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## The Letters of Charlotte Browning Page

Donna Burns

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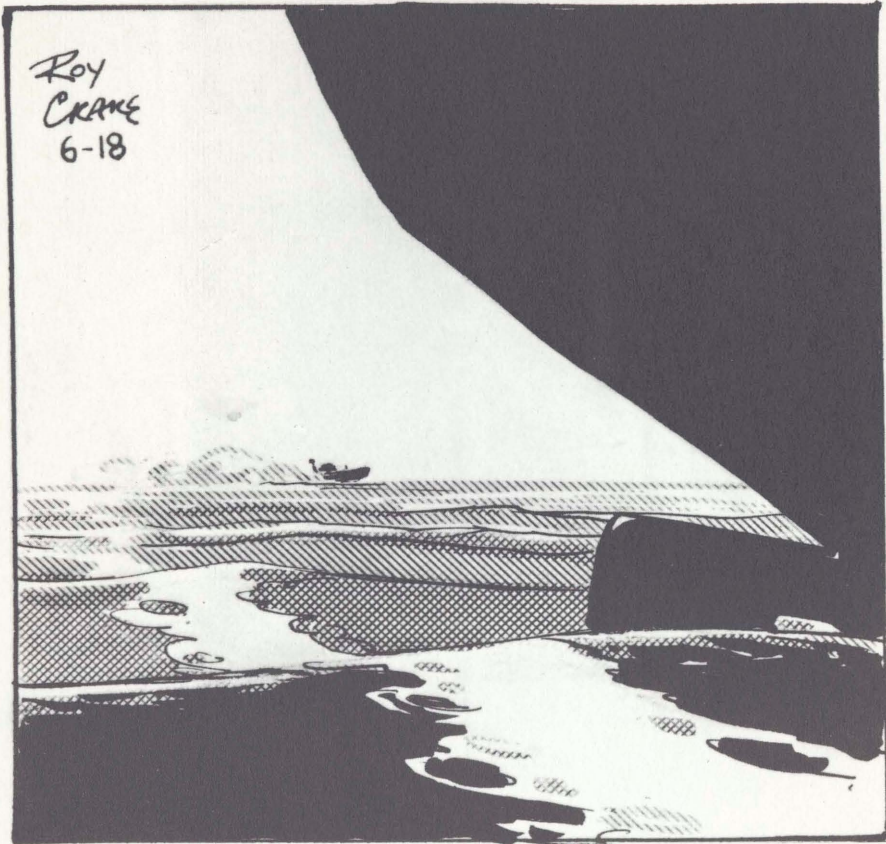
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Cartoon from Roy Crane's "Buzz Sawyer," June 18, 1963  
Original drawing size 4¾ x 4 7/8"

# THE COURIER

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# *The Letters of Charlotte Browning Page*

by Donna Burns

Don't we live in a great age? I'd like to come back fifty or a hundred years from now, when I'm sure the wonderful things we now have will look like child's work.<sup>1</sup>

A lifelong friend of Charlotte Page wrote the above words to her in a letter in 1925. Although she is not able to come back to see everything, we can take a backward look in the Manuscripts Division of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, by reading the collected Charlotte Browning Page Papers.

Charlotte Page was not eminent in state or national life and politics, but for that very reason her papers are an important primary source. The focus of history traditionally centers on prominent people in society: monarchs, presidents, and statesmen. Recently some historians have shifted their interest to obscure individuals: the peasant, the housewife, and the factory-worker. We can gain an intimate view of history by considering Charlotte Page, an ordinary schoolmistress whose collected letters span five decades, from 1878 to 1941. Charlotte's letters provide excellent written records from which to see her as an individual and to study the society in which she lived.

The period covered by Charlotte's letters brought many sociological and technological changes. Wood burning stoves gave way to gas stoves; gas lights gave way to electric lights; the horse and buggy gave way to the automobile; hair and hemlines were shortened; two wars were fought; and women won the right to vote. But these transitions provide only a backdrop in Charlotte's letters for another transformation: that of a young schoolgirl, from a rural village, into a mature, self-sufficient urban schoolteacher.

