

The Elena Letters

A 19th century portrait across three generations

by Susan DeMark

“**T**HANKSGIVING DAY DAWNED bright enough to put everybody in a good humor, and it brought all the family together. DuBois sent home the day before three turkeys, one large one that weighed seventeen pounds, and two small ones, besides killed two chickens. We cooked the seventeen pounder, and had oyster sauce with it, also the two chickens, onions, squash, cold slaw, stewed apples, cranberry sauce, currant jelly, celery, pickles, two kinds of pie, two kinds of nuts, raisins, apples, coffee.”

Quite a feast, isn't it? Elena Verplanck Overbaugh DuBois detailed a bountiful holiday meal in a letter from her Kingston home to her mother, Caroline Verplanck Overbaugh, in Brooklyn during the 19th century. Elena DuBois wrote many letters to her mother, as well as letters to her husband and family members. In turn, her mother wrote a goodly number back to Elena and many to her granddaughter, Elena's daughter Carrie DuBois Keyser, judging from a collection of these letters that survive until today.

The Overbaugh and DuBois women shared across three generations about all manner of things: the rituals of holding tea; Elena feeling frustrated with a plumber who wasn't listening to the woman of the house when she correctly diagnosed a problem; a male family member complaining about Elena

devoting too much time to letter writing; travels via sleigh to have dinner in a neighboring town; and a neighbor dying suddenly when he was struck with a piece of wood. Each page is about a family's life and daily events in their rendering of travels, illnesses and deaths, medicines and treatments, church activities and revivals, weddings, courtships, fashions, bank accounts, and weather conditions. As such, they are history.

Yet, this rich history might have been lost were it not for a descendant who lived over a century later, Anne de la Vergne Weiss, who was cleaning out her father's home in Byrdcliffe after he died in 1994. She found a packet of letters and documents that she had no idea existed. Seeing her ancestors come to life in these fragile pages addressed To “My dear mother” and “Dear Carrie,” Anne Weiss, then 69, decided to transcribe the contents of the letters. A writer, editor, and teacher, she thought this was the best option to render them accurately.

This is just one step in a history mystery. The letters still might have been lost to posterity were it not for Anne's daughter, Piera Weiss, a retired landscape architect and resident of Saugerties and Kensington, Md. After her mother Anne passed away in August of 2000, Piera Weiss took her mother's laptop computer and started looking at the files on the machine. She discovered a file entitled “The Elena Letters.” She saw transcribed letters, files of correspondence that their ancestors wrote between the 1840s and the 1890s, over three generations.

Even then, Weiss had no physical copies of the letters. Two decades later, when her father died, in 2021, Piera Weiss was going through his papers and the papers her mother left. Then, she discovered the original paper letters in addition to hard copies of the transcriptions and a document her mother had typed about her initiative to transcribe the letters and summarize their content. She ended up with some 121 pages of letters. A key challenge she encountered: Those writing the letters frequently did not date them, so Anne Weiss also tried to figure out dates via clues she could put together and using some third-party sources (e.g., the *World Almanac* Perpetual Calendar).

Now, Piera Weiss aims to find an archives, historical organization, or similar entity so she can donate the letters to be carefully preserved and scanned, and ultimately the content made accessible.

Who was this family that was at the center of these letters? The Overbaugh and DuBois families were long established in Ulster County. Their economic circumstances meant that we would consider them upper middle class, with the

men in professional mercantile endeavors. Elena's father, John Van Leuven Overbaugh, born in 1806, was one of the founders of the Bank of Ulster, which became the First National Bank of Saugerties. John's wife, Caroline Verplanck, had roots to the early Dutch settlers in New Netherland.

In 2021, Weiss donated portraits of the latter two, which had been handed down through the family, to the Saugerties Historical Society. (According to Weiss, she and her sisters are the fifth generation after that of John and Caroline Overbaugh.) In the portraits, wife Caroline looks much older than husband John: She outlived him by more than four decades, to 1895. A significant amount of her correspondence is in this packet — particularly letters to her granddaughter, Carrie DuBois Keyser, whom Weiss ultimately terms “the keeper of the family flame.”

