Ye great brewster

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YE GREAT BREWTSTER

THE "TIP" THAT LED THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY TO THIS ACQUISITION came from Professor John R. Stilgoe, Robert and Lois Orchard Professor in the History of Landscape in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies. He had seen an intriguing entry in a manuscript dealer’s catalog that read in part: “Watercolors, b/w ils. and photos. 54 leaves. . . Four Victorian ladies spend a month on an island in Boston Harbor. Happily they have a camera and are accomplished writers and artists.”

Would the library consider acquiring this album, Professor Stilgoe asked. He had many students, among them several women, interested in just such descriptions of the physical landscape and in women’s perspectives on the built environment. We contacted the dealer immediately but were told that the album had already been sold. He did, however, take the curator’s name and number. Sure enough, the purchaser returned the album. He or she had been interested only in the watercolors—in cutting them out, framing them, and selling them individually—but they were too small and too few to turn a profit. Would we like to see the album? Indeed we would. And after seeing it, we purchased it. The album is, in the words of the catalog, “a work of art and a charming artifact of a bygone day,” and it is also just what Professor Stilgoe’s students and scholars in many disciplines are looking for, and more. These fifty-four pages contain prose, photographs, poetry, watercolors, and drawings that speak to questions not only of the natural landscape and the built environment on Great Brewster Island but to material culture, leisure time and the concept of the vacation, issues of class and gender, women’s friendships and women’s talents, shipbuilding and design, Boston Harbor, maritime economy, and culinary history.

Entitled “Ye Log of Ye Square Partie at Ye Great Brewster in Ye Pleasant Month of July 1891,” the album tells the tale of four women—Ye Autocrat, Ye Aristocrat, Ye Acrobat, and Ye Scribe—who set off from Boston’s Rowe Wharf for a two-week adventure on Great Brewster Island in Boston Harbor. They left aboard a sailboat loaded with their belongings (their hats alone, all documented in photographs, must have filled several boxes) on July 15, 1891, a day that was “ninety-in-the-shade.” While the dealer had declared the four women “unknown,” we have sleuthed out the identity of Ye Scribe, who was responsible for most of the text and several of the lovely watercolors in the album. She was Helen Augusta Whittier, who was forty-five years old in the summer of 1891. Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, the daughter of the owner of Whittier Mills, Whittier had attended high school and a female seminary and, with fourteen friends, founded the XV, a group that pursued home-study courses. Whittier was an active club woman; a memorial booklet published after her death in 1925 appears in the records of the New England Women’s Club, also at the Schlesinger Library.

Whittier and her three companions (a woman whose initials were BC and possibly a Mrs. Partridge and a Mrs. A.L. Tyler), apparently upper-middle class and middle-aged women all, disembarked on Ye Great Brewster, one of the outer harbor islands now part of the new Boston Harbor Islands National Park that evening of July 15. For the next sixteen days, they chronicled their activities, from the time they arose to the hour when they went to sleep, in great
The members of "Ye Square Parie" from Helen Augusta Whittier's account of a Boston Harbor holiday in the summer of 1891.
Recent Acquisitions in Harvard's Libraries

detail. Every dish at every meal is carefully listed. On their first night on the island, they dined on cold corned beef, bread and butter, tea, Rochester jelly cake, and cheese. Among the provisions brought out to them by boat or purchased from islanders were tomatoes (eaten raw, stewed, fried, and sauced), a great deal of cold tongue, lobsters, and lots of potatoes (eaten hashed, baked, boiled, and fried).

The four friends spent their days visiting nearby islands, playing hostess to day-tripping friends, wading, playing cards, gathering driftwood for their fire, taking photographs, gathering flowers, painting, writing, reading aloud to one another, and doing chores. Sometimes they combined activities, as on Tuesday, July 21: “We pitched into the weekly wash, three at the tub, and one on the ice chest reading aloud.” Carefully captioned photographs show the wash drying on the lawn, the women reading in hammocks, holding up their skirts at the water’s edge, and sketching, and passing boats, workmen building a seawall on the island (a source of great fascination), the Boston skyline, lighthouses, and many views of Great Brewster. The many photographs of the outside and inside of their roomy but rough house with its wide verandah and leaky roof are especially interesting for what they reveal about privacy, consumption, and “essentials.” There are washtub stands with the painted china pitchers and basins, heavy carved tables, iron and wooden bedsteads, decorated dressers, bowls of nasturtiums, and iron kettles and crockery lining the shelves.

At 10:30 a.m. on the morning of July 31, Ye Scribe and her friends “said farewell to our enchanted Isle, so difficult to reach and so hard to leave,” and sailed back to Boston and home. One of the last photographs in the album is of the mountain of bulging suitcases and valises piled on the verandah labelled ye Baggage of Ye Trippers. The painstaking care with which Whitier (we think) assembled this album testifies to the importance all four women placed on their interlude on Ye Great Brewster.

While the Great Brewster album is one of the most delightful of our travel diaries/albums, the Schlesinger Library has many other women’s travel diaries, other accounts of women’s visits to the New England seashore (that of Elizabeth Mary Agassiz, for one, first president of Radcliffe, who summered in Nahant), and other photographs of women on the rocks. Professor Stilgoe is justifiably proud of his role in rescuing from “the scissors-minded antique mongers” this particular album, which he describes as a “spectacular vision of educated women at the seashore when they were away from the controlling influence of men.” We are grateful to him for leading us to the Great Brewster album, and welcome more “tips” like his.

KATHRYN ALLAMONG JACOB is Johanna-Maria Frenkel Curator of Manuscripts in Schlesinger Library.