

BY JEROLD WIKOFF P'03

# Permanent

“I look forward every day to the arrival of the post. Who knows but that it might bear a letter from an old friend; a brief note from someone I love; a letter from a foreign land; a letter from a stranger congratulating me upon my wisdom; and a good book that has long been awaited.” —Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

SINCE THE DAYS of Samuel Johnson, historians have lamented — quite prematurely — that people no longer write letters. The fact is, despite repeated complaints for some 200 years that letter writing has become a lost art, letters have persisted as a pervasive form of communication — until perhaps ten years ago, when email and cell phones began to radically change how we stay connected with one another.

Of course, it could be argued that email is just a new form of letter writing and that people look forward to the arrival of their daily — or even hourly — electronic “post” just as much as Johnson did. But really, it’s just not the same. Email is more about staying in close contact, letting people know what you are up to at the moment. Text messaging is even more “instant.” Letters were never so immediate, and generally led to more reflection.

Letters also have staying power that email messages lack. They are actual paper documents, which can be preserved and stored. Theoretically, email

can be preserved in the same way. Just print them out and save the hard copies. In reality, however, most emails simply disappear into the “deleted” file or are lost when software changes.

The loss of letters — or email messages — isn’t necessarily catastrophic, but future historians will definitely feel the lack. Plenty of sources exist that capture the events and occurrences of a specific time — newspapers, court and business records, memoirs, diaries, etc. — but letters have often provided personal details that might otherwise have been forgotten. An absence of letters will leave a gaping hole in the historical record.

The history of Gettysburg College is no exception. Letters create a sense of college life not available in usual sources. For example, a letter by David Grier Barnitz, Class of 1834, recalls the College’s first commencement with an ironic wit and pride that evokes a clear image of the historic day. George Hay Kain, Class of 1897, recounts with con-

siderable humor a chemistry lab class with Prof. Edward Breidenbaugh, making clear that student antics have been a part of college life forever.

Unfortunately, Gettysburg College is not rich in student letters. Few have been donated to Special Collections in Musselman Library — a lack that Karen Drickamer, the College’s archivist, especially regrets. “It would be wonderful to have more student letters,” she said. “Such letters give researchers details about everyday student life that cannot be found in the College’s official records. We do have some 19th-century letters and a few diaries and letters from the first half of the 20th century, but sadly nothing from the 1940s to the present.”

Student letters from the nineteenth century are indeed one of the treasures in Special Collections. Excerpted here are passages from letters written by four alumni from that era. The times were different, but students’ concerns and thoughts haven’t really changed much in the past 175 years.

# ink

David Grier Barnitz, Class of 1834  
Born June 20, 1816, David G. Barnitz was the valedictorian of the College’s first graduating class. The 1850 Pennsylvania census listed him as a successful lawyer in York County. A son, Bradford Grier Barnitz, was born Jan. 25, 1844, in York County. After that, records of David Barnitz and his family disappear.

• To Mary [sister], March 11 1834  
... We have commenced revising our studies for the examination. We are obliged to be up “every night until morning.” I would give any thing almost for a good sleep. We get 38 pages in Cavallo’s Philosophy at a recitation, the pages are about the size of the Encyclopedia Americana. Tell Becca that I will answer her letter, as soon as I get time. Aunt is very busy, making garden to-day. Our session will break up the 17th of April. I will be home the 18th or 19th.

• Sent June 21, 1834 [to W. Ruthrauff]  
... Fair time here! We had a party on Monday evening, which was graced by the presence of all the married ladies that visit here, together with some unmarried ones. They were all very agreeable. I suppose Cousin Maria will

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give you a full length description of all that was said, done, or intended to be said or done. Until then “Let it undescribed remain.”

We have finished Logic, and have

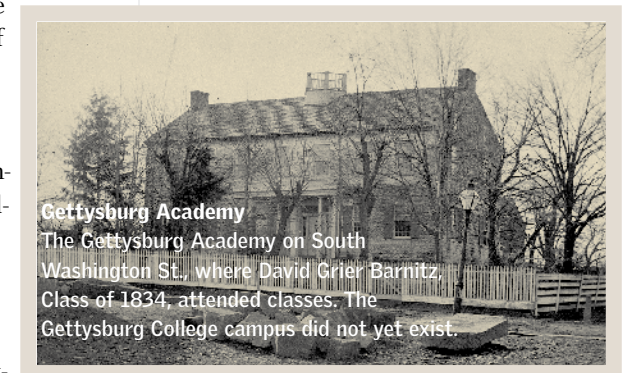
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commenced Paley’s Theology. Our class contains but three boys — less fun, but more improvement. In the college and preparatory department, we have increased to 78. —pretty good. Among the students of divinity there is a man of about 40 years of age, who has been professor of music in the academy of the musical fund Society in Philadelphia. He intends opening a school, and raising a college band. If you all approve it I should like to learn the violin with him... His charge is \$5.00 pr. quarter of 24 lessons besides occasional meetings for practicing....

