First-person accounts of proposals of marriage in Stonington, Connecticut, 1786-1890

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Nathan Smith (1764-1845) and Mary "Polly" Denison (1767-1846) Married 1788.



Nathan Smith

Nathan Smith (1764-1845) was born in Stonington, the son of Colonel Oliver Smith and Mary Noyes Denison. His father was a prominent member of the local militia during the Revolutionary War. Mary "Polly" Denison was born in Stonington in 1767 to Joseph Denison and Mary Babcock. Nathan proposed to in 1786 and the two were married in 1788. Nathan was a sea captain, and at one time interested in shipbuilding at Stonington. Nathan and Polly had at least eight and perhaps as many as thirteen children.

*Many thanks to the RW Woolworth Library of Stonington, Connecticut for their permission to publish this material; and especially to Chelsea Mitchell, the Director of the Library, who supplied me with the material and the biographical information in these four accounts

Letter from Nathan Smith to Mary Babcock Denison, Polly's mother.

Stonington 11th May 1786

Madam,

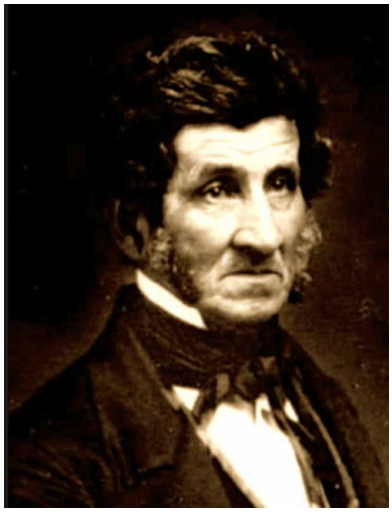
As my Intentions are Honorable I hope it will be a Sufficient excuse for the Liberty I have taken in paying my Addresses to your amiable Daughter and as my Views are founded upon the Strictest principles of Honor & Justice; so I wish for them to meet with your approbation.

I have the Honor to be with respect & Esteem, Your most Obedient & very Humble Servant

Nathan Smith

The letter of proposal is owned by the RW Woolworth Library.

Sarah "Sally" Anne Swan (1799-1879) and Gurdon Trumbull (1790-1875). Married 1817.



Gurdon Trumbull

Gurdon Trumbull was born in Norwich, CT to John Trumbull and Lucy Springer. In August of 1814, he was one of the little band of volunteers who defended the town against the British, commanded by Sir Thomas Hardy[1]

Letter from Gurdon Trumbull to Sally Swan, 1817

Be not offended Sally Ann should the manner of this application be inconsistent with your idea of propriety. Was I conscious of its being so I should never have attempted it. My reasons for adopting this mode of communicating my sentiments to you was to give you an opportunity of deciding without embarrassment and to learn your sentiments without a direct avowal. I hope that you will not be surprised at my declaration that a determination to make this attempt has been formed now for more than two years and at no time have I ceased to look forward in hope to the period when I could with propriety adopt it. To you it is now referred and your decision will either extinguish the last ray of Hope or change it to reality where I cannot hope for more. I cannot presume you unconscious of the sentiments of Regards which I have entertained toward you although not directly expressed, but if I am mistaken in the supposition believe me when I avow it now; actuated by sincere Esteem and well tested affection do I ask you to receive my addresses, directly and personally, with the approbation of your Parents to whom I only wait your permission to apply.

I have no argument to urge in my Favor. I am too well known to you to expect success from deceitful pretensions. With anxiety shall I wait the result of this communication.

[1]Hardy had been the Captain of the *Victory* at the Battle of Trafalgar, under Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson.

If it is favorable can you doubt that I shall be happy in the gratification of the first wish my Heart; if the Reverse I must always Respect and Esteem you although I may be constrained to suppress more tender Emotions.

Relying on your goodness to make painful suspense as short with me as possible.

I am with sincerity, Yours, Gurdon

Gurdon and Sally were married May 1, 1817. After the war and his marriage to Sally, Gurdon became heavily involved in developing the whaling and sealing industries in Stonington. He was a representative in the state general assembly in 1840, 1848 and 1851. According to his obituary, he was the first to propose and served as an original director of the Stonington and Providence railroad — the first link of the Shore Line from New York to Boston, and the second railroad chartered by Connecticut. In 1852, Gurdon moved to Hartford, where he was alderman of his ward and served as one of the judges of the city court in 1854 and 1855. Gurdon had an inclination to historical and antiquarian research, in particular in reference to his native county and state; and was a member and for many years one of the vice presidents of the Connecticut Historical society. He died October 8, 1875 in Hartford.

