

Blogpost: “Writing Home: William Jarvis Hamilton, Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin, to Hannah Owens Hamilton, Willowbank, 1853-1860”

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Like many nineteenth-century middle-class families in North America and the British Empire, members of the Hamilton families were keen letter writers. Fortunately for us their letters have survived; a very large number of them are held in the University of Guelph’s Archives, part of the John Macintosh Duff collection.

Some of these exchanges cannot be deciphered. Ink has faded; a writer might have been in a hurry, with the result a messy scrawl; illness and old age made it difficult at times for their authors to write legibly; and the need to conserve paper led them at times to use the “cross hatch” method of writing, which can be difficult to read (a writer would turn the paper and write across the existing lines). However, much of the correspondence is quite legible and is a rich source of information about many aspects of this large extended family’s lives and relationships. These letters tell us about their daily routines, the places and people they visited, the engagements, weddings, and births they celebrated, and the stresses and strains of sickness, old age, and death. Their authors also reflected on political, and economic matters within Upper Canada/Ontario and the wider world, as they shared their thoughts on upcoming elections, natural disasters, or imperial wars. These letters also provide valuable insights into their authors’ emotions, feelings that range from happiness and contentment to boredom, anxiety, anger, hope, fear, and at times sadness and distress.

William Jarvis Hamilton’s letters home to Willowbank from Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin are particularly interesting. Written between 1853 to the early 1860s to his mother, Hannah Owen Hamilton, and his sisters, they provide detailed portraits of his social life within the Fond-du-Lac community and his search for work and business opportunities. The letters also allow us to chart William’s own personal growth, from his arrival in Fond-du-Lac as a young and very sociable bachelor of twenty to the eve of his departure as a married man and father. Moreover, these letters also provide us with insights into mother-son relationships, a rare find for this period. While historians have explored relationships between mother and daughters or sisters: it is less common to find such detailed records of a son’s correspondence with his mother or his sisters.



**Queenston Heights, Looking South from Willowbank. Engraving, W. H. Bartlett, 1838.
Niagara Historical Society and Museum.**

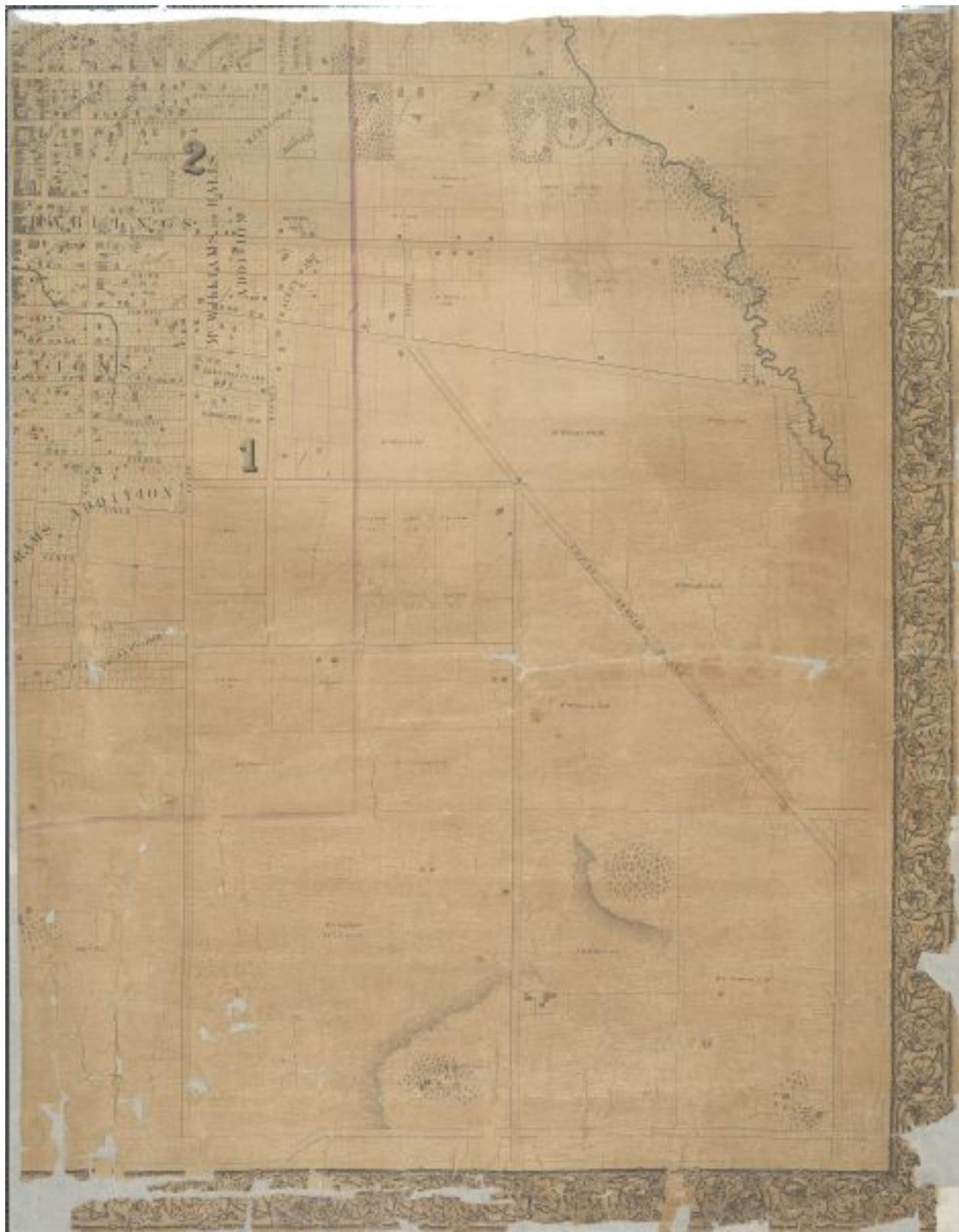
Born in 1833, William was five when his father, Alexander Hamilton, died. Alexander's death left William's mother Hannah not just a widow but one in a precarious financial situation. From what we can piece together from his letters home, in the 1840s William attended school in Toronto. Compared to his letters home from Wisconsin, far less of this correspondence has survived. What does exist resembles other letters sent by boys at nineteenth-century boarding schools: hopes for his family's good health, news of exciting events (a fire, an unnamed

