

Love letters preserve a timeless old romance

A former Burlington County resident, Freda Bensch, first told me about the wonderful stack of old love letters she found in the attic of a house that she and her late husband Richard once owned along Route 206 in Eastampton.

The letters were written from 1902 to 1906 by a nurse, L. M. (May, or "Mazie") Hampton, to Walter H. Harker of Ewansville.

Walter lived in the house on the hill near the Birmingham station of the now-abandoned Camden & Burlington Railroad.

For some reason, Hampton's mother would not allow her to see Harker. But she would ride by on the train and look for him. By letter, they arranged to meet secretly on Sundays, or sneak away to Asbury Park or to the county fair.

Harker lived with his brother-in-law, Harry Mitchell; the house remained in the Mitchell-Stiltz-Buck family until the Bensches bought it in 1954. (Bensch now lives in a rest home in Yardley, Pa.)

And when I knocked on the door the other day, the current owners, Suzanne and Bud Hamm, had great news: They have preserved those sweet, sad letters.



Jack Knarr
Columnist

And I had a great time reading them. At the end of most of them, May wrote, "B.B.S.H.L.A.K. (I think that means, 'Bye bye, sweet heart; love and kisses'), Ever your loving little girl, Mazie."

On March 16, 1905, she wrote, "Yes, Walter, I often look at your photo(ograph), and think

how many times my head has been on your shoulder, how many times my arm around your neck, and how many times I have laid in my dear boy's arms. And how many tears we have shed together.

"... God help us both to bear it until we are one."

They had their spats. Hampton urged him to quit smoking and chewing tobacco. Once, she told him to give up his love of her, to move on.

Then she'd talk of marriage — "I do think you and I would be happy together" — and of finally being together in the little house of their dreams.

But it became obvious Hampton wouldn't

break from her mother. On Jan. 28, 1906, Hampton wrote, "Mother is so good to me ... [if] you do not feel well enough, do not come ..."

Apparently Walter stopped writing and coming to see her. On April 30, Hampton wrote that she didn't understand.

"I suppose Lizzie has told you that she saw me on the street with a fellow, for she saw me with Edward Branin, but I did not think that would make you mad at me, for I think you ought to know me," she said. "He came from the station around to the house.

"I would like to have an answer, also like to see you.

"But if you will not write (I will know) you do not care to see me. But of course the people blame me."

She signed off, "Ever your friend, L.M.H." It was Hampton's last letter to Harker, and for the first and only time, she included her return address, 81 Pine St., Mount Holly, as though she wanted him to know where she was.

The lad must have been heartbroken; he quit his job at Smithville and moved away, taking work at Bridgeton. He may have been sickly.

But his mother, Theodosia Harker, wrote, "It will be nice now if you find a nice young girl, won't it?"

Then, suddenly there in the pile, is Harker's funeral notice. He died June 6, 1907, at 31.

The service was held at the house, that his sweetheart on the train had peeked into so often.

My friend Freda lived there from 1954 to 1990. She said staircases creaked and doorbells rang, "and then nobody was there. I think the house was haunted.

"We had bats in the bedroom, two bats. And of course everybody said they were the ghosts of the girlfriend and the boyfriend. We couldn't go to sleep. It was terrible."

Her husband disposed of the bats. And of course, the lovers are long gone as well. I tried the phone book. I went to Hampton's last address. Nobody remembers her.

Did she ever fall in love again or marry or have children? Whatever happened to her? If you know, write me, or leave a message at (609) 871-8155. I would love to know the rest of the story.

Jack Knarr's human-interest column appears in the Burlington County Times three days a week.

SUGGESTIONS: CALL THE NEWS DESK 871-8054, GARY LINDENMUTH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Asbury Park, N.J. 7/19/99

Pictures put faces on a century-old love story

I know who May Hampton really is now.

The late Mount Holly woman — whose love letters to Walter H. Harker of Ewansville in 1902-06 have remained in the attic of the Eastampton house he lived in on Route 206 at the turn of the last century — now has a face.