• To Mary [sister], Sept. 29, 1834  
... I have no doubt you would like to hear an account of our commencement. We met at the college at nine in the morning and proceeded from there to the Lutheran Church [on Chambersburg]. If I had the pen of a [James Fennimore] Cooper or some other great character, I would commence by telling you how the bright morning sun shone on our new “blacks” and made them shine like

satins. But excuse me. You will perhaps have chance of seeing it. By the bye my suit was splendid. It was of black \$10.00 cloth. The coat fit like a ribbon and the nether extremities as tight as

the skin. Black from head to foot except the red head, and the embroidered shirt—made for the occasion. You must imagine how well I looked. We went to the church and a Latin Salutatory



Gettysburg Academy  
The Gettysburg Academy on South Washington St., where David Grier Barnitz, Class of 1834, attended classes. The Gettysburg College campus did not yet exist.

was delivered by Wm Smith from Georgetown, D.C.—an oration on the Greek language and Literature by Jacob B. Bacon, of York, Pa. and the Valedictory by your humble servant—Smith and Bacon did very well—and so did I.— The audience was drowned in tears, and so abundant was the discharge of pearly drops that the next day I was obliged to pay the sexton for wiping up the tears from the floor.— We had excellent music for the occasion—by the college band. Mother, Jan, Aunt Jane, & Grandmother were at G—g. to hear us. Grandmother was almost tickled to death. She said the music was “heavenly.”—and so were the speeches. We are the first graduates of Pennsylvania College, and I assure we are a fair specimen— We gained a great honour and a diploma.

**JOHN M. EICHELBERGER, CLASS OF 1850**  
Following graduation from Gettysburg, John M. Eichelberger practiced law in St. Louis. He died Aug 8, 1854.

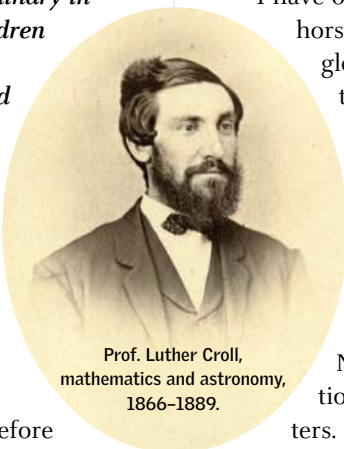
• Dec. 17, 1848 [to a cousin]  
Gettysburg is a place where the girls, old and ugly, can be measured out by the bushel. They appear to be a pretty bold set, and may be seen at all times from five to ten o'clock at night upon the streets by themselves.  
College ain't what it is cracked up to be. One can learn just as much at an academy at home, and it is so much more pleasant than away. We have about one hundred students here. This is however but a small number when compared with other years. I board with the steward, we call him Old Pete, we get tolerable good board.

We have had so far a very pleasant fall; we have had no snow exactly but once an attempt at it, but it did not succeed for it laid upon the ground only as it fell, and there could not have been more than half an inch fell all together. Christmas is now almost here and when it comes we get eleven days holiday. We have had no rumpus amongst the students in College, but I guess toward the close of the session we will have noise enough. I room in the fourth storey; consequently, I have gotten a comfortable room for we are not as much exposed as I find my neighbors below us are.

*"But I must wind up with my request that you remember me to all the girls you chance to meet, & anyone else of interest. I think I have done exceedingly well, & I hope you will not disappoint me too often in the expectations of a letter...."*

**JOHN WAGNER, CLASS OF 1871**  
John Wagner also received an M.A. (1874) and a D.D. (1895) from his alma mater and subsequently became a Lutheran clergyman in Hazelton, Pa. He was appointed a trustee of Gettysburg College in 1893 and was director of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg. His three children — Helen, Class of 1906; Vera L., Class of 1906; and Paul S., Class of 1915 — were all graduates of Gettysburg.

• Autumn 1869 [to a "schoolmate"]  
Now as [you] are allowed to discontinue calculus, I think you can drive your own cart up there, & therefore I hope to see & hear you in these old halls by next year at least. Prof. [Luther] Croll [mathematics and astronomy, 1866–1889] said he should like to have you back again. I saw Prof. [Victor] Conrad [natural sciences, 1867–1870] the other day. It makes no



Prof. Luther Croll, mathematics and astronomy, 1866–1889.

material difference whose works you study on Natural Philosophy, neither on Anatomy & Physiology, only so you are thorough. We study Well's Natural Philosophy & Hitchkocks Anatomy & Physiology. If you get Homer get Anthon. It is just the thing you want.

I have one: it is as good as a horse, & besides it contains a glossary. In Schiller we read the Thirty Year's war. Like our new German Prof. [Adam Martin] very well thus far. In Latin you are allright, but ought to have a horse.

New students are pretty scarce this year. Not much room for lecturing on society matters. We have a fellow in 'Prep' from Sweden. I saw the old Swede last night; a fat looking fellow indeed with a high hat.

