

Transcribing and Digitizing 18th & 19th Century Letters

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Transcribing and Digitizing Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Letters for a
Historical Digital Repository

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ABSTRACT: In the fall of 2011 the Scott Memorial Library purchased 53 letters belonging to an 1841 graduate of Jefferson Medical College, John Plimpton Green. The library staff transcribed and digitized the letters creating an online collection in the University institutional repository, Jefferson Digital Commons. This article will detail the process of transcribing and digitizing the collection along with sharing statistics and benefits of this project to global researchers.

KEYWORDS: special collections, digitization, University archives, Jefferson Digital Commons, institutional repositories, John Plimpton Green, Historical collections, Thomas Jefferson University archives

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INTRODUCTION

The Jefferson Digital Commons (JDC) is the online institutional repository for Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The JDC houses a variety of scholarly materials, including a historical collection that contains items ranging from digitized rare books to nineteenth century college catalogs. The JDC is managed by the staff of the library of Thomas Jefferson University – the Scott Memorial Library.

In fall of 2011 the Scott Memorial Library acquired a collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century correspondence belonging to an 1841 graduate of Jefferson Medical College, John Plimpton Green. After his graduation from medical college, John Plimpton Green practiced medicine in Whampoa, China and Copaiipo, Chile. Dr. Green spent most of his life abroad, but returned home to Worcester, Massachusetts before his death in 1892. Dr. Green had several prominent brothers, including Andrew Haswell Green, also known as the “Father of Greater New York” for his contributions as commissioner of Central Park and his work toward the annexation of Morrisania, West Farms and Kingsbridge in New York City; Samuel Fisk Green, who was a famous doctor and missionary in Ceylon (in what is now Sri Lanka); and Oliver Bourne Green, who was a renowned engineer for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, as well as a contractor for the parks system of Chicago.

The 53 letters in the John Plimpton Green collection are fragile, and housed in the Archives and Special Collections Department at the Scott Memorial Library on the campus of Thomas

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Jefferson University. In an effort to make the collection of John Plimpton Green letters available to a large audience, the collection was digitized, transcribed and uploaded to the Jefferson Digital Commons. <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/jpgreenletters/>

The original letters were scanned as color tiff files, at 300 dpi resolution using the flatbed of a Xerox DocuMate 752 scanner, with OneTouch 4.0 software. The correspondence in the collection was written in eighteenth and nineteenth century longhand, and frequently includes ink blots, tears, and other issues which make the letters difficult to read. In an effort to make the letters easy to decipher by the general public, the collection was transcribed by members of the library team using rules from the Minnesota Historical Society (Nute and Lucas 2004). The tiff files of the original letter scans and the transcriptions written in Microsoft Word were converted into PDF files using Nuance PDF Converter Professional software in order to display the original letter scans next to the letter transcriptions. Each original letter was combined with its transcription in individual PDF files. The PDF files were uploaded into the JDC. When downloaded, the PDF displays the scan of the original letter next to the transcription of the letter. A “Comments” section was added to the collection in an effort to encourage additional transcription edits by the general public.

Letter transcriptions were scanned using the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software included in the Nuance PDF Converter package, allowing access through search engines such as Google. In addition, external links were added to relevant Wikipedia pages to encourage traffic to the JDC, including Wikipedia pages for Andrew Haswell Green and Samuel Fisk Green. The

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John Plimpton Green letters are discoverable through the library catalog, with included links to the full-text located in the Jefferson Digital Commons.

THE LETTERS

The first letter in the John Plimpton Green collection was uploaded to the JDC on March 8, 2012 and the last letter was uploaded to the JDC on September 25, 2012. From the time the first letter was uploaded until January 8, 2014, the JDC has logged 1,302 full-text downloads for the John Plimpton Green collection. To date, there have been no suggestions for transcription edits from the general public. Persons viewing the letters have come from many countries including: United States, United Kingdom, Canada, India, Australia, Philippines and Sweden. The most popular paper to date is a letter from William E. Green to his son, John Plimpton Green inquiring of his move to Philadelphia, as well as fatherly advice for travel and manners: <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/jpgreenletters/14/>. The original of this letter is shown as Figure 1, and the transcription as Figure 2.