The letters of Elena DuBois comprise a central piece of this family portrait. Elena Verplanck Overbaugh was born to John and Caroline in 1827. In 1846, she married Elijah DuBois, a successful banker who became the president of the State of New York National Bank. In going through her letters in these recent years, Weiss observes, “Elena knew her own mind and she was very intelligent.... She had a lot to manage in the household.” She also struggles with ill health as the years progress, for example, bronchial ailments. Elena's letters cover an approximate 15-year period, and then, as Weiss explains, “the letters just stop, and you don't quite know exactly what happened.” Elena DuBois died on Nov. 9, 1877, at age 50. She and her husband are buried in Wiltwyck Cemetery, as are various family members.

In a world today of instantaneous digital communication and sharing, whether it's TikTok, emails, or Facebook, it's worth considering the differences between the 21st and the 19th centuries. Letters, certainly far slower to arrive at their destination, were a crucial way that people kept informed and connected. In worlds that were highly circumscribed into primarily male and female spheres, women depended upon writing and receiving letters. These women's letters are full of information and emotion, from a sisters' row — Elena: “What a spunky thing you are, just like a bunch of fleas” — to frequent expressions of heartache and deep sympathy over deaths that occur in their circles.



COURTESY OF PIERA WEISS

A portrait of Caroline Overbaugh.



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The gravesite in Wiltwyck Cemetery where Elena Overbaugh DuBois, Elijah DuBois, and his first wife, Louisa Overbaugh DuBois, are buried.

Though they cite family and friends traveling and residing in places from Cape May, Jersey City, Saratoga Springs, and Luzerne, N.Y. to Cuba, these letters encompass a world set in Kingston, Saugerties, and Brooklyn. The Overbaughs maintained a home in Brooklyn, and there were many comings-and-goings on the trains and riverboats between Ulster County and New York City.

Altogether, the cast of folks that the three generations chronicle and describe are literally dozens, in terms of their well-being and health, accomplishments, life passages, household needs, relationships, and activities. A single example of keeping track: Elena told her sister, “Mr. Westbrook is a little better. Poor fellow. He suffers a good deal and is so patient. I had not heard of Frank Fenwick's illness, and was surprised to hear of his death.... Mrs. Lathrop has been sick the last ten days, looks miserable, has lots of trouble.” There are constant worries about family dealing with illness, not surprising in the mid-to later decades of the 19th century.

The letters also illuminate the many household and family responsibilities the women shouldered, though with domestic help that they consistently discussed.

To be sure, gaiety runs all through the letters, too. “Mr. and Mrs. Hurlbut come in quite often evenings, he to play cards and she to play words, beside other callers all most every evening,” Grandma Overbaugh penned to Carrie. Of various tea and “society” evenings she enjoyed, Elena wrote of one: “I rigged up in my best bib and tucker and went, stopped on my way and took in Mrs. Van Dusen. The people we met were mostly our own church people and I must say I spent a most delightful evening. We had oysters, chicken salad, biscuits, sandwiches, cake and coffee... and I ate all I wanted of all

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Third Thursday Environmental Series presentation September 21

