in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century did not that children learn better if learning is an enjoyable experience, if they can ask questions, if they can use concrete materials, such as blocks and maps, to help them. He gave each child a separate chair with a back, ventilated the school room, provided individual slates and plenty of books, and

2 Odell Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott* (Boston: Little Brown, 1937), p.210.

3 Robert D. Richardson Jr. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (California: University of California Press, 1995).

encouraged games, dancing, and exercise.<sup>4</sup> Though not a well-educated man himself, Alcott knew much about teaching.

His most successful teaching experiment was, without doubt, the education of his own children. His imaginative teaching, if overburdened by philosophical theories, stimulated their creativity. Together with Abba's practical sense and accepting love, Bronson produced four hardworking and artistic young women.

Bronson and Abba Alcott were married in May, 1830 and in spite of family ties in New England were ready for an experiment in Philadelphia when it was suggested by Reuben Haines in the fall of 1830. Haines, a wealthy Quaker, was interested in almost everything. At Wyck, his home in Germantown, he studied agriculture, gardening, birds, and the physical sciences, and corresponded with people around the world on these topics. He was the first secretary of the Academy of Natural Sciences and an active member of the Franklin Institute and the American Philosophical Society. A firefighter with the first hose company in Philadelphia, he was also involved with art, politics, Quakerism and his family. One of his deepest interests was education; he was progressive on the subject, maintaining that girls and boys, rich and poor, black and white, should all be educated.<sup>5</sup>

Haines had helped found the Germantown Infant School in 1829. This very successful school, designed for the children of poor parents, and managed by women from local prominent families (Morris, Wister, Bacon, Johnson, Shoemaker) lasted until 1886. His cousin Ann Haines was treasurer of the group for many years.<sup>6</sup> Children aged 2 to 7 were taught the three R's, and "little girls were further instructed in flax-spinning and sewing. Bread and molasses were provided for mid-day dinner, and the tiny ones were allowed a nap. A tuition fee of ten cents per

week was charged, though in cases of extreme poverty this was omitted."<sup>7</sup>

He also had helped that same year with the formation of a Lancastrian school in Germantown, in which older students supervised large numbers of younger students. These schools operated somewhat like an assembly line, with up to a thousand students in a single class, but in the end lost popularity and were replaced by schools with adult teachers.

Haines was a trustee of Germantown Academy, founded in 1761 as the Union School, at School House Lane and Greene Street. In 1830, the Academy was run down, and Haines's invitation to Bronson Alcott's friend and fellow educator, William Russell, to establish a female department at the school was an attempt to revitalize it.

Six months older than Alcott, William Russell was much better educated, having studied mathematics, theology and metaphysics at the University of Glasgow. He taught school for some years and then taught elocution in Boston. From 1826 to 1829, he edited the *American Journal of Education*, during which time he met Bronson and published a paper by him. He was Alcott's primary mentor in Germantown, and remained for a time in Philadelphia after Alcott left, returning to Massachusetts in 1838.<sup>8</sup>

Russell was interested in Haines's proposal and in a letter to him in September, offered to run the Academy with some fellow Bostonians, particularly Bronson Alcott, who could teach young children. The probability of an opening for Alcott would be a strong inducement to him to accept the position. He asked if there were enough people in Germantown interested in a school for girls and young children.

Haines responded favorably, noting that he had heard well of Alcott; he had seen Bronson's essay

4 Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress* pp.77-78, 87-89, 96-97.

5 W. Edmunds Claussen, *Wyck: The Story of an Historic House* (Philadelphia: 1970).

6 Ann Haines was the illegitimate daughter of Reuben Haines' uncle (also Reuben) and was raised by family members, including Haines's parents. She was independently wealthy and spent some of her adult life at Wyck.

7 "Germantown Past," *Germantown Crier* Vol. 36(4):90 (Fall 1984); Germantown Historical Society (GHS).

8 Information on Russell from Shepard; Hocker; *Germantown Telegraph* 7/13/1836 (LI-30, GHS).

on education, "On the Principles and Methods of Infant Instruction," written in the summer of 1830. Haines supported the idea of an elementary school as well as a female department. He did not, however, offer salaries to the two men. They were expected to provide their own support from fees they would charge the students. Russell replied that he had no capital and requested that the trustees of the Academy "bear part of the financial risk." He, Alcott, and a third teacher named Grund were willing to take on the Academy if influential individuals would help to recruit students. "[Mr. Alcott] could then safely leave his school in Boston with some definite prospects." While couched in gentlemanly terms, the letter shows that Russell and Alcott were unwilling to leave Boston without an assurance from Haines that there would be students and fees guaranteed.

In October, Haines again visited Boston and held further discussions with Russell and Alcott. A letter he wrote to his wife, Jane, shows that he researched both Russell's and Alcott's teaching methods himself. One day he intended to visit the granite quarries in Quincy, but because of a storm spent the day instead visiting Russell's classroom. He pretended to read a book while attentively observing everything that passed. "And I can truly say that from what I witnessed of his manner to his boys as well as from all I have heard there is no man I have ever seen or heard of that I should prefer to Mr. Russell to direct the Education of my son or daughter. His government of them is truly parental and rational, keeping them under sufficient restraint by treating them as rational beings." Russell planned on visiting Haines in November on his way to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was to spend the winter teaching elocution. He would then, according to Haines, be ready to go to Germantown in the spring. "I hope with his health [restored] and his pocket replenished."

"[A]fter leaving Miss Peabody's I spent an hour in Mr. Alcott's school and was very much pleased with his manner [of] developing the young mind.

His scholars are from 3 to 8 years of age." With this letter to Jane, Haines enclosed Bronson's pamphlet on infant instruction. It seems from this account that Haines was looking for a suitable teacher for his own children, as well as for those of other Germantowners. Indeed, he sent his own children to Russell's and Alcott's schools; in that sense, Haines's children received teaching from private tutors of his own choosing.

On his return to Germantown, Haines received letters from two distinguished Bostonians. George Ticknor, a Harvard professor, and Joseph Tuckerman, a Unitarian minister, offered high praise of Russell and enthusiasm for Alcott. Ticknor noted that Alcott "is married into one of our most respectable families & is much esteemed for his personal qualities." Tuckerman wrote: "Mr. Alcot [sic] as an infant teacher, has no competitor here. He is one of the most child-like and amiable of men."<sup>9</sup>

Alcott's career to this point had consisted of a period peddling sewing supplies, combs, soaps, and penknives door-to-door in the South, followed by teaching in a number of short-lived schools in New England. These schools in Connecticut and Boston had not been unvarnished successes. The parents of his Connecticut students did not approve of his innovations, his spending on school books (though it was his own money), the lack of corporal punishment, the cheerfulness of the children, and the friendly relationship between students and teacher. He was also seen as a heretic for his belief in a loving, not punitive, God. He was more successful in Boston but had only a modest income.<sup>10</sup> As a recently married man, he probably hoped for a salary at Germantown Academy. Since Haines was not in a position to offer a salary from the trustees, Alcott and Russell came to Philadelphia on Haines's word that pupils and support would be found.

Bronson and Abba Alcott and William Russell traveled from Boston on December 14, 1830, by sea,

9 Russell/Haines correspondence from Wyck papers. William Russell (WR) to Reuben Haines (RH) 9/7/1830; Series II Box 19 Folder 252. RH to WR 9/15/1830; Series II Box 19 Folder 252. WR to RH 9/21/1830; 10/19/1830; Series II Box 19 Folder 252. Joseph Tuckerman to RH 10/22/1830; Series II Box 19 Folder 252.

10 Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress* pp.48, 77ff.

stopped a day in New York and continued on to Philadelphia, arriving December 18. Bronson was just 31, Abba 30, and the couple had been married seven months. Abba was pregnant. The three found lodgings at Mrs. Margaret Austie's boarding house at 91 S. Third Street.<sup>11</sup> They rode to Germantown with Reuben Haines, visited the Academy, and met several local prominent citizens. Alcott was surprised by how provincial Germantown was and found the Academy in a "dilapidated state but with a valuable library."<sup>12</sup> He and Abba had become used to the liveliness of Boston and were obviously more drawn to Philadelphia than to the rather sleepy backwater of Germantown. But in the city he found Philadelphians shockingly absorbed with making money, whereas Bostonians seemed interested in ideals and the spiritual life.<sup>13</sup>

### Germantown in the 1830s

The arrival of the "summer people" from Philadelphia in the 18th century had gradually brought about changes in the atmosphere of Germantown. Instead of the bustling urban scene of the early part of the century, the wealthy families who bought second homes wanted quiet, rural retreats. An 1811 guidebook described Germantown as a "summer retreat for a number of citizens, and excepting its airy and elevated situation... it has little to interest or detain strangers."<sup>14</sup>

The population in the 1830s in Germantown was probably about 5,000, mostly in manufacture and trades rather than agriculture.<sup>15</sup> The rocky ground

and narrow properties did not encourage farming, though many people kept a few cows and horses on their back lots. Germantown had from its earliest years been a town of linen weavers, tanners, stocking makers, coopers, shoemakers, millers, innkeepers and wagon makers. In the 1830s, hatmaking was a flourishing trade, four hat shops employing 100 hat makers. In 1831, John Button introduced the first hosiery mill to Germantown, using imported machines.<sup>16</sup> Reuben Haines started out as one of the wealthy summer people, but was now fully engaged at Wyck, living there year round. To cut expenses, he was building a working farm which could provide a substantial part of his family's needs. Among other crops, he grew flax, grapes and mulberries.<sup>17</sup>

The school experiment with Alcott and Russell was one of the many irons Haines had in the fire. Around this time he was working with the group that wanted to build a railroad from Philadelphia to Germantown. With his many activities and commitments, and given his own energy, he probably expected Russell and Alcott to set up their schools themselves. He was strongly in favor of their experiment, however. "He appears very much interested in it... and says it will be the best [school] in Pennsylvania," wrote Jane Haines's cousin, S. Large, in a letter.<sup>18</sup>

A huge snowfall on January 14 must have made travel difficult, but the Alcotts seem to have spent most of the month meeting people and getting to know the city.<sup>19</sup> Russell and Alcott met Dr. James

11 Shepard, *City Directories*; and Bronson Alcott's journals indicate that Austie's boarding house was at 91 S. Third Street. *Philadelphia in 1830-1* by E. L. Carey and A. Hart (Philadelphia: 1830) says it was 21 S. Third Street.

12 Bronson Alcott's journal (BA) 1/1/1831. Alcott manuscript journals (Houghton Library, Harvard \*59M-308).

13 Shepard, p.138.

14 Stephanie Grauman Wolf, *Urban Village: Population, Community, and Family Structure in Germantown, Pennsylvania 1683-1800* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp.52, 54, 55.

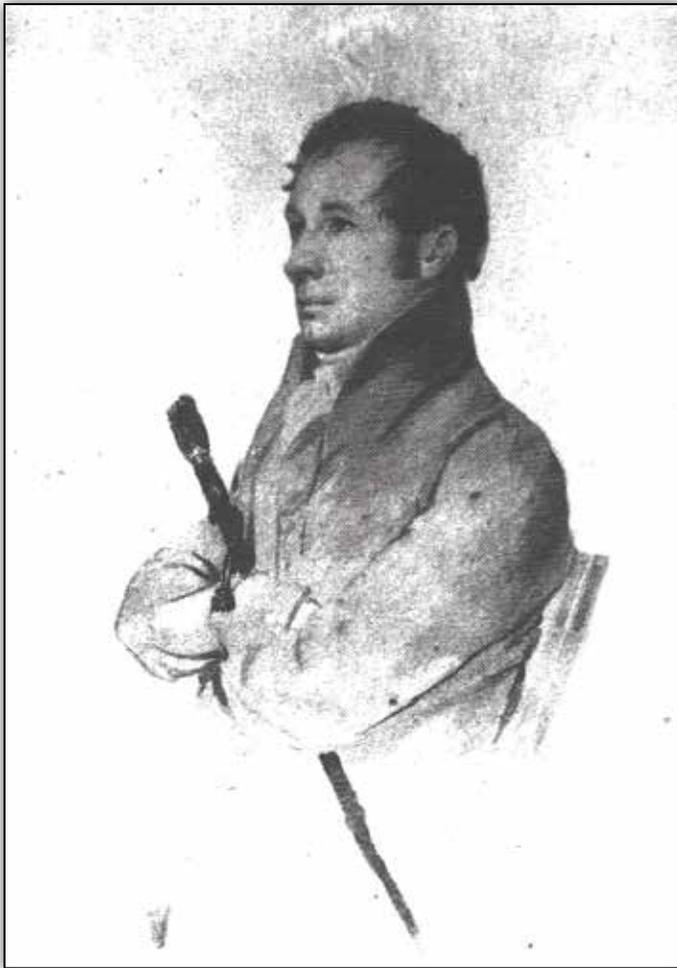
15 According to Charles Ellet's 1839-1843 map (Free Library of Philadelphia #97284-4), Germantown's population in 1840 was: "2569 white males, 2833 white females, 46 coloured males, 34 coloured females," for a total of 5482. Their occupations are listed as: "Agriculture: 341; Commerce: 50; Manufacturing and Trades: 735; Navigation of Oceans: 1; Learned Professors and Engineers: 40; Deaf, dumb, blind and insane: 14."

16 Hocker, *Germantown*; Naaman Keyser et al., *History of Old Germantown* (Germantown: McCann, 1907).

17 Sandra F. Mackenzie, "What a Beauty There Is In Harmony: The Reuben Haines Family of Wyck." Unpublished MA thesis (University of Delaware, 1979) pp.53, 55.

18 S. Large letter to Elizabeth Bowne, quoted in Claussen, *Wyck*, p.112.

19 "Snow 18 inches deep; drifted in many places 15 and 20 feet." C. J. Wister's *Memoir* (Philadelphia: 1886) Vol. II p. 128 (his father's farm journal for 1831); "An old-fashioned snow storm... It was really cheering and delightful to rise in the snow-stillness of the Sunday morning of the 16th January to witness such towering pyramids and deeply piled banks of glistening snow." Watson's *Annals*. See footnote 40.



Reuben Haines, circa 1820.

Courtesy of The Wyck Association.

