

“On the Carpet: The Coming of Age Letters of Penelope Skinner, 1832–1840.” Edited by Mary Maillard.

“On the Carpet” is one of a four-part e-book series edited by independent scholar Mary Maillard. The series includes “Albemarle Son: The Coming of Age Letters of Tristram Lowther Skinner, 1833–1849,” and “The Belles of Williamsburg: The Correspondence of Eliza Fisk Harwood and Tristram Lowther Skinner, 1839–1849,” plus a monograph, “A Map of Time and Blood: An Introduction to the Skinner Family Papers, 1829–1850.” These are tied together by an extensive website detailing the history of the family and her project, illustrated with images of family artifacts and portraits. The e-books can be purchased from Amazon for Kindle, Kobo, iBook, and other formats.

Maillard’s exploration of the Skinner Family Papers from the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, began as an effort to publish two large volumes. But when funding ran out from the North Carolina Department of Archives and History, she began to look at other ways to produce a documentary edition on her own. In turning toward digital publication, she found a solution that has worked for many organizations and independent scholars. Like others, Maillard discovered that digital editions can provide access to a wide audience while allowing editors to add extensive editorial material and experiment with creative options in the publication’s design and functionality, of which she has taken full advantage to guide her readers in understanding the lives of the Skinner family.

Maillard’s concern not to be forced into a selected edition of letters encouraged her to adopt a digital format, and as such the volumes she produces are companions to one another, not discrete editions. She explains that some letters were duplicated in the editions, but these are few and were necessary for continuity—a challenge when manuscripts skip several years or significant events. While the collection of the Skinner family manuscripts covers the years 1770 to 1900, Maillard has chosen to focus on three editions of coming-of-age letters in the antebellum period. Expanding beyond this area, her next volume, “The Civil War

Letters of Tristram Lowther Skinner, 1861–1862” will be published later this year (2016).

“On the Carpet” focuses on the adolescence of Penelope “Pen” Skinner (1818–1841) of Edenton, North Carolina, and includes her correspondence with her father, Joseph Blount Skinner, brother, Tristram Lowther Skinner, and husband, Thomas Davis Warren. The book is divided into four chapters: Education, Coming Out, Marriage, and Death (although these divisions are only evident in the navigation bar at the bottom; the letters are not separated in the digital edition but continue seamlessly). The Skinner children’s mother died when they were young, and the siblings grew close as they were sent off to school and to relatives, sometimes together, at other times apart. Their father was simultaneously distant and controlling. Their correspondence illustrates the trials of their adolescence, and Maillard suggests, the difficulties Penelope Skinner particularly experienced without a close maternal figure.

Maillard’s decision to publish correspondence from the Skinners’ early adulthood in this edition and others focuses the reader on the social lives of young, free, white southerners. The title of the e-book, “On the Carpet,” means under consideration or discussion, a direct reference to Penelope Skinner’s struggle both to present herself as a desirable future wife and to choose a worthy husband, or as Maillard aptly says, “the sheer exhausting frustration of being both pawn and agent” (24). After years of courtship and three engagements, Skinner finally marries at the age of twenty-one, and her letters suggest she is relieved to no longer be a “belle.”

But there is much more to be found here. While the subject of courtship dominates the volume and Maillard’s interest as an editor, these letters cover other subjects, including Skinner’s pregnancy and discussions of the health of neighbors and family that provide an insight into medicinal practices. Perhaps because her husband was a physician, Skinner describes in detail the physical trials of her pregnancy, her exhaustion and emotions, and remedies taken for ailments. The letters are a rich source also for understanding not just courtship rituals but the social rules of visiting, attendance at religious service, gender roles, sibling relationships, neighbor relations, the impact of illness on a community, and the minutiae of daily life.

“On the Carpet” also reveals much about the lives of enslaved and free people of color who work for the Skinner family. Maillard’s e-book notes, combined with her website, fill in details about, and the family history of, Annie Lowther Skinner, a woman enslaved by the Skinner family and a dominant figure who ran the household and nursery. We learn from the notes that Annie Skinner’s mother, Polly Lowther, was freed by the family after Annie’s birth and that Annie’s younger brother George was also eventually freed. But Maillard’s essay on slavery from the Skinner Family Papers website gives greater detail about the complicated relationship between the free and enslaved Skinners. While George Skinner went on to become an abolitionist in Boston, Penelope Skinner’s family in North Carolina still owned 185 slaves.

The Skinner Family Papers website (<http://skinnerfamilypapers.com/>) is a valuable and well-designed supplement to the editions and contains features to peruse while reading the e-books. Maillard has included sample documents, slave lists and family groups, essays on the family’s participation in and opposition to slavery, Tristram Skinner’s role as a soldier in the Civil War, and introductions to each e-book. The website also features a combined index to the e-books (the index refers to the dates of letters rather than page numbers), so users can determine if the Skinner volumes will touch on subjects that interest them. For editors interested in the process of creating her e-books, she offers a discussion on different formats both for the web and e-book design.

The website also includes Maillard’s editorial policies, which are straightforward. Transcriptions of letters faithfully represent the originals including misspellings. Authorial deletions and additions are included, as well as irregular spacings between words, most evident in the letters of Penelope and Eliza Skinner, which Maillard suggests “reflect the girls’ education but perhaps also some pauses in thought or substitution for punctuation.” Editorial notes in the text are clearly detectable with italics and brackets. She has also included information from envelopes (although not addresses), such as poetry and descriptions of sketches, including a drawing depicting Annie, “Tall and slender” (304), carrying a tray of glasses.

The letters are annotated with extensive notes that explain family relationships and customs or terminology that may be obscure to the modern reader. Within the edition, it is easy to navigate between the notes and the text through hyperlinks,

which take you from the notes, grouped together at the end, back to your page in the correspondence. Notes identify people and places the first time they are mentioned. A simple search in iBooks also turned up a complete list showing every mention of a name or term in the edition.

Maillard states that this is the first documentary edition to be crafted specifically for e-books, but there are challenges in marketing a documentary edition to a wide audience. Although the title clearly states that this is an edited volume of letters, some users may not fully understand what they have purchased until they have downloaded the book, and may be frustrated by the length of the introductory essays and notes, which comprise over half the book. Others may find using the linked notes and referencing the web page for more information to be too cumbersome, preferring a straightforward narrative. And while most of her editorial material is easy to use and navigate, the family tree at the beginning of the book was tiny, and impossible to read on the iBook, a big problem in an edition focused so much on family relationships. However, Maillard's choices of format create a clear and attractive presentation, and these issues should pose few problems to those familiar with digital documentary editions. Readers new to the genre will be rewarded for exploring all of Maillard's editorial material and will be encouraged to examine her other editions.

In the Skinner Family Papers web page, Maillard explains that the challenges she faced as an independent scholar, without institutional affiliation or funding, are part of the reason she turned to the e-book format rather than to traditional publishers or other digital publishing initiatives. Although born-digital editions like hers are increasingly common, there are still issues of changing technologies, format, design, access, and marketing. With the Skinner Papers project, Maillard has offered an example of a viable option to other independent scholars and organizations who want to create a documentary edition outside traditional publishers. As part of her evolving series, and on its own, "On the Carpet" offers much to scholars and the general public in format and substance, on topics that appeal to both audiences, in an accessible and enticing format.

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