

### THE DIARIES OF SARA H. PHELPS

Phelps, Sara H.  
Diaries, 1861-1865 (inclusive).  
Purchased from Charles Apfelbaum, 1998.  
Schlesinger Library A/P5415

THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY PURCHASED THE SARA H. PHELPS DIARIES IN 1998. The price was relatively high, a reflection of the growth in value of women's manuscripts, a situation about which the Schlesinger Library both rejoices and worries. We rejoice of course that women's materials are acquiring the attention and merit they deserve; and we worry because of the stress on our modest acquisition budget.

The Phelps Diaries consist of four volumes, 1861-1862 and 1864-1865, in which Sara Phelps made regular entries, necessarily small because the diaries are "pocket" size. The volumes are in generally good condition, although the writing has in some places faded, making it difficult to read—a difficulty compounded by the fact that on a day full of activity Miss Phelps would "cross" the page: that is, turn the written page sideways and write across it, with the new lines perpendicular to the first. This common nineteenth-century practice is definitely a challenge to students in the twenty-first century, but those who persist can uncover the values and life pattern of a young middle-class woman who lived in Northampton, Massachusetts, a century and a half ago.

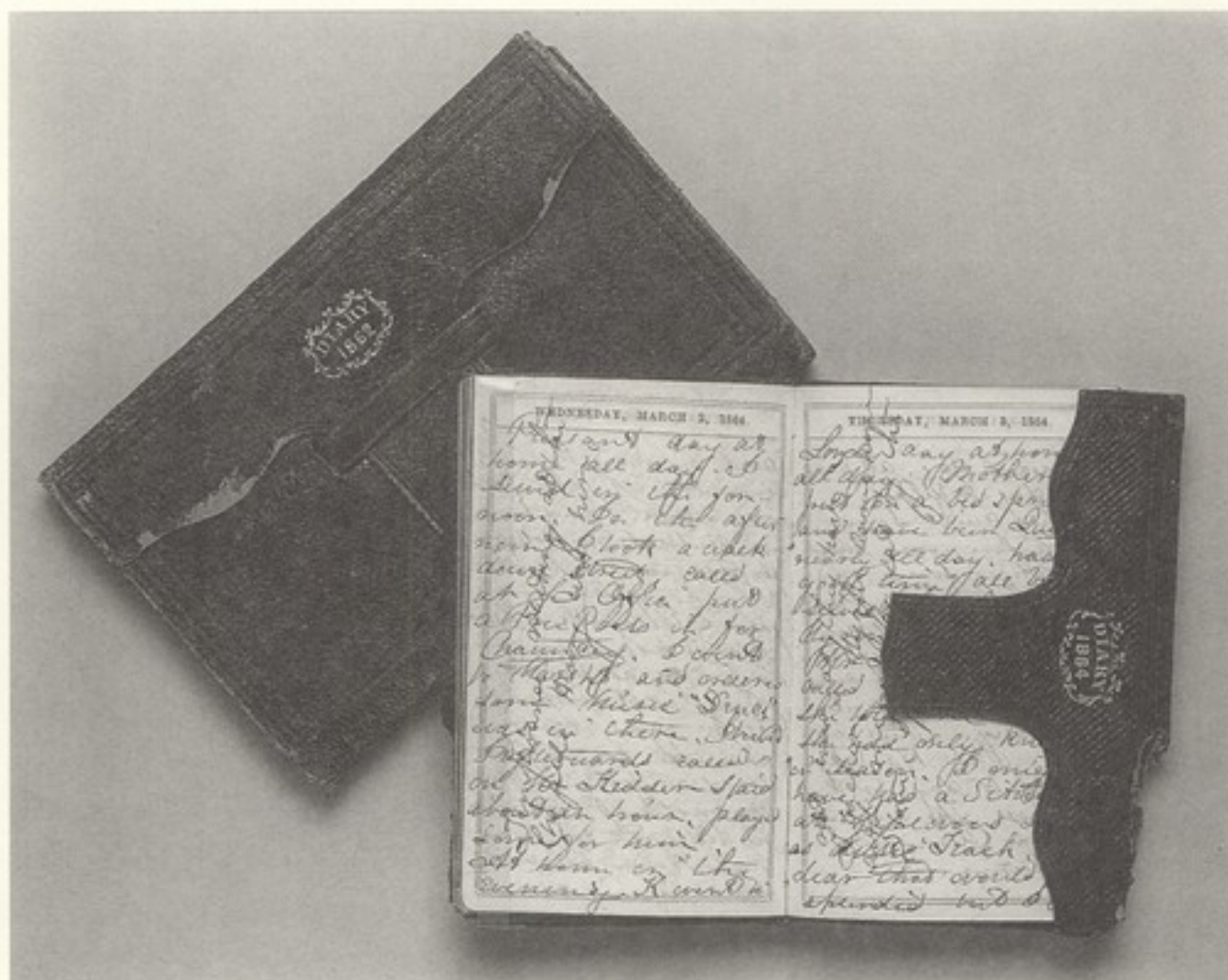
Sara Phelps was a busy young woman, and there was a good deal of bustle in her life. Household chores consumed a good deal of time for the Phelps women—cleaning, for example, preserving food, preparing for company. More than once, Sara announced that and the diary makes clear just how much time women spent sewing in those days before the sewing machine. Any illness in the family was noted, as was the weather ("Hot enough to melt a body").

