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“Exile from my native Shore”: The Loyalist Diaspora and the Epistolary Family

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This thesis is dedicated to my mom, who has to great effect read and edited every word of this piece, even down to the footnotes.
On September 29, 1778, an eleven-year-old girl living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, transcribed in a letter to her aunts in Boston, Massachusetts, the verse from her first sampler:

I a young Exile from my native Shore. / Start at the Flash of Arms and dread the Roar. / My softer soul not form'd for Scenes like these / Flies to the Arts of Innocence, and Peace: / My heart exults while to the attentive Eye. / The curious Needle spreads the enamel'd Dye / While varying Shades the pleasing Task beguile / My Friends approve, and my Parents smile.¹

For Eliza Byles, the oft-repeated childhood action of showing off her accomplishment to family members was transformed both in content and transmission by the American Revolution. The verse itself explicitly reflects the wartime milieu, but the material context of the sampler is equally revealing. Eliza could not run down Boston lanes, scrap of muslin in hand, to proudly hand over the physical evidence of her new skill to her aunts. In the spring of 1776, patriot forces in Boston had exiled Eliza, her loyalist father, Mather Byles Jr., and siblings, along with the rest of the loyalist refugee community to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Eliza’s grandfather, Mather Byles Sr., and two aunts, Mary and Catherine Byles, remained in Boston while her eldest cousin, Mather Brown, eventually wound up in London.² The American Revolution dispersed this loyalist family to far-reaching points around the Atlantic, and so, for Eliza, the simple act of sharing her sampler relied on the only means of

¹ Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsy) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 29, 1778, Microfilm Edition of the Byles Family Papers, 1757-1837 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1984) (hereafter cited as Byles MS).
² Clifford K. Shipton, “Mather Byles,” in Sibley’s Harvard Graduates: Biographical Sketches of Those Who Attended Harvard College . . . 13: 1751-1755 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1965), 19. On June 2, 1777, Mather Byles Sr. was convicted of “disloyalty to the state” and sentenced by the Board of War in Boston to be exiled, but the sentence was never carried out. He was instead placed under house arrest for the remainder of the war and lived in Boston with his two daughters until his death in 1788. Byles’s biographer, Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, notes that it is not entirely clear why the banishment was not enforced, although Byles’s age and long-standing reputation as a minister of the town were likely influential. Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, The Famous Mather Byles: The Noted Boston Tory Preacher, Poet, and Wit, 1707-1788 (Boston: W.A. Butterfield, 1914), 161-166. On Mather Brown, see Dorinda Evans, Mather Brown: Early American Artist in England (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 11-14.
communication left to her – letter writing. When confronted with the challenge of long-term separation, the entire Byles family employed epistolary means to reconstruct and maintain familial connections and networks of emotional and material support.

The Byles family’s correspondence illuminates a collective effort to reconstruct and maintain family ties through letter writing when faced with the challenge of familial dispersal across the loyalist diaspora. The Byles family may not represent the whole of loyalist family experience, but it underscores some of the contours of what forcible family migration entailed. These contours can be found within the hundreds of letters written by family members over a period lasting fifty years. This large body of correspondence employed period-specific strategies that enabled the family members to create a textual space in which they preserved their relationships. Letter writing became increasingly important after 1783, as the Byles family did not reunite after the war. The Nova Scotia relatives remained in their new home in Canada; Mather Brown made himself a permanent home in England; and the Boston contingent stubbornly refused to abandon their view of Boston Harbor. Inasmuch as they lamented the loss of physical proximity, their attachments to their respective socioeconomic positions outweighed this loss, especially given the available medium of letter writing. In this sense, the long duration of the Byleses’s epistolary relationship and the family members’ individual choices after the American Revolution makes their correspondence even more instructive for understanding migratory families in the late eighteenth century. Letter writing provided the Byles family the opportunity to reconstruct itself during the American Revolution and to
continue to do so in the decades after the war, while also allowing each member to follow his or her own pursuits, wherever those endeavors might lead them. Multiple branches and generations of the Byles family writing before, during, and after the American Revolution thus demonstrate the capacity of letters to act as multi-generational tools of family construction.

