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"BEING ENTIRELY ALONE
& UNPROTECTED"

Mrs. Newcomb in Letters

HARRIET SWIFT

Little is known about the woman named Josephine Louise Le Monnier Newcomb. College and university lore portrays her as eccentric and difficult. University historian John Dyer introduces readers to Josephine Newcomb through her letter of donation to the Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund. He then dismisses her generosity as "sentimental" and writes: "Revealed in this letter is the story of a precocious and sickly child and of the pathetic, overprotective attachment of the mother for that child. It is the story of a wispy, lonely little woman who combined in one mind and personality the astute business sense of a Hetty Green and the sentimental, ethereal qualities of an Elizabeth Barrett Browning."¹ Tulane University president William Preston Johnston initially advised Newcomb's president, Brandt Dixon, to direct all correspondence with Mrs. Newcomb through him. Otherwise, "however carefully the letter might be worded, she would possibly look upon it as a plea for more money, and somehow take offense."²

Dixon eventually met and corresponded with Mrs. Newcomb and, over a ten-year period, became one of her most trusted advisors. His straightforward description of Mrs. Newcomb offers a view of a complex woman: a woman possessing wit, intelligence, generosity, and great resolve who was, at the same time, frail, frugal, and apprehensive.

In stature, Mrs. Newcomb was somewhat below the average height, and quite slender. For many years her health was most uncertain, but such was her energy and force of character that it was difficult to realize how ill she often was. Her memory of people and of facts, her ability to quote what she had heard or read, her wit and ready repartee gave constant surprise and pleasure to those

of us who knew her well, but with strangers she was most reserved. Like many elderly people, she had acquired certain peculiarities of thought and practice easily misunderstood. . . . It was her disposition to be quite exacting in little things, but she was most generous and sympathetic in affairs of greater moment. She dressed in the simplest manner, spent dollars and dimes most carefully, but, when convinced of a genuine need with which she sympathized, gave away checks freely. Mrs. Newcomb was a timid woman, careful not to intrude on any occasion.³

More recently, as the study of women's lives emerged as a serious field of inquiry, interest in Mrs. Newcomb's life beyond that revealed in these sparse accounts and College lore took on scholarly importance. Susan Wittig, Newcomb College dean from 1979 to 1981, examined Mrs. Newcomb's personal library for its "insight into the life and the ideas and the personal hopes of the woman who owned it."⁴ Rosa Keller (NC 1932), New Orleans philanthropist and voice of social justice, explored University and College archival collections in search of evidence about Mrs. Newcomb's financial acuity and beneficence. "There is quite a bit more of mystery than of history in her biography," Keller wrote. "If she kept diaries, none have come down to us. Her letters could illuminate Mrs. Newcomb for us, but these, too, are nowhere to be found."⁵

Quite serendipitously, however, letters written by Mrs. Newcomb have been found. While researching the family of Gustavus Schmidt (1795–1877) during 2002,⁶ I discovered among a collection of some 1,274 items, many written in French, an entry in the finding aid for Box 2, Folder 15: "1876, July 11, Charles Schmidt, New Orleans, to Mrs. Warren Newcomb, New York." While the Schmidt collection focuses mainly on Gustavus's work as an attorney in early Louisiana, "hidden" are five letters between his son Charles Schmidt (1832–1891), Josephine Louise Newcomb, and Mrs. Newcomb's second cousin Léda Louise Hincks (1835–1908), who married Charles in 1869.⁷

Similarly, a letter in the James McConnell Papers is addressed to Tulane University president "Col Wm. P. Johnston" from "Jo L. Newcomb." James McConnell served as an Administrator of the Tulane Educational Fund from 1882 until the time of his death in 1914, and also as Mrs. Newcomb's personal attorney. Among the documents in the McConnell collection are materials used by McConnell to thwart the legal challenge to Mrs. Newcomb's will brought about by her relatives.⁸

This essay examines several of these letters to better understand Mrs. Newcomb as a friend, relative, and neighbor. In contrast to the formality of her letters addressed to the Tulane Administrators, her letters to family and friends are often quite chatty and punctuated with abbreviations and underlining for emphasis. Her letters illuminate her intellect, reveal her sensitivity to the joys and sorrow in the lives of others, and unapologetically express her own sadness and fears.