women's death, a fellow-pupil's faint during church service), his taking first place in the college rankings, and requests for apples, money, and letters from home. By 1849 William was living in Hamilton, where he was employed by a Mr. Harris, who appears to have run a dry-goods store. It seems the Hamiltons hoped William might be joined by one of his brothers. He advised his mother to tell him that while Harris might take him on as well, he should not expect much in the way of a salary for the first year (although Harris would provide board). The work, moreover, would at first involve "a great many things to do he will not like at first but he must make up his mind to do it he will have to carry parcels put up the shutters and many other little things." Overall, though, William seems to have been happy in Hamilton, telling his mother that he liked Harris "very much."

By the early 1850s, though, he foresaw that he would be "out on the Tramp" and hoped he might find employment with the Grand Trunk Rail Road. Other family members' mobility might have inspired him. His brother Alex was leaving Hamilton for Brantford and another relative had "deserted Queenston for the flourishing big city of London." By January 1853 William was in Fond-du-Lac, a growing Wisconsin town just south of Lake Winnebago, working as a surveyor. His first letter home told Hannah about his rail trip: a delay in Chicago as a result of his trunk going missing, the loss of his gloves, and his amazement by the beauty of the prairies. Westerners, he thought, "are not a bit like the Eastern people either in looks or manners the Western people seem more like English than American." What's more, "this place is noted for pretty women and all nearly young married people." William was keen to meet new friends but he also benefited from his extended family's presence in the town. His cousin Julia Hamilton Dee and her husband Thomas Dee also had moved to Fond-du-Lac and "trotted me around town," he told Hannah, introducing him to "several ladies and an engineer." What's more, he met people from Niagara and from London, the latter with a "nice daughter" who, unfortunately for William, was presently in New York. Fond-du-Lac's thriving lumber trade attracted people from both sides of the Canada-U.S. border.



Fond-du-Lac City Map, George Harrison, 1857. Image ID34852. Wisconsin Historical Society. In December 1859 William attended a “grand Masquerade ball” at the Armory Hall.



Fond-du-Lac City Map, George Harrison, 1857. Image ID 34853. Wisconsin Historical Society. William's letters refer to the many drives and rides he took into the countryside, possibly along the Plank Road (the diagonal line on the bottom right).