Rush, Rev. William Henry Furness, Walter R. Johnson, and other “gentlemen of influence and intelligence,” including Robert Vaux, a friend of Reuben Haines, who had been impressed by Alcott’s essay on education.<sup>20</sup> During the period in Philadelphia, Alcott described Germantown and some of its notables in his journal. Reuben Haines, he observed, “is descended from an ancient and wealthy family, whose wealth he, at present, inherits. Mr. Haines is a very active busy man, chiefly interested in practi-

cal matters, meddling very little with theories and systems. He is engaged in agriculture, having extended landed estates.—Horticulture, brewing, his properties in the city, occupy much of his attention.

He is particularly curious in improving his breed of cattle having imported some from England.... At his residence in Germantown [Wyck], he has collected an extensive private cabinet of curiosities, minerals, prints etc. etc. Here we saw a fine bust of Plato. [He] is a tall... man, active and rapid in his movements and seldom fastens his mind long upon one subject. He seems designed for action, rather than thought. His temperament is sanguinous in the extreme. Great wealth and active influence have made him think that all his purposes are practicable; and failure seldom enters his imagination, which rather than judgement, is his leading attribute.”

Two more different men can hardly be imagined: Reuben Haines, the wealthy, practical man, interested in science, business, farming, and Bronson Alcott, reliant on his wife’s relatives for financial support, the abstract thinker who thought about the practical only when forced to. Though the families often socialized, Bronson’s lack of interest in practical, i.e. financial, matters was frequently discussed by the Haines family in letters, and no doubt, in person, in acerbic terms. Bronson described Germantown as he found it in early 1831: “The houses, built chiefly of stone, are all situated upon one street, which extends through the place, in a northern and southern direction, with many twistings and diclivities [sic].<sup>21</sup> The houses, externally, appear dingy and untasteful, but internally they are comfortable, and in some instances, elegantly decorated and furnished. Of this place, Mr. Watson has a history, which we saw in manuscript.”<sup>22</sup> The institutions he found worthy of notice in Germantown were Germantown Acad-

20 James Rush, son of the famous Philadelphia physician, Benjamin rush, was a non-practicing doctor who married the wealthy Phoebe Ridgeway and left the Library Company a million dollars. Rev. William Henry Furness was the only Unitarian minister in Philadelphia in this period. A preacher, writer, and abolitionist, he served his church from 1825 to 1875. He was the father of Philadelphia architect Frank Furness. Walter R. Johnson, see footnote 71. Roberts Vaux was one of the originators of the Pennsylvania public school system, president for 14 years of the Philadelphia public school board, one of the founders of the Athenaeum and the Pa. Historical Society. He was involved in the penal reform, abolition, and temperance movements.

21 Main Street or the Germantown Road, now known as Germantown Avenue.

22 *Annals of Philadelphia* by John Fanning Watson, originally published 1830, revised 1843.

emy, the Manual Labour Academy, and the Infant School. Germantown Academy was large enough to accommodate 100 boys, but only 25 were enrolled. Bronson noted that the school was currently under the superintendence of “two young gentlemen from the north; but it is not considered in a flourishing condition.” Some years before, Mr. Brewer from Massachusetts had taken charge of it, and from the low condition in which he found it, raised it to respectable standing and attracted many pupils from Philadelphia. After him followed Walter R. Johnson, under whose care the school continued to prosper. Both Brewer and Johnson were invited to the city as teachers, and the Academy lost its reputation with their departure.

Bronson was intrigued by the articles of apparatus in the Cabinet of the Academy and the many books and valuable prints. The Academy at present seemed in decline, with few people interested in its success, and the trustees, with the exception of Mr. Haines, apparently paid little attention to its concerns. When fewer good schools existed in Philadelphia, parents had sent their children there. Bronson was told that the Academy’s prospects now were improving. “The people of Phila., and of Pennsylvania, are slow in motion... The wants of education are beginning to be felt, and a movement seems about to commence. With the plain and cautious habits, I hope and trust that something good will be done.”<sup>23</sup>

At the end of January, William Russell (in Philadelphia) wrote to Haines (in Germantown) offering a new proposal for the Academy. Mr. Grund had decided to stay in Boston, but Theodore Jencks, also of Boston, was interested in heading the male school with Mr. Cole [already a teacher in the school], and Russell and Alcott would run the female and infant schools.<sup>24</sup> In February, Russell and Alcott wrote a

prospectus for their female and infant departments, which, after revisions, received the signatures of the trustees of the Academy, among them Benjamin Chew, John Watson, James Duval, Samuel Harvey, and Haines. Alcott’s journal notes that he and Russell would prefer a school in Philadelphia, but support might take a year to arrange “among the people of this careful and calculating community. In Germantown, Mr. Haines would be actively engaged in our favour... and we were unwilling to lose [his influence and assistance.]”<sup>25</sup> They hoped to have a school together, taking day-scholars and a few boarding students who would live with them. Some of their circulars specifically mention that Mrs. Alcott and Mrs. Russell would be assisting in the care of the boarders.

In spite of their recent arrival in Philadelphia, in mid-February Alcott and Russell called a meeting of the city’s teachers at W. R. Johnson’s room at the Franklin Institute and formed The Philadelphia Association of Teachers.

### **The Alcotts move to Mrs. Stuckart’s boarding house in Germantown**

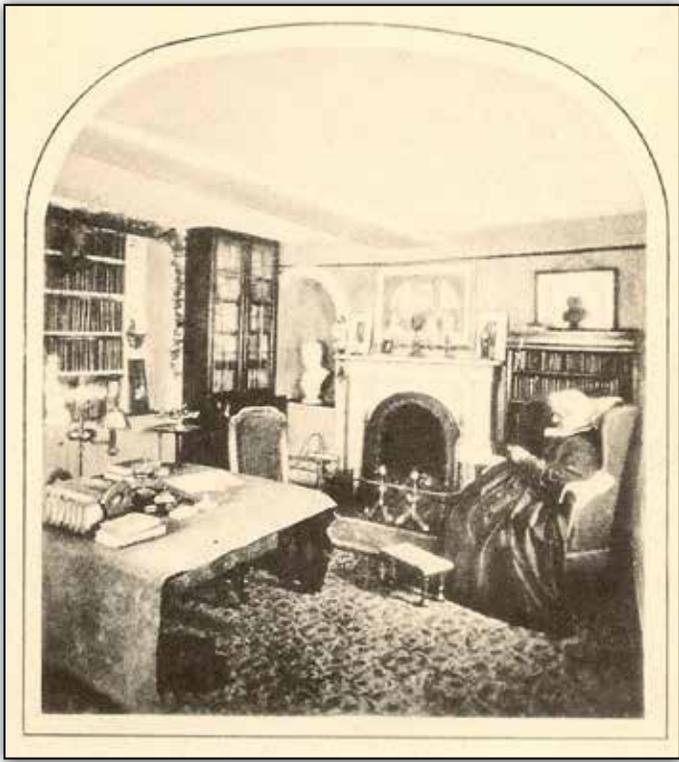
On February 18, Bronson and Abba Alcott moved to Mrs. Stuckart’s boarding house<sup>26</sup> in Germantown to await the birth of their first child. Russell remained in Philadelphia, proposing to go to Boston for his family as soon as plans for the school were firmed up. According to Alcott’s journal, nothing was certain: “Our school in Germantown is in progress. Three or four weeks will decide this question. At present the want of suitable dwellings for ourselves, and commodious school-rooms seems unfavourable to our purpose. These may, however, be provided. Should they not be, and the success promised by Mr.

23 BA Journal 1/20/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

24 William Russell to Reuben Haines 1/26/1831 and 1/29/1831. Wyck papers: Series II Box 19 Folder.

25 BA Journal 2/10/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

26 Mrs. Stuckart’s boarding house: An 1851 Township of Germantown map by Rogerson and Murphy (copies at Free Library of Phila. and GHS) shows a Mrs. Stuckart’s at the northwest corner of what is now Coulter Street, so this may be the boarding house site. An 1856 survey in preparation for the cutting through of Coulter Street shows Dorothea Stuckart owning the northwest corner lot (Road Petitions, Court of Quarter Sessions [Phila. City Archives Folio 81 folder 1581]). In 1831, before Coulter Street existed, boys used the fields of Christopher Bockius as a shortcut to Germantown Academy (Keyser et al.). There were other Stuckarts/ Stuckerts in Germantown at this time.



Abigail "Abba" May Alcott shown relaxing in the parlor of their home in Concord, Massachusetts, shortly before her death in 1877. Germantown Historical Society.

Haines, who is very active in our favour, not be what we expect, we might both return to the city. A school in the city would, on some accounts be preferred; and Mr. Furness and my friends there seem inclined to... aid me in establishing one there." They were comfortably situated

—Mrs. Alcott much to her mind, in anticipation of her approaching confinement—and myself in watching the progress of our plans for the school, and the preparation of my book for publication—beneficial visits to the city in reference to the movement... regarding education, will likewise be interesting to me. Forming acquaintance with the people of Germantown will also occupy some of my time... Mr. Haines' society, and Library, and collections... are also attractions.<sup>27</sup>

It must have been clear to the energetic and busy Reuben Haines that he would have to provide Alcott with a school and home and students, or the school would not happen. Both Abba and Bronson were resigned to the fact that only Haines could help them and that any school he helped set up would be in Germantown, not the city.

Abba, in a letter to her father, Col. Joseph May, wrote:

Our prospects are pleasant and encouraging; we have found many important friends and, though in Germantown, shall not be cut off from this very generous and intelligent society. We enjoy the simple manners and habits of the people here very much. You would be delighted with the cheerful and natural behavior of the most wealthy and aristocratic part of society. The Friends are the majority and this, I suppose, gives a dignified, tranquil, and simple air to the whole.<sup>28</sup>

Bronson described the "refinement" of the circle he knew, thus:

The people of Germantown have been very kind and attentive to us—to Mrs. Alcott in particular. They are interested in their manners, and from having frequented good society (living as they have done in the city) they do not resemble those so generally prevalent in villages like Germantown. And besides, the people from the city, making this place a summer resort, have contributed much to the refinement of the mind and manners of society here. Those who patronize our school are, without exception, people of wealth, intelligence, and refinement, residing in Germantown in preference to the city, to enjoy the advantages of health and rural scenery.

27 BA journal 2/18/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

28 Abba Alcott letter to Col. Joseph May, Feb. 1831, quoted in "The Alcotts: A Study in Genius," by Elizabeth Mellor, *Germantown Crier*, Vol 2(4): 7, Dec. 1950 (GHS).

Bronson continued his observations on Germantown:

The country around Germantown is very beautiful. On the main street [Germantown Avenue], extending three or four miles are situated the houses, with lots in the rear. These houses are by no means agreeable to the eye. But those situated on the lanes at a little distance from this street, are very beautiful, elegant, and delightful. On the banks of the Wissahicon [sic], running within a mile of the village, and uniting with the Schuylkill, there are many romantic situations... In a deep and romantic valley, a mile from the village, is the birth place of Rittenhouse, the philosopher. The dwelling is of stone, in the German style of architecture, and is still inhabited by his descendants.

Bronson recorded that he and Russell had taken a house, pleasantly situated a short distance from the village (the center of Germantown near Market Square) and spacious enough for their families and school, with fine gardens and walks. The rooms were well-suited for schoolrooms and the bedrooms "large, airy, and much to our mind.—We think the situation a very fine one." With enough pupils promised to make the school financially viable, they felt optimistic about their prospects. Bronson thought their residence was one of the most beautiful in the village, more so than they had expected to obtain, after the "long looking about for a dwelling. Several houses have, at times, been thought of, and almost fixed upon for us, but in the wish to suit ourselves better, we had deferred taking them. Unexpectedly, this has been obtained." Although Bronson writes as if the house on Germantown Avenue were designed to be used as a school and home for both Russells and Alcotts, in the end only the Alcotts moved into it.

The house Haines found for them was owned by Elizabeth Rooker (nee Smart), the widow of a minister of the Presyterian Church in Germantown, James Rooker. Elizabeth Smart and her sister, Ann Armat, owned the house jointly for a number of years; then

Elizabeth bought out her sister and jointly owned the property with her husband when she married. Haines's family account book for March 18, 1831, has the entry: "Bought of Elizabeth Rooker house and lot next below Widow Stuckert's place for \$3100." The deed of the property, drawn up April 18, known to the locals as Pine Place or the Rookery, gives the purchase price as \$3000, and describes it as "a certain two-story stone messuage [house] and two contiguous lots."<sup>29</sup>

Alcott and Russell planned to set up separate but nearby establishments and to teach in each other's schools. Haines's arrangement with Russell was somewhat different than that with Alcott. He loaned Russell \$1400 to establish the girls' school at Kelley's house on Church Lane (near the railroad bridge), which Russell paid back in installments with interest. A memo by Haines on the Pine Place property, however, noted: "A. B. Alcott moved into this property to open a preparatory to pay no rent for the property until the success of the school shall enable him to do it with convenience."<sup>30</sup>

From later descriptions, it is clear that the Alcott house (at what is now 5423-5-7 Germantown Avenue) was the more desirable of the two. The house was unusually large and attractive and throughout its existence was used by institutions and groups as well as individuals because of its large rooms. It was on a 3/4-acre property with woodland paths and a garden.

### **The Birth of Anna Bronson Alcott**

Although they now had a house and school, the Alcotts remained at Mrs. Stuckart's boarding house, waiting for the birth of their child and until Bronson, with his strong aesthetic sense, was satisfied that the decoration and furnishings of the school were suitable for the influence they would exert on students. He also sent his prospectus to 25 gentlemen in the city, attended Friends Meeting with Haines, and rode into the city for another meeting of the Philadelphia Teachers Association.

