Two Young Lives Rediscovered:

The Friendship Albums of Tacy Swallow and Charlotte Bisson

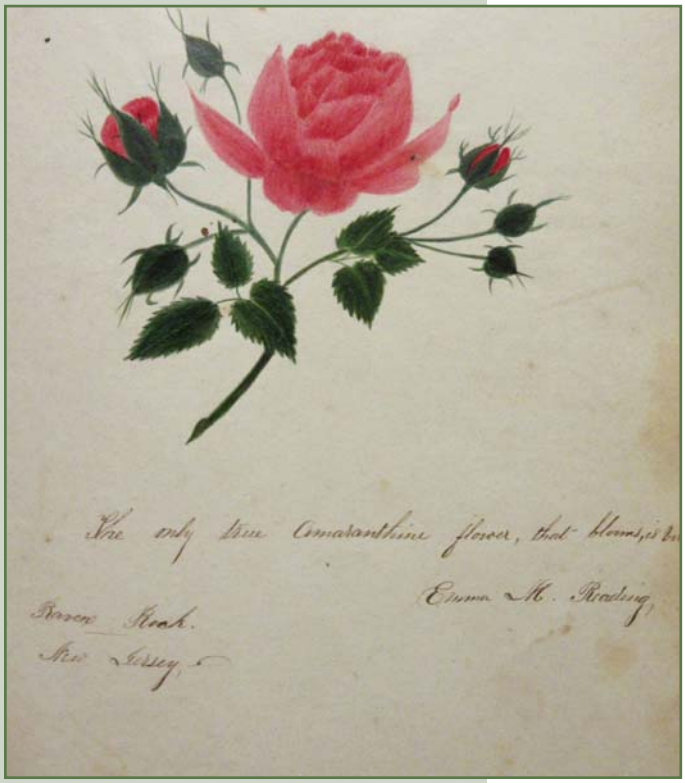
I hate texting. I only text out of obligation to respond to those who text me. To me, texting is a fractured, impersonal form of communication. Lest you get the wrong idea, I am a big fan of technology but not of some of its results, texting being one of those, although I understand that many parents and older folks text because that is their children's or grandchildren's preferred way of keeping in touch. Just the same, I doubt that a hundred years from now, people will be re-reading a series of century-old text messages, only to find their hearts full of nostalgia and their eyes welling up with tears. That brings me to the subject of this column and a story about some precious paper communications that did survive to be re-read over a century later and tell a personal tale of two young lives. Yes, I confess. On a recent antiques-hunting ramble in Lambertville, I sniffed out two Civil War era "friendship albums," snatched them from a dusty shelf and made them mine, happily anticipating the quest to trace them back to their original owners. So, let me tell you about those owners: Tacy Swallow and Charlotte "Lottie" Bisson.

The search for Tacy Swallow was no real challenge. The first page of her album was emblazoned with the words: "Respectfully Dedicated to Miss Tacy R. Swallow." A lengthy two-page verse followed in flowing script and signed: "Your Sincere Kate, Phillips-Burgh, September the 22nd 1856." A unique name like Tacy Swallow is a real gift to a genealogical researcher and I quickly found a few records on her. Sadly, those were death and grave records. Tacy Swallow, born in 1834 in Hunterdon County, died there in 1859 at the age of twenty-four. Tacy's short life was punctuated with loss. Both her father, Benjamin Swallow, and her mother, Susan Ent Swallow, died in 1844 when Tacy was just ten years old. Her older sister, Bartolette Swallow, died in 1853. All four are interred in the Sandy Ridge Cemetery in Delaware, New Jersey. Benjamin Swallow had served in the Hunterdon County Militia during the Whiskey Rebellion and lived in Kingwood Township in the early 1790s. He married Susan Ent in New Jersey in 1811. The family lived in Amwell and in Delaware in Hunterdon County.