The first letter in the Schmidt collection was written to "Mrs. Newcomb" by Charles Schmidt to announce the birth of his and Léda's daughter.⁹ Charles's affectionate tone coupled with the fact that he wrote immediately to notify Mrs. Newcomb of this special event speaks to the closeness of the relationship:

New Orleans, July 11th 1876

Dear Mrs. Newcomb,

Léda gave birth to a girl yesterday at about 1 o'clock A.M. Both mother and child are doing remarkably well. Of course, Léda cannot hope to see you this summer in New York, but she trusts the time is not far distant when she will have the pleasure of introducing her daughter to you. After mature deliberation, it has been determined that the young lady's name is to be Louise. She is also to bear that of Marie. As you might suppose, the child is found to be physically faultless. She is strong and healthy, and there is no telling how near she may eventually reach perfection. I cannot be considered an impartial judge, and can therefore only give you the opinions of my wife's friends.

Meanwhile, no Centennial excursion or Northern or European trip for Léda this year. She says that later in the season she will allow me to absent myself for a few weeks, in which event I will not fail to do myself the pleasure of calling on you.

Léda and the family beg me to send their love to you.

Believe me,

Very respectfully and sincerely yours,

C. E. Schmidt

It is unclear how this letter made it back to the Schmidts and into their collection. As Mrs. Newcomb's letter of October 16, 1876, recognizing the birth of Louise is written specifically to Léda, without mention of Charles, it's possible that Mrs. Newcomb was traveling and the letter was returned to

Charles, having never reached her. Her letter, written with a steady hand in brown ink on 4 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ " folded ecru writing paper with an embossed N, is copied verbatim:

Mrs. Warren Newcomb

P.O. Box 2846

New York

Oct 16th/76

Dear Léda,

By Mr. Zacharie who is now in New York, I send you a set to keep for your sweet babe_ it has been admired by all who have seen it _ On New Year, 1871 Sophie was to have put it on for the first time but I trust she was in Light of Peace with her Heavenly Father, who took her from me I would also send you her picture in blue velvet frame & Ma's [her mother] in Steel & Gilt armor & Mr. Newcomb's set in gold & black enamel (as I have promised them all to you) if I could part with them now, but it is a mournful sadness to have them before me & this will prove they are to be yours. I also have a set of Garnet & gold sent to dear Ma from some of Pa's family in Paris. I want Lucie [Léda's sister] to have. The recent cruel efforts of your Cousin Ellen & the constant threats I hear, of her son-in-law W. M. McCarthy & her children¹⁰ make it necessary, my advisors tell me to be very particular; & oh Léda (being entirely alone & unprotected) I am so crushed by a severe insult I received from the present Proprietor of the New York Hotel, which took all my faith, all my fortitude & my prayers to accept it with resignation & submission; but such is life _ made up of trials & disappts. Do Léda, when you see Mme. Rost make my souvenirs to her, as I was compelled to leave without saying goodbye & she is always so kind to me, with love remember me affly to your Pa, Lucie, & husb & kiss your dear babe for Cousin Jo

[PS] When you hear of my death write to Mr. A. H. Pomroy 54 Broad St New York.

In this letter written nearly six years after the death of her daughter, Sophie, Mrs. Newcomb conveys her warm affection for Léda by gifting to Léda's baby daughter the set of jewelry that was to have been worn by her deceased child. This affection and generosity stand in sharp contrast to her feelings toward her sister's family, whose "cruel efforts" were to serve as a constant reminder of the need to protect her assets against their efforts to seize them,

including the gifts that she here bequeaths to Léda to “prove” her intentions as suggested by her advisors. While some considered Mrs. Newcomb’s concern with family matters to be an unfounded obsession, time proved that she well understood the motivations of her sister’s son-in-law and children. In fact, as a widow in the late nineteenth century, she may have experienced being “entirely alone and unprotected” more often than suggested in her mention of the crushing “severe insult” received from the hotel proprietor.