29 Deed Book AM#18 p. 193ff (Philadelphia City Archives).

30 Sandra F. Mackenzie thesis, "Wyck," pp. 82, 111.

At 11 P.M. on Wednesday, March 16, 1831, Abba and Bronson's first daughter was born, to the couple's ecstatic welcome. Named Anna Bronson Alcott, she was the first of the four daughters (and eight pregnancies) of Alba Alcott.<sup>31</sup> Bronson's journal records his emotions: "At this hour a child was born to us. This is a new, and interesting, event in the history of our lives. How delightful were the emotions produced by the first sounds of the infant's cry, making it sure that I was, indeed, a father! Joy, gratitude, hope, and affection, were all mingled in our feeling.—Unto us a child is given!"<sup>32</sup>

Abba's reaction was similar. In a letter to her brother, Samuel J. May, she wrote

I am so well and happy that I cannot resist the wish any longer to give you some actual demonstration of my strength and enjoyment... Lucretia [Sam's wife] I suppose is ready with her condolence that it is a girl. I don't need it—My happiness in its existence and the perfection of its person is quite as much as I can well bear. I cannot conceive that its being a boy could add thereto—Had she not lived an hour after the pangs of birth, I still should rejoice that she had been born. The joy of that moment was sufficient compensation for the anguish of 36 hours. But she has lived long enough to open all the fountains of my higher and better nature. She has given love to life—and life to love...<sup>33</sup>

Bronson stayed close to Abba and Anna and began keeping a journal of his observations of Anna's progress: "[I commenced] an Historical account of the development of the Intellect and Moral Conduct of my little girl from birth, to be continued as her mind and heart make progress. I had often thought of this, previous to my becoming a father."<sup>34</sup>

These infant journals, twenty-five hundred pages of them, were kept by Bronson through the birth and early childhood of Anna, Louisa, and Elizabeth. They are, says Madelon Bedell in *The Alcotts: Portrait of a Family*, "the most complete records of early child rearing in America yet to be discovered... [It was] the first work of child psychology in the United States."<sup>35</sup>

By the end of March, Russell had returned with his family from Boston. The snows of January were still visible in Germantown. According to Bronson's journal on April 7, Abba "improves daily; rode out today; and the infant makes daily progress, which I have recorded." On April 15, he noted that Anna's progress was rapid and interesting. On April 20, Bronson spent the day in Philadelphia, looking at furniture "to supply our house, into which we expect to move in a few weeks—Mr. Haines having purchased one for us on the first in Germantown." At the boarding house, he worked on a lecture for the Philadelphia Association of Teachers, which he gave at the end of April to a small and not particularly responsive audience.<sup>36</sup> Reuben Haines's account book notes on May 2: "Mr. Russell's School for Girls opened at Kelley's House Church Lane. Mr. Alcott's School for Preliminary Instruction opened."<sup>37</sup> Bronson's journal for the same day noted that Russell started his teaching at his house with 13 scholars, including Haines's daughters Elizabeth, aged 14, and Hannah, aged 9. Since his own house was not ready, Bronson deferred the formal opening of his school until the following Monday, meanwhile receiving a few pupils at his boardings. On May 3, Bronson returned to Philadelphia, again buying furniture. Soon after, Abba reported to her father that their house was painted inside and out and neatly furnished, the spacious grounds beautifully laid out and the garden planted.<sup>38</sup>

31 "Eight pregnancies" Madelon Bedell, *The Alcotts: Portrait of a Family* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1980) p.151.

32 BA journal 3/16/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

33 Abba Alcott letter to her brother Samuel J. May, quoted in Bedell, *The Alcotts*, p.56.

34 BA journal 3/25/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

35 Bedell, *The Alcotts*, pp.57, 58.

36 BA journal 4/18/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

37 Reuben Haines's account book 1831. Wyck Papers.

38 Abba Alcott letter to Col. May 5/7/1831, quoted in Mellor, "The Alcotts."

## The Alcotts move into Pine Place

On May 13, 1831, according to Bronson's journal,

Our house being ready, having been painted and fitted up to our minds, we this day moved into it; and shall now be ready to commence living by ourselves, receiving boarders as scholars into our family. The house is almost every thing which we could desire, neat, somewhat modern in its architecture, and sufficiently large to answer all of our present purposes. The parlours, and school-room when furnished, will be very comfortable and exert a good influence on character. Mrs. Alcott and baby are both in fine health; and the nurse whom we have engaged to live with us, to aid Mrs. A. in the superintendence of the domestic concerns, and in the school-room, seems quite suited to our purpose and wishes.

Bronson had only five little boys from Germantown as day-scholars, including apparently, Robert Haines, three children from Russell's household and a young Wistar. For those parents, Bronson's school was what they wanted for their children. He also hoped to receive children from abroad as boarders, to increase the numbers. But Bronson had visions of influencing teachers and parents on a large scale. A little school in a dull suburb of Philadelphia was not his goal. Already he found the society available in Germantown narrow and provincial. Whether he succeeded or not, and this was not a particularly auspicious start, the healthy air of Germantown, he felt, would be beneficial for his family.<sup>39</sup>

Bronson's journal recorded his wish to study, write and publish more. He seemed to be looking beyond Germantown, noting its limitations, and as throughout his life, feeling underappreciated. Abba, on the other hand, engrossed in her new baby, appeared content with Pine Place and her life. In a letter to her brother, she wrote:

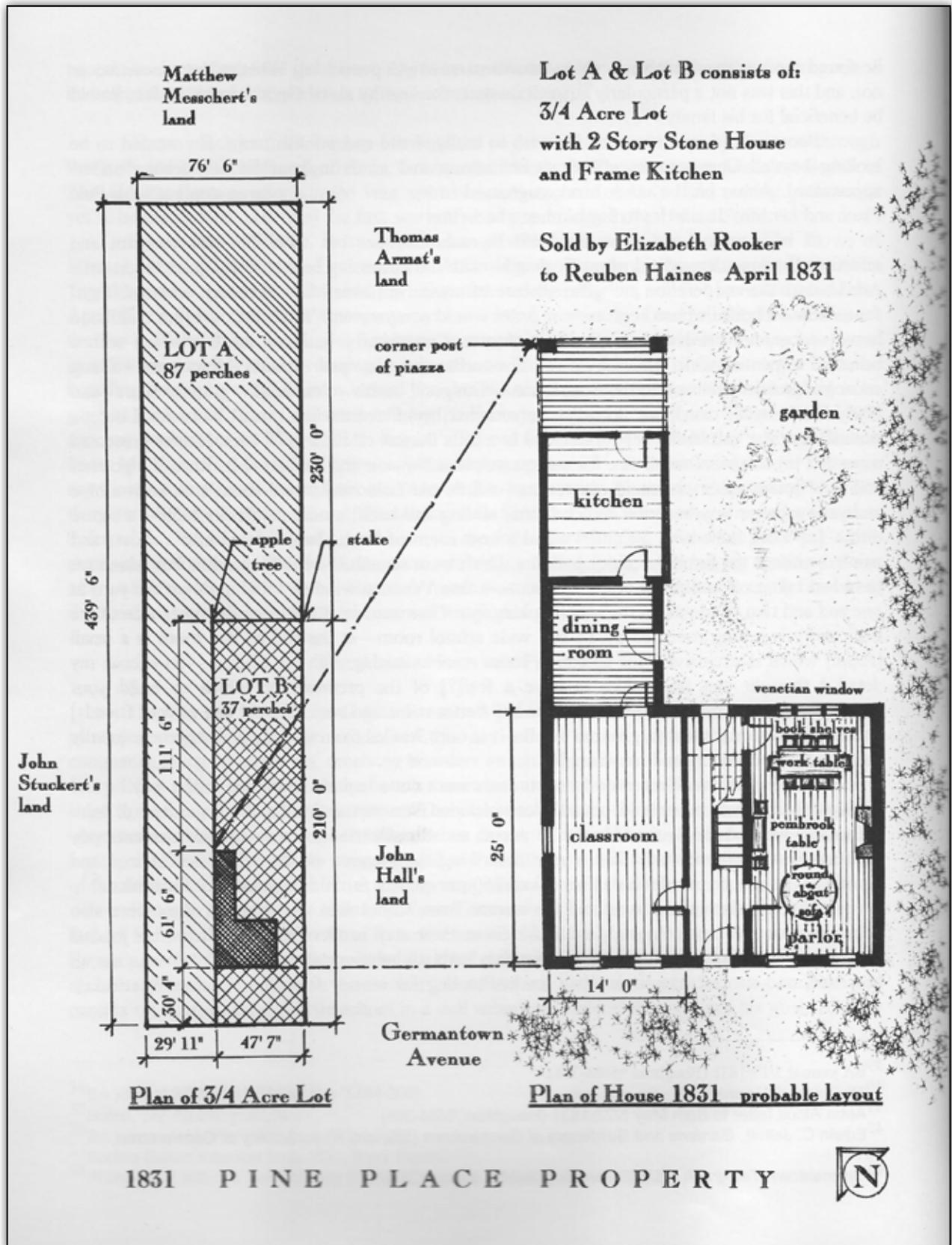
I have cares—and soon they will be arduous ones but with the mild constraint and

affectionate sympathy and aid of my husband—with the increasing health of my quiet bright little Anna—with the cooperation and efficient care of my nurse (turned housekeeper), an amiable girl for a cook—a house whose neatness and order would compare with Federal Court [her childhood home]—a garden lined with raspberries –current – gooseberry bushes – a large grounds with a beautiful serpentine walk shaded by pine – firs – cedars – apple – pear – peach – plum trees – a long cedar hedge from the back to the front fence—with good health – clear head – grateful heart – and ready hand—what can I not do when surrounded by influences like these? Note for Lucretia exclusively (the “out back” is... situated in a little thicket of cedars).<sup>40</sup> Mrs. Haines presented us with 2 bronze busts small size for our mantelpiece Newton and Locke—Mr. Russell's portrait and two flower vases ornament our rooms—a little old-fashioned round-about sofa with a blue and yellow cover (my beautiful French fabric, seating and back) a neat pembroke table—a centre ditto—[a] work table with 10 chairs—and a neat room of book shelves fitted into a recess and painted white is the furniture of our parlours which were separated by folding doors but which we have had taken off and made one long room—a fine Venetian window looking down the yard at one end and two windows on the other looking into Germantown Street [sic] —on the other side of the front entry is a long room 25 by 14 feet wide school room—at the end of this room is a small [room] which is exclusively for an eating room communicating with the kitchen—do excuse my detail I thought you might like to have a feel[?] of the premises on which to build your conclusions about my new home—but you had better come and see... Should any of [our friends] chance this way beg them to give me a call—it is only 7 miles from the city and stages frequently through the day coming and returning.<sup>41</sup>

39 BA journal 5/31/1831 (Houghton \*59M-308).

40 The “outback” is presumably the outhouse.

41 Abba Alcott letter to Sam May 5/31/1831 (Houghton \*59M-305).



This drawing by Ann LaBorie and included in the original *Germantown Crier* article shows the location of Pine Place at present-day 5423-5427 Germantown Avenue, and the floorplan of the property. Church Lane would be located along the left border of this illustration. Germantown Historical Society.

The fees Bronson received from students were not adequate to live on in the way he and Abba wished. Their household nevertheless included servants and a "jobbing gardener," John Hart, who worked for Reuben Haines.<sup>42</sup> Alcott and Russell tried to increase their student body with ads in the *Germantown Telegraph*, describing the location of the school as "retired and agreeable... a country residence." They asked \$50 per quarter for boarding and \$10 for tuition.<sup>43</sup>

The Alcotts had a house, and the income from school fees. Nevertheless, they were also living on money from Colonel May. Throughout their stay in Germantown, Bronson's journal records: "Wrote Col. May regarding remittance." Abba's relationship with her father was not an easy one, and it must have been hard for her to beg for money from him. A letter of rebuke, written by Colonel May to Abba shortly after the family returned to Boston and again requested money, pointed out in no uncertain terms what he viewed as their failure in Philadelphia, resulting in a waste of four and a half years and debts of \$1000 or more.<sup>44</sup>

In his journal for June, Bronson summarized his efforts thus far. He was teaching a school for children between the ages of three and nine years of age, as a department of the Germantown Female School, under the superintendence of William Russell in the higher department. They had hoped to have a school of 30 to 40 pupils, drawn from the immediate neighborhood. He and Russell interchanged instruction in the two departments.

The school has been in operation 8 weeks. The number of pupils in my own department is, at present, 10. They begin to be interested in their pursuits at school; having associated pleasant ideas with all their exercises. The school-room (a part of my own dwelling) is a pleasant one...

A large yard is attached to the school-room in which the children are encouraged to play an hour or two daily.

The main purpose of the school is to form the character, mental and moral, of the pupils. For this purpose, they arrive at the school at 8 o'clock in the morning; have an hour's play in the yard, and enjoy a pleasant social intercourse till 9, when their exercises in the school-room commence. The relation of a story by the teacher, involving an illustration of some virtue, designed to excite virtuous feelings in their bosoms, usually begins their exercises. Both Teacher and children remark upon the story, and illustrate the principles involved in it, by events or feelings drawn from their own reading or experiences. This exercise usually occupies an hour, when the children commence writing on their slates, or in books, prepared for the purpose, simple exercises in spelling, reading, definition, expression, drawing, etc. All are competent to write in the common roman letters. In a variety of exercises on the slate & in their books, they pass the day; 3 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon.

Nothing is presented them without first making it interesting to them, and thus securing their voluntary attention. They are made happy by taking an interest in their own progress and pursuits.

In July, at the end of the first quarter, Bronson noted that he had 13 students, so the school was expanding. In August, there was a vacation, during which he read and wrote. He also took students to the Wissahickon woods for a day's outing.<sup>45</sup> Abba, meanwhile, spent most of her time with Anna, never going out without her and taking her about the garden in a basket wagon twice a day.<sup>46</sup>

42 Edwin C. Jellett, *Gardens and Gardeners of Germantown* (Site and Relic Society of Germantown, 1914).

43 *Germantown Telegraph* 7/6/1831 and subsequent issues (GHS).

44 Colonel May letter to Abba Alcott, quoted in Bedell, *The Alcotts*, p.136.

45 BA journal 8/1831 (Houghton \*59M-305).

46 Abba Alcott letter to Sam May 8/11/1831 (Houghton \*59M-305).

The Haines family socialized with the Alcotts, introduced them around, and wrote about their activities in family letters. When Jane Haines visited family in New York, she received news of Germantown from Reuben's cousin Ann, and from Mary Ann Donaldson, the Haines governess and family friend. These letters cover news of the farm at Wyck, the advent of the railroad, the Haines children, and often, comments on the doings of the Alcotts and Russells.

