

## THE NILES MANUSCRIPTS, 1765-1925

*By* VIRGINIA L. MAUCK

**T**HE BLACK AND GOLD shingle, still preserved, from the law office of John Barron Niles (1808-1879) could serve as a frontispiece for the 32,438 items in the Niles papers in the Lilly Library. His career as a lawyer in LaPorte, Indiana, pervaded all of his life's activities. In addition, however, he spent ten years as a professor of chemistry at the Indiana Medical College, served as a delegate to the Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1850-1851, was one of the organizers of the First National Bank of LaPorte in 1864, and represented his district in the state Senate for the term of 1864-1868.

In 1851 Schuyler Colfax, who was himself nominated for Congress in that year, had inquired of Niles whether he was planning to be a candidate for a Congressional seat, but Niles seemed to have had no political ambition outside of the state. His family was very dear to him. During his "four months of . . . captivity in Indianapolis" attending the Constitutional Convention (as Colfax described it to Niles in a letter of March 2 in 1851), he required that his children, fifteen year-old William, thirteen year-old Henry, and eleven year-old Mary Relief, should each write a letter to him twice weekly. In this way from October 1, 1850, to January 23, 1851, a lively account of the household happenings for mid-19th century Indiana were recorded in a succession of letters, beginning with "The Reporter." The first issue of that hand-written newspaper was the last, but the letters, urged on by the children's mother, Mary Polke Niles,

continued to be written with regularity in a forthright manner. They told of the receipt of *The Living Age* and seeing their father's speeches in *The Journal*, observing the Aurora Borealis, gathering twenty barrels of apples, sewing rag carpets, doing Latin lessons, the completion of the building of their new home, the birth of baby sister Ellen in December, reading Cummings' *Travels in South Africa*, and more. Altogether a picturesque, entertaining, informative series. It was Mary Relief, called "Leafie" by her family, who later married Emmet Hoyt Scott in 1870, and so provided the continuing structure for the Scott family papers in the Lilly Library.

During the Constitutional Convention Niles himself wrote infrequently to his family, but he received several letters from concerned citizens offering advice on the problems before the Convention: the question of Negro suffrage, the grand jury system, the rights of women, and education. Caleb Mills of Wabash College on December 7, 1850, strongly suggested: "Can you not make a *great speech* on the subject [of education] and show the shallow heads that academies and colleges are as indispensable to a good education as common schools?" He went on to propose the creation of a fund jointly by the state and by each community, as was being done in New York, "sufficient to secure a library of 150 to 200 vols such as you will see in the state library room, to every school district in the state. What a glorious point gained to secure such a result. Such a library would educate parents as well as children, prove of untold value to every neighborhood."

John Barron Niles was born in West Fairlee, Vermont, on September 13, 1808, the son of William and Relief Barron Niles. Graduating from Dartmouth College in 1830, he taught school briefly in Pittfield, New

Hampshire, before reading law in the office of Gilmore Fletcher in New York City. In 1833 he traveled west, settled in LaPorte, Indiana, and the next year on December 16 married Mary Polke, the daughter of William and Sarah Cooper Polke, the progenitors of the Polke family papers.

Among his correspondents from the Niles side of the family are letters from his uncle, Nathaniel, who was active in the United States diplomatic service in Europe and married to the widow of Eugene Sue; from his brother, Henry Thayer, who practiced law and taught at Urbana University in Ohio which had been founded by the Swedenborgians; and from his sister Relief Jannette (Jenny), a teacher in Brooklyn. On January 24, 1847, Jenny wrote: "I love Mr. Beecher's sermons more than anything else in Brooklyn outside of this house . . . I am as hearty as need be so now is the time for me to hurry away before anyone revives the obsolete and foolish fashion of being sick . . ." and she had called upon Mrs. Noyes "who boards at the St. Germain - corner of 5th and Broadway. She is perfectly fascinating - I hardly wonder at Frank's saying he could enjoy life on the top of a chimney with her."

