



Bringing History to Life: The Importance of Archival Research

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Postcolonial scholar "Gloria Wekker remind[s] us ... 'Show me your archives and I will tell you who is in power'..." (Wierenga & Wierenga, p.11)



SOCIAL LIFE

Frances to her mother (Julia E. Thorpe Reynolds) on Jan. 10, 1861 (Meadville, PA) about New Year's Day.

Frances L. Reynolds to Grandmother (Jane J. Kennedy)

McHenry House [Hotel]

Meadville, PA.

November 26th, 1886

Thanksgiving Morning

"They have the Hotel furnished very handsomely and the dining hall is beautiful. I only wish you could see it. On Wednesday last was the day of the excursion. It was a beautiful day and everything went off very nicely. They had the American, English, and Spanish flags flying from the towers of the Depot, and the train from New York, which arrived here at seven in the morning, was decorated with flags. The train from Cleveland arrived here at twelve, returned at two - The dining hall looked beautifully [sic] as the silver was all bright and new and everything was so nice. Such an array of good looking and homely gentlemen I never saw before. I was introduced to a great many good looking ones of course, and had a very pleasant time."



"Here the weather proved very disagreeable but notwithstanding we received numerous calls from 12pm on to 10pm. The Parlors were well filled all day. We had a very pleasant time. *All the foreign Legations called* so that I had a chance of being introduced. I wore my green silk with lace set, and white camellias in my hair. Saturday afternoon, I, in company with Annie, attended Mrs. Gov. Spragues, and enjoyed a very pleasant visit. She has her reception every Saturday from three in the afternoon until nine in the evening. Music, dancing, and a fine entertainment all the time. *The fact is it keeps a person busy every day attending these receptions.*"

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What do Women's Archives Tell Us about History Making

The personal is political and through these letters I have briefly covered here, what we start to appreciate is how the conversations that women had with diplomats, and with men in political positions of power, could subtly influence the shaping of international relations through family connections, and also influence policy making in the long run.

What my early research has helped establish are the following take-away points:

- The feminine contents of archives provide useful "situated knowledge" (Haraway) that provides context to how domestic and social life provide the backdrop to unfolding events
- As subjugated knowledge or knowledge from below (Foucault), such gendered evidence also makes us aware of the role of women as gatekeepers of familial relationships, social mores, cultural and moral codes attached to one's class, and as architects of community building in their own right.
- Finally, the connection between history and contemporary place branding as a way to make a historic town like Meadville especially attractive in demonstrating its rich connections with nation-building, innovation and entrepreneurship, and international relations.

Bibliography

Source: Wieringa, S. E., & Wieringa, S. (2008;2009;). *Traveling heritages: New perspectives on collecting, preserving and sharing women's history*. Amsterdam: Aksant.