On June 5, Deborah Logan, living at Stenton, wrote in her diary that Ann Haines called with Abba Alcott, "who seems an agreeable woman."<sup>47</sup> At the end of August, Jane Haines reported to her husband, in Boston, that she and Abba were going to the dentist together.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Death of Reuben Haines**

On October 19, 1831, disaster befell the Haines family, and, by extension, the Alcotts. After an evening meeting at the Academy of Natural Sciences, Reuben Haines, then only 45, died at Wyck.<sup>49</sup> His death left Jane Haines with five children and one due the following summer, and a huge estate valued at \$200,000 which took many years to settle.<sup>50</sup> For the Alcotts, dependent on the good will and energy of Haines, life became much more difficult. As friends of Jane Haines, they were in an awkward position. Abba Alcott wrote quietly to Mary Ann Donaldson, asking if the family could remain at Pine Place until spring. "Do not consult Mrs. Haines on this subject—it might distress her—I had rather give up the project than for a moment add to her sufferings." This must have been agreed to, and the family remained in the house for over a year.<sup>51</sup>

But without Haines's patronage, some students were withdrawn from the school. Beyond Haines's circle, opinions were not kind about Bronson's ideas. C. J. Wister, who started at Germantown Academy at this time, and whose father was a trustee of the Academy, wrote later: "These gentlemen [Russell and Alcott]... hailed from Yankeeland, and were charged to the muzzle with progressive New England ideas, far too transcendental for the matter-of-fact village in which they were about to disseminate them. They were gentlemen, however, of culture and refinement, but being entirely unpractical, were not successful in advancing the prosperity of the school."<sup>52</sup>

A different kind of man from Bronson Alcott might have taken on the task of filling his school and making a financial arrangement with Jane Haines to rent the house. But Bronson was unable to do so, and there are signs that in spite of cheerful letters to his mother, he was depressed by the situation. His journal is full of abstract writing and diagrams that he called "Pyramids of Being," about the soul's relationship to heaven. He wrote to Colonel May in December "regarding our pecuniary matters" and noted that he had only eight or ten pupils, down from thirteen. He and Abba probably continued to live on borrowed money as tuition fees shrank. In January, Bronson's journal notes: "Interested this month in reading and reflecting on the nature of man... My school occupied some of my time and thoughts. But the essential interest of my thoughts was turned upon principles rather than details." This was a recurring feature of Bronson's life: when a project was failing, he turned inward, sometimes even retiring to bed and refusing to eat.

47 Unpublished Deborah Logan journal 6/5/1831. Courtesy of Stenton Museum.

48 Jane Haines letter to Reuben Haines 8/28/1831. Wyck papers Series II Box 20 Folder 275.

49 Haines's friend Mme. Fretageot believed that he died from an overdose of laudanum, either accidental or deliberate (Wyck). Laudanum and other opiates were legal and available without prescription in the 19th century for pain, insomnia, depression, and other ailments.

50 Mackenzie thesis, "Wyck," pp.58, 110.

51 Mackenzie thesis, p.111.

52 C. J. Wister's memoir Vol. II p.63 (GHS). Typed notes of an interview by E. C. Jellett with Wister noted: "[He] remembered Bronson Alcott as peculiar and eccentric. Often told pupils 'Never be surprised; be eternally on your guard.' Passing along the aisle he would suddenly kick a seat from under a pupil; parents complained and withdrew their children. Charles J. Wister's brother Owen was a student in Alcott's school. On his wedding trip he called on Alcott in New England. He showed no cordiality and the visitors left in disgust." (Alcott family file, GHS).

In May, however, he felt more hopeful that his school would fill up. Jane Haines wrote that her cousin Daniel B. Smith's two boys were to be day scholars with Alcott; and Hannah Haines, Jane's daughter, noted that there were three girls boarding at the Alcotts. Hannah herself lodged at the Russells' with another girl.<sup>53</sup> In June, Bronson commented in his journal that his school experiment had not provided an adequate income, and he was not sure if it could be continued in the fall. He wanted to continue his joint effort with Russell, however.<sup>54</sup>

Friendly relations between the Alcott and Haines families continued. Anna must have enjoyed being taken to the garden and farm at Wyck. Abba Alcott went there to see Jane Haines's new baby, also called Jane, born eight months after Reuben's death. The baby was being attended by Mrs. Brown, who later assisted Abba (now five months pregnant) after her second delivery.

Abba's letter to her brother in August shows the state the family was in financially: "Mr. Haines' death has prostrated all our hopes here... We have done well; but our children all leave us in October and then it is a long time to live till June without any income worth mentioning—And living in Germantown is higher than in a market town. We pay more for meat and vegetables here than in the City."<sup>55</sup>

Widely published, if apocryphal, stories of the Alcotts during this time relate the deprivations faced by the family. They tell how Abba Alcott tried to reduce expenses by dismissing servants and doing all the household work herself. Bronson took on the menial work around the school. Yet matters went from

bad to worse. Once the family and the pupils were without meat for two days, and the boarding children complained of hunger. Abba angrily declared, "I cannot bear children, teach school and do all the work without food," she protested. Exhausted, she told her husband to "use common sense and care for the bodies of the children as well as their souls."

"What would you have me do, my dear?" inquired the astonished Alcott. "Can I hunt or trap in Germantown? We have no money for the butcher." Abba's answer was "Give up this school, before we are hopelessly in debt. It is impossible."<sup>56</sup>

In September, Bronson's journal says that "the public mind is not yet... prepared for an experiment adequate to my desires and expectations." In October he mostly read and engaged in a correspondence on religion and ethics with a nine-year-old girl, Elizabeth Lewis, who was boarding with the family. (He often had students write letters to him as part of their schooling).<sup>57</sup>

Mary Ann Donaldson, hired by the Haines family in 1828 to tutor the children and now a trusted friend, was a loyal friend also to Abba Alcott.<sup>58</sup> On November 25, 1832, she reported to Jane that she had visited Abba Alcott the week before and found her well and in good spirits, but that Ann Haines had just visited and found her in bed "not well."

### **Louisa May Alcott's Birth at Pine Place**

In spite of their serious financial difficulties, caused largely by the death of their patron Reuben Haines,

53 Jane Haines letter to Ann Haines 5/30/1832. Wyck Papers Series II Box 27 Folder 407; Hannah Haines letter to Ann Haines 6/12/1832. Wyck Papers Series II Box 27 Folder 406.

54 BA Journal 6/1832.

55 Abba Alcott letter to Sam May 8/24/1832 (Houghton \*59M-305).

56 The earliest tellers of this story seem to be Hocker, *Germantown* (1933) p. 178; and Mellor, "The Alcotts," (originally read before the Germantown Historical Society in 1932).

57 BA journal 9/1832.

58 Mary Ann Donaldson's correspondence with Jane Haines and Ann Haines show the trust placed in her regarding both the children and the management of Wyck. She shows no reticence in discussing the Alcotts, Russells, Ann Haines and others. Her sister was married to Walter R. Johnson, one of the men Bronson met when he first arrived in Philadelphia. He had been principal of Germantown Academy from 1821-6. He took what were probably the first daguerreotypes in Germantown in 1840, including one of Mary Ann Donaldson and the two youngest Haines children at Wyck. ("Secure the Shadow, Ere the Substance Fade," *Germantown Crier* Vol. 38(1):10 Winter 1985/6).

Abba and Bronson were delighted by the birth of their second daughter, Louisa May Alcott. She was born just past midnight on November 29, 1832, at Pine Place. Anna was now a year-and-a-half old. Bronson immediately wrote with the good news to his father-in-law, Col. Joseph May: "It is with great pleasure that I announce to you the birth of a second daughter. She was born at half-past 12 this morning, on my birthday (33), and is a fine, healthful child. Abba inclines to call her babe Louisa May—a name to her full of every association connected with amiable benevolence and exalted worth. I hope its present possessor may rise to equal attainment, and deserve a place in the estimation of society."<sup>59</sup>

The previous "possessor" of the name Louisa May was Abba's beloved older sister, Louisa May Greele, who had died four years before. Of the twelve children of Abba's parents, only six, including Louisa, had survived infancy, and the death of her sister had been a serious blow to Abba.<sup>60</sup>

To his mother, Bronson Alcott described Louisa thus:

She is a very fine, fat little creature, much larger than Anna was at birth, with a firm constitution for building up a fine character, which, I trust, we shall do our part to accomplish.—Abba is doing well thus far. She has suffered a good deal during the summer, but has been unusually cheerful amid the cares and anxieties of life, and of her situation. There are few, I believe, more interested in home than she alone.—Such, as you are aware, was the companion which I wished to secure to myself; and such, have I, indeed, found.<sup>61</sup>

Bronson wrote the same day to Jane Haines about Louisa's birth and reported that "Anna is in excellent health—her mind and heart, as well as her person, expand most beautifully, and promise us all we could ask or desire."<sup>62</sup>

One of Bronson's pupils at the time was Robert B. Haines, son of Reuben and Jane. In later years he used to tell his children of the enthusiasm of Bronson Alcott over the arrival of Louisa in the family and how he took all the children in the school upstairs to Mrs. Alcott's room so they could see the baby.<sup>63</sup>

Bronson's journal for this period rejoices in his new daughter, extolling the virtues of domestic life, from which "I have derived much enjoyment, finding in the ties thus originated the necessary connexions [sic] with sympathetic existence—from which my abstract habits incline me too strongly, perhaps, to escape."<sup>64</sup>

He resumed the careful observations and notetaking which he had started on his elder daughter, Anna, and immediately began a new notebook on Louisa:

The subject of these observations is a female, born after the usual period of gestation November 29 1832: L.M. Alcott. 5<sup>th</sup> day: From the want of appropriate nourishment, the maternal fountain being unfilled, she was quite uneasy during this period. Crying at times was common, arising from the irritations of food on the stomach, and the meconium, which from the negligence of the nurse, was suffered to remain until this time, to the danger of the child's life. After the disengagement of this, she became comparatively easy, her sleep was unbroken by periodical

59 BA letter to Col. Joseph May 11/29/1832. Richard Herrnstadt ed. *The Letters of A. Bronson Alcott* (Ames: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1969). Letter 32-2, p.19.

60 Saxton, *Louisa May* p.34, 47 (Avon edition).

61 BA letter to his mother 11/29/1832. Herrnstadt ed. *Letters of Bronson Alcott*, Letter 32-1, p.18.

62 BA letter to Jane Haines 11/29/1832.

63 Hocker, *Germantown*, p.178.

64 BA journal 11/1832.

crying as before, and all the organic... functions became more free and active. Her life was almost wholly organic at this time.<sup>65</sup>

After Bronson's scientific observations, we can turn to the letters of Mary Ann Donaldson, the Haines family governess, and Reuben's cousin Ann Haines for the chatty details. These three women—Jane Haines, Ann Haines, and Mary Ann Donaldson—were three of Abba's most devoted friends in Germantown.

Mary Ann Donaldson wrote to Jane Haines: "I know you will rejoice with me to hear that our dear Mrs. Alcott has an acquisition of another daughter to her family. She calls the little one Louiza May after a sister she lost. Mrs. A was so ill that at one period it was thought she had ceased to breathe but she revived again and is now I believe likely to do well. I was there yesterday but of course did not see her. Ann saw Miss Milnor [a local teacher] at Meeting this morning who said she was better than when I was there."<sup>66</sup>

On December 9, Ann Haines wrote to Jane Haines that all had seemed to be well at first after Louisa's birth. A day or two later, however, Abba had written to Mary Ann Donaldson begging her to find out if Mrs. Brown who helped Jane with her newborn baby could be hired, or someone else experienced in nursing. Mrs. Brown, a local seamstress, had expertise in helping newborn babies and their mothers. According to Ann Haines, Abba was in great difficulty "on account of her baby being neglected its care taker having no proper knowledge as to the management of an infant.—Mrs. Brown through many difficulties consented to go for a few days and run the risque [sic] of incurring [sic] the displeasure of her customers."

To allow Mrs. Brown to take care of Abba and Louisa, Mary Ann Donaldson took on some of her sewing work, and Ann Haines brought Mrs. Brown's

daughter Elizabeth to Wyck to board and help with her mother's sewing "so that Mrs. B might be at rest on that account."

Mrs. Brown, apparently, was helpful and efficient, and in Abba's words, "My babe is better as well as myself for the felt presence of excellent Mrs. Brown who bears about every attribute of intelligence, comfort and kindness, the very border of her cap has a charm in it." According to Ann Haines, Abba's original nursemaid

was much displeased at being displaced in consequence of which she had wrought upon Mrs. Alcot's [sic] Maria to induce her also to leave her—Maria thou knowest has been treated by Mrs. A with more than common kindness and that she should be prevailed upon to send up word to Mrs. A in her helpless state that she should leave her was more than the misanthrope could have supposed a human creature guilty of—but so it was and Mrs. A is now upon the look out for a girl—Poor woman she has been wrought up to a high pitch of excitement from her nurse's inexperience and neglect of her baby—the little creature was not even properly washed so that its eyes were in a sad condition and its bowells [sic] not attended to—the Dr upon one of his visits found the child in almost a dying condition for the want of nourishment—the mother having nothing to give it—the nurse of course should have attended more particularly to its food, but the ignorant thing thought fennel seed tea all sufficient—this is all the child took for three or four days.

Having removed the meconium blockage and helped Abba successfully start nursing Louisa, Mrs. Brown prepared to leave a local woman, Rebecca Crout, to help for another week. Abba was made more comfortable by Jane Haines's loan of a stove,

65 "Observations on the Experience of an Infant during the first year of its existence Germantown and Philadelphia 1832-1833." BA journal (Houghton \*59M-304).