Then, not two weeks later on the same stationery, a very short note to Léda:

Mrs. W PO Box 2846 New York NY

Oct 30th 1876 [but postmarked October 29th]

Dear Léda,

On Oct 15th I sent you by Mr. Jas L Zacharie a letter & a box for your sweet babe, & I have had no ansr. I fear as she is yet so young you do not like it. therefore feeling I can take the liberty with you return it to me at once by express & I will send you something I prefer you to have for yourself & her, & will also send the set I have for Lucie. Please direct the package thus, “Mrs. W.N. Care of A.H. Pomroy 54 Broad St NY.” With Souvenirs to you & yours & a kiss to your babe

Cousin Jo

What was the “set” that Mrs. Newcomb sent? This may have been as small as a necklace with a pendant hanging and matching earrings; or as large as a set that included five or six pieces. As Sophie was to have worn it for the first time at age fifteen, it seems likely that this was a small set and more appropriate for a young lady than the garnet set that Mrs. Newcomb sent to Lucie.¹¹ Considering the slowness of the mail in the nineteenth century, her consternation over Léda’s lack of response seems an example of Mrs. Newcomb’s alleged impatience. However, it also seems to indicate a desire to send the “perfect” gift, something that would be a meaningful and appropriate commemoration of the birth of her cousin’s first child.

We never learn Léda’s thoughts about the gift, but her “sweet letr” of response would seem to indicate that the relationship was equally important to both cousins and any offense quickly forgotten. Mrs. Newcomb’s third letter to Léda describes the family significance of the jewelry she is sending to her, and again references other possessions she wishes for Léda to have in the future. In subtly contrasting her cool relations with her sister’s family and

the warmth and love among Léda’s family members, Mrs. Newcomb appears preoccupied with keeping her possessions out of reach of her sister’s family. Consider however, the possibility that these letters are not representative of a lifetime of letters between Mrs. Newcomb and Léda but were saved by the Schmidt family precisely because of their potential use as legal documents in an anticipated dispute over her will.

New York Nov 25th /76

Dear Léda

The box & yr sweet letr I have received all safe, & return by my good friend Mr. Ed Pillsbury what I think you will like better The bracelet I send you, will be of double value to you, when I tell you it was ordered & made for me by your “Cousin Warren” whom you knew & which you can leave for your dear child as I wrote, but wear it Léda & wear it often for the worth & taste combined. The set of Garnet of my dear & Sainted Mother’s for Lucie was often worn & valued by her therefore like the bracelet I wish them to remain in your family. These Souvenirs Léda are gifts of pure friendship & not from anything I have received or expect to receive & only wish I could send the pictures I have promised you but they are marked for you. Many long years of happiness to your dear Papa & all knowing how you all love another & with my best wishes & love to each one & yourself & kiss to your sweet babe.

Cousin Jo

Mrs. Warren Newcomb

PO Box 2846 New York NY

Three years later, on a 3" × 2 ½" note card dated December 24, but postmarked December 23, 1879, “Cousin Jo” writes from New York about the discord with her sister Ellen and her family:

Chere Laida, [a phonetic spelling, one of Mrs. Newcomb’s few spelling errors, although her capitalization and punctuation were erratic]

In these sad days I know you will rejoice with me My Exr [executor] has recov’d from your Cousin Ellen my darling’s picture, for wh[ich] Mr. A. H. Pomroy wrote to her for, & you & yr dear hus’d [husband] read her severe letter to him, in ansr which he still holds. A lady wrote me from Louisville, Mr. McCarthy said, I had sent for it, wh[ich] I have never done, or said a word, know’g yr Cousin Ellen could prove nothing, she wrote to Mr. A.H.P. & I would yet have the picture before very long.¹² Last sumr Mr. A.H.P. met

the Rev W Norton, who is the clergyman of the Church, yr Cousin Ellen & her family attend. Mr. P had a long talk with him, told him everything all I had done & given to Mrs. Wm H'son and her four children, & were indebted to me for all they possess'd & enjoy, & all her cruel treatment to me, & their ungrateful returns to me. The Clergyman was struck at such revelations. Now my Ex'rs & my lawyer speak openly of the whole affair to anyone. You see I have written to you first, feeling I have the sympathy of you & yr dear hus. I inclose two little cards for Louise do kiss her for me, with love to Cousin John [Léda's father] & Lucie; & for yrself & yours,¹³ all you desire; Nine years the 16th of this month, was I made motherless & alone.

