Almira Stetson
1828 – 1916

Eve dear Father.

There is a bar to go to your stay after to
peace, and I thought I would commence at this early promise
the case of having something for you for I have possibly
make any calculations of any time... I have found it best
to take time when it is going... now for another reason
I write too. I feel you know what I ought to disclose all my
plans of life to those who have thus far been one of the means
of keeping life in me. You know that it has always been
the greatest wish of my existence, to be a thoroughly wise,
duly educated girl. To this purpose have I made all my
plans of life and hopes for the future have been to this purpose
end. I never have said a great deal about it, but enough
as I thought to have those around me know what my plans
were. I have said little but thought all the same.
I have from a little necessity for a while past given up all hope
of pursuing such a course of study, but have been reading
and learning a good deal within a few days of Margaret Miller
the author of "Pioneers in the Nineteenth Century" (which is
a very superior work). She is an almost entirely a self educated
woman. Her father was once a wealthy man but failed in
business and being honest the gave up almost everything, but
Margaret was very ambitious and she went on with her studies
alone, and it is the opinion of all who are acquainted.
“What was it like to grow up in the Community?”

Almira Stetson

Introduction

We stand before the oldest mulberry tree in the village of Florence. Growing mulberry trees was integral to producing silk, which was how the Community largely supported itself. Making silk was how many members spent their working hours, including children as young as five-years-old. One of those children was Dolly and James Stetson’s teenaged daughter, Almira. She was fourteen when her family moved to the Association in 1843 and lived here until 1848.

“Who was Almira Stetson?”

—Almira was born to Dolly and James Stetson in Brooklyn, Connecticut in 1829. She was the oldest of six siblings. Your partners in the “Dolly Stetson Group” can tell you more about her family.
—Do you think she was one of many children living in the Community? Was this part of a national trend at this time? (Docs. A,B)
—Were children considered members of the Community? What were their economic rights? What were their political rights? Also refer to your copies of the NAEI Constitution under “By-Laws.” (Doc. C)
—Do you think Almira liked living in the Community? If so, what do you think she liked about it? (Docs. D,E)

“What was Almira’s work in the Community?”

—Community members got to choose which Department they wanted to work in. These were like separate businesses owned and operated by the Association. Children had less choice, they were usually assigned to work where they were needed. Silk production was so important that it was divided into two Departments. Most children worked in the Silk Growing Department. Briefly describe some of the other Departments Community members worked in. (Doc.F)
—There were a lot of steps that went into producing raw silk, almost all of them done by children. Can you describe them in basic terms? Almira and her younger brother George had very different jobs in this Department. What were they? Boys and girls generally had different jobs. What were they? Almira became one of the best reelers in the Association. Can you describe what she did? (Docs.G,H middle)
—Almira’s father James sold the silk they produced all over New England. The letters we have from Almira addressed to her father were included inside boxes of silk they shipped to him to sell. Do you think she understood the business and played an important role in it? (Doc.I)
—Can you think of some reasons why the Association might have chosen silk production as its main business?
“Did Almira get an education living in the Community?”

—There was an Educational Department led by highly qualified teachers, both men and women. Children worked in the morning and attended classes in the afternoon. Sometimes work and school overlapped. Can you find an example of this? Why do you think they combined work and schooling in the way they did? (Docs.H (bottom), J)

—As with everything else, educating children became an opportunity for experimentation in the Community. Unlike other schools, classes were co-educational and boys and girls did everything together from sewing to gym exercises. Teachers pioneered the use of “object lessons” in the classroom. Can you describe how this worked and how it differed from methods used in most schools at the time? (Doc.H (top))

—Did Almira value her own education? Who was Margaret Fuller and why did Almira admire her? Do you think Almira sounded frustrated in this letter? If so, what do you think was getting in her way? (Doc.K)

“Did Almira benefit from living in the Community?”

—The Stetson Family withdrew its membership from the Association in 1846, just months before the whole experiment came to a close. The family moved back to Brooklyn, Connecticut while Almira stayed in Florence where she taught school. She eventually moved back to Brooklyn, married, and started a family of her own.

—Do you think Almira had a good experience living in the Community? What about children overall? Would you like to live, work, and go to school in a place like this?