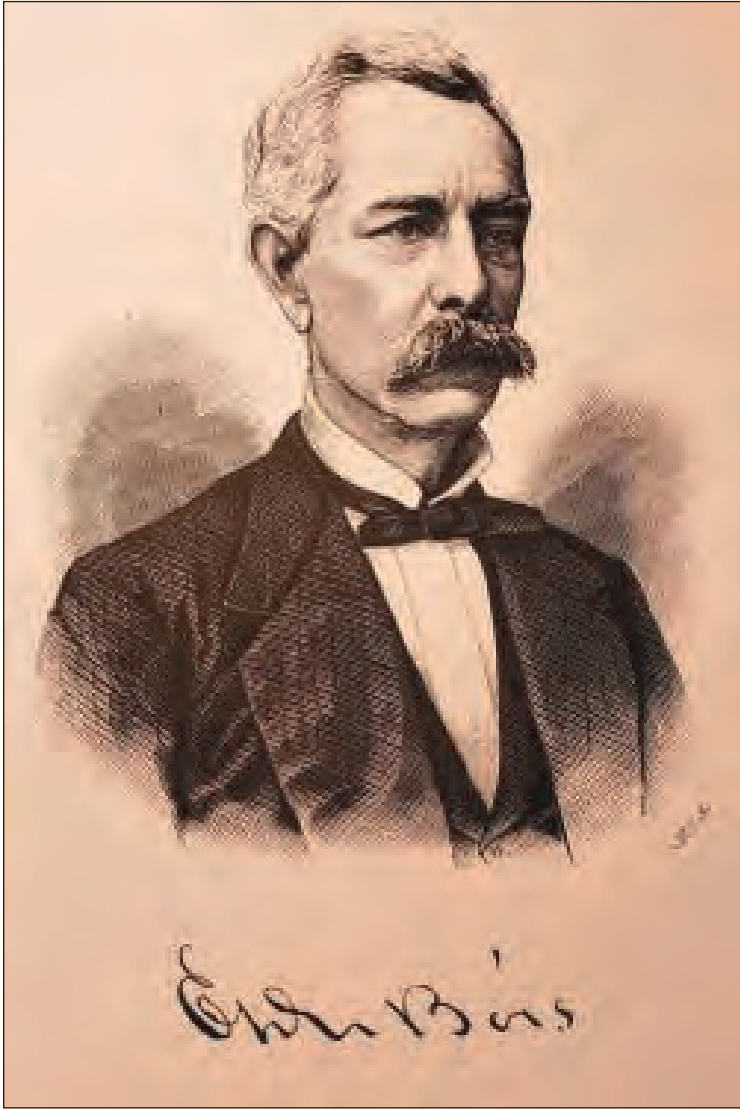
CENTRAL TO THE CONCEPT OF “PERMACULTURE” is the question of how we can create conditions for prosperity that are intergenerational as well as ecological.

In this Third Thursday Environmental Series presentation, Andrew Faust, with the Permaculture Institute of North America, discusses how we can achieve

greater food and energy independence at home, in the community, and throughout our entire region.

This is a free, interactive webinar via Zoom. Simply navigate to <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/83538684901> on Thursday, September 21 at 6:25 p.m., or send an email to thirdthursdayseries@gmail.com any time before the event to obtain a clickable version of the link.

For videos of prior presentations related to environmental conservation, go to the “Third Thursday Environmental Series” channel on YouTube.



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COURTESY OF PIERA WEISS



COURTESY OF PIERA WEISS

Above, Elijah DuBois, husband of Elena Overbaugh DuBois, top right, Carrie Keyser, shown with her husband Daniel Keyser, was the daughter and granddaughter who received many of the letters in this trove of correspondence; bottom right Piera Weiss is seeking to find a repository for a large number of letters her ancestors wrote in the 19th century that center on their lives in Kingston, Saugerties and Brooklyn.

Elena concluded the statement: *“My most earnest wish and prayer to Almighty God is that my children may all become Christians, that they may live together in love and unity, each one cherishing a brotherly and sisterly affection for each other, all uniting in filial obedience to him who has always been a kind Father, and that at least we may be an unbroken family in Heaven.”*

She passed away ten years after she wrote this document.

Asked whether one could read into Elena DuBois’ later letters that she was becoming more seriously ill, Piera Weiss says, “She complains a bit more.” Basically, however, her letters are striking in their portrait of a woman who savored her life and had much to say about what she held dear. The letters are, in some ways, “fresh and modern,” as Weiss says, even as they depict the conditions and obstacles women dealt with in an earlier era.