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Charlotte Browning Page was born into a moderately prosperous Earlville, New York, family on November 20, 1868. Her grandfather, George M. Page, owner of three boats on the Chenango Canal and storehouses in Norwich and Earlville, bought and sold farm produce and supplies. Charlotte's father, Caleb S. Page, later took over the family business; but, like other canal businesses, it declined as the railroads grew. The canal was officially abandoned in 1878.<sup>2</sup> The Pages' Earlville storehouse burned a few years later.

The first glimpse of Charlotte Page through her letters is of a ten-year-old girl away from home on a visit. Young Charlotte has forgotten to take along her Sunday School lesson. In her best schoolgirl handwriting and grammar she politely requests her parents to send the forgotten article. Charlotte never outgrew this tendency to leave things behind. As long as her mother was alive to search and send, Charlotte would request this glove or that book.

After the demise of the canal business, Caleb Page became the station agent for the New York and Oswego-Midland Railroad. Although there are gaps in the sequence of the early letters in the collection, we can infer that Charlotte's father failed in the business world. Disgraced by financial difficulties that are not detailed in the correspondence, he left Earlville to pursue a career elsewhere. He eventually went into the circulating library business with his brothers in Louisville, Kentucky. His wife Katherine asked him never to return home, and communication between the two ceased. However, Katherine did not forbid him to communicate with his daughter. He and Charlotte corresponded frequently, and when he was able, he sent her money and presents. But though Charlotte made several extended visits to her father, she lived with her mother.

Katherine and Charlotte lived in a house built by her grandfather Page. The lovely white two-story house boasted Earlville's first flagstone walk in the front and a covered "drywalk" to the privy in the back. The Pages called the three-sided outdoor area formed by the wings of the house and the drywalk "the summer kitchen." They frequently entertained there in pleasant weather. A friend described the spacious lawn as the picture of summertime hospitality:

The grounds looked very pretty—the tennis set, the croquet set, the hammocks tent and rustic seats.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Pierce to Charlotte Page, July 1, 1925, Charlotte Page Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University Libraries. All the letters which follow are from this collection.

<sup>2</sup>Federal Writers Project *New York Guide to the Empire State* (American Guide Series), Oxford University Press, 1940, p. 642.

<sup>3</sup>St. Clair Reed to Charlotte Page, August 10, 1886.

In order to supplement their income, Katherine Page worked as a seamstress, doing most of the sewing in her own home. Sometimes to sew a large order, like a bride's trousseau, Katherine temporarily moved in with the family. Charlotte and her mother took a detailed interest in clothing styles and construction and their letters reflect this. In 1894 Charlotte wrote to her mother:

My dress is going to have two three inch ruffles on the skirt (the latest thing is a hem almost to the knees but I think the ruffles are prettier). The waist is fitted on the sides with fullness in front and back—Bishop sleeves with a graduated ruffle about the wrist and there are to be three ruffles to form a sort of yoke—the first comes over the top of the sleeves and rounds down in front and the third forms the neck finish.<sup>4</sup>

Stylish clothing was a weakness of Charlotte's and even though she had to economize she always wanted to look "dead swell." A little creativity went a long way in constructing new outfits out of the scraps of old ones.

I absolutely cannot wear my white flannel as it is and shall not try to do so but I wondered if you were to rip that lynx fur off my coat and send me a piece long enough to go round the neck and down both sides of the basque front if I couldn't let the buttonholes out with strings and not have it show. If the sleeve pieces are too large around maybe there would be enough of the other little pieces for the sleeves and I thought it would just fill the bill and look very pretty.<sup>5</sup>

Hats were also rejuvenated. Sometimes to provide herself with a new hat at a reduced price a penny-wise Charlotte bought the basic hat form and supplied the milliner with her own trimmings salvaged from old hats or clothes.