66 Mary Ann Donaldson to Jane Haines 12/2/1832. Wyck Papers Series II Box 23 Folder 352.

which must have made Pine Place in December more bearable.<sup>67</sup>

Mary Ann Donaldson's charges, the Haines children, were with their mother in New York, so Mary Ann had time to assist Abba with Louisa. She wrote to Jane on December 16 about her own efforts to help Abba:

I have a dear little pet in Mrs. Alcott's little Louiza. It is the prettiest best little thing in the world. You will wonder to hear me call any thing so young pretty. But it is really so in an uncommon degree. It has a fair complexion dark bright eyes long dark hair a high forehead [sic] and altogether a countenance of more than usual intelligence. Perhaps the circumstance of my having nursed it more than I have ever nursed a baby so young before has made it more interesting to me than it would have been under other circumstances. I sat up with it all one night when it was sick and its mother had no nourishment for it and was almost in despair of its life and have been often with her since when she stood in need of what little comfort I could bestow.

We have had a long storm and I have not seen her for three days but a note I received from her says she and the baby are doing finely. She is such a delightful woman that it is a cordial to my heart whenever I go to see her. Her gratitude to our friend Mrs. Brown for the services she rendered, is not without bounds. She considers her as the savior of her infants life and dear Mrs. B is so happy in the consciousness of having been of service to her and so charmed with Mrs. A. I went in to see her for a few minutes the evening we received your last letter and I think

I never saw her in better spirits and truly if goodness and integrity can ensure felicity she deserves to be happy.

Dr. Betton<sup>68</sup> was exceedingly attentive to her and in those dreadful turns of syncope [faintness] which followed the birth of her infant got up behind her pillows and supported her head and fanned her, whilst the ignorant woman who was with her seemed utterly at a loss to know what to do. And his attentions were unremitting until there was no further need of them. Mrs. A says she could not have imagined it possible that the frozen exterior which he has heretofore presented to her could have hidden so much feeling and tenderness as he exhibited towards her during her illness.

According to Mary Ann Donaldson, Anna, too, suffered from the ignorance of the nurse, and had caught a cold and had inflamed eyes. Donaldson also helped Abba by making clothes for her, at Jane Haines's request: "I finished one of her [Abba's] frocks and the other is on the way. She is exceedingly grateful to you for them. I was just thinking how she should get warmer clothing for Anna when I carried them down to cut them out by one of her frocks. The sleeves too were very acceptable and just what she wanted. Anna is a perverse little thing and determined to do as she pleases and nothing else."<sup>69</sup>

With the help of this loyal and practical group of friends, Abba and Louisa thrived. According to Bronson, Louisa was a very healthy child and was not unwell again for a year and a half.

### **Bronson's Prospects**

In spite of Bronson's pleasure in the birth of Lou-

<sup>67</sup> Ann Haines letter to Jane Haines 12/9/1832. Wyck Papers Series II Box 25 Folder 376.

<sup>68</sup> Dr. Samuel Betton (1786-1850). He and his son, Thomas Betton, (1809-1875) were both Germantown physicians. Samuel Betton is buried in St. Luke's churchyard.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Ann Donaldson letter to Jane Haines 12/16/1832 Wyck Papers Series II Box 23 Folder 352.

isa, his prospects in Germantown were decidedly unhopeful. He wrote to his mother that they would probably leave Germantown in the spring, either for Philadelphia or for Boston.<sup>70</sup>

His journal for December is very introspective and abstract. In January, he laid out the situation for himself in the journal. The experiment he and Russell embarked on had not led anywhere, and the death of Reuben Haines meant a serious loss of financial support and patronage. Few people in Germantown, he felt, were interested in education or in anything else intellectual. It was time to find a more satisfying sphere of activity, one that would provide a better income.

His other plans had also not worked out well. The Association of Teachers in Philadelphia and the Journal of Instruction which he and Russell had started under its auspices had not lasted. Someone who they had hoped would publish their works on education had failed to do so. These events had stymied the growth of their influence in the community. Philadelphia and Boston were both attractive as sites of future experiments, but Boston seemed the more promising. "There is a more intelligent sympathy felt in the improvement of humanity—freer toleration of variant opinions—a more generous philanthropy abounds... my best friends reside there, family ties unite me with many."

But there were reasons to remain in Philadelphia. If he could successfully run a school there for a few years, he could return to Boston without shame and begin a new venture. To this end, he wrote to friends and acquaintances in Philadelphia, including Roberts Vaux and Rev. William H. Furness, for their help. He noted that "Mr. Furness thinks a school could be easily established supported by the members of his society [Unitarians] and if I go into the city I shall be compelled to throw myself chiefly

upon this source for patronage." In Philadelphia, he averred, "society is too much broken into sects to look favourably upon an undertaking [such] as the one in which I wish to engage. Opinion there has not risen about the narrowness of inherited faith, or the zeal for its prosecution."<sup>71</sup>

Alcott's letter to Roberts Vaux on January 10, 1833, asked his opinion about the likelihood of a successful school in the city. He said that Russell had received enough encouragement to continue in Germantown but that his own program for younger children had met with less patronage. Twenty-five or thirty children, at the rate of \$15 per quarter, would enable him to start a new school in Philadelphia.<sup>72</sup>

News of Bronson's efforts was conveyed to Jane Haines by various members of her household and family, who were much less sanguine than Bronson about his chances of success. Daniel Smith, her cousin, and guardian of Reuben's estate, wrote to her in January that he felt the Alcotts would be more likely to succeed in Boston than in Philadelphia.<sup>73</sup>

In the same month Mary Ann Donaldson wrote to Jane Haines that she did not think Roberts Vaux's patronage would help Alcott. "It is more than three weeks since I have seen her (Mrs. Alcott). I believe it is their present intention to make an experiment in the city but I have no hope of their success. They talk of 15 or 20 \$ a quarter but who will pay such a price? They wrote to Mr. Lewis on the subject but he could not on his own responsibility give them any assurance of success. Roberts Vaux promises them his patronage but I fear that will be of little avail."<sup>74</sup> Ann Haines added her opinion in a February letter to Jane Haines:

To depend on Roberts Vaux we know is to trust the wind wafting them riches from Peru—Sarah Lewis says she thinks Elizabeth [presumably the precocious girl who lived

70 BA letter to his mother 11/29/1832. Hernnstadt ed. *Letters of Bronson Alcott*, Letter 32-1, p.18.

71 BA journal 1/1833.

72 BA letter to Roberts Vaux 1/10/1833. Hernnstadt ed. *Letters of Bronson Alcott*, Letter 33-1, p.20.

73 Daniel B. Smith letter to Jane Haines 1/26/1833. Wyck Papers Series II Box 23 Folder 353.

74 Mary Ann Donaldson letter to Jane Haines 1/31/1833 and 2/3/1833. Wyck Papers Series II Box 23 Folder 353.

with the Alcotts in Germantown] is now too old any longer to neglect the common branches of education such as Geography, Grammar etc. neither of which has been attended to during her stay with her present teacher.

Mrs. A. is I think decidedly unwilling to return to Boston therefore they are the more willing to catch at straws—They have got along very comfortably to all appearances this winter—Mrs A has had the kind care of Miss Crout during part of her confinement and ever since—and understand she will go with them to the city—Oh! what [sic] a world is this? I think sometimes I should like to gather myself into a cave or some snug little cabin [sic] with a cat or a dog and pass the remainder of my days away from besetting snares and cares of others happenings.<sup>75</sup>

The Haines family thought it was a serious mistake to rely on Furness and his Unitarian Church to provide students for Bronson's school. Unitarians were so unpopular in Philadelphia, in many circles viewed even as heretics, that their close connection with Alcott would mean that members of other denominations would not send their children to his school. For Bronson, however, Unitarians were his only reliable source of students for a downtown school.

In February and March of 1833, Bronson was still trying to get a commitment of students for a Philadelphia school. He had so far only seven or eight pupils pledged, and he felt he could not think of opening a school without at least nine to fifteen children.<sup>76</sup>

Abba Alcott was preparing to leave the pleasures of Pine Place and her friends in Germantown for the uncertain possibility of a school in Philadelphia. Nevertheless, her delight in her children can be seen in a letter to her brother: "My children are thriving

and are blessings indeed—Louisa May now nearly three months old is a sprightly merry little puss."<sup>77</sup>

Plans were already afoot for the house at Pine Place. William Russell was to move there from Church Lane. Although Russell struggled to attract students, he had just enough to continue his school. Mary Ann Donaldson told Jane Haines that Russell had issued a new circular in which he proposed teaching a preparatory department for little girls from four to six years old for \$5 a quarter. He also proposed to have a "class of young ladies who have finished the ordinary course of education & will instruct them in English literature and practical Rhetoric History Mental philosophy etc. etc. at \$20 a quarter. How earnestly do I wish them all the success they anticipate."<sup>78</sup>

On March 9, Ann Haines wrote to Jane Haines's sixteen-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, who was away with her mother, and that she and Mary Ann Donaldson had spent the previous afternoon and evening with Abba Alcott and had found her in good spirits. Mary Ann thought Anna had improved wonderfully and "is really a lovely little creature—the baby [Louisa] grows finely and is very good & pretty." Bronson had gone to the city to look for news about their prospects there. He returned while they were still visiting Abba but had found no assurance that there would be enough students. He would be satisfied with fifteen at the beginning but even this number was not yet sure.

What was certain, however, was that they had to move on April 1 either to New England or Philadelphia. It does not appear that Jane Haines was forcing the family to leave. Rather, they had no income and no possibility of one in Germantown. Colonel May was probably refusing to send further funds, so their only hope was the school in Philadelphia, even though its hopes rested on the Unitarians alone.

75 Ann Haines letter to Jane Haines 2/11/1833. Wyck Papers Series II Box 25 Folder 377.

76 BA journal 2/1833.

77 Abba Alcott letter to Sam May 2/20/1833 (Houghton \*59M-308).

78 Mary Ann Donaldson letter to Jane Haines 2/24/1833. Wyck Papers Series II Box 23 Folder 353.

Russell was preparing to move into Pine Place, and Ann knew Elizabeth, one of his pupils, would like to have her school in that pleasant house on the main street. According to Haines, many people had wanted Mr. Alcott's house.

By March, 1833, Bronson's friends had rounded up twelve prospective students, aged five to ten, for his new school, and he and Abba prepared to leave Germantown for Philadelphia, all the while planning an eventual move to Boston. In his imperturbable way, he reviewed and summarized his experiences in Germantown, putting the best face on what must have been an unsettling time: "Intending to board as a means of allowing Mrs. A more time to devote her influences to the children, and at the same time, to bring our domestic expenses within our pecuniary ability, we disposed of such furniture as would be useless to us, and took boardings at Mrs. Austie's No 91 S Third St—the same boardings which we enjoyed on our first visit to Philadelphia in the autumn of 1830 with Mr. Russell."

Bronson was ever the optimist.

I leave Germantown," he wrote, "with few regrets. The opportunity of Mr. R[ussell]'s society has been the chief charm of my residence in the place. I have gained much from the intimate intercommunion of the two years now past. My health has also been greatly improved. I have accomplished some valuable reading; and shall never on the whole have cause to regret the time passed there. I have made some valuable acquaintances, and enter the city with a more definite prospect of success in the experiment which I hope to conduct, than two years since, I could have anticipated. As the birthplace of my two children, I shall ever [look] to it with some pleasure.<sup>79</sup>

Bronson's calm in the face of difficulty was not shared by Abba or her female friends. Mary Ann

Donaldson, writing to Ann Haines on March 20, spoke of a visit to Abba

to have a little social chat... Yesterday morning Mr. Alcott sent home all things belonging to Mrs. Haines—and Mrs. G's stove among the rest [apparently the stove lent to Abba during the previous winter when Louisa was born]. Messieurs Alcott and Russell called to see me yesterday morning—I was literally in a pickle when they came in, being in the act of skimming some that was boiling over the fire—Mr. Alcott seems as happy as if he had everything he could wish in this world—his imperturbable equanimity sometimes almost provokes me—I should like to see him with a jumping toothache—He tells me the chances are about equal of going to Boston or Phil[adelphia].

"I did not see Mrs. Alcott long enough to mention the subject—she told me when I left her to tell the man, she wished he was in Guinea for she had a thousand things to say to me—I did not tell him so, but internally reciprocated the wish. Mrs. Alcott told our friend Mrs. Brown—in case Mr. A went to Philadelphia she should like to obtain boarding for a season in Germantown—I hope when I write again to be able to speak more definitely on the subject."<sup>80</sup> To her women friends, Abba was clearly suggesting that she wanted a separation from Bronson. She did not want to return to her father's sphere in Boston, but she wanted to remain in Germantown during Bronson's new experiment in the city. In the end, however, she and the girls went with him.

Later in March, Mary Ann Donaldson wrote to Jane Haines that the Alcotts were still thinking of returning to New England. "I cannot bear to think of their leaving us to go so far—and yet it would be worse to remain in Phil. to be disappointed which I have very little doubt would be the result of an experiment there. I look upon Mrs. Alcott as a 'bright, particular star' in our hemisphere & shall never

79 BA journal 3/1833.

80 Mary Ann Donaldson letter to Ann Haines 3/20/1833. Wyck Papers Series II Box 27 Folder 407.

cease to regret her removal from it. I do not believe Mr. A will succeed any where."<sup>81</sup>

### A Move to Philadelphia

On the morning of April 1, Mary Ann Donaldson took the Alcotts to Philadelphia, and the following morning many of their belongings were sold at auction:

Yesterday [April 1] I took our friends Mr. and Mrs. Alcott to Phila. where they have made up their minds to sojourn for a season—They had contemplated going in on the railroad under the impression that carriages were provided to take passengers wherever they wished to go—when they found that was not the case they were at a loss for a conveyance—until I offered to take them—they would not consent to my arrangement until I assured them John had business in town which was really the case—I felt quite sure your Mother would have wished me to do so—I left them at Mrs. Austey's on 3rd Street where they occupy three rooms one a sitting room & the others bedrooms—in the back part of the house where not a ray of sunshine can reach them and even the blessed light of heaven is almost excluded by the high brick walls around them—fortunately, they are less dependent for happiness on external objects than I am—or they would be miserable.