The Byles family’s experience in relationship to the American Revolution caused them to be part of the political diaspora of those men and women who were exiled as a result of their loyalism to the crown. “Diaspora,” using sociologist Robin Cohen’s useful framework, usually denotes a group experience of “collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile.” This meaning is especially apt for “victim diasporas,” in which the “most important characteristic” is a “scarring historical event,” a model that fits the Byleses neatly. In the recent resurgence of literature on loyalists, diaspora studies have been directly connected to the American loyalist population. Historian Keith Mason, for example, applies Cohen’s model in his work to analyze four different exiles to reveal the manner in which the loyalist migration was influential in transforming the British Atlantic world geographically, demographically, and in the policy and perception of the new British imperial order. These and other studies highlight the diasporic nature of the loyalist

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4 Ibid., 28-29. Cohen also explores the models of “labour, trade and imperial” diasporas in his study.
5 Keith Mason, “The American Loyalist Diaspora and the Reconfiguration of the British Atlantic World,” in *Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World*, eds. Eliga H. Gould and Peter S. Onuf (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 239-259. This argument is one Maya Jasanoff also explores in her book, attributing to the loyalist migration what she terms the British Empire’s “spirit of 1783,” which had three defining components: global expansion, commitment to humanitarian, liberal ideals, and increased governmental authority. Maya Jasanoff,
experience during the Revolution and focus on the manner in which the loyalist migration changed the new institutions and characteristics of the British Empire at the turn of the nineteenth century.\(^6\)

However, this work does not address the manner in which families dealt with the separation the war thrust upon them. It seems perhaps a contrived or even rhetorical question. This was, after all, the eighteenth century, and if family members wanted to remain in touch and continue to perform their traditional familial duties, what choice did they have but to write letters? Yet these letters, the relationships they maintained, and the purposes they served for individuals and the family as a whole demand scrutiny. It is especially important, in fact, to be sensitive to the content and context of letters written by members of the loyalist diaspora. These letters were written in a particular moment of political urgency that precipitated the necessity of the letters’ very existence, and they were therefore charged with the realities of war, exile, and subsequently radically transformed lives.

Epistolary practices employed by literate loyalist families were part of a deeper culture of eighteenth-century letter writing. William Merrill Decker notes the importance of contextualization in his study of epistolarity by stating that the enduring function of letter writing was – and is – to remain in contact in the face of geographic separation. As such, letters contain “[c]ertain rhetorical features [that] typify all letter writing.” Beyond this, however, Decker notes that “social conditions and aesthetic expectations . . . vary widely from period to period as well as within

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given historical times.”

For a study of the Byles family’s epistolary means of family connection, then, one must bear in mind that the letter “had a special place in the intellectual and personal lives of literate people” during the latter half of the eighteenth century, which one author refers to as “the great age of the personal letter.”

This “great age” was facilitated by the construction of a communications infrastructure capable of sustaining the increasing volume of letters sent around the Anglo-Atlantic world. Packet services – postal ships that ran a regular monthly service between London and New York – were established in 1755, thus creating a generally reliable, month-long method of transatlantic letter transport.

Within the British American colonies during the 1760s, internal communications experienced a similar process of stabilization. The postal act of 1765 established two different administrative postal districts – one for the northern colonies and one for the southern – into which Canada was also integrated in 1766.

Given that the burden of cost for sending letters through the postal service fell on the recipient, however, the use of friends and acquaintances to carry letters was a regular strategy that added yet another viable layer to the era’s growing communications network.

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10 Ibid., 132-133.

