On a Tuesday morning in the spring of 1861, Troy Female Seminary student Isabel McKennan wrote to a friend back home about the world gone turbulent. Her letter is dated April 23, 1861. The previous days had brought the first shots of the Civil War with the bombing of Fort Sumter and its eventual surrender to Confederate troops. She wrote in elegant cursive in the whisp-thin letters of a steel nib pen dipped in ink,

“When I left home last September how little I thought so many changes would take place before I returned, that I was bidding many of my friends bye for the last time. For surely we cannot expect them all to return from such as bloody war (as everyone predicts this is going to be) alive.”
From her window, McKennan watched new troops—“some of them are so young”—gather to leave for war. A band played a farewell tune. Adding to her letter the next evening, she described how 20 Troy Female Seminary students and teachers started making lint for the wounds of soldiers, using linen sheets torn into strips by the school nurse.

McKennan’s letter is one of thousands of documents, photographs, and objects illuminating the history of Emma Willard School (formerly Troy Female Seminary) and its students that have been preserved in the school’s 200-year-old archives. Emma Willard School Archivist Nancy Iannucci once called the archives, housed in three unassuming rooms in the basement of Dietel Library & Gallery, the “chamber of secrets.”

The Emma Willard School Archives include early 19th- and 20th-century student letters and diaries, scrapbooks, catalogs (the 1831–1832 Catalogue proscribes a dress code of “calico, gingham, or ‘crape,’ made in plain style”), yearbooks, Emma Hart Willard’s correspondence, old uniforms, dresses, photographs, and blueprints detailing the evolution of the Mount Ida campus. A 1919 student scrapbook includes programs from dances, napkins, and a small dance card noting the names of the gentlemen she danced with, at what time, and which dance. Perhaps the most unexpected item is a broken bottle of champagne, wrapped in a red, white, and blue ribbon in a wooden box, from the 1943 christening of the S.S. Emma Willard, a World War II vessel.

“It’s absolutely incredible we have this,” said Emagin Tanaschuk ’14, who is creating an independent project on how the Emma Girl has evolved over 200 years based on archival material in a new, year-long independent study program for seniors called Signature.

“It changes the whole Emma experience,” she said. “You already feel special because you are getting this education, but now I feel like it’s much more important because it’s been going on for so long. You hear about the traditions, but to actually see it, you feel it. I’m touching something a girl my age touched over a 100 years ago.”
The archives are gathering no dust from infrequent use. Rather, instructors, like Iannucci, frequently use student letters and other documents in their history classes to help bring American history to life.

“It personalizes it for the girls,” Iannucci said. “They see a national event affecting their school and students like themselves and see how they went about dealing with it.”

Beyond the students, archival material has been used by many scholars and writers, including best-selling author David McCullough, filmmaker Ken Burns, and graduate students conducting doctoral research on women’s education.

“The value of an archive such as you have [at Emma Willard School] is immeasurable, there is no way to measure its worth,” McCullough said, who wrote about Emma Hart Willard’s 1830 trip to Paris in his best-selling book, The Greater Journey. “It’s one of a kind. It represents not just one of the outstanding people in our history, but an institution that has been part of our history for 200 years.

“I was delighted when I learned there was an archives,” he said. “Emma Willard was the first American woman to seriously champion education for women and to do so very effectively, both in what she said and what she wrote and published. And the way she lived out her life, she devoted her life to it. She’s a truly heroic American who left her mark in no uncertain terms.”

And, thanks to Iannucci’s enthusiasm, the halls of Slocum are lined with blown-up photos of archival material in honor of the Bicentennial this year. In one, a student in the 1940s writes home about being allowed to wear ankle socks for the first time without silk stockings, “[w]ill wonders never cease!,” and dancing with the boys from Deerfield. One afternoon, Newell Chair of Humanities and Head of History and Social Science at Emma Robert Naeher, Ph.D. strode out of his A.P. US History classroom, returning excitedly with the blow-up of President Thomas Jefferson’s letter to Emma Willard from the hall to show his students. Jefferson wrote, “The subject [female education] is of great importance and of lamentable
deficiency in this country…. [I am] happy to see it brought before the public so ably and elocutlyy by Miss Willard.”

IN THE ARCHIVES, dozens of labeled, acid-free boxes fill closely spaced metal shelves. The sound you hear is the soft blowing of the air conditioner, maintaining ideal preservation conditions. Despite the modern sights and sounds, once you open a box, voices from the past lift off the pages. The many, distinct voices of students are filled with energy and excitement at discovering new friends and strengths, anxiety and fatigue over the heavy academic load, homesickness, and the highs and lows of navigating young womanhood.