Aff'ly Cousin Jo

Dec 24th 1879

This was the last letter from Mrs. Newcomb in the Schmidt family papers. Surely others were written and perhaps discarded or saved, someday to be found "hidden" in the collection of other family members.¹⁴ Even if the events Mrs. Newcomb writes about are too obscure to piece together (her sister, Ellen Henderson, refused to return to Josephine a portrait of Sophie; she generously had given monetary gifts totaling \$150,000 to Ellen and her four children, but their relationship had soured when Mrs. Newcomb surmised that Ellen and her son-in-law, "Mr. McCarthy," were attempting to institutionalize her), her feelings of betrayal and the vindication of having that betrayal recognized by persons of importance are clearly communicated. Moreover, in this letter, Mrs. Newcomb's habit of underlining words for emphasis is given an emotional edge by her use of red ink to underscore her position. One could speculate that she literally was "seeing red."

A Different Focus

That righteous indignation, coupled with a desire to memorialize Sophie, was brought to bear on one goal when Mrs. Newcomb was approached by Tulane University president Johnston about establishing an allied women's college as a memorial for her daughter. Instead of focusing her considerable energy on the misdeeds of her estranged family, Mrs. Newcomb searched for and found her lifework in the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College.

When Newcomb College opened its doors in October 1887, Mrs. Newcomb was seventy-one years old. Johnston wrote to Mrs. Newcomb and

enclosed a newspaper article about the opening. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Newcomb responded. This letter, located in the collection of attorney James McConnell, was possibly given to McConnell by Johnston. Her letter reveals a comfortable friendship with the president, whom she addresses as "Colonel," as it moves quickly from her change of residences, to the opening of the College, to the offer to furnish and provide for a College chapel, to news of New Orleans acquaintances and sympathy to the president for the loss of his uncle:

14 of West 15th St _ N.Y. Oct. 31st/ 87

Col Wm. P. Johnston,

Dear Col

Your two last letters of Sept 19th from Staunton, and Oct 15th (my dear husband's birth day) from N.O. was only received a few days since, as you directed it—"39 Broad St N Orleans La" was only received a day or two since [sic] as it was sent back to your city, and was returned to me again. I arrived from Lime Rock on the 13th, the very day the H.S.N.M.C was opened; and have been very busy in getting fixed for the winter, but do hope all will be well. The person I lived with at 13 West 22nd St, did not want any invalids, or delicate persons in her house. While I know I am delicate, I am not an invalid, as I am not helpless. _ I received the newspaper you sent me with a half dozen others, and am so happy to know all is so satisfactory to you it is so encouraging and spiring. _ I read Catharine Cole's account, but Col[onel] are there no rooms to be appropriated for a Chapel and a reception room; as I have two portraits I intended for the H.S.N.M.C., one taken at four years of age, and one at the time of her death; and also a very excellent photograph of Mr. N[ewcomb], and other pictures, and many books, and some ornaments. The Chapel I will furnish & finish, as I wish it simple but very pretty, & would like to know from you, all that is required. I was in hopes to have seen Mrs. Richardson before her return South. _ She had my true sympathy for her two nieces; her Bro's only child, renounced her Church, her country, & her fortune, to become the wife of a R.C. [Roman Catholic] Italian Count & reside in Rome Italy. The other her only sister's child, Mrs. I. B. Potter, commenced an engagement at the Fifth Ave Theater Oct 31st. I am told Bishop H. C. Potter feels deeply for his Bro Howard, who is the Father-in-law of Mrs. I.B.P. —

I am most happy you are so truly encouraged, at the opening of the Tulane University. _ I do pray both may ever give you all the comfort & success you ever desire.