By 1885 Charlotte (or Charlie, as she was known to family and friends) was attending the Hamilton (New York) Female Seminary which had been conducted nearly twenty consecutive years by a Mr. and Mrs. Goodenough. We have no photographs of the lively sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, but letters describe her as small (110 lbs.) with dark hair. Her friends considered her pretty and very popular.

As I write I can see you this minute.... A little girl with big brown eyes and lovely soft brown hair in curls. She was so pretty and dainty.... All the girls wanted her to come and sit with them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, June 15, 1894.

<sup>5</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page. [1892]

<sup>6</sup>Ada Livingston to Charlotte Page, Nov. 3, 1925.



**THREE GENERATIONS.** Charlotte is with her mother and a friend in the “summer kitchen” in back of their house in Earlville, New York. The dry walk is in the background. The other wing of the large house is in the typical two-story colonial style. *Photograph courtesy of the Earlville Free Library.*

Strict rules at the boarding school regulated hours for classes, meals, study, social activities, and sleep. Despite these restrictions, Charlotte and her friends took part in forbidden amusements and often got caught.

...were up in Nettie Hutchin's room right opposite mine and had been making candy.... It was long past ten and we were talking pretty loud when the door opened and in walked Mrs. G. The other girls sat perfectly still and looked at her and left me to do the talking as usual. But I was equal to the emergency and told her we just came up for a little visit and hadn't the slightest idea that the bell had rung. I tell so many squibs lately that my tongue is sore all the time but I should be in constant disgrace if I did not.<sup>7</sup>

Charlotte loved concerts, parties, and dancing and usually had an escort, often a member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity of Madison University (later Colgate University). But Mrs. Goodenough strongly disapproved of her girls "going in society before their school days were over" for fear they would lose "the freshness of youth."<sup>8</sup> More than once she forbade Charlotte to accept an invitation from a young man. Undaunted, Charlotte explained to her mother how she planned to circumvent this restriction:

Why not say I am going home, start for the train, go down to Mr. Nash's and go just as I intended.... Mrs. G. need not know whether I staid [sic] at Auntie's, went home, or what I did. That seems to be the only way for me to do and as there is not time to get a reply to this, think I shall do it and then keep as still as possible about it so people will not talk.<sup>9</sup>

Charlotte also tried to keep secret from Mrs. Goodenough a vigorous correspondence between herself and St. Clair Reed, her most ardent admirer among the Delta Kappa Epsilon men. When Mrs. Goodenough became suspicious of the frequent, thick envelopes, Charlotte and Clair left letters for each other in a secret hiding place. During Clair's sophomore year, his father died and he had to leave school to support his stepmother and younger brothers. Although he lived in remote Victoria, Texas, he kept up an epistolary courtship with Charlotte until 1894.

In June of 1887 Charlotte graduated from the seminary and obtained a teaching certificate. For a few years she stayed in the Earlville-Hamilton area teaching elementary school. In 1892 she took a momentous step, leaving home to teach third and fourth graders at the Bird School in Des Moines, Iowa. In the days before fast, air-conditioned travel, the train trip west in late August could be very uncomfortable, especially for a hayfever sufferer like Charlotte:

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<sup>7</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, April 4, 1886.

<sup>8</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, January 7, 1885.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.