The sale of the Alcotts' goods took place the following morning. Donaldson had not heard whether things sold well or not. The Russells had been sitting with her in the evening, and no doubt the topic of discussion was the fate of their friends. Neither of the Russells was at the sale but Mrs. Russell had

seen Bronson afterwards and he seemed satisfied with the result. Mary Ann mentioned in particular the sacrifice of the china vases which had cost \$6 and were sold for \$2. The Russells were to move into Pine Place the following day, "and will no doubt be the gainer by the change," wrote Donaldson.<sup>82</sup>

Bronson opened his new school on April 22 at 222 S. 8<sup>th</sup> Street with fifteen pupils. Abba, like Bronson, looked back with mixed feelings on their stay in Germantown. In a letter to Jane Haines, she wrote: "The Spring has arrived and instructed our departure from Germantown where I have passed two years in many respects delightfully—some moments of fear and distrust but for the most part confidence and content. It is a place which will be dear to me from its having been the birthplace of my children—and the residence of those near and dear [to] my fondest recollections," presumably Jane Haines herself and other friends.<sup>83</sup>

Bronson associated in Philadelphia with some of those who should have been most supportive of him, such as Walter R. Johnson. "Still, I feel my own purposes to be, in many respects—peculiar—without the approbation and approval of even these men. I am not understood even yet..."<sup>84</sup>

In June, the family left the dark rooms at Mrs. Austie's and moved to Mrs. Olivia Eaton's boarding house at the southeast corner of Fifth and Library Streets. Mrs. Eaton had become a Unitarian, perhaps owing to the fact that one of the lodgers at her previous boarding house had been Rev. William H. Furness, the minister of that church.<sup>85</sup> Bronson took advantage of the libraries nearby and read a great deal that month.

In October, Bronson observed in his journal: "My mind this month full of the future... I find, as yet,

81 Donaldson letter to Jane Haines 3/21/1833. Wyck Papers Series II Box 23 Folder 353.

82 Donaldson letter to Elizabeth Haines 4/2/1833. Wyck papers Series II Box 29 Folder 422.

83 Abba Alcott letter to Jane Haines 4/9/1833 (Houghton \*59M-306).

84 Abba Alcott letter to Jane Haines 4/9/1833 (Houghton \*59M-306)

85 City Directory 1833 (GHHS); First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia: "Bicentennial Gazette" article by Shirley Steele, April 1996; Elizabeth Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism: 1796-1861* (Phila: Univ. of Pennsylvania Pres, 1961).

but little sympathy in regard to my purposes or sentiments. There is not in this place much reference made to the intellectual and the spiritual. The material and palpable are most interesting."<sup>86</sup> A continuing theme in Bronson's life was his desire to remove himself from the concerns of the material world, and he was always frustrated by others' lack of sympathy with this view.

On November 29, 1833, Louisa had her first birthday. Apparently, C. J. Wister's mother sent a cake and received an acknowledgement of it.<sup>87</sup>

### **Abba, Anna and Louisa Move to "The Cottage" in Germantown**

It is apparent that in the new year some kind of difficulty arose between Abba and Bronson, probably brought about by cramped quarters and two cooped-up children in the boarding house, and by the lack of success of the school. At any rate, in April 1834 Abba, Anna, and Louisa moved back to Germantown to a cottage in a "retired place" with "fields and groves in view." Bronson remained at Mrs. Eaton's, and continued teaching his school.<sup>88</sup>

Abba wrote to her father that she hoped by the move to Germantown for a few months to reduce the family's expenses in proportion to the reduction in their income.<sup>89</sup>

Bronson's journal entry on April 21 does not focus on the problems, only the benefits to be gained from the separation:

I have removed my family to Germantown, six miles from the scene of my daily labours. There I intend they shall pass the summer... Declining spirits, the sure indication of incipient disease, attendant on the confined air, and unsavory nutriment of factitious life, urge the necessity. A delightful cottage, surrounded by some of the choices of nature's

pictures, has been selected for their residence, and... amid such scenes, I anticipate a return to the energies and joys of a renovated frame [?]. The children, freed from the deadening restraints of a city life, will luxuriate in the freedom and freshness of the country. Nature, like a generous nurse, will proffer her aid to the mother, and from their united influences, happy results must come.

He thought both he and Abba would benefit from the separation. For him, an occasional visit to the cottage at weekends and possibly a night during the week would break up the monotony of his duties and revive his "drooping powers." Separation would show him the true value of his treasured family. He could survey them from a new point of view. Already he and Abba had grown closer during their walks to the railroad car which took him back to Philadelphia. Abba talked to him of their early courtship days, days he remembered of "joyous expectation—tranquil hope."

At school he found some of his pupils disobedient and their parents uncooperative. The parents, he felt, did not appreciate his exertions on behalf of their children. One entry in his journal says,

This was a cloudy, dire day. No fire without: no fire within. My school room was dark, and but few pupils were present." He thought often of his wife and children and contemplated a visit to Germantown, but heavy rain dissuaded him. He wrote that the separation was beneficial, since "in our present want of pecuniary means, we cannot surround ourselves with those comforts, essential to the full enjoyment of domestic life, by furnishing ourselves with an establishment of our own.

A few days later, he walked the six miles to Germantown along the rail path, having missed the

<sup>86</sup> BA journal 10/1833.

<sup>87</sup> Note in Alcott family file at GHS of E. C. Jellett's notes of 1904 interview with C. J. Wister.

<sup>88</sup> BA journal 4/1834.

<sup>89</sup> Abba Alcott letter to Colonel May 5/19/1834.

train and stage coaches. He reached the cottage late in the evening and found Abba well and the children asleep. "So had but a peep at their faces before retiring to rest... The children [are] thriving—the mother improving in health and spirits." Abba was more comfortable at the cottage, though she missed the social life of Philadelphia. Bronson's spirits seemed to improve with the contact of his family, and he tried to pay attention to their needs. In an unusually self-critical journal entry, he wrote: "I have so long lived an inward reflective life, that the relations of external things to my temporal prosperity have been almost lost sight of. I am not perhaps sufficiently included to yield to the dictates of earthly providence. I cling too closely to the *ideal* to take necessary advantage of the practical and my wife and children suffer from this neglect."

Despite this insight, Bronson always struggled to reconcile his inner life to the demands of society that he support his family and their material needs. One can see in these journal entries the debate between himself and Abba. Sometimes he was able to see her point of view that he must be practical and provide a proper home for his family. But it was hard for him to find a way to combine this with the contemplative life he was most comfortable with. He was devoted to his family and benefited from their company, but still he resisted the material world.

He himself cared little for comfort and money, and at the end of April happily moved himself from Mrs. Eaton's third floor to her fourth floor room, "blessed, at last, with one little window, fronting the *City Library* and the *Athenaeum*—with a bed—a trunk for my cloths [sic] —a washstand—two chairs—and my books. On these I am to feed, and content myself during the summer. Well! It matter little, after all, what surrounds us—how few are the things... to which we attach ourselves—if the mind have wherewith[?] to feed, and the heart to comfort itself."<sup>90</sup>

Bronson undertook a vast program of reading during his time in Germantown and Philadelphia, his formal schooling having ended when he was thirteen. He immersed himself, under the guidance of William Russell, in philosophy, literature, science, and education. His discovery of Plato was of enormous importance in his thinking. According to Odell Shepard, he underlined the day in red in his diary (putting it on a level with his marriage, the births of his daughters, the start of the Civil War, and the assassination of Lincoln). Plato reflected his own views of the material world as a shadow of the "real" or spirit world. As a reader, says Shepard, "Bronson Alcott had neither talent nor training, so that he was obliged to get on as best he could with a thin streak of genius."<sup>91</sup> This streak of genius was commented on by many who knew him during his life, as his friends and acquaintances tried to understand and describe his character.

### Students Withdrawn From School

His school in Philadelphia was not doing well. He was informed by one of his pupils, Charles Leland, that he and his brother would be withdrawn at the end of the quarter. In his journal, Bronson denounces the boy: "His imagination, fed by romance and tales of adventure, has got the mastery of his intellect, and thus, wrong-headed impulse sweeps all else before it. Of moral truth and beauty, I have tried in vain to give him an insight. He cannot understand them."<sup>92</sup> Bronson had nothing good to say about the boy's parents either: As Shepard says about Alcott and Leland, "A more charming and delightful misalliance has seldom been imagined by the President of the Immortals, the Spirit of Comedy, or whoever it is by whom such arrangements are made."<sup>93</sup>

Leland, who later became a writer, described Alcott in his memoirs:

90 BA journal 4/1834.

91 Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress* p.155.

92 BA journal 4/19/1834.

93 Shepard, p.162.

Mr. Alcott was the most eccentric man who ever took it upon himself to train and form the youthful mind. He did not really teach any practical study; there was, indeed, some pretence [sic] at geography and arithmetic, but these we were allowed to neglect at our own sweet will. His forte was 'moral influence' and 'sympathetic intellectual communion' by talking; and, oh heaven! What a talker he was! Yet I cannot say that I really liked the man himself. He was not to me exactly sympathetic—human... I was removed, and with good cause, from Mr. Alcott's school, for he had become so very 'ideal' or eccentric in his teaching and odd methods of punishment by tormenting without ever whipping, that people could not endure his purely intellectual system.<sup>94</sup>

(C. J. Wister mentioned his habit in the Germantown school of kicking a chair out from under students to keep them on their guard. In one of his Boston schools, he made students who needed physical discipline strike him instead, to make the punishment worse).

On April 30, Bronson visited the cottage to pass May Day with his family. The weather since their arrival at the cottage had been variable and cold, with cloudy mornings, rain, occasional glimpses of the sun, and frost (nipping the early vegetation), effectively shutting them up most of the time indoors. Still they seemed improved by being in the country, and Anna and Louisa, when asked if they would like to return to the city, said they would not. In the evening Abba and Bronson continued their debate on domestic topics. "I am looking more to the future, and intellectual relations, that she deems consistent with the welfare of my family," wrote Bronson. "This may be true."<sup>95</sup>

On May Day, which was a holiday for all, Bronson took a morning walk with Anna, listening to her impressions and observations. In the afternoon, he

walked to the village to see William Russell, but he was away. In the evening, he talked with Abba, trying to explain the "reflective, self-involved life which I have led." He viewed Abba as necessarily involved in outward affairs because of her duties as a mother, and understood that his behavior must be irritating to her, appearing coldly abstract, when she was seeking "the sympathy of the heart" to sustain her.

The following day, Abba and Bronson went to Philadelphia together, and Abba was able to visit all her downtown friends. She was very interested in the subject of slavery, noted Bronson, and had joined the recently formed Female Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. Her influence had already been considerable. She saw her friends and coworkers in the cause, including William Lloyd Garrison, and had a delightful day. They returned to Germantown, and on May 4, Bronson was able to spend time with Russell, whom he had seen much less than when they were both teaching in Germantown: "Our views and purposes were mutually exchanged... A year has now passed since we have often seen each other... We had much to communicate at this interview... Mr. R. is most employed on the *real*, I am most interested in the *ideal*."

The following day Bronson learned that several more students were being withdrawn by their parents, when he remarked, "The standard of attainment which I have set up, differing from the common one, has not been used by parents as a means of testing my efforts." It seems clear that parents were demanding more of the basics, which Bronson, because of his own lack of formal education, and his own theories, did not provide. In any case, his often messianic view of himself did not permit him to be self-critical about his teaching methods, and in his journal he wrote pages of attacks on parents and others who "misunderstood him." He made an effort, however, to win the students back, visiting their parents to explain himself. He also visited his friend and supporter, Rev. William H. Furness, (whose son Wm. Henry, Jr. attended the school), and

94 Charles Leland's memoirs (1893), quoted in Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism*; and in *A History of the Germantown Academy* (1910).

95 This and following information: BA journal April/May 1834.

received assurance of his friendship. A few years later, Emerson wrote to Furness, "I shall always love you for loving Alcott. He is a great man."<sup>96</sup>

On May 7, he visited his family and found Louisa quite unwell, though Abba and Anna were fine. This was the eighteen-month-old Louisa's first illness, since the difficulties surrounding her birth. Bronson ascribed her ill health to teething and the change of situation and diet. Until now "she had enjoyed uninterrupted health. Her mind and body have expanded naturally, & a degree of symmetry of form, and grace of movement, has followed this course of management." The same was true of Anna. He found Anna sympathetic to his problems with parents, saying she knew them to be incapable of appreciating his "views," though he does not detail what these views are.<sup>97</sup>

Bronson was someone who saw teaching as a sacred trust. So to return to his school to find fewer pupils, now fourteen down from twenty, was depressing. He wanted a "full room of happy faces" but instead, "Desolate is the place which was once peopled with life and enjoyment! My school-room seems empty and forsaken... I am almost alone there." He noted in his journal that he had not been able to support himself financially, and that Philadelphia was probably not the place for him to succeed: "I never had much faith in it. I came here rather, as a step nearer Boston, and as a means of escaping from Germantown."

### **Rumors and Embarrassments**

At this time rumors started to be spread about him, though he does not say directly in his journal what they were. They may have had to do with his lack of rigor in the basics, his religious teaching, his odd punishments, or his friendly affection to the students. His journal talks of the situation under the

heading "Embarrassments." He goes to speak to a Mrs. M., "one of my most sincere friends—one whose interest for myself and family, particularly for Mrs. A. has been of a marked character."<sup>98</sup> She informed me of several reports regarding my school—my influences—opinions, etc. which were of importance to me." On May 16, Abba came into town, and the couple dined with the Furnesses and discussed the school. "My mind was full of the reports in circulation against me. They would come up in spite of the effort to keep them out of view... I have never had anything seize, with so firm a grasp, upon my spirit. I cannot shake it off. Nor should I... Evil associations pervert the purest truths, and best of purposes, into evils, and crimes."

Bronson's friends, Russell and Furness, both took steps to help Bronson prepare for a move to Boston, Russell carrying letters from Furness and a Mr. H to their friends there. Bronson tried in his journal to put a good face on what was basically a failure in Philadelphia. "My success in Philadelphia has been remarkable; but I cannot expect a fair hearing, nor a full trial here. The minds of parents are not ready. Customs are against me."

Monday May 19 was a delightful morning after a series of "cold, disagreeable days." (On May 15 a severe frost had left ice half an inch thick, and killed all of the fruit bushes, including currants and gooseberries).<sup>99</sup> Bronson had "fallen into the indolent habit of indulging in bed," and was not taking advantage of the pleasures of the city on a May morning. Furness went to see several parents, who assured him of their satisfaction with Bronson's teaching and promised to return their children after the summer holidays. Bronson knew that not all the pupils would return and still could not decide whether to give up on Philadelphia.

