



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3065

Margaret B. Howell
Diary

1865

3 volumes in 1 box, 0.2 lin. feet

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Restrictions: None

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Diary, 1865
3 volumes in 1 box, 0.2 lin. feet

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Scope & content

Margie (Margaret) B. Howell kept a diary beginning January 1, 1865 and ending August 22, 1865. Howell, who one month into her diary celebrated her sixteenth birthday, frames an engaging snapshot of the life of a young, middle class female in the Victorian age living in comfortable, but not elaborate circumstances, in Philadelphia. In addition to recording her daily activities, Howell offers reflections on her—and the city’s—response to momentous events occurring with the end of the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln.

Within the time period covered by Howell’s entries, January to August, 1865, there is a break of almost three months. Howell made daily entries until May 12, taking up the diary again on July 29, the day she left for a vacation in the country. The diary, written in pen on lined paper, is separated into three small booklets 4” x 4.5” with one booklet bound with a ribbon. Each entry begins with a remark on the weather and chronicles the rhythm of household chores, music lessons, visits to and from family and friends, gatherings for anniversaries and birthdays, and Sunday church attendance. Howell also offered personal glimpses such as titles of books read, her thoughts on scripture passages, the sorrows of death, as well as her struggles with ill health. Howell recorded a prolonged bout with a sore throat, as well as an ailment which she termed “the Neuralgia,” a complaint common to Victorian women. Although “the Neuralgia” lasted over a week, Howell never describes this malady, referring only to “neuralgia pain”—in contrast to entries detailing pain suffered from a sore throat. Despite her health concerns, Howell’s diary conveys a spirited and sensitive approach to life as she reports her delight or disappointment in the vagaries of winter weather, her energetic attack on household chores, and her enthusiasm for family celebrations—especially for the dancing accompanying these gatherings.

Howell’s diaries offer an observant and vivid response to significant events in United States history as played out in Philadelphia. On Monday, April 3, when Richmond fell to the Union Army, Howell began her daily entry, quoting perhaps her father: “Will for all coming time be a memorable day in the local history of Philadelphia, the hopes and fears of four years were set at rest by the brief announcement, at eleven o’clock, ‘Richmond is ours.’ H. Howell.” Although Howell often expressed her sentiments through others, for example, Biblical passages or sermons, she also offered her own reaction to events. She described the uproarious crowds in the street, a city and its people “wild with exultation”

sharing their joy with “impromptu speeches.” News of Lee’s surrender, received April 9, produced similar sentiments and Howell offered an electrifying account of its impact in Philadelphia, conveying the sense of a city unable to contain its joy, exploding with sounds of bells, whistles, and cannons.

In contrast to the triumph at war’s end, Howell’s entry of April 15 recorded grieved reactions to news of Lincoln’s assassination as well as recounting particulars of Booth’s and his accomplices’ capture and execution. She described Lincoln’s funeral procession in Philadelphia and his viewing, April 23 in the State House, which she and her father attended. Howell offered her own impression of seeing Lincoln’s “remains” noting “there was a smile on his face.” Howell continued to record events associated with Lincoln’s death and the war, ending on May 12 with Jefferson Davis’ capture.

After May 12 entries cease until July 29, when Howell left for South Mountain House, a hotel in Womelsdorf, a town near Reading, Berks County where she remained until August 22. These vacation pages describe days at Womelsdorf patterned after those of Philadelphia--shared activities centered around walks, teas, and dancing in the evenings. Her final entry noting, “one last lingering look at the Mountains and then we started for our home,” is followed by a page recording Howell’s weight on several days during August, with a final notation of 116 ½ lbs. on August 19.

Margaret B. Howell (b. 1849) lived in Philadelphia with her parents, a younger sister Ida and an older sister Annie. Around 1870 she married William H. Zinser, and they had three children: Ida Howell Zinser, Margaret E. Zinser and Laura May Zinser. William Zinser died in 1908 at the age of 64 while Margaret (Howell) Zinser died in 1942 at the age of 92.

Subjects

Diaries – Howell, Margie (Margaret) B. – Female – White – Philadelphia, (Pa.) – United States History Civil War, 1861-1865
Manners and customs – Recreation – Family – White – Berks County (Pa.) – 19th century
Neuralgia – Diseases – Pain – 19th century
Philadelphia, (Pa.) - Social life and customs - 19th century
Philadelphia, (Pa.) – Family life – White – 19th Century
Young Women – Girls - Philadelphia, (Pa) – 19th century

Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865 – Assassination
Lincoln, Abraham, 1809-1865 – Funeral journey to Springfield – Philadelphia, (Pa.)

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Barbara Ochester of Saint Michael's Lutheran Church, Germantown, 1999.

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