It was extremely warm and the cinders came in the windows dreadfully. I was foolish enough to take off my hat and got my hair full.... I perspired so that every bit of dust and cinder stuck fast to me and of course I sneezed and attended to my nose with considerable regularity.<sup>10</sup>

Every August a multitude of schoolteachers converged on Des Moines in preparation for the academic school year. Many young women like Charlotte came from the East to live and teach in Des Moines from September to June and then returned to their homes for the summer. Since they were not year-round residents, they usually boarded with private families. Charlotte faced keen competition for the most suitable lodgings when she arrived in Des Moines. Sometimes she managed to find a good place with large rooms, good food, and pleasant company. Other times she was not so lucky. Some places were cold:

One day I succeeded in keeping warm for about half an hour by lighting my lamp and taking enough whiskey to make any ordinary individual drunk.<sup>11</sup>

Other places served poor food or included among the boarders the unwelcome *Cimex lectularius*:

Oh I had a fight for life with the bugs last night and Mrs. D. had saturated the bed with gasoline while I was gone.<sup>12</sup>

Charlotte spent five years teaching in Des Moines. An attractive woman in her mid-twenties, she enjoyed an active social life: concerts, lectures (including one by Julia Ward Howe), receptions, buggy rides, and card parties. Pleasant weather, a front porch, and Charlotte's banjo inspired many an impromptu neighborhood sing-a-long. She also took part in the Daughters of the King, the women's group of St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Through her church affiliation she associated with many prominent Des Moines families, including that of Governor Jackson. On his dancing ability at one of the annual charity balls, Charlotte remarked that "...it is to be hoped that the Governor knows more about politics than he does about grand marches."<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, Charlotte's Des Moines years were not as happy and carefree as her social life would lead us to believe. Poor health seemed to sap her strength. Although she dosed herself with *Grindelia Robusta* and inhaled eucalyptus, Charlotte suffered annually from hayfever. In 1893 she missed several weeks of school with grippe, which further weakened her constitution.

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<sup>10</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, August 19, 1892.

<sup>11</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, September 1, 1892.

<sup>12</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, [April 15, 1902?].

<sup>13</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, February 2, 1894.

Even without the unexpected drain on her budget for health care, Charlotte's financial situation worried her constantly. It was expensive to travel each year to and from Des Moines, pay out board and room, and try to contribute to the comfort of her mother and grandmother. She had little left over for frivolous items, certainly a hardship for a young woman with a penchant for pretty clothes.

This trying to live without spending anything is misery.<sup>14</sup>

Charlotte was not a career-woman by choice. She often wrote of her wish to remain at home and keep house with her mother, but her family's financial situation demanded that she earn a living. Charlotte lacked the skills and special training required for dressmaking, nursing, or stenography, or the driving ambition necessary to enter any male-dominated occupation. Only teaching was open to her among respectable jobs.

Much of Charlotte's dissatisfaction with teaching school may have stemmed from an inadequate academic background.

I don't know things thoroughly enough and in a good many cases I don't know the right sort of things.<sup>15</sup>

Charlotte also considered herself a poor disciplinarian; one particularly unruly class in 1893 frustrated her terribly.

When teaching could not provide escape from her monetary woes, Charlotte saw only two immediate solutions. At her lowest point she contemplated suicide as "very sensible and the least troublesome to other people"<sup>16</sup> but dismissed it because of the notoriety it would bring to the family. The alternative was marriage. In a moment of bitter self-disgust Charlotte wrote, "I guess the reason everybody has advised me to get married was because they saw I couldn't do anything else."<sup>17</sup>

If Charlotte had truly wanted to, she could have married St. Clair Reed who proposed to her many times during their nine-year acquaintance. Sadly, Charlotte wasn't as free to choose a husband then as women are today. She felt compelled by the prevailing social attitude to put duty to her impoverished mother before her personal happiness. Charlotte wrote to her mother of Clair's first proposal on the seventh page of an eight page letter. Even this casual mention of marriage must have prompted a tirade from Katherine because Charlotte quickly responded:

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<sup>14</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, April 28, 1895.

<sup>15</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, November 22, 1893.

<sup>16</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, December 2, 1894.

<sup>17</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, May 13, 1894.

Mama, I am disgusted with you. As if you thought I would marry Clair Reed or any other boy. You *know* you didn't think so and there was no need of saying such unpleasant things.<sup>18</sup>

Clair's response to her refusal hints at her reasoning.