The inscriptions and verses in Tacy Swallow's album often talked of the inevitability of death and the afterlife in heaven. The entries date from the two years preceding Tacy's death and it may be that she was not well during that period. Excerpts from the first entry by Tacy's friend Kate are especially poignant:

> Thou are a child of earth, a creature formed for grief and mirth;
> And truly as thou ever had breath, as surely shalt thou sleep in
> death. That day must ever end in night, until we gain the day

Above is the title page of Tacy Swallow's album. Below and on the next page are examples of inscriptions.



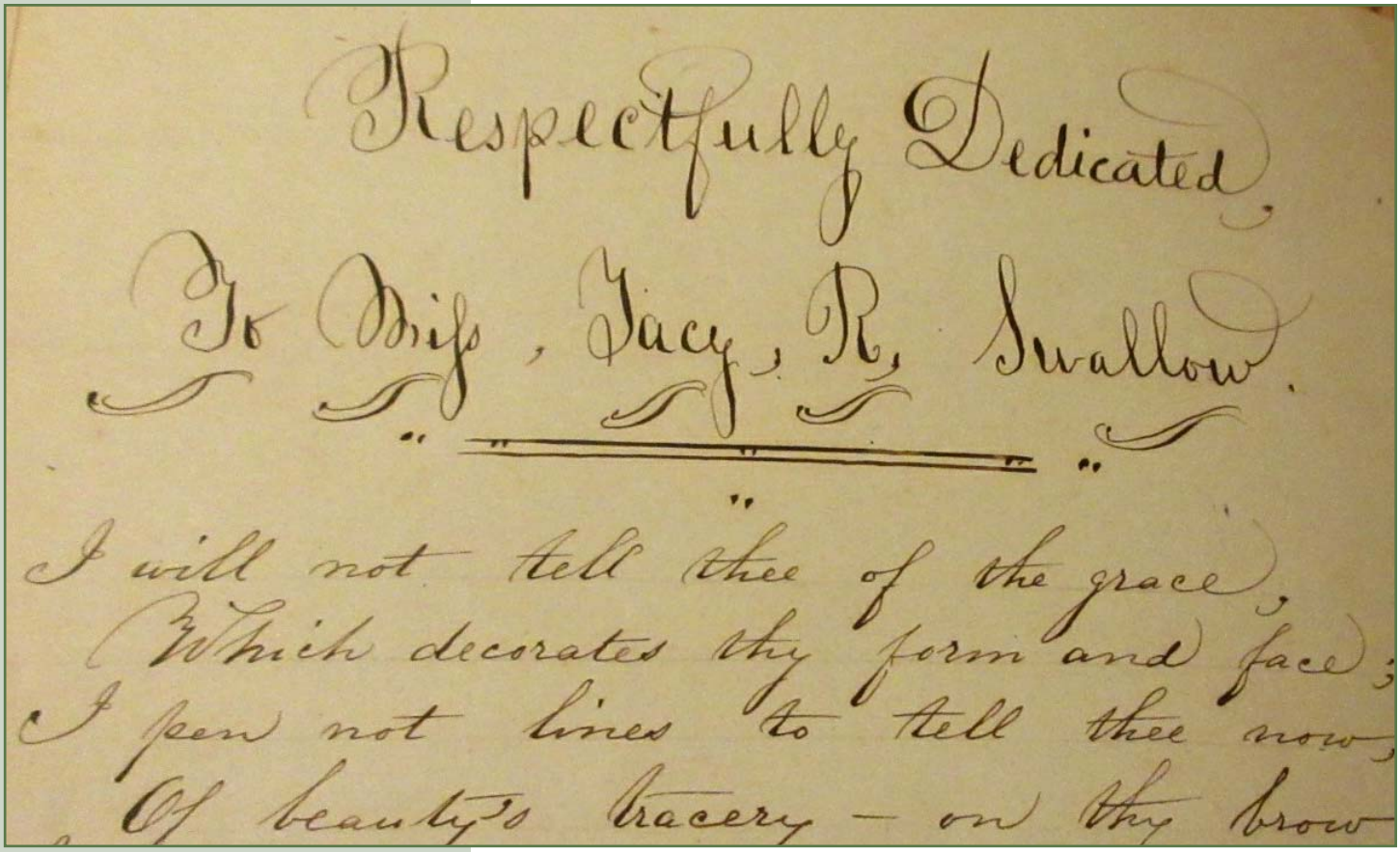
of Rest and mingle ever with the Blest. Oh, Tacy dear may you and I so live that we'll not fear to die. We've each a Mother there with God, their forms are sleeping 'neath the sod. I think I'll never forget the day when, low in sickness, I did lay. And thou, sweet friend were ever near to soothe, to comfort and to cheer...Love me on earth—meet me on High.