What a glorious triumph was the close of your Uncle's life, such a solace to his relatives and friends. To see our dear ones so resigned to go, & so filled with Faith & Hope, relieves & soothes the last parting, but nothing but His Love, & care & time, can heal the wound of the broken heart.

Our weather is clear but cold.

Very truly & Sin'ly, Jo L. Newcomb

There are several curious aspects of this letter. First, in Mrs. Newcomb's habit of abbreviating, she refers to the College by its acronym, H.S.N.M.C., never mentioning Sophie's name or expressing her own satisfaction with the establishment of the memorial she had long anticipated. Perhaps she was withholding her enthusiasm for a time when she was certain of its success, a caution expressed by her donation, and by her reluctance to visit the College until February 1892. Rather than mentioning the triumph of the College opening, she draws attention to what is missing, the College chapel. Further, she refers to the opening of Newcomb College as "the opening of the Tulane University." An oversight on her part, perhaps, for she then writes in hopes that "both" will give Johnston "comfort & success," meaning apparently both Newcomb College and Tulane University. In this letter, she defines herself in words any biographer would remember: "delicate" but not an "invalid."

The McConnell Family Papers contain an additional file of letters offering insight into Mrs. Newcomb's life. In a thick folder are the letters solicited from her friends and neighbors as evidence in the court case that would last from 1901 to 1908, challenging her donation to the University. These letters address the grounds of the lawsuit, attesting to her sanity and independence of thought (i.e., not under the control of the Board of Administrators), and corroborating New Orleans as her legal domicile. In the letters handwritten on engraved writing paper, most with Garden District addresses, the women who knew and admired Josephine Newcomb stepped into a public arena in her defense. The letters following are typical:

New Orleans

May 29th, 1902

This is to certify that I lived next to the Josephine Louise House on Washington Avenue, opposite the H. Sophie Newcomb College, and have resided there since 1893. The Josephine House was built after the purchase of my own home.

Mrs. Newcomb spent her winters there, the last one being 1898.

In 1899, she established a home on Fourth Street, directly back of mine. Just before leaving for the North, in the spring of 1900, Mrs. Newcomb sent for me, wishing to show me "her beautiful home," as she called it. We went over the entire house. I saw much of Mrs. Newcomb when she lived in the Josephine Louise House, her apartments being next to my home. We held almost daily conversations through the open windows, the intervening space being something like 18 feet. During 1898 and 1899, Mrs. Newcomb frequently visited me in the evenings at my residence.

During all my acquaintance with her, I had opportunities to judge her, as one person would another. She often told me that her time was mostly spent in looking after business affairs, as she attended to those matters herself. From my knowledge of her during the last few years of her life, I can positively affirm that Mrs. Newcomb was perfectly sane and that all of her mental faculties were normal and unimpaired.

Respectfully,

Mrs. M. M. Suthon

And:

... During these twelve years Mrs. Newcomb was frequently a guest at dinner parties at my home and discussed matters of general interest as intelligently as any woman friend & I have heard businessmen say of her that she was thoroughly cognizant of the most minute details of her affairs, allowing nothing to be done unless previously explained by them. ... Mrs. Newcomb always impressed me as a woman who knew her own mind & was perfectly capable of disposing of her property understandingly.

Very truly,

Margaret Avery Johnston

And again on Mrs. Newcomb's intelligence:

This is to certify that I, Julia C. Logan, was personally acquainted with Mrs. Josephine Louise Newcomb for nearly twelve years, and that during the above stated time she ever commanded my respect and admiration for her great good sense, judgment, and rare intelligence. ... I beg further to add that Mrs. Newcomb was a woman whom it was a privilege to know, and that I never left her presence without feeling that I had been personally benefitted by the contact with a woman of such rare greatness of heart.

Addressing Mrs. Newcomb's sanity and independence of character:

... As to the question of her sanity it is absurd to question it. No one who knew Mrs. Newcomb could do so. She was a woman of her own mind—very strong & decided anything but weak & uncertain.