Charlie, I do not love or like you any the less for refusing me.... I do not like your idea of continuing in single blessedness however much I admire your motive. And your mother would not consider you selfish and ungrateful if you gave yourself to some noble ambitious person....<sup>19</sup>

Charlotte and Clair continued to write each other. Charlotte hoped to remain friends with him. Clair tried to respect her wishes but, being a romantic man, he often renewed the forbidden subject of marriage. One of his proposals caught Charlotte in a vulnerable state, depressed about her career and financial situation; she came close to accepting him. But devoid of sentimental notions, Charlotte viewed marriage merely as an escape from her financial worries. Clair would have been a poor risk because he had a stepmother and three brothers to support. Within a year of her final refusal, he married another.

Charlotte's attitude toward marriage may have been influenced by her parents' example. She saw first-hand the problems caused when a husband could not support his family. A better prospect for financial security was a certain Des Moines widower. In 1894 Charlotte wrote her mother, "I am going to do my level best to catch Mr. L—."<sup>20</sup> But Charlotte's best efforts were not enough. She blamed her failure on the deplorably bolder competition.

...I'm not a *western* girl and I don't ask people to take me places and call on me, etc. as the truly western girl is very liable to do, in fact, has done until the men are spoiled by it and expect to be run after.<sup>21</sup>

Mr. L— was unfortunately one of the spoiled ones; since Charlotte refused to demean herself by running after him, she lost her quarry. The restraints of Charlotte's economic duty to her mother, St. Clair Reed's conflicting financial obligations, and Mr. L—'s indifference to her more subtle and refined notion of courting could hardly have nurtured a free-spirited sense of romance. Charlotte lived out her years a single woman.

By the end of the school year in 1895 Charlotte's fears that she would be asked to resign from her teaching position prompted her to do so before any official action could be taken. Without any specific plans for her future she returned to her home in Earlville.

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<sup>18</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, May 1, 1887.

<sup>19</sup>St. Clair Reed to Charlotte Page, May 14, 1887.

<sup>20</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, November 19, 1894.

<sup>21</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, February 2, 1895.

With Charlotte living at home and, therefore, not writing to her mother we have no report of her thoughts and actions. But a year later the letters resume when Charlotte, in a much happier frame of mind, left home again, this time to attend the State Normal School in Oneonta, New York. Her course of study for the next two years gave her that solid academic background, the lack of which made her feel inadequate in Des Moines. In addition to a heavy class schedule, Charlotte taught a tenth grade arithmetic class. Her success with this class encouraged Charlotte to stay with teaching as a profession.

Although busy with schoolwork, Charlotte still found time for social activities. She joined the Clionian Sorority and participated in their functions. And she also learned how to ride a bicycle (or the “devals mashean,” as her Aunt Cynthia called it<sup>22</sup>). She and her friends practiced riding in the cemetery at Schenevus, a popular spot because of its level roads. In a letter to her mother Charlotte boasts of her skill:

I didn't mingle with the tombstones only once and escaped with no more serious injury than the loss of a lift off the heel of my new shoes.<sup>23</sup>

Charlotte finished the Normal School course in January of 1898 but remained in Oneonta for a few months, taking extra classes while looking for a job. In April she was hired to finish out the academic year at a school in Passaic, New Jersey. Although Charlotte enjoyed Passaic, she disliked the school and the “factory foreign element”<sup>24</sup> in her class, and so did not return there in the fall.

For the next year Charlotte remained at home. She was too ill to teach in the fall of 1898, and in the following spring her grandmother's death may have kept her at home helping to settle affairs. When the 1899 school term began, Charlotte resumed her teaching career in Oriskany Falls, New York.

Charlotte taught in Oriskany Falls for one year, then in Utica, New York, for three years. Her letters from this period do not reflect the dissatisfaction with life and depression that were characteristic of her Des Moines years; instead, she seems to be enjoying her profession. She was so popular as a teacher that two boys who moved out of her school district during the term requested and were granted permission to remain in her class, because they had been making excellent progress.