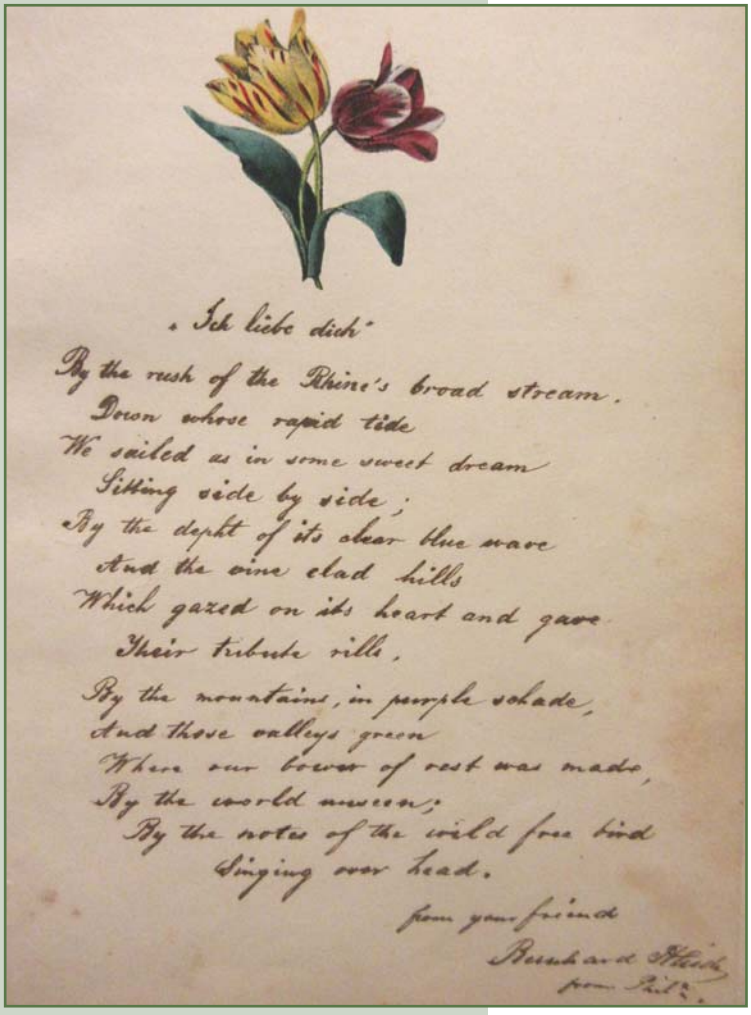
Beyond researching Tacy's life, I also looked for information on some of the people who contributed to her album and signed their full names. Among those were entries penned by Ephraim Solliday Widdemer and his wife Margaret. Margaret wrote about parting from Tacy in 1857: "Tomorrow we part, it may be forever on earth, but here such scenes are ours to bear. Let us make it our aim to meet in that world above where parting never comes, and sorrow is unknown. Farewell dear friend."