William appears to have been a very sociable young man, fond of whatever entertainments Fond-du-Lac society could offer. He enjoyed sleighing, dinner with his new friends, fishing, and gathering flower seeds from the nearby woods (although he was not fond of the area's mosquitoes, "so large and so ferocious that you are obliged to carry a large stick to thwack them"). His favourite pastime, though, was attending the community's many balls and social gatherings. William, it seems, loved to dance, telling his sister Hannah that while "they dance nothing here but cotillions and as I know nothing about them I did not dance at first." However, "after I found they did not dance anything else" he decided to learn and "soon found I could dance as well as the best of them." Dancing, of course, helped introduce him to members of the opposite sex and he told his sister "I had quite a flirtation with the Belle of Fond du Lac . . . I suppose you would like to know what sort of ladies we have here she is tall and a good figure has thick hair and beautiful eyes paints very nicely and has a small hand and foot." "Paint," though, didn't always please him, as he told a male acquaintance that a certain young woman "had paint enough on her face to paint the side of a house," and then found out she was the man's fiancée. "I hope I have not caused a split," William confessed to his mother, as unsurprisingly the man "seemed not to like it much . . . but I believe in speaking plain language." He also, though, reassured Hannah that while he had not taken the temperance pledge - "that is something I will not do to please the Queen I am afraid I never was made to be bound by a chain" - "nevertheless perhaps you would be surprised if I told you that I had not tasted liquor since I left Canada and in future do not intend taking anymore."

Flirting with the Belle of Fond du Lac was all very well but William also was looking for a permanent relationship. At a ball in Fond-du-Lac William met Sarah Clark, whose parents lived in Berlin, Wisconsin. He took "rather a shine" to her he wrote Hannah, not least because she was a good dancer. The two did not meet again for a year. When they did, it was on a sleighing party, where she and his other companions teased him about his Canadian "blanket coat." He seemed not to mind, though, as she invited him to call upon her and they started courting. Much to William's delight, Hannah wrote to her. Although we don't know what was in the letter, it

must have pleased Sarah, since not only was it unexpected but William told Hannah that “I never saw her look more pleased in my life.” However, William’s letter of 23 February, 1858, also demonstrates the disruptive role gossip and rumour might play in family correspondence, exacerbated by a distance of more than a thousand kilometres. In a rare display of anger, William refuted the news passed on by his sister Hannah to his other sisters “that Sarah was a Catholic but would change on my account now my dear Mamma I must say that I am not at all obliged to her for spreading such a report as that for she is not, nor ever has been, or is at all likely, to become” one. As well, if his mother was

expecting that she is some great person, now I can only tell you that if such is your expectation that you will be disappointed she is but a Farmer’s daughter and has always supported herself as many others are now doing by her needle these few remarks I do not want repeated to anyone as some of my relatives would not feel much honor by such an acquaintance and it makes no difference to me whether they are or not when I told you I made a particular request that it should not be mentioned to any one out of the family but it seems that my wishes in that respect were not noticed or if they were they would not have been told to everyone that comes along. I never said that she was a Catholic nor gave any one any reason to think so you asked me if I had chosen out of my own church and I told you that she did not belong to any in particular but attended ours, which I think you will find by referring to my letter you also wish to know who she is staying with in F d L she is boarding at a Mrs Brown’s.

As well as reminding us of the undercurrents of hostility that nineteenth-century Protestant Ontario harboured towards Catholics, William’s letter also suggests that other tensions - over class and status, for example - might arise during a couple’s courtship, particularly when the prospective daughter-in-law and her family were unknown entities. Although by the 1850s compatibility and affection increasingly were becoming a hallmark of middle-class marriages, similar social standing and respectability - witness William’s reassurance that Sarah was living in a boarding house, not on her own - also were important.

Yet while William appears to have been very happy with “his darling little wife,” and their “darling Baby” daughter, he didn’t cease to think of his mother at Willowbank and his family.

He consistently asked for news of Hannah and his relatives and apologized for not writing more to each family member. He felt it was easier for him, and more interesting for them, if he wrote to them collectively than to send each a separate letter that would only repeat his news. He also passed on news that other family members sent, such as brother Herbert's story of an 1859 railway accidents or fires (such disasters crop up frequently in the family's correspondence). Many of his letters are full of jokes (often at his expense), mild teasing of his siblings, and amusing anecdotes for his mother's enjoyment. But at times he worried about his aging mother's health and well-being, particularly when the question of her having his cousin Mary, Julia's older sister, come to live at Willowbank. Although a relative had offered Hannah £50 per year for Mary's keep, "I think he should be ashamed to make you above all others such an offer."

