

Mary Elder (1835-1889)

Mary Elvira Elder was born in Bloomingburg, Fayette County, Ohio on September 18, 1835 according to her grave marker, or November 15, 1835 according to her obituary. Her parents were Dr. Eleazor and Catherine Perkins Martin. She was the fifth child, though three older sisters died of scarlet fever before her birth in 1833. Her father had a medical practice near their home and Mary and her sister Clara attended school in Bloomingburg.

In 1854 when Mary was about nineteen she and her family moved to Illinois. Fourteen years before the family moved to McLean County, Dr. Martin had purchased a large tract of land in what is known as Martin Township today. However, the family came to Bloomington instead and settled at 77 East Front Street.¹

The Elder family also came to Bloomington in 1854 and settled at 97 East Grove Street near the Martins. The two families most likely met through church or other social activities. The oldest son of the Elder family, William, was also a physician like Dr. Martin. William's brother, Charles Stewart Elder (Mary's future husband), worked as an apprentice "tinner" (tinsmith), and also as a hardware salesman in the years before his marriage to Mary.

On September 2, 1856 two and a half years after Mary had moved to Bloomington, she and Charles were married. It is said that Abraham Lincoln attended the ceremony. After their wedding, Mary and Charles moved to Lexington. They would eventually have eight children—Lora (Laura), Harry, Josephine (Jossie), Edgar (Eddie), Lucy, Charlotte, Grace, and Charles. Harry and Lucy died in infancy while their youngest child, Charles, died from diphtheria in 1886 at the age of nine.

Charles began studying medicine upon the advice of Mary's father, Dr. Eleazor Martin. He began studying with his brother, Dr. William Elder, in the summer of 1861 and would continue his studies by attending lectures in Chicago, IL in the fall of 1861.² His studies in medicine were put on hold because of the outbreak of the United States Civil War on April 12, 1861.

Charles enlisted in the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band on September 19, 1861. He was appointed one of the leaders of the band and held the rank of Lieutenant.³ During his time of service between September 19, 1861 and August 16, 1862, Charles and Mary kept a close correspondence through letters. Twenty letters survive today (thirteen from Charles to Mary and seven from Mary to Charles). Many of these imply more letters were written but have long since been lost. This is not surprising considering that Charles would have had to carry the letters from Mary around through the mud, rain, and battles that he faced. It is amazing that he was able to preserve this many.⁴

Mary and their three children—Lora (age four), Jossie (age 2) and Eddie (age 1)—remained in Lexington with her parents while Charles was off to war. In her letters to Charles, she would keep him up to date on friends and family back home, events that were going on in the community, how their children were doing, and other details about life at home. She did not write as often as Charles would have liked her to, but he assumed it was because she was busy with her social life and was doing everything she could to keep a sense of normalcy for the children at home. This included hosting a tea party for Lora and seven

¹ Catherine Martin. "Life Stories." 28

² Martin, "Life Stories," 9

³ Virgil Way. *History of the Thirty-Third Regiment Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, August 22, 1861 to December 7th, 1865.* (Gibson City, IL: The Association, 1902) 71

⁴ Richard and Mary Veselack. "Summary of transcription of the letters of Charles and Mary Elder," 1998,

other children and providing their children with candies, cakes, stockings, and carved wooden animals for Christmas. During the time Charles was away, the children aged considerably. Eddie was weaned from breast feeding; Jossie made huge improvements in her speech, and Lora learned how to write. Charles missed the marriage and departure of Mary's beloved hired helper Katey. The children also came down with the measles and Eddie had problems with his foot and his face, both of which were never described in great detail and from which he eventually recovered. She clearly missed Charles as she usually closed her letters with the hope that he would be home soon and that she would "try to keep in good spirits" until his return.⁵

Yet while life was going on in Lexington, Charles was greatly missed. The family left an empty chair at the table during Thanksgiving and Christmas keeping with the lyrics of a popular song by George F. Root called *The Vacant Chair*. Every time Charles was paid, he sent part of his earnings back to Mary (on one of the letters, a round impression can still be seen in the paper from the enclosed gold coin). She was very frugal with it buying only what was necessary for herself and the children and either sending the rest back to Charles in the form of a gift or saving it so he could continue with medical school when he returned.

The last letter from Charles was written on August 6, 1862 from Old Town Sandy, Arkansas which was in Confederate territory. In it, Charles expressed the hope that he would be home soon though he found himself caught up in "red tape" regarding his discharge. The reason for discharge was the passage of General Order 91 which was passed on July 17, 1862. This order required all volunteer bands to be discharged because it had become too expensive to support them.⁶ However, shortly after he wrote this letter, Charles mustered out of service on August 16, 1862.

After completing medical school, Charles and Mary moved their family to Chenoa sometime before 1865. After Charles returned from the war they had three more daughters—Lucy, Charlotte, and Grace, as well as one more son, Charles Jr. In 1877 the Elder family moved to Lincoln, Illinois where Charles had a medical practice and sold drugs and other items in a downtown drugstore. By 1884 they had returned to Chenoa, where they lived the rest of Mary's life.

On July 18, 1889 Mary died in her home after being sick for a year. She had been a charter member of the Star of Bethlehem Chapter No. 114, Order of Eastern Star, as well as one of the first members of St. Matthews Episcopal Church in Bloomington. She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery with her parents and several of her children. Charles was still living at the time of her death and would survive until his death in 1911.

By: Laurie Peterson 2008

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2010

⁵ Letter from Mary to Charles Elder, March 2, 1862

⁶ Researcher footnotes of letter from Charles Elder to Mary Elder, August 6, 1862, McLean County Museum of History Archives.