NOTES ON SOURCES

A. List of Northampton Association members, published by the Association.
B. Prepared by the David Ruggles Center (2020).
C. From “The Northampton Association of Education and Industry” by Hope Hale Davis in The Northampton Book: Chapters from 300 Years in the Life of a New England Town, 1954
D. Letter from Almira to her father, James, May 26, 1844.
E. Letter from Almira to James, June 19, 1844.
F. List of Departments, or places of work, printed by the Association.
G. From a short biography of Almira created by the Ruggles Center.
H. From a memoir by George Stetson, Almira’s younger brother (1894).
I. Letter from Almira to James, May 22, 1845.
J. From an account written by former Community member Frances Judd (1870).
K. Letter from Almira to James, March 4, 1845.
Stages in the growth of the silk worm from *The Silk Culture in the United States*, 1844
Stages.—Success is probable according as the several changes in the existence of the Worm take place, with the greatest possible uniformity as to time. In order to this, it is necessary to maintain in the Cocoonery: 1st. a high temperature, sufficiently moist and uniformly diffused; 2nd. a brisk and regular ventilation; 3rd. A light, frequent and regular supply of food; 4th. the most particular cleanliness; 5th. an active and unceasing superintendence.

HATCHING.—In a heated room or stove.

First Day... 70 to 70°... 76°... 79°... 76°... 79°
Second Day... 70... 75°... 78°...
Third Day... 70... 77°...
Fourth Day... 70... 79°...
Fifth Day... 80°...
Sixth Day... 84°...
Seventh Day... Hatched. 86°...

OBSERVATIONS.

(a) During the first three days the leaves should be cut very fine and chopped into the sand, and the provision be more equal for

(b) During the second day the leaves should be kept more moist, and the ventilations more equal for

(c) During the third day the leaves should be kept still more moist, and the ventilations more equal for

(d) During the fourth day the leaves should be kept moist, and the ventilations more equal for

(e) At the fifth day the leaves should be kept moist, and the ventilations more equal for

(f) At the sixth day the leaves should be kept moist, and the ventilations more equal for

(g) At the seventh day the leaves should be kept moist, and the ventilations more equal for

(h) The number of days' work does not depend upon the number of leaves or leaves. 30 days are sufficient, 30 days being for 100 leaves.

(i) A single case of cocoons contains 50 to 100 leaves, with 50 to 100 leaves at once. The number of cocoons is in proportion to the size of the room.

(j) The worms are known to be Lepidoptera of the family of the Coleoptera, and are of great importance in the cotton industry. They are found in all parts of the world, and are particularly frequent in India, China, and Japan. They have four wings, and are of various colors, but generally of a greenish-yellow. They are not attacked by anyknown enemies, and the only remedy is to destroy them by fumigation.

(k) Each worm requires but three days to build the cocoon, but it is not well to expose them to it for more than twelve hours, or they will be injured. They are formed from a web of silk, and are covered with a thick, tough skin. The cocoon is of a golden yellow color, and is of a perfect form. It is about one inch in diameter.

(l) The worms are killed by exposing them to a temperature of 100° for two or three minutes. They are then placed in a box of sand, and covered with a sufficient quantity of leaves. They are then kept in a warm room, and the leaves are changed every day. After the worms have been killed, they are allowed to remain in the box for a day, and then the cocoons are removed and placed in a box of sand, and kept in a warm room until they are ready to be hatched.
A