May's dear aunt, Margaret Danley, 93, lives in Southampton, and last week, she searched for hours through dusty boxes of ancient family photographs. And she found a few of May.

One shows May at about 25, when she was secretly meeting Walter despite her mother Sarah's demands she not see him.

At the time, May was living at 81 Pine St., Mount Holly, nursing her uncle, Michael Johnson. On April 5, 1902, according to a receipt from Mount Holly jeweler J. Harry Halt, Walter purchased "One Solid Gold Ring & Genuine Diamond Guaranteed ... \$12.00."

Only later, in 1906, after May was seen on the street with another man, did the romance fall apart. Jilted Walter quit his job at Smithville and moved away to Bridgeton. A year later he was dead, cause unknown.

But those wonderful, sad, sweet



Jack Knarr
Columnist

letters always remained in the attic, and last Sunday, excerpted here in the BCT, they told a romantic, sentimental sort of "Bridges of Burlington County" type tale.

With them was a tiny faded soiled portrait, likely of Walter. And now here, too, is May.

After 94 years, they are finally on the same page again.

The letters were vivid, yes; but they ended in 1906. Whatever happened to May Hampton? Did she ever fall in love again? Did she marry and have children?

A faithful reader and friend, Rhoda Lucas of Southampton, found the key to everything in Judy Olsen's book, the "History of Pemberton," which listed Civil War veterans:

"Amos and Eliza Hampton sent their oldest son, William H., at 22. After his discharge, he married Sarah Jane Johnson on 23 July 1863 at New Lisbon. He was a farmer and they were parents of six children: Harvey, Ida, Maggie,



These are old photographs of Walter H. Harker (left) and May Hampton (center), whose 1902-06 love letters to Harker were found in an attic in Eastampton. Clarence Paul (right), who later married Hampton, is shown in this picture from early in the century.

Alfred, L. May and Harry. He died on 2 Jan. 1923 and was buried in the Methodist Cemetery at Pemberton."

L. May
There she was.

At the cemetery, her father was buried with her mother. But there was only one other Hampton, Harry, in the family plot.

Then, I spotted the names "MAY H." and "CLARENCE" on a nearby stone marked with the family name of "PAUL."

This May was buried at the foot of Sarah Hampton. Was this her?

Had she been buried with her mother after all, despite marriage, even in death?

Then, the next day, my neighbor, Jeannie Orschler, learned that one of her old friends, Maurice Gower, 72, of Pemberton, was actually related to the late May Paul.

May was his wife's (Dorothy Parker's) mother's (Dorothy Paul's) stepmother.

And Gower told how May Hampton had lived in Mount Holly, nursing her uncle, when she met Clarence Paul and married, perhaps about 1918.

"They had no children; she did not like children," he said. "Clarence worked at Smithville, and they tried farming, and weren't successful, and then they moved out to Whitesbog."

This was a little cranberry village — now historically restored — near Browns Mills. "He was an employee there," Gower said. "They lived in a little house near the store; they lived a plain old ordinary life."

May died in 1959 at age 82, and Clarence in 1965. Gower said Margaret Danley, 93 — whose mother and May were sisters — would remember May, and she did.

"She was quite a lady," Danley said as she fingered the precious old photographs. "She was a nice looking woman."

Oh yes, two of Walter's relatives surfaced as well, Bea Stiltz and Jim Roache, both of Burlington.

Jim said his sister has that little gold ring that Walter once gave to May Hampton, the love of his life. "And in our family history," Jim said, "I remember this is where I learned the meaning of the word, 'jilted.'"

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Large group

- Clarence
(middle - has on
hip)

next to (R) Aunt May

(L) Harry

far (R) Grandfather
"William"
Hampton

Note: Grandfather in
Civil War

portraits -
May Paul
Clarence Paul

group pic:
✓ Aunt Msy (white) ← single when
pic. was taken
✓ mother Sara Hampton
✓ grandfather Hampton to (2)
① bro. Aunt Msy Alfred (suit)
sock - overalls - bro. HARRY