96 Geffen, *Philadelphia Unitarianism*.

97 This and following information: BA journal May/June 1834.

98 An entry in Abba Alcott's memoir (1878) compiled after her death by Bronson says: "[In Philadelphia we formed] a few more delightful friendships. Among them were a Mrs. Lucretia Mott, Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Morrison, for whom I cherish a grateful remembrance and with whom for twenty years corresponded most freely from 1834-1854." Since "Mrs. M." was close to the Alcotts, perhaps it is Mrs. Morrison, or even Lucretia Mott, who Bronson confided in (Houghton \*59M-306).

99 C. J. Wister's memoir Vol. II (1886) p. 129 (his father's farm journal).

That same day, Abba suffered a miscarriage, but word did not reach Bronson until two days later. He immediately closed his school and rushed to Germantown, finding that Abba's life had been seriously at risk. The skill and perseverance of Dr. Betton, along with Abba's insistence that he be called, saved her life. "Had she fallen into the hands of an ignorant, or even timid physician, her life would have been the sacrifice."

By the time Bronson was able to get to Germantown, Abba was feeling more comfortable. He spent the day at her bedside, and they spoke about their lives together. Blessed with two sweet children, they looked forward to the time when these grown children would reflect in a more ideal way the character of their parents. The calamity of Abba's nearly fatal illness brought Abba and Bronson closer together. He stayed for four days, discussing with Abba important issues connected with their "pecuniary and social comfort."

Bronson went back to his school but returned to the cottage on May 28. The rain prevented him returning to Philadelphia the following day. "I passed some time with the children, fitting up their playthings, conversing with them, and learning, as far as I could, through the subtle medium of looks, accents and gestures, their thoughts and feelings."

He resumed teaching "to satisfy the wants of the practical" but resented the idea that he needed to put in a certain number of hours in the school. Since parents were paying tuition, he was forced to comply with their demands:

[I]n unimportant matters it is best to yield; but principles must never be compromised to suit the practical, short-sightedness of parents, or others. The good to be derived from instruction depends less upon the time applied to study, than upon the spirit and manner in which study is pursued. Parents are apt to measure it by the number of hours when their children are at school, and cannot

understand how the mind can advance independently of the usual application to books during the *six* hours appropriated to study. It is not fit fare for my yearning nature.

Bronson keenly needed to be recognized and appreciated. He wanted to spend his life not only as a teacher, but also as someone who influenced others in the profession. He wanted to "spend [his] talent for the good of the many as well as the few." He felt that Philadelphia was fifty years behind Boston "in a moral point of view. Philadelphia is less guided by intelligence—Evils of *condition*, rather than of *mind*, are the more prominent objects of interest. Education is not a popular topic as it is in Boston." On the other hand, he at least had some sort of income in Philadelphia ("of not less than \$1200 per ann. —sufficient to feed and clothe myself and family") and no certainty of one in Boston. But "my heart is, and long has been... in Boston. It will be a source of great delight to me to return there. *There I am*, doubtless, *to do the great work of my life*. There I am to leave the *remembrance of having lived*."

A discussion with Furness led to a decision to remain in Philadelphia until the following spring, and right up until the moment the family departed from Philadelphia, Bronson still spoke as if they would return in the fall. Some of his pupils had already left for the summer, but he expected them back in the fall.

Bronson thought that Abba was not coping well with their separation. "These periods of absence operated unfavorably on the heart of my companion. They keep her mind in a state of excitement, between expectation and doubt. They unsettle its tranquility... It is easy to perceive the feelings of a mother, left to superintend her children, her husband absent, and her heart straying after him." Abba's doctor, he noted, recommended a better climate, with sea air and bathing, which they would find in New England. He himself planned to meet people in Boston to discuss his future. Still, at this point he expected to resume his school in September with twenty students.

Bronson and Abba left Philadelphia on July 9, 1834, never to return to the school. Abba had been reluctant to return to Boston, where she would have to accept both her father's criticism and his new wife. But apparently things looked promising. According to Mary Ann Donaldson, "Mrs. Alcott left Germantown in high spirits—just before she went away she received a most cordial letter from her father inviting her to come to his house with all her family and stay as long as she pleases—Her stepmother has gone to Bellows Falls to spend some weeks."<sup>100</sup>

### After Philadelphia

The Alcotts were married for 47 years until Abba's death in 1877. After Anna and Louisa, Abba gave birth to Elizabeth and Abigail May, known as May. The family moved frequently, living off the generosity of relatives, until Louisa's success brought them financial security. A Utopian experiment at Fruitlands in the early 1840s came to a pathetic end. Bronson eked out a living through his public "Conversations." He then became superintendent of Concord's public schools in 1859, holding that position for six years, and receiving a salary of \$100 a year.<sup>101</sup> He was not re-elected to the position.

Years of seeing her family dependent on others persuaded Louisa to start work early: sewing, teaching with Anna, and serving as a companion and housekeeper.<sup>102</sup> None of these suited her well, and she decided to try writing sensational stories for magazines. Just before her 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, her

story "The Rival Prima Donnas" was published in the *Saturday Evening Gazette* under the pseudonym Flora Fairfield. Numerous similar tales, under various pseudonyms, brought her a steady income.<sup>103</sup> In 1862, driven by her fervor for abolition, Louisa became a Civil War nurse in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., and suffered permanent damage to her health during her brief service.<sup>104</sup> Her sketches of hospital life became a book and brought her a measure of fame. As she recovered from her illness, she continued her melodramatic stories, and in 1868 at the suggestion of her publisher, she turned her hand to a "girls' book." Written under her own name, *Little Women* became an immediate success. Its warm picture of domestic life remains her best-known achievement and deservedly so.

Louisa's sisters Anna (Meg in *Little Women*) and May (Amy) both married. May was a talented artist, and Louisa was able to help finance her studies in Europe. Elizabeth (Beth) died of scarlet fever at the age of twenty-three. Louisa herself never wanted to marry, nor did she want her heroine, Jo, to marry. "The loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called 'Mrs.' instead of 'Miss,'" she wrote in an article<sup>105</sup> and declared, "Liberty is a better husband than love to many of us."<sup>106</sup> She was uninterested in fame and wanted to be able to support her family and be completely independent. She remained devoted to her family and was particularly attached to her mother. After Abba's death, she said she had no reason to keep on living. She raised Louisa May Nieriker

100 Mary Ann Donaldson letter to Jane Haines 7/9/1834. Wyck Papers Series II Box 30-32 Folder 460.

101 Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress* p.477.

102 Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (Yale University Press, 1984).

103 Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (originally published by the University of Oklahoma Press 1950), new edition by Random House, 1996, p.70.

104 Louisa was treated for a fever with calomel, a mercury compound, which caused delirium and permanent damage to her nervous system. Saxton, *Louisa May*. Her health after this treatment was never good and to enable her to sleep she sometimes took opium.

105 "Advice to Young Ladies: Being a Series of Twelve Articles by Twelve Distinguished Women. No. 3—Happy Women," *New York Ledger*, April 11, 1868, quoted in Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, A Better Husband*.

106 Journal of Louisa May Alcott 1/22/1868, *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals* ed. Ednah D. Cheney (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890) p.197.



The home of Louisa May Alcott, "Orchard House," as it appeared circa 1910. It was here that Louisa May Alcott wrote her seminal novel, *Little Women*; the house also provided the novel's setting. Germantown Historical Society.

("Lulu"), the daughter of her sister, after May's death, and was a fond aunt to the two sons of her sister Anna.

Like her parents, Louisa was a lifelong abolitionist, knew many of the leaders in the movement, and participated in organizations and meetings opposing slavery. She wrote stories, non-fiction pieces and poems about abolition. In 1868, the year she wrote *Little Women*, she wrote in her journal "Glad I have lived in the time of this great movement, and known its heroes so well. War times suit me, as I am a fighting May."<sup>107</sup> She wrote in a letter in February 1881: "[I] take more pride in the very small help we Alcotts could give [to the anti-slavery movement] than in all the books I ever wrote or ever shall write."<sup>108</sup>

Likewise, she was a firm supporter of women's suffrage, trying to rouse the women in her community of Concord to action but found it "hard work to stir them up; cake and servants are more interesting."<sup>109</sup> She was the first woman to vote in Concord—in school committee elections in 1880.

After the publication of *Little Women* in 1868, Bronson became famous as the "Grandfather of *Little Women*"<sup>110</sup> and was greeted by curious questions about Louisa wherever he went. He accepted financial comfort as he had accepted poverty—with equanimity. Following Abba's death, Bronson and Louisa became closer, and they died two days apart, Bronson on March 4, 1888, at the age of 88, and Louisa two days later. She was 55 years old. "She had

107 "a fighting May:" Louisa's mother's side of the family. Journal entry LMA 1/22/1868.

108 Louisa May Alcott letter to Thomas Niles 2/19/1881. Cheney, *Alcott*, p.342.

109 Journal of LMA 9/1880. Cheney, *Alcott*, p.337.

110 BA letter, quoted in *Louisa May Alcott and "Little Women"* by Gloria Delamar (McFarland 1990), p.110.

been suffering from nervous prostration for some time [and] a cold developed into spinal meningitis," according to the Philadelphia *Public Ledger*.<sup>111</sup>

### Summing up the Germantown Years

The Alcotts lived in Germantown and Philadelphia for about 3 and a half years, about 2 and a quarter years of that in Germantown, including periods in three lodgings—Mrs. Stuckart's boarding house, Pine Place (the house bought for them by Reuben Haines), and "the cottage," a house some distance from the main street of Germantown. In Philadelphia, they boarded for a couple months when they first arrived and for another year after they left Pine Place, Bronson then remaining in the city while Abba and the girls moved to the cottage. In many ways it was a pleasant time for the young married couple: Pine Place, their first house after rooms in various boarding houses, was large and attractive, with nearly an acre of ground, including a garden, fruit trees, and pines; both parents were deeply interested in their two daughters, Anna and Louisa.

Professionally, though, Bronson's efforts were not very successful. He could not sustain and build up a school which could support him and his family. His ideas were ahead of his time, but he was too impractical to satisfy the parents who were paying him school fees. The loss of his patron, Reuben Haines, was a serious blow, but even if Haines had lived, he might have been unwilling to underwrite Alcott's school permanently. Bronson was thinking ahead from the moment he arrived in Philadelphia. He felt that neither Philadelphia nor Germantown was "advanced" enough to accept his ideas, and he looked forward to a time when he could influence others through public lectures and writing about education.

Many of Abba's journals were destroyed, at her request, so her view of the Germantown years is harder to gauge. The letters of the Haines women and their sympathy for her, as well as Bronson's own journals, give us some idea that she often found life with her husband difficult. She was, like him, a reformer and idealist, but she also wanted him to build a family life. Throughout her life, she was devoted and loyal to her husband and daughters, drawing the family close when it was attacked by outsiders. (When necessary, she took determined action, arranging their move from Fruitlands when Bronson was too depressed to find a way out). She seems to have been highly regarded in Philadelphia both in the anti-slavery movement and among her personal friends.

Emerson's daughter, Ellen, on reading *Little Women* soon after its publication wrote of the Alcotts that "to spend a day at their house was a rapturous event."<sup>112</sup> Some of the rapture of *Little Women* came from the ability of Bronson and Abba to make a home where imagination and pleasure were accepted and expected. If times were rough in Germantown and Philadelphia, they remained so throughout the Alcotts' lives, and yet family members were able to express themselves in art, writing and drama; they were able to contribute in a meaningful way to the abolitionist and women's rights movements, and they had as valued friends some of the most interesting minds of the day.

#### About the Author

Judith Callard is a writer. She has lived in Germantown for twenty-two years. She has done extensive volunteering for a number of organizations, including the Germantown Historical Society and started the local history collection for the Northwest Regional [Joseph Coleman] branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Ms. Callard was the driving force behind the series of programs devoted to Louisa May Alcott this year [1996].

111 Philadelphia *Public Ledger* 3/7/1888.

112 Ellen Emerson letter, quoted in Baker, Emerson, p.480.

## Louisa Alcott Born in Germantown

Author of "An Old-Fashioned Girl" Which Begins Today in  
The Bulletin Moved to Boston When a Child



Orchard House, the Alcott homestead at Concord, Mass. It is the house described in "Little Women" as the home of the March girls, and is preserved today as a literary shrine. Below — Louisa May Alcott, at 22, when her literary career was getting under way.



**G**ERMANTOWN was the birthplace of the author of the most popular books ever written for girls.

Louisa May Alcott, who wrote "Little Women," "An Old-Fashioned Girl," "Little Men," and other books, was born November 29, 1832, in a house at 5425 Germantown av., the site of the present Masonic Hall.

Her book, "An Old-Fashioned Girl," begins today in The Bulletin.

Louisa May's parents were of New England "Yankee" stock. Reuben Haines, a trustee of the old Germantown Academy, was responsible for bringing the Alcott family to Philadelphia.

Louisa's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a teacher whose ideas were far in advance of his time. In Boston he had founded an "infant school," said to have been much like the present day kindergarten. Reuben Haines prevailed upon Alcott to come to Philadelphia to establish a similar school.

Just two years ago, in November, 1932, the centenary of Louisa May Alcott's birth was celebrated, with activities centering at Orchard House, in Concord, Mass., where her early life was spent.

written while she was recuperating from illness.

Her "Hospital Sketches," written from a journal she kept during her Civil War service, and letters to the home folks, was her first real literary success.

Though success came gradually, it was real and worthwhile when it arrived. Louisa was able to make her family comfortable, to give her younger sister (the "Amy" of "Little Women") the education in art which her talents warranted, to travel abroad and finally to care for the two children of her oldest sister and the baby of the youngest, all left motherless by death.

Louisa May Alcott died on March 6, 1888, of complications arising from a cold she caught while visiting her father. He was failing rapidly, and died just before Louisa, though the knowledge of his death was kept from her. Her beloved "Marmee," her mother, who figures so charmingly in "Little Women," died in 1877.