11 Ibid., 107. For examples of the Byles family’s use of letter carrying, see Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 5, 1782, Byles MS and Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 18, 1783, Byles MS.
During this same time period, the letter became an increasingly ordered and regulated genre in itself. The transatlantic community consumed with great enthusiasm the increasingly popular English and French genre of epistolary novels, in which a young heroine expresses her experiences to the reader through letters.\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, as Eve Tavor Bannet notes in her study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letter manuals in the British Atlantic world, “this period . . . witnessed a concerted program of public pedagogy, undertaken both in schools and in print, that was designed to inculcate and promote manuscript letter-writing in the vernacular.”\textsuperscript{13} In this sense, letters had become so central a practice that there were socially acknowledged literary norms that correspondents were expected to employ in order to write successful letters. In sum, then, the letter undeniably occupied an essential place in the lives of literate people during the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, a developing language of sentimentality and familiarity through prose allowed eighteenth-century letters, especially between lovers and family members, to become even more deeply personal than they had been previously, which would become particularly important for families such as the Byleses separated by war.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Eve Tavor Bannet, \textit{Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 16.
\textsuperscript{14} It is crucial to note that letters could only be a strategy of familial maintenance for literate people. As Konstantin Dierks notes in his book, \textit{In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America}, “[w]hatever the explicit purposes [of letters] may have been—educational improvement, family connection, business development—the effect was to divide haves from have-nots in the anglophone Atlantic world” (xviii). Moreover, Dierks argues that literate people participating in the cultural practice of letter writing were also engaged in the construction of their own new middle-class identity. Thus letters became a significant tool of cultural power for white middle-class individuals: “in the eighteenth century it was letter writing that helped confine kinds of people inside their own privilege and blind them to their own power” (8).
\textsuperscript{15} See Pearsall, “Familiarity in Life and Letters,” in \textit{Atlantic} Families, 56-79.
Historians studying letter writing during the eighteenth century have underscored the particular social "work" letters accomplished for their authors. For the Byles family, the social purpose of letters was their capacity to act as a medium through which the family members enacted family duty and provided familial support. Letters were emotional texts to be read – both privately and aloud – and re-read for their words of advice, affection, and solidarity. They were timely notices of family news, including births and deaths of members, the social and economic health of the family at given moments, and the more quotidian episodes of strolling through a garden or enjoying a slice of pumpkin pie. Letters were also the place where family members communicated their frustration and anger with one another; alternately, they were the method of apology. Letters were material objects that could be touched, handled, saved, and treasured as physical manifestations of absent relatives. And, of course, the Byleses were not alone in writing letters to serve these ends. The migration and movement characteristic of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world demanded that those literate families who chose to remain in contact once they were physically separated employed letter-writing practices.

While the Byleses's correspondence was in some ways reflective of the prevalence of the "mobility and separation [that] had long characterized anglophone...

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16 Toby Ditz's study of eighteenth-century Philadelphia merchants is one excellent example from this literature. Her work on the assertion of masculinity through letter writing demonstrates the ways in which letters must be interrogated as social and material objects. In one salient example from her article, a certain merchant who had been "wholly unmanned" by affronts to his reputation from creditors wrote a letter about his emasculated condition and thus "the production of the letter refute[d] the disability and the stasis that its texts assert[ed]: writing was a reconstitution of self." Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (Jun. 1994): 72.

families” and the natural solution of letter writing in this epistolary age, their correspondence was also distinctively attached to the context of the American Revolution and the family’s loyalism. The merchants, land speculators, and other participants in a wide variety of voluntary eighteenth-century occupations might have had exigent circumstances that precipitated their choice of livelihood and subsequent migration. Speaking generally, however, that choice was not provoked by the same violence and coercion as a wartime migration. Additionally, for most of those epistolary relationships, there was a definable beginning and end. In contrast, the Byles family’s separation was initially uncertain in length, especially in the first few years before the war came to a close. Furthermore, while the family’s separation may be seen as a result of the choosing to remain loyal to the king, it was also a punishment imposed by patriot authorities that they could not defy. In this context, the family’s urgently stubborn work at remaining a family in spite of the patriots’ interference might be read as a quiet act of political defiance. Their correspondence did not serve any military purpose; they did not aid the loyalist cause by spying or by overtly discrediting the patriot cause in their letters before the war ended. But neither did they allow the war – in which they saw the patriots as irrevocably blamable – to entirely cut familial ties the patriots had threatened by forcing half the family into exile. Ultimately, the American Revolution coupled with the Byleses’s loyalism compelled the family’s separation and thus caused the beginning of a decades-long