In 1842 Niles was employed as a chemistry professor in the Medical Department of LaPorte University which in 1845 became Indiana Medical College. In 1848/49 there were one hundred students. Among the papers in the collection which could expand upon a history of the medical institution are accounts, brochures, a draft of a deed of the land for the school, insurance policies, lists of laboratory supplies and apparatus, and letters from young physicians getting started in their medical practices. On March 17, 1848, Elizur H. Deming reported his attempt to compete with the clinics at Chicago and Cleve-



land by buying a microscope for \$250 and securing "large colored folio plates of morbid anatomy exhibiting the change of structure produced by various diseases which will be pointed out to the class . . . ." Another letter of the same year on March 4 from George W. Stacy, M.D., of Warsaw, Indiana, described the post-operative recovery of a Mrs. Armstrong after surgery for cataracts: ". . . the broken parts of the cataract [are] to be seen and they appear to be condensing into a solid mass. The pupil still remains dilated . . . ." The medical school burned down in 1856 and brought that educational effort to a close.

John Barron Niles' sons, William and Henry, attended Urbana University where their uncle Henry Thayer Niles taught. This was partly as an expression of their father's adherence to the principles of the New Jerusalem Church (Swedenborgian) and partly, no doubt, because he was a trustee of the school. Some of the boys' letters home have been quoted in *A Buckeye Titan* by William E. and Ophia D. Smith, an account of John Hough James, also a school trustee whose sister Henry Thayer Niles had married. Supporting further study of the New Church are letters from the years 1847 to 1885 reporting on annual meetings, offering personal religious beliefs, presenting the prospectus of church publications, all from such Swedenborgians as Nicholas Hard, Judge Abiel Silver, Ebenezer Mattoon Chamberlain, and Lewis Pyle Mercer.\* It was Mercer who in 1885 sug-

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\*The New Church material in the Niles collection is supplemented by a separate collection on the New Church in Illinois, covering the period of 1851 to 1903, which was given to Indiana University by Mrs. William Clyde Bowyer in 1961.

gested that it would be "useful if there were kneeling stools" for the congregation.

For all of his interests in other directions, it was his law practice that formed the chief source of Niles' income. The many legal papers in his files relate in the main to railroad cases (there are railroad passes from nineteen companies between 1859 and 1875), and collection of debts, two divorce cases, and the transfer of land titles: legal activities which are enlarged upon by account books, letter copybooks, and handdrawn maps of towns and townships especially in relation to railroads and depots. One of the land title cases involved the proper identification of "We-Saw", alias Louison, whether he was the chief of the St. Joseph band or of the Wabash band of the Potawatomi in the 1830's. In this case, the names of Hyacinth Lasselle, father and son, both are found. Other litigants among the legal cases are those of the Bank of the State of Indiana, Alexis Coquillard, Stoughton Alonzo Fletcher, and the Oliver Chilled Plow Works.\* For example: it was Coquillard vs. Michigan City Bank, State Bank vs. Coquillard and Anthony Defrees, and Charles French vs. the estate of Alexis Coquillard. In the divorce cases the complaints' causes had the familiar ring of the charges in the courts of the 1970's: assault and battery, drunkenness, desertion.

The most comprehensive legal files is that for Abraham Teegarden, stockholder, vs. William J. Walker, contractor for the Cincinnati, Peru and Chicago Railway

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\*Material on the Oliver Corporation is supplemented by a separate collection devoted to the company for the period of 1860-1952. These papers were given to Indiana University by the company in 1952.

Company. A few pieces related to the initial construction work in 1855 are augmented by the explosion of paperwork in the 1870's when charges of mishandling funds was brought by the stockholders against the contractor. In this case a substantial portion of the casework was handled by William Niles who joined his father in his office for a time. Another law firm working on the case was Baker, Hord, and Hendricks of Indianapolis.\* The action on this case continued until the 1880's and the material contains several printed legal briefs.