G— is a dry as ever, with the exception of the street cars which is an improvement on the place. I was out to see the monument—which is now completed— & a very nice piece of work it is. [Soldiers National Monument, erected 1869]

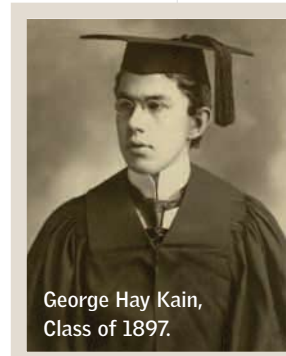
...  
But I should like to know how you have been spending your times. I advise you to have all the fun that you possibly can for if you were here you might like myself be wishing for the chance. Improve your opportunities....

But I must wind up with my request that you remember me to all the girls you chance to meet, & anyone else of interest. I think I have done exceedingly well, & I hope you will not disappoint me too often in the expectations of a letter....

**GEORGE HAY KAIN, CLASS OF 1897**  
Born in 1877, George Hay Kain graduated from Gettysburg College at age 20, earning a bachelor's degree in the "scientific course." He was a member of Phi Delta Theta and associate editor for the Spectrum. He subsequently attended Harvard Law School and practiced law in York, Pa. He died in 1958. Special Collections has 46 letters he wrote as a student to his college girlfriend, A. Marjorie Zug.

*"Don't you like this paper? This is what we write exams on and Breidy keeps a lot of it on hand and so the Scientific men never want paper. We just wait until he is somewhere else and then borrow some. It is very convenient, I assure you."*

• Fall 1896  
I am evaporating (oh, boon to the weary) four beakersful of aqua regia—the "regia" must have reference to the Satanic, for surely such a smell has naught to do with anything else. During my whole course I have schemed and schemed, so as to avoid taked iron analysis, but at last dread Fate has overtaken me and I am working at that abominable stuff... Between the lines of this, I must keep watch of my four beakers which are cheerfully working under the hood, all oblivious of the horrible fumes they are emitting. And it is no light task to watch them for the hood is encased in glass and my weary eyes must pierce the dust of ages before they can see beyond the glass.



George Hay Kain, Class of 1897.

... That man [Prof. Edward] Breidenbaugh is scouting around in [my] very unpleasant reactions. If you come to some reactions or a scheme for analysis soon, don't get scared. He thinks that that is what I am writing, I guess, if he sees me. And the beakers are cooking merrily.

Don't you like this paper? This is what we write exams on and Breidy keeps a lot of it on hand and so the Scientific men never want paper. We just wait until he is somewhere else and then borrow some. It is very convenient, I assure you.

• December 30, 1896  
... Santa Claus brought me a pocket Kodak and when I get back to college, I am going to take a picture of the cannon.

Do you want one? I tried to take my fraternity pin and your W.C.B. pin together but, of course, that was the only one of the whole film that was not good. Possibly it was because I took it on Sunday.

You should have stayed a little longer and then you could have gone along to New Oxford with us. We had lots of fun, even if Fred did try to persuade me that I ought to drive back because he drove down. I didn't do it, however. And then I went to Carlisle Junction without permission and just as I started, one of the professors got on the train and went along. I am living in hopes that he will forget it before he sees the rest of the faculty....

• September 6, 1897  
... There is a slew of Freshmen over in college, somewhere near seventy but they are pretty slow, from all appearances and accounts. The sophs put up a set of rules for them on Wednesday night and on Thursday night, the Freshmen painted 1901 all over the telegraph poles for retaliation. But as yet there are no signs of a rush. The

Freshmen, I believe, are not unanimously in favor of having it and maybe it will be allowed to go by default...

You ought to see my class in Physics, only Bess Van Cleve and May Belle Hield in it. If only it were Bess alone, I'd like it better. I think she's a cute little peach and I know you'll agree with me, if you know her...

A lot of girls have been playing guitars and mandolins all evening on Croll's lawn, just across from Prep, and it was fine. I wish they'd play every evening for my benefit, but I fear it would be to the detriment of the youths who are supposed to be studying at that time...

A new monument was dedicated this morning and that took a lot of time and brought a big crowd and besides there were two excursions in for the day. So you see we have been busy. ■



**Send your letters — and email messages**

Do you have any letters tucked away from your student days? If so, Karen Drickamer, the College's archivist, would love to look forward to the arrival of your post.

Special Collections is seeking letters — and even email messages that pertain to campus life. Of particular interest are letters, diaries, or journals that recall or reflect on the College's academic and social life. Pictures from your time as a student are also appreciated.

Send items to Karen Drickamer, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, 300 N. Washington, Gettysburg, Pa., 17325. For further information, contact Drickamer at [kdrickam@gettysburg.edu](mailto:kdrickam@gettysburg.edu) or 717-337-7015.

Gettysburg College campus in the 1850s, when John M. Eichelberger, Class of 1850, was a student