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Worcester Oct. 14th 1840

To Dr. John P. Green

Dear Son, your favor of Wednesday morning, without date, came to hand on the ninth instant, post marked the 7th inst., in which you informed me, that you arrived the week previous on Wednesday after a pleasant journey, and that you immediately proceeded to Capt. Sturman, and from thence to the boat for your baggage, and that your boarding place is at a Mrs. Peal's, South Ninth Street near Spruce. Now, as I am rather advanced in life, it would be much pleased to know how you found the way from N. Y. to P. a, and by what means of conveyance, being a little more particular, would gratify my curiosity, and of vast benefit to your younger brothers, when they, (if ever) should travel that way, as well, as the expense of each mode of conveyance, if there was more than one route from N. Y. to Philadelphia. Where does Capt. Sturman live? what street, in what number? where does Eng. Earle live? who is his land? and what profession is he of? you are in the City of brotherly love please be very particular, that we can know, as much as possible for us to have without being on the spot, all these little things coming to us in a neat well written letter would please us, who are not, so fortunate, as yourself to have the pleasure of travelling to me that part of the world. by, & by we will have a volume published with the amount you may favor us with, which would be very entertaining, and instructive, that those who come after us might know the way, the price, and means of a very civil young Dr.'s getting from the heart of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to the City of New Penn. on what month, foul, or fair, and what year, a letter of the diary kind would

Figure 1: Most popular letter from William E. Green to John Plimpton Green

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Letter from William E. Green to Doc[tor] John P. Green
October 14th 1840
[John P. Green Mss. - A.L.S.]

Worcester Oct. 14th 1840

To Doc[tor] John P. Green

Dear son,

Your favor of Wednesday morning, without Date came to hand on the ninth instant post marked the 7th [*Ms. illegible*] in which you informed me, that you arrived the week previous on Wednesday, after a pleasant journey, and that you immediately proceeded to Capt Thurmans [sic] and from there to the boat for your baggage, and that your boarding place is at a Mrs. Soalk's South Ninth Street near Spruce. Now, as I am rather advanced in life, & would be much pleased to know how you found the way from N.Y. to P[hiladelphi]a, and by what means of conveyance, being a little more particular, would grattefy [sic] my curiosity, and of vast benefit to your younger brother, when they, (if ever) should travel that way, as well, as the expense of each mode of conveyance, if there was more than one part from N.Y. to Philadelphia. Where does Capt Thurman live? and what was his Christian name? what street? & what Number? where does Esq. Earle live? who is Esq Earle? and what profession is he of? As you are in the City of brotherly love please be very particular, that we can know, as much as possible [sic] for us to learn without being on the spot all these little things concerning to us in a neat well written letter would please us, who are not, so fortunate, as yourself to have the pleasure of travelling to see that part of the world. by & by we will have a volume published with the accounts you may favour us with, which would be very entertaining, and instructive, that those who came after us might know the way, the price, and manner of a very lived young Doc[to]r's getting from the heart of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to the City of W[illia]m Penn. on what month, foul, or fair, and what year, a letter of the diary kind would

Figure 2: Transcription of scanned letter that is located with original scanned letter

CONCLUSIONS

The John Plimpton Green letters consist of fragile eighteenth and nineteenth century correspondence from a prominent Massachusetts family. The Jefferson Digital Commons allows users to view the letters without visiting the library in person, and without handling the delicate paper housed in the collection. The PDF downloads of the letters include an image of the letter next to the transcription, making the collection simple to access and easy to read. Although no individuals have suggested transcription edits, this addition to the JDC allows patrons to interact with the collection. In the 22 months that the John Plimpton Green letters have been

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available to readers, letters in the collection have been downloaded over 1,300 times. The fragility of the letters, along with their “by appointment only” location in Jefferson’s small archives and special collections department, would never have supported an equal number of in-person visits.

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http://www.mnhs.org/about/departments/processing/transcribing_manuscripts.pdf

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