In 1903 Charlotte made her last professional move. She accepted a position at an elementary school in Tottenville, New York, on Staten Island. She remained there until her retirement around 1930.

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<sup>22</sup>Katherine Page to Charlotte Page, November 27, 1896.

<sup>23</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, May 10, 1897.

<sup>24</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, April 12, 1898.

Most of the letters Charlotte wrote which have been preserved in this collection were addressed to her mother. Consequently, after Katherine Page's death in 1917 the correspondence thins out considerably. There are no more letters describing Charlotte's feelings and opinions, and we can only deduce her social activities indirectly from friends' letters. She did have many friends living in the New York City area. Some were girls she had known at the Hamilton Female Seminary, who met often to attend the theatre, dine, and shop in the city.

In the winter of 1926 Charlotte was granted a three-month sabbatical leave which she spent traveling through Florida. The addresses of letters sent to her indicate that she visited in Orlando, Jacksonville, and St. Petersburg where several families from Hamilton and Earlville were in the habit of wintering.

The personal correspondence ends in 1926. By 1931 Charlotte's business correspondence indicates that she was retired and staying at the Mizpah Hotel in Syracuse, New York. Her income was made up of disability insurance and dividends from her various stock holdings. The last glimpse of Charlotte through her papers is a sparsely filled out income tax form for 1941. According to Earlville cemetery records she died in 1950.

During her eighty-two year life span, Charlotte's world underwent many changes. Fashions, of course, were always varying. A 1903 rainstorm caused Charlotte to complain that her long skirt became "sopping around the bottom and is all cockled,"<sup>25</sup> while 1926 found Charlotte's cousin raising the hemlines on all of her dresses to keep up with the new styles.

Hemlines were not the only item being shortened in the twenties. Several of Charlotte's friends mentioned having bobbed hair, but in 1926 Charlotte still had not succumbed to this new fad.

When Charlotte attended a party in the 1880s, her escort would call for her in a horse and buggy. But by 1926 the automobile had swept the nation. In describing an auto trip, a friend of Charlotte's wrote that they "jogged along at 35 miles most of the way—even touched 45 a few times for a thrill."<sup>26</sup>

Not all of the new trends and conveniences were welcomed at first. Thomas Alva Edison's new illumination device did not elicit much enthusiasm from Charlotte.

Electricity is another thing I guess I am glad we can't afford for the house. It hurt my eyes so to read or write by that I was really afraid to try to do anything.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, March 24, 1903.

<sup>26</sup>Martha Baggs to Charlotte Page, January 3, 1925.

<sup>27</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, October 5, 1892.

They are awfully handy when you go into a room and don't have to light even a match but for a light to work by I don't like them a little bit.<sup>28</sup>

The Charlotte Browning Page collection is interesting from many research angles. It offers details on fashion, household economics, health problems and remedies, current popular literature, attitudes toward different classes and races of people, sexism, social etiquette and entertainments, women's education and employment, and much more.

But these technological and sociological aspects are secondary to the central theme of the collection. The Charlotte Browning Page Papers are primarily a personal record of an ordinary woman's transition from a lively adolescent into a competent career-woman. They also offer an intimate look at some of the frustrations, struggles, and joys she experienced along the way.

### **Author's Note**

In July 1979 I visited Hamilton and Earlville, New York, to do some first-hand research. The Page home, now owned by Derek and Judi Wilson, stands almost unchanged on the exterior from the Pages' time. I wish to thank the Wilsons for showing me the house. I also wish to thank Mrs. Barbara Palmer, librarian of the Earlville Free Library, for her help in locating some Page family history among the old newspapers and DAR cemetery records, and for her personal reminiscences of Charlotte Browning Page.

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<sup>28</sup>Charlotte Page to Katherine Page, September 21, 1892.