Sally died February 21, 1879. Her obituary in the Hartford Daily Courant described her: "She had a vigor of mind and body uncommon for her years. She was almost a regular attendant at the Asylum Hill Congregational church, and it is only a few Sundays ago that she walked to and from the service. Mrs. Trumbull was a woman of uncommon intellectual and moral force, most attractive and winning in manner, and in character saintly. Her many friends, and they were largely among the young, never spoke of her but with tenderness and enthusiasm. Now for many years she has been to them 'a dear old lady', and she has kept her hold on their affection by maintaining a lively interest in the passing world without ever losing sight of that world which does not pass. On hearing of her death one naturally says 'a saint has gone to heaven.' "

The letter of proposal is owned by the RW Woolworth Lbrary.

Richard Wheeler (1817-1904)

Married Frances Avery (1821-1855) in 1842.
Married Lucy Noyes (1827-1905) in 1856.



Richard Wheeler

Richard Anson Wheeler, son of Richard Wheeler and Mary Hewitt, was born in Stonington January 29, 1817 at the family homestead on Wheeler Road. At the age of eighteen, he was chosen sergeant of the 6th Company, 8th Regiment, 3rd Brigade, Connecticut Militia, and two years later was elected and commissioned captain of the same company. He served the town as selectman, representative and a member of the Board of Education for fifteen years. Frances (1821-1855) was born in Stonington to Stephen Avery and Elizabeth Morgan. Richard proposed to Frances in November 1839; they were married in February 1842.

Letter from Richard Wheeler to Frances Avery

North Stonington, November 25, 1839

Miss Avery:

I take this manner of expressing to you my thoughts upon a very important subject, one that has seriously occupied by contemplation for a length of time past. I trust you will pardon me, when I ask would my addresses be acceptable to you, and have

I aught to do with the happiness of your future? The above request, thus briefly and unceremoniously presented, is the result of mature reflection and I indulge hope that you will receive it as an offering of true friendship and unfeigned regard. An answer to the above is requested whenever it may suit your convenience.

Yours truly,

R.A. Wheeler

Letter from Frances Avery to Richard Wheeler

North Stonington, December 12, 1839

Mr. Wheeler:

In answer to a communication received from you some days since, I would briefly say that whenever you deem it proper to call your company will be accepted.

Frances M. Avery

Richard and Frances had two daughters: Eliza, born in 1844, and Emily, born in 1855. Frances died nine weeks after Emily's birth.

The above letters are quoted From *Grace Wheeler's Memories* by Grace Denison Wheeler, Pequot Press, 1948. Grace Wheeler was the daughter of Richard Wheeler and his second wife Lucy Denison Noyes (1827-1905).

Her book also contains the following striking anecdote of her parents' courtship:

In a little diary which Richard and Lucy kept for three months before their marriage there is more of death than life written on those pages. They wrote in it alternate weeks. My mother had a deeply religious nature, and this little book is full of her thoughts about her new life soon to begin and wishes that she might prove to be a true helpmate to one whom she loved and deeply respected.

Grace's book quotes a few passages from this joint diary.

Excerpts from a joint pre-nuptial diary by Richard Wheeler and Lucy Denison Noyes

Entry by Lucy:
Joseph [Lucy's brother] has gone and all went with him to the boat, and I am here alone. Mother has just left me and her heart is almost broken, one after another gone and left her, she said to me, "Oh, Lucy, I am glad you are not going far away." It makes me feel sad. I can hardly tell how I felt, and in leaving all I love here, I go to one who loves me and will always love me and I will go to your home and love you and may the blessing of Heaven rest upon us both and now good night.

Entry by Richard:
My thoughts flew back to you and when I remembered that you have passed many a day, week, and month there [in Mystic CT] and must have many pleasant and perhaps some melancholy thoughts, and I could not help loving you the more as these thoughts passed through my mind and every leisure moment I have will all be devoted to you in affectionate remembrance of your devotion to me. Thus will I pass each fleeting hour and love each passing one. Thoughts of you are ever present like ministering spirits to kindly care for me. My thoughts and hope and prayers fly up for you and in this pleasant reverie of mind I say, Goodnight, dearest.

Letter from Richard to Lucy the night before their wedding (or possibly an entry in their joint diary)
I have thought that sorrow might throw its shadows over our joyous pathway and darken our happy days, but then I thought that hearts united asour by chords of increasing love would so strengthen our souls that we might be happy even then. I have a strong, abiding faith that is my guiding star of hope that we shall be happy. I am resolved to never let an unkind word pass these lips and fall on your ear to crush your hopes and throw a withering pain of bitterness athwart your happiness. For this I will labor, for this will I pray, for I know that I cannot devote myself too much to you for in devoting myself to you is my highest enjoyment and I am determined it shall ever be so, and when I fail to be faithful pass this page to me and now, dearest, I must close as the darkening twilight obscures the leaf and I can scarcely see the lines I write. Tomorrow at this time where shall I be? By the side of her I love and who loves me, happy years as happy as mortal needs to be. Till then, I will wait and think of you, dearest, till I come. Goodbye love — R. A. Wheeler

Joint diary entry by Lucy on their wedding day
The fifth day of November, my bridal day and what a beautiful morning! The rainy clouds have all blown away, the sun shines beautiful and bright, and my heart is light and happy, and may this morning be an omen of days to come. I have finished writing in this little book. The words I have written are for you to read. Please accept them from your own dear Lucy.