On Jan. 29, 1876, Elena wrote to her mother of marking three decades of marriage, calling her husband — as she did throughout her letters — by his last name: “DuBois has just sent home oysters, Carrie has made some very nice wine jelly, and the prospects are that we are going to have a nice tea.” Then, like her other letters and despite feeling fatigue and having been out “only a few times during the winter,” she went on to talk about what was going on with 12 other people. The letters that were so important to Elena DuBois and her family, thankfully, haven’t been lost for future generations.

the good things.”

The letters convey how much planning could be required for trips between Saugerties, Kingston, and elsewhere, via carriages, sleighs, or riverboats, due to the weather and road or river conditions. “The Saugerties people are coming down here to cross the river so we have come to the conclusion that the ferry cannot be open at Saugerties,” Elena wrote. On another occasion, in warmer weather, Elena changes her mind about traveling from Kingston to Saugerties, given her breathing difficulties: “The roads are so terribly dusty I am sure I would suffer from the effects. It makes me cough even to go into a room where there is sweeping going on.”

For both Elena DuBois and her mother, Caroline Overbaugh, their religious beliefs were a consistent thread. Bemoaning the lack of “jollity or lectures” in Saugerties and comparing an old

piano that a family member brought up from Brooklyn that might seem “small and meagre to our folks after seeing the style of Brooklyn,” Caroline nevertheless wrote, “It is time to lay aside pride and be contented and happy with the comforts our kind Heavenly Father has given us.”

For her part, Elena described how uplifted she was by being able to get out after a time of isolation during winter, twice to tea and then to church for the first time that season. “The good sink at the Baptist Church is still going on, fourteen immersed this morning, and so many more for next Sunday.” In another letter, she noted, “they are having a great revival at the Baptist Church here, eighteen to be immersed tonight and the meetings to be continued through this coming week.” In that same letter, Elena expressed a desire to go to New York City during the coming month to hear “Moody and Sankey at the Hippodrome” — the evangelist Dwight Moody and gospel singer and composer Ira Sankey, who partnered in evangelical crusades in the final decades of the 19th century.

On Oct. 22, 1867, a document that she dated, Elena completed a statement of property that she owned, at age 40, adding up to \$5,000 in bonds and other assets, plus some furnishings. She suggested ways that her husband could divide it up among their four surviving children “all fair and square.”

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PUBLIC NOTICE

Ulster County Transportation Council

Jen Metzger,
County Executive
Chair

The Ulster County Transportation Council (UCTC) has released for public comment proposed amendments to the FFY 2023-2027 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP)

Resolution 2023-05— Addition of new PINs 876312 and 876313, BridgeNY Projects: Hurley Mountain Road over the Esopus Creek in the Town of Marbletown and Old Mill Road over the Quassaic Creek in the Town of Plattekill

Resolution 2023-06— Addition of Carbon Reduction Program funds for PIN 876122: New Paltz Sidewalk project on Prospect, Church, H.W. Dubois Dr. and Huguenot St. in the Village of New Paltz

Details regarding the proposed amendments can be viewed at the Council’s office (address below) and are available at: <https://ulstercountyny.gov/transportation-council/transportation-improvement-plan>

Written comments may be sent to the Ulster County Transportation Council, c/o Brian Slack, 244 Fair Street, PO Box 1800, Kingston, NY 12402-1800 or emailed to bsla@co.ulster.ny.us The public comment period ends Tuesday September 26th, 2023 at 5:00pm

The UCTC Policy Committee is scheduled to meet **Tuesday, September 26, 2023 at 10:00 am** in person in Rm M-1 at the Rondout Municipal Center (Joint Marbletown/Rosendale Town Hall), 1915 Lucas Avenue, Cottekill, NY to discuss public comments received and consider adopting the proposed TIP amendments. Detailed meeting information will be posted ten (10) days prior at: <http://ulstercountyny.gov/transportation-council>

All UCTC meetings begin with an open call for public comment. For additional information, please Call Dennis Doyle at (845) 340-3340