In a December 11, 1856, diary entry, a student exudes excitement at her “Sweet Sixteen,” “This noon, I received an elegant present from darling Johnnie, of two gold bracelets! Lizzie also got me a bottle of perfume!”

In 1825, a student writes about a visitor arriving by canal boat, the first one that had gone clear through the Erie Canal.

Another: a 19th-century student laments the morning routine of being woken by a bell at 4:30, then walking in formation in town. The Troy boys would sometimes taunt them, “Shoo, sheep!”

In the 1940s, a student from Savannah struggles with homesickness exacerbated by culture shock, but, later, writes with pride and excitement at her initiation into art club, “It’s a great honor so I feel very proud,” news of dances at other schools, her Latin class field trip to see a matinee of Antigone in Manhattan, her war work, knitting socks on No. 2 needles, and the surprising discovery of her love of chemistry.

“I can’t even describe how excited I was that we were going to be really using the archives,” said Erin Hogan ’15, a student in Iannucci’s class. “The whole process of finding letters…It was really cool, reading what girls wrote 100-plus years ago. There are so many similarities.”

In the final weeks of the fall semester, the archives were filled with students in Iannucci’s US History class consulting primary documents for their research papers, which must be based on at least four primary documents. Hogan wrote about slavery, and, like many before her, was surprised to learn of Emma Hart Willard’s position on slavery as detailed in her pamphlet Via Media and an 1861 letter to a “Dr. Washington” in which she distances herself from abolitionists.

“This letter is a gold mine. Students are really surprised by her views,” said Iannucci. “It shows the students how the remnants of the American Revolution are still in the feeling of it. She is very states-rights…I tell them it’s generational thinking. Emma Willard originally refused to sign Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s petition. But, she produced a student like Elizabeth Cady Stanton.”

At a table in the archives reading room, Katie Archambault, director of research at Emma, talked with her students as part of their Signature projects. Senior Alyssa Maier said she wanted to focus on how the Emma Willard academic program evolved over the school’s 200 years.

“Have you looked at the classes Elizabeth Cady Stanton took?” Archambault asked.

“We have that!” Maier’s voice jumped an octave.

These are in fact the same records used in the research of the 1999 Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) film, Not For Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, produced by filmmakers Ken Burns and Paul Barnes.

The two looked at early photos of the school and archival records pertaining to Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s education. One document lists Cady Stanton’s September 1831 course load as “criticism, arithmetic, chemistry, French, music.”

“The school’s archival collection is an absolute treasure for any historian interested in researching the early struggles to educate women in our country and in telling the stories of the many remarkable women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton who passed through the doors of Emma Willard School,” producers Burns and Barnes wrote.

THE EFFORTS OF MANY are responsible for creating the school’s archives, which are unusually rich and deep for an independent school of Emma Willard School’s size. The first “archives” was a closet in Slocum.

“It’s a blessing the school kept this material,” said Barbara Wiley, head librarian at Emma for 36 years until her retirement from the school in 2012.
The 1890s marks the first time the school community began to consciously preserve its history, thanks to the efforts of 1847 alumna Olivia Slocum Sage, said Trudy Hanmer, associate head emerita and author of Wrought With Steadfast Will: A History of Emma Willard School. Sage, whose philanthropy is responsible for many of the buildings on campus, chaired a committee of alumnae who captured the biographies of the school’s students in the published Emma Willard and her pupils, or, Fifty years of Troy Female Seminary: 1822–1872.

“There is such a richness in all of this, to think about the lives of some of these women,” said Hanmer, who has her history students read and write about these alumna profiles. “I see our archives as critical to further scholarship and introducing the students to the legacy they are now a part of. The girls are not passive recipients of American history; they are part of a tradition that made American history.”

With the building of Dietel Library & Gallery in the late 1960s, the archives found its home. Over the next several decades, the school managed the archives on a very part-time basis, for just 30 days a year. Several people, including retired archivist Marion Munzer, volunteered their time to tend to the documents.

In 2001, the archives began to blossom with the hiring of Nancy Iannucci, who devotes 40 percent of her time to the archives, the rest as a history instructor.

“Iannucci was heaven-sent,” said Wiley, who continues to volunteer in the archives.

Iannucci created a reading room for research, oversaw the digitization of thousands of archival photographs, and is now working on creating a virtual archive database of alumnae bulletins and student publications including The Clock, Triangle, and yearbooks.

The keystone of the archives are the Emma Hart Willard papers with some 1,000 of her correspondences, family papers, copies of the textbooks she authored, her published letters and journals, and copies of her published pieces and advocacy pamphlets. Each document in her collection was hard-won for the school.