Richard and Lucy had one daughter, Grace.

Mary Allyn Noyes (1862-1908) and Cornelius "Neal" Miner (1854-1934) Married 1891.

Excerpts from Mary Allyn Noyes' diary

February, Friday 7. 1890.
Clear and cloudy. Only 8 again today. Joe didn't come, I miss him very much. _____ after school. Spoke with John Lord. All at home this eve. It seems still and lonely. I wish I had someone to love me, but I never shall I suppose.

March, Sunday 30. 1890.
Squally again today. Didn't go to church but visited and in PM went to S.S. [Sunday school] at Quiambaug. I had a class of boys which I enjoyed very much. Neal spoke very pleasantly to me. Asa acted funny this morning as if he don't care any for me, as I don't believe he does.

April, Sunday 6. 1890.
A clear Easter. Fan [Mary's older sister] stayed with Mrs. Haley and the rest went. It was a glorious day for us at church. 18 were taken into the church, but oh, what a sad day for us all. Poor Fan my heart bleeds for her. Henry said in the letter that he could not marry her. There are no words to express that I can use to express what I feel.

April, Friday 11. 1890.
Clear. Tried to busy ourselves through the day. Fan took a walk towards night and after she got back Henry came. He was very mean and aggravating, said he didn't love her any more etc. Oh is it wicked to hate him. I never heard of any one as mean.

May, Sunday 18. 1890.
Clear. Went to church and S. S. Luther was there, he looks quite natural. Frank took Mama out for a drive. Mrs. Noyes came in then Neal came and I went to drive with him and came back and we went to meeting. He made a short call after.

May, Sunday 25. 1890.
Clear, a fine day. We all went to church. After dinner Neal came for me to go to Quiambaug S.S. I went. The people were rather surprised I imagine. Afterwards I went down to Miner's to tea. Had a good time. They are very kind to me. Neal took me to a Union service at the Mystic Cong then home.

June, Sunday 8. 1890.
Clear. M didn't go to church but the rest did. I had three boys in S. S. Took ten cents. Mrs. N took Fan down to Quiambaug. Frank took Mother for a long drive. They went around Lantern Hill. Neal came up this evening. We all went to Church and he made a call after.

June, Tuesday 10. 1890.
Warm. Churning, ironing after which I cleaned the hall. Fan helped me put down

the new carpet which looks very good. Henrietta came for me about supper time and I went back with her and to Mystic in the eve. Neal brought me home. He asked me that question, and I haven't yet answered it.

June, Wednesday 11. 1890.
As I didn't get to sleep very early have felt rather tired. I cleaned the middle chamber. Fan help some. She white washed and put up curtains. Grace and Charlie came in on horseback just at night. I am thinking all the time what I shall say. Please dear Lord, help me answer right.

June, Friday 13. 1890.
Cloudy. A hard thunder shower early. I stamped 24 pounds of butter. Then we cleaned Frank's room and clothes press. At night I went to Mystic with Frank. Did only a few errands. Am still undecided.

June, Sunday 15. 1890.
Cloudy. All but Mama went to church. Had two in S.S. class. Neal did not come up. I don't know why. We all went to evening service.

June, Sunday 22. 1890.
Cloudy. Helped on the work then went over to the church – it being children's day there was a profusion of flowers. Mostly pink peonies. Concert in the eve. Neal came up. We went to Stonington to mail the letters on the way I told him yes. I hardly know whether I ought or not.

June, Saturday 28. 1890.
A busy day. Fan came on the noon train so I went for her. She seems better than when she went I think. She brought some lovely flowers from Oak Lawn. Neal came up for me. We went to the chapel in the evening to hear Miss Holmes class in elocution. I then went home with him to stay all night.

July, Thursday 24. 1890.
About ten Fan and I went to Westerly. I got a sunhat and cloth for a dress costing 85 cents. Did a number of errands. I got back about 5. Feel tired. It is pleasant to think there is someone caring for me and I know Neal does.

> Mary and Neal were married October 29, 1891. They had two daughters together, born in 1894 and 1897. Mary and Neal worked on the Minor family farm in Stonington.
>
> Mary Noyes' diary is owned by the RW Woolworth Library.