

Recent Acquisitions: Anna Wroe Curtis Letters By Lauren Van Dyke*

The Supreme Court of the United States recently acquired a collection of 23 letters written by Anna Wroe Curtis, second wife of Justice Benjamin R. Curtis. The letters were donated by William Low and Kathryn Graff Low, along with several books belonging to Justice Curtis.

Benjamin Curtis married Anna Wroe Curtis, the daughter of his law partner Charles Pelham Curtis, on January 5, 1846. In addition to the three children they had together, Anna also cared for Curtis' three surviving children from his first marriage. Their lives were dramatically changed on October 10, 1851, when Benjamin Curtis, a prominent lawyer in Boston, joined the Supreme Court. His family relocated

to Washington D.C. each winter for the Supreme Court's Term, often renting a house in the city before returning to Massachusetts for the summers.

Justice Curtis' six years of service on the Court are perhaps best remembered for his dissent in the infamous *Dred Scott* decision, which contributed to his resignation in 1857. After leaving the Court, Curtis and his family returned to Boston where he resumed his prosperous legal practice. The couple remained happily married until Anna's sudden death on April 24, 1860.

The collection of letters written by Anna Curtis highlights the Curtis' time in Washington D.C., bringing to life the political and social events of the city in the 1850s. Writing to her family at home in Massachusetts, Anna details the everyday events of a young mother and wife of a Supreme Court Justice in antebellum Washington. Juxtaposing tales of her children learning to walk with dinners at the White House, she provides a unique perspective on the concerns and events of the day.

Anna's letters candidly comment on popular culture and the personalities present in the Washington D.C. political

scene. She discusses the recent publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, dramatically recalls President Franklin Pierce's 1853 Inauguration (see inset), and gossips about Attorney General William Crittenden's recent marriage. Her descriptions

of political figures such as President Milliard Fillmore and members of the Court, including Justices Peter V. Daniel, John Catron, and James M. Wayne, paint an unseen picture of these prominent men.

"The old chief (Roger B. Taney) is as pleasant & chatty as he is ugly & that is saying much. He said he took his family to P[oin]t Comfort last summer & had more time with his family than he had for thirty years. I asked him if his family liked him as they became

better acquainted with him & he said he thought they did that one of his daughters asked him once to go to walk which he thought showed that he was agreeable."

Anna's fresh voice also illuminates daily life in the 1850s, highlighting the challenges in establishing and managing a household in a new city, while raising her children and supporting her husband in social engagements. Her personal reflections on motherhood and family life are honest and timeless. She writes of her youngest daughter:

"Dinkie has acquired the use of scissors & she was so much delighted to find she could cut, that I bought her a pair with round ends. Last week I found a good slice taken from Mrs. Ingerham's tablecloth & yesterday a slice into a new mantilla belonging to Nannie's doll. I told her the scissors would disappear if I found any more."

**Lauren Van Dyke is the Curatorial Assistant for the Curator in the Supreme Court. For more information about this collection, please contact the Office of the Curator.*



Anna W. Curtis described the political scene in Washington. This drawing depicts the Inauguration of President Franklin Pierce, 1853. When it appeared the caption read "One man supported himself affectionately on Ben's shoulders notwithstanding the gown, until Ben turned round and requested him to take his hand off his shoulder."