

Letters From an American Utopia: The Stetson Family and the Northampton Association 1843-47



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Letters From an American Utopia: The Stetson Family and the Northampton Association 1843-47 In 1842, a group of radical abolitionists and social reformers established the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, a utopian community in western Massachusetts organized around a collectively owned and operated silk mill. Members sought to challenge the prevailing social attitudes of their day by creating a society in which "the rights of all are equal without distinction of sex, color or condition, sect or religion."

This volume brings together a remarkable set of seventy-five letters written by the members of the Stetson family, who belonged to the Association for almost four years. Discovered recently by a family descendant, the correspondence documents the thoughts and experiences of ordinary people struggling to uphold common ideals in challenging circumstances. The letters re-create an extended family conversation in which news was shared, stories were told, hopes and fears expressed, and ideas discussed. We meet James Stetson, an ambivalent family patriarch with a wry sense of humor. There is Almira, his eldest child, who strove earnestly to work for her family and wrote movingly of her dreams of a career in service to her principles. And there is Dolly Witter Stetson, James's wife and the central figure in this collection, whom we first meet as she was about to give birth for the ninth time and whose relish for community life was shaped by a lively intelligence, a commitment to exploring reform ideals, and a down-to-earth view of family duties and household burdens.

Also appearing in the letters are such prominent figures as the black abolitionists Sojourner Truth and David Ruggles. Comprehensive annotations by the editors guide readers through the letters, and three original essays flesh out their historical context. Christopher Clark looks at family life, marriage, and the regulation of behavior; Marjorie Senechal highlights fresh evidence the correspondence provides about silk raising and manufacture; and Paul Gaffney discusses the Association's unique status as an interracial community.

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