In 1999, Wiley began working with Northern Illinois University Professor Lucy Townsend to gather as much of Willard’s correspondence as possible. Townsend had been considering writing an updated biography of Emma Hart Willard and was eager to help gather new primary sources. And there were many.

Willard worked exhaustively to promote her ideas for improving female education through frequent correspondence with influential people of her time, including John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Henry Clay, DeWitt Clinton, William Henry Seward, Amos Eaton, and the Marquis de Lafayette. As a result of Willard’s proclivity for the pen, there were hundreds of documents spread around the country.

The story behind how the school’s impressive collection of her works was assembled reads like a script for an episode of the PBS series History Detectives. The story includes a Passat wagon, a bidding war with a graduate student, chance discoveries, and a gated room in the bowels of the Library of Congress.

Wiley and Townsend wrote to more than 2,000 institutions that housed the papers of Willard’s correspondents and eventually visited dozens of universities, historical collections, and made one memorable visit to the Library of Congress to read Willard’s Peace Petition.

During one archival mission, a trove of letters passed down to a Willard descendant was donated to Amherst College, which agreed to let Emma Willard School copy them. Rather than risking loss or damage to the documents via the postal service, Wiley put the
priceless collection in the back of her Passat to deliver them safely to LexisNexis offices 400 miles away in Bethesda, Maryland, for micro-filming.

Another dozen letters joined the collection rather unexpectedly. One summer day, a woman walked into the school library, explaining she had decided not to do the laundry that particular morning and, instead, went up into her attic. Her dirty socks resulted in the discovery of 13 Willard letters in a dusty trunk. She asked if the school wanted them. The answer was an enthusiastic, yes!

The countless hours pursuing each new document have helped to put another lens on the life of the dynamic Emma Hart Willard.

When writer David McCullough was researching his book, *The Greater Journey*, on the many Americans who were greatly impacted by a 19th-century journey to Paris, he looked to Emma Hart Willard’s published letters and journals from her trip. McCullough quotes at length from Willard’s description of her first view of the cathedral in Rouen, France:

“She’s a marvelous writer,” McCullough said. “Let me point out that I cite other well-known writers of the time, including Charles Sumner, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., and James Fenimore Cooper… but none of them compare to Emma Willard’s account. She was changed by the experience….She had a lot more courage because she was a woman and women weren’t supposed to do that sort of thing and very, very few did.”

Beyond Emma Hart Willard’s correspondence, the archivists have been able to compile a trove of primary sources from students across the generations. One rare treasure now housed in the archives is the Anna S. Kellogg Collection, a collection of 620 letters, 10 diaries, notebooks, and documents written while Kellogg was a student at Troy Female Seminary. The collection was originally sent under the name of Anna’s husband to a historical society. After its contents turned out to relate mostly to his wife, the school quickly bought the collection and Iannucci changed its name.

In the documents, Kellogg writes of her very first trip to the seminary from Utica, meeting Mrs. Willard, stressing over a major research paper (topic: the Ministry of Angels), eating nuts and oranges in a classmate’s room, cutting out a whale bone skirt, and of her confusing feelings for a young man, whom her mother did not feel befitting of her position from a prominent Utica family.

One student who has read the letters in depth is Victoria Albert ’17, who is helping transcribe the letters into type-written copies in an archives Practicum, the Emma Willard School internship program. Kellogg’s sloping cursive can be hard to decipher and some of her letters are cross-hatched with sentences written at right angles over the body of the letters, a common 19th-century method to save on postage.

In one letter Albert worked on, dated April 12, 1866, Kellogg wrote, “My darling Sister, I am as sleepy as I can be, but I think I must write you a few lines, because I am in the habit of doing so on Sunday.”

“Oh, that’s every Emma Willard student now. We are all so tired,” said Albert in the week before her own exams. “I love the voice, that authentic way she has of talking. It’s tender, between family members. It’s kind of a moment, meant to be between the two of them, that is trapped in time.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m part of the secret society,” she said, smiling, propped on one of the library’s fireside banquettes. “Sometimes I feel like I’m looking at the snow globe from the outside and other times it’s the complete opposite. I relate so much to her.”

---

Robyn Pforr Ryan is an award-winning writer and journalist based outside Albany, New York. She has a deep love of history, and has spent many happy hours in the archives at Wellesley and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as well as the New York State Archives researching her first novel. She is also parent to Emma Girl Chandler Ryan ’15.

I had heard of fifty or a hundred years being spent in the erection of a building, and I had often wondered how it could be; but when I saw even the outside of this majestic and venerable temple, the doubt ceased...when I entered the interior, and saw by the yet dim and shadowy light, the long, long, aisles—the high, raised vaults—the immense pillars which supported them... my mind was smitten with a feeling of sublimity, almost too intense for mortality.