### Patron Dies

When Amos Bronson Alcott and his wife, Abigail May, established themselves in Germantown in 1831, it seemed as though the troubles of the visionary school teacher were over. The school opened, pupils arrived, and success seemed around the corner.

But in October, 1831, Reuben Haines died suddenly. The school was plunged into financial difficulties, the parents withdrew their children. The Alcotts had no money with which to continue the enterprise. The first daughter, Anna Bronson (who became the "Meg" of "Little Women") was born May 19, 1831, and in November, 1832, there was the second daughter, Louisa.

### Move to Boston

Forced to give up the school, the Alcotts removed to Boston. The earliest anecdote about Louisa concerns that journey. Dressed in Sunday best, she was suddenly missed on the boat. A frantic search ensued. She was finally discovered in the engine room, grimy but happy.

**M**R. ALCOTT was never to achieve financial success and as Louisa grew older she took upon herself the support of the family. Her first literary endeavor began with a poem written at the age of eight, entitled "To the First Robin."

### Served as Nurse in Civil War

Contrary to the story of the Alcott family as recorded in "Little Women," her father did not go to war. But Louisa did. She volunteered as a nurse in the Civil War, served six months at Union hospital in Georgetown, was stricken with fever and sent home.

The attack of fever was responsible for the many ailments from which she was to suffer in later years. "An Old-Fashioned Girl" was

(2)

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Newspaper clippings capture the essence of Louisa May Alcott's life, as found in George Clarence Johnson's scrapbook, *Pictorial Germantown Road and the Vicinity & Some of its Inhabitants*, Volume I. Germantown Historical Society.

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## Curator's Cabinet of Curiosities

*By Laura C. Keim*

European cabinets of curiosity were rooms in early modern homes of the ruling and aristocratic classes filled with objects that inspired admiration, wonder, and knowledge, such as historical relics, natural history collections, innovative mechanics, books, and works of art. These “wunderkammer” or “wonder rooms” set the stage for institutional museums and libraries. Today, our public collecting institu-

tions, such as Stenton and other Historic Germantown sites, are filled with artifacts that foster contemplation, learning, and connection across time, space, and place – social and educational places that reflect and shape values. A sample of objects from Stenton’s collections and elements from the house are highlighted here to provoke your senses of curiosity and wonder while at home.



This desk-and-bookcase was made in Philadelphia c.1730-1745, in mahogany, mahogany veneer, red cedar, lignum vitae, light and dark wood inlays, Atlantic white cedar, tulip poplar, yellow pine, and oak.

Courtesy of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

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### 1730 Mahogany Desk-and-Bookcase

While not a proven Logan family object, this c.1730 mahogany desk-and-bookcase has represented the “Scrutore” worth seven pounds on James Logan’s 1752 estate inventory and alternatively the “Escritoire with Glass Doors” worth seven pounds, ten shillings on his wife Sarah’s 1754 inventory. Could an addition of glass panels have increased the value by ten shillings?

Desk-and-bookcases of this type were most often found in parlors as a symbol of education and mercantile success in the Atlantic trade. The form illustrates the 18th-century mind’s desire for order. The “pigeon” holes across the top allowed for alphabetical filing of recent correspondence. The tall divisions provided ideal space for merchants’ ledger

books, where the details of accounts were recorded. The many small drawers stored implements for writing, and the “secret” drawers behind the central prospect door in the desk held small valuables and currency, like built-in spice box drawers.

The book-style details of this desk could have appealed to a bibliophile like Logan. The inlaid prospect doors and central doors in the upper case look like book bindings. The inside of the backboards is painted with an oyster shell-like design, much like the endpaper patterns inside printed books.



The Stenton parlor buffet with Logan family porcelain both survived above ground in family collections and was excavated archeologically at Stenton.

Courtesy of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

## Buffets

Buffets, sometimes phonetically spelled and pronounced as “bow-fats” in the 18th century, were important architectural and functional features of genteel parlors. At Stenton, the “Buffet and Closets”

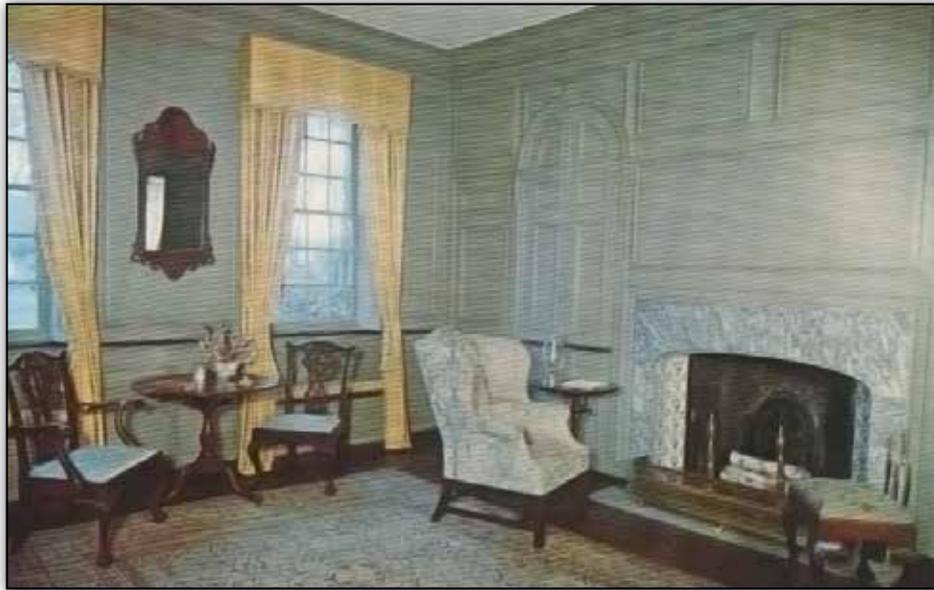
contained Chinese porcelain, broken cases of knives and forks, and 329 ounces of plate (the period term for silver). Arched tops, often finished with a sunburst or shell design, and shaped shelves framed

and displayed the wares inside. These sometimes brightly colored interiors complemented the costly and reflective ceramics and precious metals. The

buffet was kept locked to secure the valuables within when the room was not in use.



The Stenton parlor fireplace, c.1890, showing original fireplace tiles and two of the Stenton fire backs.  
Stenton Archives, Maria Dickinson Logan Photo Collection.



The Stenton Parlor as it appeared in the 1950s-1960s, decorated by Frances Brumbaugh with silk upholstery, oriental carpets, and changed fireplace tiles.  
Stenton Archives, Stenton Postcard Collection.

### Parlor Fireplace Tiles

In the 1950s, led by Decorator Frances Brumbaugh, the Colonial Dames “Winterthurized” Stenton with soft silk upholstery and oriental rugs in the manner of Henry Francis du Pont. Purple manganese floral tiles replaced the original carnation and fritillary design that complemented the grain of the King of Prussia marble surround. While we mourn the loss

of the original tiles, we can see the change as a product of its own historical context and as an artifact of 20th-century historic house interpretation. Lessons like these are cautionary tales on the dangers of initiating irreversible change to historic buildings and interiors and also on the value of maintaining a change for the layered story it can tell.



Deborah Norris Logan's sketch of the Logan Arms in her manuscript Family Record book, shows a heart pierced by nails.

Robert Restalrig Logan Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg.



A pendant drop in the Stenton Entry – a quietly Quaker Coat of Arms?  
 Courtesy of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America  
 in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

### Hearts: Heraldry, Decorative Motif, or both?

The hearts carved into the pendant drops over Stenton's interior entry hall doors are distinctive and draw one's eye up, obscuring the asymmetry of the room, which accommodates a fireplace to one side and a cupboard to the other. What is the meaning of this common European decorative motif in the context of Stenton? The hearts may be gentle allusions to the Logan coat of arms featuring a heart pierced

by nails. Arms commonly appeared over thresholds such as doors and gates. However, Stenton is not the only early Philadelphia house to display this feature, which is found on all four sides of a single pendant drop in the Bellaire stair hall in Passyunk. And hearts are also to be found on pendent drops in the skirts of some Philadelphia case furniture of the same period.



James Logan's antiquities -- his own cabinet artifacts -- the Greek skyphos and marble sample collection, both on loan from the Commissioners of Fairmount Park, Loudoun Collection.  
 Courtesy of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

### Classical Collecting in Early America

James Logan did not travel to continental Europe on a Grand Tour. Instead, he kept objects sent to him from Peter Collinson, a fellow Quaker merchant in London, to represent his fascination with the Greco-Roman past. The small collection included a Greek wine cup, or skyphos, from Apulia in Italy, which may be the first piece of Classical pottery in North

America, and a group of marble samples with paper wrappers labeled with their descriptions and origins. We see in Logan's collection the power of objects to engage imagination and to affect one's sense of self and identity through association with artifacts from other times and places.



James Logan's bookcase and book cupboard, where Deborah Norris Logan put her transcriptions, diaries, and papers to "press."

Courtesy of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

### Collecting Across Generations

Stenton's Blue Lodging Room housed the majority of James Logan's 2,681-volume library during his lifetime until 1752. The built-in press cupboard in the room probably served as a book closet. His grandson's wife, Deborah Norris Logan (1761-1839),

used the same room for herself, calling it "my apartment in the library," keeping her writings, diaries, poetry, and transcriptions of James Logan's papers in the "press cupboard." While James Logan collected ancient relics, Deborah collected family and local



Deborah Norris Logan's Relic Wood "Snuffbox," a gift to her from John Fanning Watson. This box was later given to Stenton by Logan descendant Rosemary Ellis Crawford.

Courtesy of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

objects connected with the period her "antiquary friend," John Fanning Watson (1779-1860) would call "olden time," Philadelphia's founding era. Deborah's Norris-Logan lineage, status as mistress of Stenton, and their common interest in "olden" times and things brought Watson to Stenton for many Saturday visits over tea beginning in 1823.

This article is a compilation of short posts originally shared with the public via social media and as a corresponding blog on Stenton's website during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The intent is to focus the

viewer's gaze on particular objects, architectural elements, or groups of objects in Stenton's collection. These posts mined artifacts for digestible information and placed them in the context of Stenton and the wider material world of the past, creating meaning in the present. The visually compelling posts including more images than featured here were mini digital exhibits designed to stimulate viewers' minds with a mix of beauty, history, and evolving research. Hopefully, this article peaked your fancy and inspired new thoughts and connections in your curious mind.

#### About the Author

**Laura C. Keim** is Curator of Stenton one of Historic Germantown's sites which The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has administered as a historic house museum since 1899. She is also a Lecturer in the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at the University of Pennsylvania. She holds an M.S. from the Penn Preservation Program, an M.A. in Early American Culture from The University of Delaware's Winterthur Program, and an A.B. in Art History from Smith College.

Her recent publications include, "Why Do Furnishings Matter?: The Power of Furnishings in Historic House Museums," a chapter in *Reimagining Historic House Museums: New Approaches and Proven Solutions*, and "Remembering the 'Olden Time': John Fanning Watson's Cultivation of Memory and Relics in Early National Philadelphia," in *A Material World: Culture, Society, and the Life of Things in Early Anglo-America*.

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## The 2020 Restoration of Awbury's Ponds and Watercourse

*By Alex Bartlett*



The lower pond at Awbury as it appeared shortly after its 1975-1976 restoration executed by Tourbier, Westmacott Associates. The current restoration work being performed will be the first full restoration of the pond in 45 years.  
Awbury Arboretum Association.

*Editor's note: This is the first in an ongoing series of short articles about one of Historic Germantown's member sites, to be published in each issue of the Germantown Crier. Each article will feature a current or up-and-coming project, a little-known fact, or historical tidbit associated with the featured site. On a more general level, the article will help illustrate the uniqueness of the featured site, and why the site is so special to both Historic Germantown and the larger community.*

*Historic Germantown is a partnership of 18 extraordinary historic houses, destinations, and museums in the old Germantown Township and vicinity- now Germantown, Mount Airy, and Chestnut Hill- that have joined together to protect, preserve, and share some of Philadelphia's prized historical assets.*

## **Scope of Work**

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This spring, Awbury Arboretum is beginning a much anticipated restoration of its iconic ponds and water courses. GreenUp Construction and Maintenance, Incorporated, of Philadelphia will rebuild both the upper and lower pond, to help catch stormwater which has often caused flooding in the vicinity of the intersection of Chew Avenue and Washington Lane. The total cost of the project is \$336,000; of this, the Philadelphia Water Department has contributed \$261,000 as part of a stormwater management grant, and the outstanding \$75,000 will be covered by a grant from the Pennsylvania State Department of Community and Economic Development. Work began this April and will consist in part but not limited to removing invasive plants and dredging the ponds of sediment, excavating the ponds deeper to allow for a greater volume of retention, reshaping the lower pond and watercourse to more accurately reflect their historic designs, replacing the stormwater drains along Washington Lane, and replacing vegetation adjacent to the ponds.

## **A brief history of Awbury Pond**

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Though the ponds at Awbury Arboretum appear as though they have existed “forever,” they are only approximately 100 years old. Landscape architect Arthur Westcott Cowell’s 1919 landscape plan for Awbury Arboretum shows the two ponds and water course proposed for the locations in which they are now situated. The water features were installed

at some point shortly after Cowell’s 1919 landscape plan was completed and 1923, when they are depicted in George W. Bromley’s *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia: 22nd Ward*. As far as can be determined, no complete renovation of the any of the ponds and watercourse occurred until 1975-1976, when Tourbier, Westmacott Associates executed a design proposing for the full renovation of the lower pond. The photograph shown here is from 1976, of the lower pond taken shortly after the restoration was completed. However, grass had not yet grown around the pond following the restoration.

It is interesting that given the prominence and beauty of the pond, very few photographs of it dating to before World War II exist in Awbury’s Archives. Descendants of Francis Cope have donated hundreds of photographs of Awbury to the Archives over the years, and only a handful of them capture images of the pond, but only in the background.

During the 2020 restoration of the pond, Awbury staff will make regular visits to the pond, to photo-document this latest pond restoration. Digital photographs will be taken of all phases and aspects of construction, and printouts will be made of a sample of the images to ensure the photographs’ survival for future generations. These will be housed in the Archives.

### **About the Author**

Alex Bartlett is the Archivist and Curator of the Awbury Arboretum Association.