NAMES.
William Adam, wife, 4 children,
James D. Atkin,
George Ashley,
George Benson, wife, 4 children,
Francois P. Birge,
Samuel Brooks, wife, 7 children,
Samuel A. Bottom, wife,
Roxey A. Brown,
James Boyle, wife,
Wm. J. Bumstead, wife, 3 children,
Luther Brigham, 4 children,
Susan Byrne,
William Bassett, wife, 4 children,
Cyrus Bradbury,
Elizabeth Ely Bradbury,
Sarah Elizabeth Bradbury,
Bailey Birge, wife, 3 children,
Joseph Conant, wife,
Orwell S. Chaffee, wife, 1 child,
George Cooper,
Octavia M. Damon,
Sophia Foorde,
Emily Farrell,
Gustavus Gifford,
Roswell K. Goodwin,
Caroline M. Gove,
Erasmus G. Hudson, wife, 2 children,
Rhoda Hudson,
Romulus Fowler Hudson,
Samuel L. Hill, wife, 3 children,
Sally Hill, 4 children,
Joshiah Hayward, wife, 3 children,
William Haven, wife, 7 children,
Maeida Hill, 4 children,
Lucy Charlotte Hayden,
Harriet W. Hayden,
Elisha L. Hammond, wife,
Hall Judd,
William Larned,
David Mack, wife, 2 children,
Charles May,
Aser S. Meade,
Littleton T. Morgan,
Moses K. Meader,
George W. Miller,
A. Menkin, M. D.,
Joseph C. Martin, wife, 4 children,
Lorenzo D. Nickerson,
Enos L. Preston, wife, 1 child,
William P. Parker, wife, 2 children,
Susan F. Parker,
Oliver D. Paine,
George Prindle,
Fortune R. Porter,
Lydia B. Pierce,
Nancy Richardson, 4 children,
David Ruggles,
Stephen C. Rush,
Lucius F. Reed,
Austin Ross, wife,
Fara Rosbrooks,
Polly Rosbrooks,
Louisa C. Rosbrooks,
Frances O. Rosbrooks,
Three Rosbrooks children,
Theodore Scarborough, wife, 1 child,
Jason Solloway, wife,
Pamela Small, 1 child,
Earle Dwight Swift, wife,
Herbert Scarborough,
Mary Ann Smith,
Calvin Stebbins, wife, 2 children,
William Stearns, wife, 1 child,
James A. Steenson, wife, 6 children,
Laura Stebbins,
George Washington Sullivan,
Sidney Southworth,
George Thurber, wife, 1 child,
Hiram Wells, wife, 1 child,
Joseph S. Wall, wife,
Wm. G. Wilson,
James Willey,
Lyman F. Wight,
Thomas Whitmarsh,

FROM.
Cambridge,
Old Cambridge,
Chaplin, Ct.,
Brooklyn, Ct.,
Colborne,
Hadley,
Mansfield, Ct.,
Bloomfield, Ct.,
Boston,
Bloomfield, Ct.,
Worcester,
Williamantic, Ct.,
Lynn, Boston,
Cohasset, Mansfield, Ct.,
Chesterfield,
Dedham,
Cambridge,
Nantucket,
Lynn,
Bloomfield, Ct.,
Wolcottville,
Bloomfield, Ct.,
Williamantic, Ct.,
Northampton,
Salem,
Windham, Ct.,
Williamantic, Ct.,
Bath, Me.,

ENTERED.
April 8, 1842.
April 9, 1842.
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May 28, 1842.
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Nov. 12, 1842.
June 5, 1842.
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The U.S. birthrate shot up in the decades following the Revolutionary War. Based on U.S. Census records, the population (not including enslaved persons) rose from four million in 1790 to seventeen million in 1840. The average free American woman bore seven children in her lifetime. One half of Americans lived in households containing eight or more members. As a result, the average American in the 1830 Census was 16-years-old. Contrast this with the 2010 Census. Children were everywhere and made up an important part of the workforce on farms and in factories.

Sources:
Children above the age of five years may become members,“ the by-laws concede, and may engage in the industrial pursuits of the community, and receive compensation for their labour; but they shall not vote “until they have attained the full age of sixteen years.”

The compensation turned out to be one cent an hour for those under 12, though the typical small Northampton wage-earner could carry home to his parents two cents for each of the long hours he worked. The community rate was 4 ½ cents an hour for youngsters between 16 and 20, and 6 cents for adults, a wage other Northampton employers reserved for women while lavishing all of ten cents an hour on men.

Though their pay seems low, the members made out pretty well by their own account, since the association charged them only 50 cents a week for board and lodging. They would have had to pay a private landlady 75 cents or even a dollar. Rising prices forced the community to raise the charge to 80 cents a week for adults, with a bargain rate of 40 for children under 10.
Almira B. Stetson to James A. Stetson

Northampton May 26th 1844.

My Dear Father,

We received your last letter by Mr Fuller. He seems to be a very pretty young man His trade is the tailors but he only cuts, does not sew at all. Now I am going to write you a real community letter, and tell you all about every thing. ...

Mr Hammonds family has come and got settled in Mr Adam’s house they expect Mr Whipple in about a week I like them very much. I went over and help them some and have got quite well acquainted with them. He is by profession a portrait painter but he does almost any thing He has been white washing the rooms at the Factory, and the next job is the old Boarding house which is to be whashed on the outside. Mrs Hammond has a piano and is quite a singer. I spent the evening there Friday and we had “dreams of future bliss” Mr Hammond wants to have the swamps in front of the factory and by his house drained and all the trees and brush in the swamp dug out with the stumps and a handsome fence round it and plant fruit trees in clusters and have a gravel ride round it and then have a flight of steps go from the foot of the hill through the woods up to the new community house, and have that beautiful spring in the woods brought to the middle of the garden and there have a fountain. Oh—when shall we see all this. But I feel assured that we shall see it some time. I mean to bring all my energies together to accomplish it. Mr [Kerr?] has come and has settled down with Uncle George.

