

Frances Harriet Rowell Ela (Nov. 15, 1835-Jan. 10, 1924) and
George Porter Ela (Jul. 13, 1832-Feb. 5, 1898)

“To wed or to wait To go or to stay?” Like many young men and women in the early 1860s, Francis Rowell and George Ela struggled with these life-changing decisions. Even as the United States moved ever closer to the Civil War, Frances and George faced challenges that would determine the paths of their lives.

Both George and Frances Ela were born in New England to prominent families which included some of the earliest English settlers. Both had grandfathers who fought in the Revolutionary War. They met at McIndoes Falls Academy (a school of higher education) in Vermont. Frances, or Hattie as she was known, studied to become a teacher. George studied surveying and civil engineering. After graduation, both began teaching careers in New Hampshire.

But, in 1858, George decided to move west to Illinois because of his “love of land and a desire for adventure.” He probably knew that there would be plenty of need for trained surveyors and engineers in the new land of Illinois. Hattie was not as anxious for adventure and opted to stay in New Hampshire and teach. This did not mean the end of their relationship however. Their relationship, which began in school, would continue to grow even with George residing in Illinois. This relationship continued to grow through the letters which they exchanged. George traveled West with two of Hattie’s uncles to Pekin, IL. At first, he worked in teaching and “railroad bridging.” By May, he was already writing to urge Hattie to come west and share his life. Sadly, her answer was no...not now. A year later, George moved to Hudson, IL, again as a teacher, and then soon after, to Bloomington.

In Bloomington, George opened an office at the corner of Main and Front Streets where he worked as a surveyor and civil engineer. Illinois law required that every section of land be surveyed, platted and recorded, so there was plenty of work for him in the growing community. He wrote to Hattie that his work was often laborious and time consuming. He worked outside in all sorts of weather, on land that was often swampy and filled with mosquitoes. As a result, he told Hattie, he sometimes suffered from “shakes” (malaria) and “ague” (fever).

Hattie’s letters to George were full of news of her students, friends and family, and her political opinions. She was a Democrat and an ardent supporter of Stephen Douglasm although as a woman she could not vote. George, an equally staunch Republican and supporter of Abraham Lincoln replied by saying he felt the election of “Honest Abe” a certainty.

Two days after the fall of Fort Sumter, President Lincoln issued his first call for troops. The first troops from McLean County included George’s brother, Richard. George wrote Hattie that if his personal health and affairs had been in better condition, he would have gone with him. Anxious for his safety, Hattie wrote to George, pleading with him not to act on the enthusiasm of war fever nor do anything risky. But her fears were soon realized when on August 20, 1861; George enlisted in Company G of the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment, the “Teachers’ Regiment” led by Col. Charles Hovey, president of Illinois State Normal University. Again, George wrote Hattie asking her to marry him, and again she turned him down. However, by September, she changed her mind, and agreed to come. But at that point it was too late for the war had already begun.

At first, George was sent to Camp Butler outside Springfield, IL. From there he wrote that “on the whole I like soldier life so far very much.” By the following spring of 1862, the 33rd moved southward toward Arkansas. That spring and summer were spent in forays into

Confederate territory “collecting” baled cotton, mules, and other supplies needed by the Northern Army. George wrote Hattie that he was involved in a “novel service” for the army “stealing cotton” and “engaging the enemy successfully.” He also wrote of the “contraband of the war...the hundreds of slaves that flocked to the Northern army.” In September of 1862, George resigned from the 33rd and joined the Engineer Corps. His first job as an engineer was to supervise the building of a fort to protect Helena, MO. He wrote Hattie that most of the labor there was done by “contraband,” that is, emancipated slaves.

In the meantime, Hattie with her family had moved west to McLean County. She wrote they were very pleased with their new western home. While serving with the Engineer Corps, George was allowed to travel back to Bloomington several times. At last, on April 23, 1863, George and Hattie were married in Bloomington. That June, George was appointed Deputy Provost Marshall for the 8th Congressional District in Illinois, a position he held until the end of the war. A Provost Marshall combined the duties of police chief and judge during war time and was charged with preserving good order.

After the war, George and Hattie began their new married life together in their home at 309 E. Locust Street in Bloomington. They had three children: Clarissa, Guy and Harriet. George did all the original engineering for the Bloomington & Normal street railway and was instrumental in establishing the tile drainage system of McLean County. This drainage system is what allowed the rich agriculture of the area to develop. He was county surveyor for 20 years and also city engineer. He also worked as a Notary public and abstractor of deeds. He belonged to the William T. Sherman Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Civil War veterans of the Union Army.

Hattie was very active in the Presbyterian Church. She and George joined Second Presbyterian Church and she was very active in raising funds to build the new sanctuary in the 1890s. She also served as treasurer for the Girl’s Industrial Home for 25 years.

Shortly before their 35th wedding anniversary, George died at the age of 65. He was remembered as a quiet man who made friends easily and kept them for many years. Hattie survived as a widow for 26 years and died following a short illness in January of 1924. She is buried next to her husband George in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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Discussion question: Compare and contrast George and Hattie’s correspondence with ways couples communicate today. What value was there in their long letters?