Mamma you have no idea what she is or you would not listen to such a proposal she would cause you more anxiety and trouble than ten times the amount would compensate for - for she is nothing more or less than a Lunatic and I feel certain that taking her back to Queenston would not have a tendency to improve her in the least she is getting more unmanageable every day and is continually making some trouble and therefore I think you would not want her in a minute in your home she is as cunning as a mad man and would not be with you one week before she would cause you to regret having anything to do with her. Mamma I do not wish you to think that I am unmindful of your necessities for I will know the want of any trifle to you but when I know how it is to be gained I cannot but tell you that that amount would be hardest earned money you ever got I have now lived nearly 3 years in the same house with her and not have found out what she is as for the paltry sum of £50 they would willingly give four times that amount to get rid of her provided they could not get any one to take charge of her for less. that is not such a great temptation after all if you but consider why . . . she will be more trouble [than] 6 other persons . . . and has been in the habit of dining in the best kind of style and I know that she is not satisfied with even that. Only yesterday she accused Julia of stealing some of her clothes and, if she would do such a thing to her own sister, what would she to do you they can't go out of the house without locking up everything and I should be sorry to have such an example set to the younger members of your household.

William went on, telling Hannah “you my dear Mamma God knows have trouble enough already without having any more to battle with . . . Tom made me an offer to take her when I married and said that he would make it worth my while to do so but I very distinctly told him that I would not take the charge of her for £1000 per annum and I would not. . . . I sincerely hope and trust that you will have nothing to do with her if you do she will turn my dear old home into a perfect Hell, for you could neither say nor do anything that she would not tell to every one who came in. She does so here and when she does begin there is no stopping her.” It is not clear what Mary’s problems were. There are plenty of hints in William’s letters home, however, that she was at best difficult and disruptive to live with and may have been emotionally unstable; other letters in the family collection suggest she lived for some time in a hospital in Buffalo. Usually he dismissed her outbursts with humour or, at other times, with resignation. It was a different matter, however, when it was a question of her living with his mother, who was just over sixty: the bonds of an extended family could only stretch so far.

William’s comment about Mary having the potential to “turn his dear old home into a perfect Hell” was not a casual slip. Willowbank was often in his thoughts. On his arrival he toyed with the thought of becoming an American when he first arrived, since he enjoyed its citizens’ “free and easy” attitude. At times he felt that he had enjoyed more economic opportunities in Wisconsin than were available in Ontario. In August, 1859, in replying to his mother’s hopes that he would come home and run the farm at Willowbank, he confessed “your own wishes are not stronger in that respect than mine but what would I do were I to come to Canada agin [sic] I think it’s better for you to get the rent from an experienced farmer than to risk getting it from one who has to learn the trade,” adding “after all it is best that I have left Canada I feel ore and more convinced as time wears on.” Five months earlier, though, he told Hannah I do want to come and see you so much . . . if I could get a good permanent situation near you and once I get clear of debt here I am already [sic] to leave this part of the world never to return to it.” His family - particularly his mother - and his home thus continued to exert a strong emotional pull over William. At times he hoped that Hannah could travel to Wisconsin to visit him, although he believed that the journey would be too difficult for her on her own and that she would need a companion. Perhaps his brother Alex could accompany her? More often William wished that he could come home for a visit but, he told Hannah, he lacked both the time and funds to do so. He

did, though, send Sarah to Queenston in the spring of 1859 and asked his mother to show her “all the beauties of my dear old home take her up to the Monument and the Heights.” And his longing for his home and family became even more acute after the birth of his and Sarah’s daughter Caroline. “Oh how I wish I could pop in today and see you all and show you our little darling baby,” he told Hannah. Even the smallest things could evoke nostalgia for Willowbank. Hannah’s gift of plums (even though they had not yet arrived) would be most prized because they came from home sweet home.”

As it turned out, William returned to Queenston in 1865, just after the birth of his and Sarah’s son, Cyrus Jarvis. Four years after Sarah’s death in 1865 he married Margaret Houston; between 1871 and 1875 they had three daughters, Grace (who died when she was just over a year), Grace, and Minetta. Like his father Alexander but unlike his mother Hannah, William did not live to old age; he died in 1881 at the age of forty of “phthisis pulmonalis” or tuberculosis. During his relatively short lifetime, though, William left a fascinating record, one that tells us much about both himself, his family, and the mid-nineteenth-century society in which he lived.