Ephraim Solliday Widdemer was born in Pennsylvania in 1824. When the 1850 US census was taken, he was a tinsmith living with his wife, son, and daughter in Spring Garden, Pennsylvania. By the time he and his wife wrote in Tacy's album, Ephraim was preparing to enter an Episcopal theological seminary in New York. He became a clergyman serving congregations in Stillwater and Yonkers in New York and in Philadelphia over his career. He died in Asbury Park in 1901. His 1857 message in Tacy's album speaks of his affection for her and of the changes coming to his life:

"That the pleasant scenes which we have enjoyed as Christian friends may live long in your heart and be cherished in fond memories of the future. I inscribe my name on the last evening of my sojourn among loved ones of whom I believe you to form one of the truest, preparatory to my departure to another home—though among strangers. Hoping that the ties of heart thus formed where sin and disappointments reign will be strengthened by time and consummated in Heaven. Yours ever truly, E.S. Widdemer"

An 1858 inscription made by Samuel N. Swaim speaks of both life and death: "To Tacy, May the blessing of God always attend thee; May the sun of Glory shine 'round thy bed; May no sorrow distress thy days; May the pillow of peace kiss thy cheek; And when thou art tired of earthly joys and the curtain of death closes around thy pillow, may the hand of God


Respectfully Dedicated
To Miss, Tacy, R, Swallow.
I will not tell thee of the grace,
Which decorates thy form and face;
I pen not lines to tell thee now,
Of beauty's tracery — on thy brow



"Ich liebe dich"
By the rush of the Rhine's broad stream,
Down whose rapid tide
We sailed as in some sweet dream
Sitting side by side;
By the depht of its clear blue wave
And the vine clad hills
Which gazed on its heart and gave
Their tribute rills,
By the mountains, in purple shade,
And those valleys green
Where our bower of rest was made,
By the world unseen;
By the notes of the wild free bird
Singing over head,
from your friend
Bernhard Thiele
from Pilz

attend thy bed and take care that the expiring lamp of life shall not receive one rude blast to hasten on it extinction." Below Samuel's signature, in a different handwriting, is a later annotation that reads: "In just one month and two days from that date, that lamp ceased to burn. Before a year had past [*sic*] away, they both rest in death's decay."

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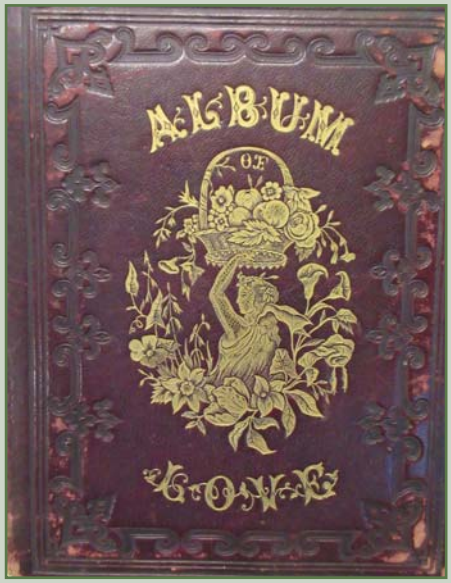
Unlike the search for Tacy Swallow, the research journey to identify Charlotte Bisson was a merry chase only made possible by some clues in the pages of her album. Charlotte's surname was never inscribed and, in most of the entries, she was referred to as "Lottie." After reading every entry, I concluded that hell would probably freeze over before I ever sleuthed out who Lottie was. After a couple frustrating false starts, I tried again, re-reading every entry and looking for anything I might have missed. It came down to just the following:

Above is Tacy Swallow's grave. She died at age 24.

Below is the cover from Lottie Bisson's album. Examples of inscriptions follow.