Very sincerely,

Mattie M. Austin

The letters exhibit an underlying sense of reserve, no doubt a product of their intended use as legal testimony. However, the formality also may reveal that no one became terribly close to Josephine Newcomb. She lived in a number of places throughout her lifetime—New Orleans, New York City, and various resort cities, staying mainly in residential hotels—and had not built the friendships enjoyed by longtime neighbors. We see this peripatetic life when she mentions in her letters that her mail hadn't reached her or had been delayed. Moreover, she was isolated by widowhood and by choosing, within her particular society, a different life from those of these women so similar to her in background and class. In a very real sense, Mrs. Newcomb worked. As her neighbor Mrs. Suthon put it, "her time was mostly spent in looking after business affairs, as she attended to those matters herself." Though Mrs. Newcomb's accounts were managed by brokers, she was knowledgeable about her financial investments and thought a great deal about how money could be entrusted to one individual or one institution over another. The letters written on her behalf reflect upon her knowledge and cautious trust that served her well in managing and protecting an increasing fortune.

For the court case in Tulane's defense of the College, there were thirty-eight testimonials in all, twenty-eight of them from Mrs. Newcomb's friends. Though the tone of these testimonials lacks the intimacy of letters such as those between Mrs. Newcomb and the Schmidts, they are uniform in their admiration and possibly envy of Mrs. Newcomb's ability to take care of her business affairs and to be "a woman of her own mind." Most of the letters were written by women who had property and resources of their own and who most likely had experienced the difficulties of controlling their own wealth. Recall that in Louisiana, as in many other states, male relatives had extraordinary legal powers over women's property and even hired advisors, such as accountants and attorneys, could easily ignore the intentions of their female clients.

While the location of Mrs. Newcomb's letters—"hidden" within the collections of prominent men—illustrates one of the difficulties for scholars studying women's lives, the letters themselves define Josephine Newcomb as a woman who set her own course and was treated seriously by her advisors and by the men and women who were her friends and acquaintances. This was no small achievement for a widow of the nineteenth century. Her letters and those about her are a rich source of knowledge for those interested in how, although "entirely alone and unprotected," she eased her way into protecting herself, befriending others, and leaving a legacy that was to benefit thousands of women.

NOTES

1. John P. Dyer, *Tulane: The Biography of a University, 1834–1965* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 53.
2. Brandt V. B. Dixon, *A Brief History of H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College 1887–1919* (New Orleans: Hauser Printing, 1928), 36–37.
3. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
4. Susan Wittig, "Reflections of Sorrow and Hope." *Newcomb News* 5, no. 11 (1981): 2–11, Newcomb Archives, Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Tulane University (hereafter cited as NA NCCROW).
5. Rosa Keller (1911–1998) "Josephine Louise Newcomb." n.d., NA NCCROW. See also Rosa Freeman Keller Collection, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.
6. Schmidt family papers, Manuscripts Collection 207, Louisiana Research Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, 70118 (hereafter cited as LaRC).
7. Léda's father, the Honorable John W. Hincks, and Mrs. Newcomb's mother, Sophia Waters, were first cousins (personal correspondence of Winifred Delery Hills and Beth Willinger, January 4, 2011).
8. McConnell family papers, Manuscripts Collection 156, Box 15, Louisiana Research Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, LaRC.
9. The four letters are located in Schmidt family papers, Box 11, Folder 15, LaRC.
10. "Cousin Ellen" is Josephine's sister, Eleanor, and her four children, a daughter and three sons.
11. Waldhorn & Adler (New Orleans), representative correspondence, July 2005.
12. The Hendersons moved to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1872.
13. It is notable that Mrs. Newcomb doesn't mention Léda's brother, Joseph A. Hincks. J. A. Hincks was one of her executors and as secretary-treasurer of the Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund figured prominently in representing Mrs. Newcomb's interests to the board both prior to and after her death.
14. Since the writing of this essay, a file of letters written by and to Josephine Newcomb has been located in the McConnell family papers.