Music at home was an important source of entertainment in the nineteenth century, and Sara Phelps was a great part of the entertainment and the industry it supported. A pianist, she practiced regularly, and gave lessons, too. As she earned money, she began to keep a cash account, as well as a list of her students and the dates of their lessons. Her purchases were, for example, paper, postage, fabric, sewing notions, gloves and hats, books and, especially, music. In 1864 she had her photograph taken and said "they are good ones." She probably had *cartes de visite* made to exchange with friends or give to students. It is perhaps too easy for modern eyes to read into her accounts a sense of pleasure in earning money, but we observe this also in the mill girls in Lowell, Massachusetts, whose writings are also in the Schlesinger's collections.

Sara Phelps loved music and books, and sometimes wrote poetry, but she also had a fairly active social life that involved church several times a week (Mary Baker Eddy was a favorite speaker), choir practice, exhibitions at the local Lyceum, traveling musical entertainments like the visit of the Yale Glee Club or a concert by Madame Varian on her spring tour of 1864. Visiting was a big part of social life, and sometimes involved what students would now call a "road trip," for example a sleigh ride to Deerfield for an overnight stay. A favorite entertainment was to walk to town with friends, perhaps to shop. And she appeared to have a number of gentlemen callers, especially George B. Parker,



Sarah Phelps's spidery penmanship, coupled with overwriting, presents a challenge in the early March, 1864, entries in her diaries.



whose name is written on the inside cover of the diary for 1865, elaborately decorated and surmounted by a heart pierced by an arrow.

What is surprising is how little reference there was to the Civil War, which spanned exactly the same four years as the diaries. The anniversary of the fall of Fort Sumpter merited a mention, as did a great rally to raise money for "soldiers volunteers." Lincoln's death was noted. But overall, the diaries exude a sense of life lived as usual, even though the nation was caught up in a war that had an incredible death toll.

The Phelps diaries are important additions to an already strong collection of women's and girls' diaries at the Schlesinger, making it possible to create a comparative view of young women's development across time in America, as well as their place in American social, political and economic development. It is interesting to think of the possibilities in comparing Sara Phelps with Martha Ballard's daughters and nieces in Laurel Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale*; or with the girls who went from New England farms to work in the Lowell mills; or even with the girls in Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997), whose lives were also largely recovered from diaries. It would be wonderful to know more about Sara Phelps, too. Did she marry George? Have children? Continue with her music? Did she become more politically aware, perhaps taking up one of the many crusades pursued by women in the second half of the century? The library, the librarian, and Sara Phelps, wait patiently for the historian!

*At the time of this writing, MARY DUNN was Acting Dean of Radcliffe Institute.*