June 19th 1844.

Dearest Father,

I was very glad indeed to receive your letter as I had indulged myself in feeling quite hurt that you said nothing about the reception of mine in either of yours letters to Mother. Father I do not feel one bit like writing to you or any one else to night for I have the blues as bad as ever a person can have them.

I suppose that Mother told you about our meetings and about the talk of giving up the Association so you must know with my love for this Community I am almost as unhappy as I can comfortably be. There cannot be any thing connected with my life here that will throw a gloom over my spirits as much as talking of this dear community going to break up. But if I cannot tell you something more interesting than this I will not trouble you with it. Most of the people here are strong in the faith of sucess and think that it is almost an impossibility for it [to] sepprate, but Uncle George's faith seems shaken and I cannot have one bit of hope. If every one else had have given up but him I could have believed all would have been well but now it is all all gone. Uncle seems rather more hopeful now I believe, but my feelings are not at all changed. Oh you will say I wish such stuff might be kept at home so good bye from your daughter Almira
Beginning in the summer of 1843, Almira was one of several older girls at the Community engaged in the process of making silk thread out of silkworm eggs and mulberry leaves. As her brother George later wrote: "We gathered the mulberry leaves for the silkworms, being watched over and directed by a member appointed for that purpose." Community members picked mulberry leaves, chopped them into small pieces and sprinkled them on the worms day and night. As the eggs changed into large white silkworms, the silkworms converted the mulberry leaves into a liquid protein, found a bundle of straw or twigs on which to spin and spun liquid silk and sericin into a nearly watertight cocoon. The cocoon, once softened would be unwound, or reeled, and after processing, used as thread. Almira became an experienced reeler. Seated before a reeling machine, she tossed about two dozen cocoons into a pot of simmering water. Using a piece of broom straw, she stirred the pot until the silk unraveled and clung to the straw. Once the threads of 16 cocoons were gathered, Almira guided the filaments through the plates, holes and eyelets of the reeler as one of the Community children turned the reeling machine's handle. After Almira and the other older girls reeled the cocoons, other Community members doubled, twisted and dyed the raw silk to make "all varieties of sewing silk and twist".

"1. Agricultural Department, including all farming operations, and all standing wood and timber. Theodore Scarborough, Director. E. D. Hudson, Assistant Director in Horticulture.

"2. Lumber Department, including sawing lumber, cutting shingles, care of lumber yard, and sale of lumber. G. W. Benson, Director.

"3. Silk Manufacturing Department, including the manufacture of Silk and Flax, and the direction of the machine shop. E. L. Preston, Director.

"4. Cutlery Department, including all kinds of blacksmithing and cutlery. H. Wells, Director.

"5. Mechanical Department, including all carpentry, the planing machine, and the manufacture of shoes. W. F. Parker, Director.

"6. Silk Growing Department, including the culture of mulberry trees, the feeding of silk-worms, and the reeling of cocoons. O. D. Paine, Director.

"7. Domestic Department, including the providing of females with work, the superintendence and care of domestic labour and of the community boarding house. Roxie Brown, Director. Nancy Richardson, Assistant Director of the Table. S. L. Hill, Assistant Director of the Household.

"8. Store Department, including the purchase and sale of supplies and the care of the Daily Express. Hall Judd, Director.


"10. Educational Department, including the direction of the studies, labours, and amusements of all members under the age of eighteen, in consultation with parents, guardians, teachers, and industrial directors. W. Adam, Director.

"11. Secretarial Department, including charge of the correspondence of the Association, keeping copies of letters sent and recording the transactions of all business meetings. W. Adam, Director. G. W. Benson, Financial Assistant in the Treasurer's Department."
The educational methods were original and our instructors were among the first in this country to use object lessons. While the children of my age had lessons from books, the lessons taught through the oral and practically illustrated methods are the ones I now remember. A class of which I was a member was under the instruction of Miss Sophia Foorde. Our schoolroom was frequently the plain back of the present braid factory. On the banks of the river we were taught to build the different geographical formations, miniature islands, capes, promontories, peninsulas, and isthmuses. I have frequently noticed that I have a much clearer idea of these formations than others of my age, who were my superiors in memorizing lessons.

Work was interspersed with our lessons. We gathered the mulberry leaves for the silkworms, being watched over and directed by a member appointed for that purpose.