William Niles, born in a log cabin in 1835 and living to the age of 91, eventually gave up his law practice and devoted his attention to business and to farming, a secondary occupation that he inherited from his father. With his brother-in-law, Emmett Hoyt Scott, he was one of the organizers of the Niles and Scott Wheel factory in 1870, manufacturers of agricultural wheels, cultivator woods, and grain cradles. As a farmer he owned more than 2,000 acres of land in LaPorte and Lake counties. An insight into farming practices of the day can be obtained from the letters present from stock dealers, implement salesmen, and tenant farmers. Writing on the back of an old 1878 *Summit Farm Circular* in which he advertised Durham cattle, Southdown and Lincoln sheep, hogs, turkeys, geese, wild geese, Dominique chickens, and Cayuga ducks, John Wentworth of Chicago in July, 1880, advised: "When the colts are weaned & haying is over, I shall sell a few more, as I have several . . . 3

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\*Among the papers of the Baker, Hord, and Hendricks law firm at the Lilly Library is a small file on the Teegarden vs. Walker case.



yrs of age who will do to work next season . . . . Write me in September & I can give you a more definite reply."

The social and economic history of the nineteenth century is further exemplified by the household account books of Mary Polke Niles from 1863 to 1891. With the same clear hand which she had no doubt used in assisting her father in recording the land transactions for the Michigan Road, Mrs. Niles entered land rental receipts and bills for such purchases as a croquet set at \$2.00 in 1881, barbed wire for fencing at \$17.00 in 1882, and a supply of oysters, turkey, and lamb for December 24, 1879, at \$1.71.

John Barron Niles died at LaPorte on July 6, 1879. His wife, born in 1811 in Knox County, Indiana, and educated at the convent at Vincennes, survived him by fourteen years. The papers of the family are concentrated largely between 1820 and 1890. The earliest piece, however, is a composition book dated 1765 on Moral Philosophy, consisting of 582 questions and answers: No. 38, What is zeal? No. 339, What is the reason of public coinage?\*

The latest piece is a letter from a family member in 1925 offering congratulations on Cousin William's 90th birthday, and then commenting on her own life: "I came west in the covered wagon. My only trip east - I drove a team of horses from Oregon to Rock Springs, Wyoming. Came west again on the railroad, and now if I would go east in an airplane and return through the Panama Canal I would feel I had done my stint in travel!"

The Niles family traveled on many occasions - to attend school, to visit relatives, to conduct business, to

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\*Answers: No. 38. A warm affection excited by the esteem for any object, compounded by Love, Anger, & Sorrow. No. 339. To prevent Fraud, & save Trouble.

tour Europe. Along with experiencing the several modes of transportation of the time, they also contributed to the development of internal improvements in the state of Indiana. Throughout the collection are found legal papers and correspondence relating to roads, to the Southern Plank Road Company, and to railway companies of many names. On June 12, 1864, William, who had enlisted as a private in the 100 day enrollment of Company B, 138th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, and was mustered out as a corporal on September 30, wrote to his mother from Tantallon, Tennessee: "Trains are constantly passing. The trains south pass by here over this road and those going north go by way of Huntsville, so that virtually they have a double track. A great many of the cars here were made by Haskell & Barker at Michigan City. The train that just passed had a car numbered 2004 & I don't know how much higher they go." Haskell and Barker was a familiar name for William; in fact, correspondence from the company exists in the collection. In letters that summer from home William learned that his father was traveling to Indianapolis, to Toledo and Cleveland, on railroad business. One of the last cases to which John Barron Niles gave his legal attention involved the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway Company.

Following his death in July of 1879 the obituary notice of Niles appeared in the *Railway Review*. Upon reading this an official of the Eastern Railroad Company then wrote on July 23 to an associate: "If the Judge has really gone, one must mourn the loss of as honest and faithful a man as ever lived."

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