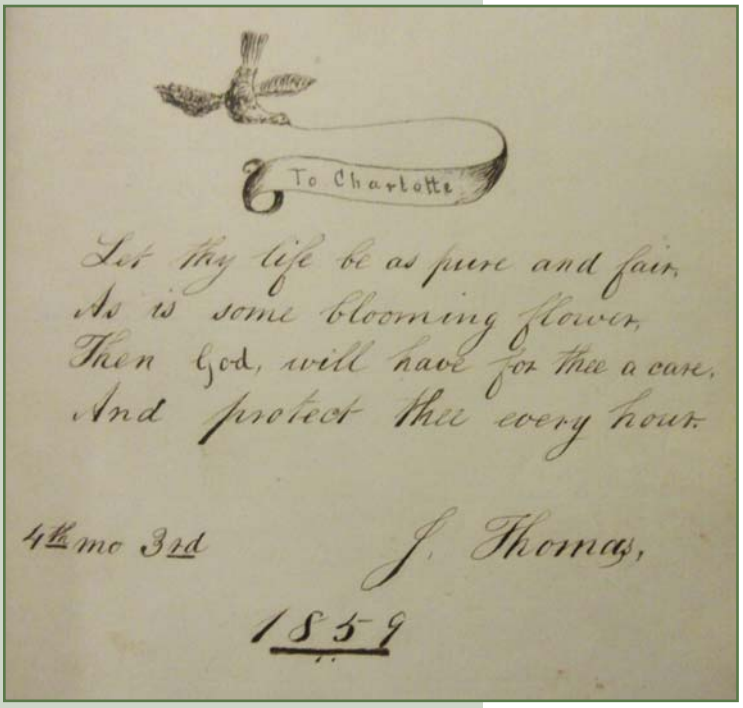


- Lottie's proper name was Charlotte (based on two entries)
- Lottie's last name began with the letter "B" (based on one entry written to "Lottie B.")
- Lottie lived in the Gwynedd, Kulpsville, Harleysville area of Pennsylvania
- Lottie had a cousin named "Clemmie" (likely Clementine—based on one entry)
- Lottie had a grandmother named Nancy Snare (based on an entry titled "To My Granddaughter" and signed "Nancy Snare")

How to start? The only way was to look for Nancy Snare. Assuming that Lottie would have been about 18–20 years old when she shared her album pages with family and friends (1859–1863), she would have been born about 1840, probably in Pennsylvania. Using that assumption, it would have been likely that her grandmother Nancy would have been born circa 1780, give or take five or even ten years. I found a Nancy Snare who fit my profile in the right area of Pennsylvania. She was born (Anna) Nancy Kulp in 1784 and was still alive at the time the album was inscribed. (She died at 81 years old in 1865.) Further searching for Nancy found her in the 1850 US census living in Towamencin, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania with her daughter Elizabeth Snare Stover and son-in-law Charles Stover. The household included their daughter Clementine and one of the album inscriptions was signed by an Elizabeth Stover. So far, so good. More searching revealed that Nancy Kulp Snare had another daughter, Leah Snare Bisson and, yes, Leah and her husband John Bisson had a daughter named Charlotte, born in 1838. Mystery solved—Lottie B. was Charlotte Bisson.

Digging deeper to find out more about Charlotte, I came upon an 1856 publication of the Pennsylvania Female College located at Perkiomen Bridge, Pennsylvania, that listed Charlotte as a student there and a resident of Gwynedd. It also included a detailed outline of the school's four-year curriculum which included English Grammar, Geography (ancient and modern), History (ancient and modern), Botany, Chemistry, Geology, Physiology, Logic, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Calculus, Philosophy, Natural History, U.S. Constitution, and Political Economy. Lectures were also offered on a variety of subjects including Mineralogy and Astronomy. Talk about STEM!
#Most of the messages in Charlotte's album expressed thoughts of the future and "forget-me-not" sentiments. Her grandmother, Nancy Snare, then nearing 80-years-old, wrote with thoughts of her advanced age:

"The time is fast approaching when we my friend must sever. May thou enjoy felicity and happiness forever. Farewell and O



remember me some far distant day, that she who penned thee this may then have passed away."