One department of industry was raising silkworms for raw silk. Extensive fields of mulberry bushes were already planted, a cocoonery was built, and the eggs imported. The children did the work, under the supervision of a couple of men to keep us in order, and see that it was not all play and no work. The long, rather low cocoonery had shelves on each side of a passageway, running lengthwise with it, upon which the eggs were hatched, and the boys brought the leaves in baskets, while the girls distributed them over the shelves, and worms soon devoured them. The work was clean and wholesome, done at regular times, between school hours, and really enjoyable. Some of us were sorry when it had to be abandoned after a full trial, it proving cheaper to obtain the silk from China.

When the cold weather drove us indoors, our work differed in many points. We were taught sewing, braiding straw, knitting silk and beaded purses, and other useful things. And while we worked our teacher read the classics to us,—Shakespeare’s plays, Scott’s novels, Prescott’s “History of the Conquest of Mexico,” “Undine,” and many other charming books, both prose and poetry; so that while our minds were the most receptive, all the beauties of the literature were pointed out and impressed upon us.
Dear Father

The box is about being closed to send to you, and I must say a few words I think you will find the silk superior to any thing yet from Northampton especially the hundred skeins of blue black. we compared it with the Italian and could scarcely tell the difference (Oh what a lie) We are getting off 50 pounds, like what you told James you wanted so that you could take it and throw it across the room and have it as it fell. We might throw it to Boston and ha[ve?] it land safely at 228 Wash—St. and not a skein would be tangled. It is exactly like the Italian in this respect. The silk is done up nicely. I shall write a good long letter by Isaac and Lucy and so will Mother. I wish you could witness the connubial bliss that is enjoyed so there—it is enough to—make me wish my self in the same place bah—

I expect the six dollar silk velvet bonnet from Mother Swazey will cut a dash in Boston through Winter and Wash—Sts—I wish I was going to spend the winter in the city. Consider my case yours ever for I do not see much prospect of ever being any bodies else—Pray excuse mistakes for I am almost to late Almira

Addressed: Our Father Stetson / Boston. / some where // By silk box

We have just got off our first crop of worms they have come off first rate, excellent cocoons and very few sickly worms. ... You enquired about the report I suppose mother has told you about I was not present at the reading of them it so I cannot tell you any thing. We had 25 bushels of cocoons of the first best quality they came off very well indeed much better than we feared having so much unfavorable weather and new hands put on to feed, and all other things considered we went beyond of best expectations. We have a larger crop on now and very unfa bad weather indeed I do not know what will be the effect but we are rather fearful that they will not do as well as the first crop.
A department of education was organized, in which it was designed to unite study with labor, on the ground that no education is complete which does not combine physical with mental development. Mr. Adam was the first director of that department, and was an able and efficient teacher. He was succeeded by Mr. Mack and his wife, who were persons of much experience in teaching, and of superior attainments. A boarding-school was opened under their auspices, and several pupils were received from abroad, who pursued the same course as those belonging to the Association.

Almira Stetson to James A. Stetson
Northampton March 45.

Ever dear Father.

There is a box to go to you day after to morrow and I thought I would commence at this early period to be sure of having something for you for I can scarcely make any calculation of my time so I have found it best to take time when it is going and for another reason I write too. I feel, yes know that I ought to disclose all my plans of life to those who have thus far been one of the means of keepin life in me. You know that it has always been m the greatest wish of my existence to be a thouroughly and highly educated girl, to this purpose have I laid all my plans of life and my hopes for the future have been to this purpose end. I never have said a great deal about it but enough as I thought to have those around me know what my dearest wishes were. I have said little but thought all the more.

I have from a life necessity for a while past given up all hopes of pursuing such a course of study, but I have been reading and hearing a good deal within a few days of Margret Fuller the author of “Woman in the Nineteenth century,” (which is a very superior work) She is an almost entirely a self educated woman. her father was once a wealthy man but failed in business and being honest he gave up almost every thing, but Margret was very ambitious and she went on her with education alone, and it is the opinion of all who are acquainted with her that she is a very superior woman. Mr Mack knows her and he says that he “never saw a woman with such a mind and so complete an education”. I do not expect to come up to her however in talents but I can do my best for it. I can attain as near as possible to my ideal. But I find that as a general thing those that educate themselves, and are obliged to make some sacrifice (if you please to call it so, no sacrifice to me) to attain to a thourough education are generally the best learned and use their learning to the best advantage.