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## In 200 Years of Family Letters, a Nation's Story

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#)

BOULDER, Colo., Jan. 27 — To most college students, instant messages, or I.M.'s, are about as ephemeral as the topics they typically address. One flicker and gone.

Ethan Cowan, a 20-year-old cinema studies major, saves his I.M.'s on his computer to read again later. But in his family, that is no surprise.

Mr. Cowan comes from a long line of savers — really, really dedicated savers.

"It's in the genes," said his mother, Linda Cowan.

Beginning more than 200 years ago, Mr. Cowan's family has kept the messages — people called them letters in those days — written to one another, as well as correspondence with eminent outsiders like Ralph Waldo Emerson, sermons given by preachers in the family and multipart essays sent home while traveling.

The collection, at least 75,000 documents totaling hundreds of thousands of pages filling 200 boxes, is one of the largest private family troves that has turned up in recent years, genealogy experts say. It has been stored in attics, sheds and storage lockers over the years, and most recently in the Cowans' home here in Boulder, where they were interviewed on a recent morning. Its contents cover the scandalous (a relative jailed for embezzlement), the intriguing (a runaway slave seeking refuge in the North) and the historic (the settling of Chicago).

Now the current owner of the collection, Mr. Cowan's grandmother, Mary Leslie Wolff, who is 82, is negotiating to donate the papers — called the Ames Family Historical Collection, for her father's branch of the tree — to a historical society somewhere back East, where the family began. Ms. Wolff declined to say where the collection might go because discussions were continuing.

Historians and librarians say the collection is probably as remarkable for its intellectual vigor as for its age and size. It is essentially a dialogue of history: one well-educated, middle-class family's long conversation, and its interaction with the issues that defined the early nation and its westward tide, including the abolitionist movement before the Civil War, the early rise of feminism and the discoveries of geology that were shaking religious assumptions about the age of the earth. The family's writers talked all of it through, often at length. Letters of 10 to 12 pages were common.

"Whenever anyone finds a record like this that speaks to one family in depth, it's a gold mine," said David S. Ouimette, who manages the

genealogy collection for the Family History Library, run by the Mormon Church in Salt Lake City.

"And it sounds like they weren't just observing the events of the day, they were participants," added Mr. Ouimette, who has not seen the collection. "That's what puts flesh on the bones."

One series of letters, for example, talks about a runaway slave named Mary Walker who took shelter with an abolitionist branch of the family in Philadelphia, the Leslies, during a visit by her master in the 1850's. Ms. Walker, after being hidden for a time, was eventually sent farther north to live with Leslie relatives in Massachusetts.

But the story did not end there. As the Civil War tore the country apart, the letters show an effort to reunite Ms. Walker with her family in North Carolina. A friend who was an officer in Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's army, then advancing south, was asked to look out for Ms. Walker's children, and he apparently succeeded, because they ultimately made their way north to join her.

Another series of letters offers a vivid early glimpse of the still-raw settlement of Chicago by a family member who had journeyed west from Philadelphia in 1836 to Missouri to see some land he had bought. The land was not much to speak of, wrote the author, Peter Leslie — Ms. Wolff's great-great grandfather — in a letter to his children. But when he arrived at what he called "Chicago on Lake Michigan," Mr. Leslie immediately knew a rising force when he saw it.

"The town has more natural advantages than any place I have yet seen and is destined to be the N. York of the West," he wrote in a letter describing the construction and the bustle of the new city, then a few years old. Hotels were springing up, land fever was in the air and ambition was everywhere.

"The people of the West have a town-making mania," he wrote. "This one must succeed."

Ms. Cowan, Ms. Wolff's daughter, said she had recently been working through the letters of Mr. Leslie's son, J. Peter Leslie, who was a geologist in Philadelphia later in the 19th century. Many of those letters, she said, read like a novel: you start one, and you just have to find out what happens next.

"Right now there's a relative in jail for embezzlement," she said. "He ran off to Canada, then his conscience got the better of him and he came back and gave himself up."

Why this family saved the things that many others threw away or lost remains a mystery, Ms. Wolff said. An early progenitor in Massachusetts apparently got the ball rolling in the 1700's; that branch's attic-size collection was donated to the Massachusetts Historical Society many years ago.

Beginning in Massachusetts and Philadelphia, where the first immigrants of the family settled after arriving from Scotland, the letters piled up as the clan, like so many others of the day, gradually moved west — to Minnesota in the 1850's, then Colorado a century later.

"I think a lot of people have the urge, but at some point they just give up and throw it out," Ms. Wolff said.

Ms. Cowan spoke up. "These people didn't — they didn't throw out anything."

In today's era of the instantaneous and disposable, even the paper on which the letters were written can seem alien — so durable, at least through the 1850's vintage, that neither coal dust from furnace-room storage nor glue from an ancestor's zealous scrapbook-making apparently harmed it.

Even some of the subjects that gripped people back then can seem new again with time, like poetry. Family members transcribed poems they loved, or perhaps wrote themselves, into a book that Ms. Cowan said nobody had tried to go through yet.

"We don't even know what's in it," she said.

Mr. Cowan, a junior at Oberlin College in Ohio who said he thought of becoming an author someday, looked up sharply at the mention of unread 19th-century poetry.

"Whoa, can I check that out?" he asked.