Charlotte Bisson was the great-granddaughter of Charles Bisson, born in France in about 1752 and was perhaps named for him. Charles, a tailor by trade, emigrated to Pennsylvania in the early 1770s and served in a Pennsylvania regiment during the Revolutionary War. He died in Gwynedd in 1826 and was, like many of his descendants, interred in the Bethel Hill Methodist Episcopal Cemetery in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. Like Tacy Swallow, Charlotte lost both of her parents at a young age. Her father John died in 1850 and her mother Leah in 1855. In December 1863, Charlotte Bisson married Daniel S. Young, a local painter and Civil War veteran. Charlotte was widowed in 1882 but lived for another fifty years.

The survival of these two delicate paper albums for 160 years opened the door to the rediscovery of the lives of two young women, lives that still have resonance today. At a time when the teaching of history in schools is on the decline and subject to sometimes questionable revisionist efforts, I wish there was a way to effectively raise awareness of the value of studying the past (warts and all) to bring context to the present. As William Butler Yeats once said: "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." What better kindling than the stories and lessons of centuries of human existence?

"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies."

—Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

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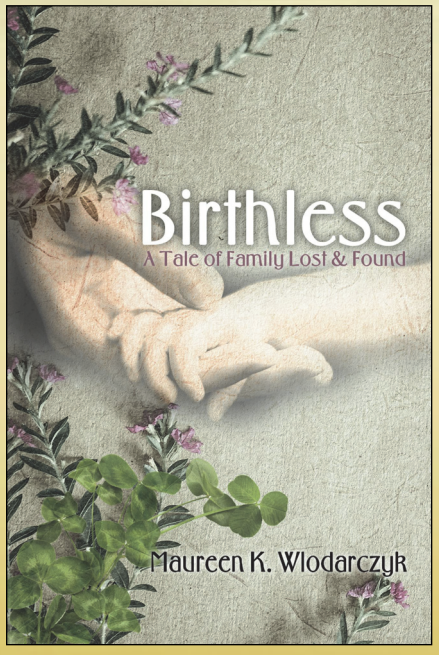

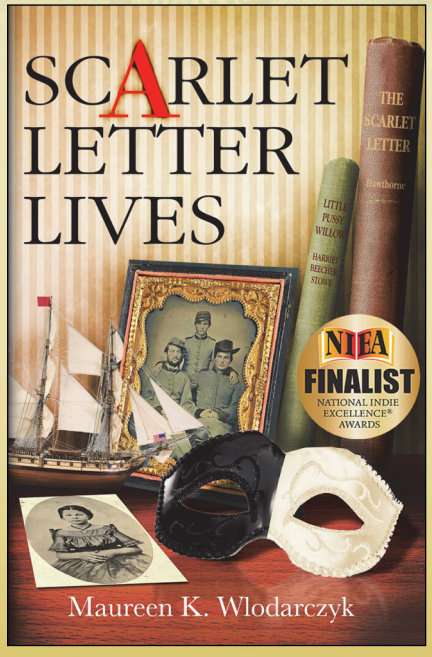

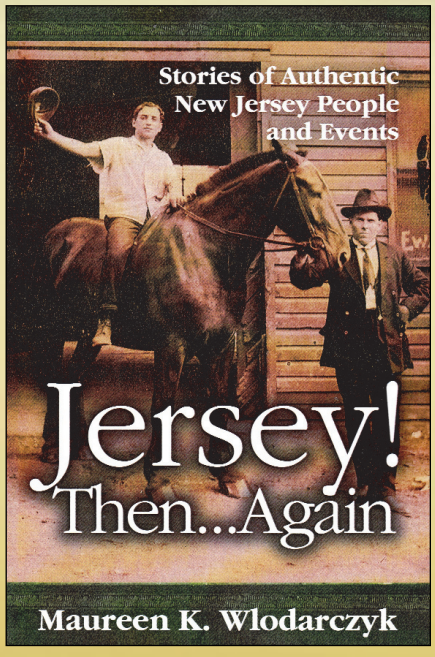

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