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19 Konstantin Dierks asserts that this kind of subtly politicized action was typical especially of loyalist women, who, though prudent self-censorship prevented them from explicitly undermining the patriots in their letters, still remained tenacious in keeping their families bound together through correspondence. See Dierks, *In My Power*, 214-222.
epistolary relationship that was often uncertain, unstable, and unforgottably begotten by force.
Section One. Branches and Sprigs: The Family

On September 12, 1805, Catherine Byles wrote to one of her nieces that "[she could not be] too particular in [her] communications respecting every branch & sprig of our family, for though far separated & transplanted in different climes & soils, we are nourished by the same sap from one genial root, & seem to vegetate for each other." For Catherine, each small stem of her dispersed family was a crucial part of the whole. To understand the Byles family as they understood themselves, then, it is necessary both to know who comprised each "branch & sprig" and to comprehend what Catherine meant when she referred to the family's common "sap" and "root."

The patriarch of the Byles family, Mather Byles Sr., descended from the Cottons and Mathers on his mother's side, and the illustrious Puritan ministers Increase and Cotton Mather - along with their famous library - had a hand in young Mather Byles Sr.'s education. Erudition, devotion, and dedication to educating oneself and others ranked preeminently among the Mather family's priorities, and Mather Sr. followed in his forefathers' footsteps in these inclinations. He began what was to be a lengthy ministerial career in 1732 at the Hollis Street Church, where he would continue to preach for the rest of his professional life. Immediately thereafter,

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in 1733, Mather Sr. married Anna Noyes Gale, with whom he had six children. Three of those, Mather Jr., Elizabeth, and Samuel, lived beyond infancy. Shortly after Anna’s death in 1744, Mather Sr. remarried Rebecca Tailor; the couple had three children, of whom two, Mary and Catherine, reached majority (see chart one in appendix). Finally, while Mather Jr., Elizabeth, Mary, and Catherine all reached adulthood, Samuel Byles, who by all accounts had lived a quiet and pious life, died in 1764 when he was only twenty. Beyond raising his children and devoting himself and others to God, literature was another of Mather Sr.’s passions, and he spent much time throughout his life composing poetry and spouting witticisms. From both a professional and recreational perspective, Mather Sr.’s pursuits reflected a long-entrenched familial thread of clerical and literary talents that he integrated into his parenting. Through a similar religious and cultural education to that which he had enjoyed in the Mather library, Mather Sr. cultivated literary abilities as well as Christian faithfulness in his children, as those children would later do for their own.

A new generation of Byleses began in 1760, when Elizabeth Byles married widower and clock-maker Gawen Brown and less than a year later gave birth to the

24 Ibid., 108.
25 Clifford K. Shipton wrote of his witticisms: “Byles’s puns and accompanying practical jokes were the chief comic relief of eighteenth-century Boston and they were retold and collected with loving care” (Shipton, “Mather Byles,” in Sibley’s 7, 476). These witticisms are what “punning Byles” is now perhaps best known for; renditions of his jokes speckle sources for eighteenth-century Boston. See Eaton, “Doctor Byles’s Humor” in Famous Mather Byles, 117-141, for the most complete account. Additionally, Mather Byles Sr.’s poetry and his small but much-celebrated connection with Alexander Pope have merited study in themselves. See Paul Giles, “The Art of Sinking: Alexander Pope and Mather Byles,” in Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730-1860 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 17-39. Additionally, Byles’s poetry and sermons are available in published form; see Mather Byles, Poems on Several Occasions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940 reprint of 1744 edition) and Mather Byles, Works, ed. Benjamin Franklin V (New York: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1978).
couple’s only child, a son named Mather Brown. Like many mothers of her era, Elizabeth was not long a part of her son’s life. In the spring and summer of 1763, the young woman suffered from a protracted illness and passed away in June. Her obituary provides one of the few insights into her public character that remains extant in the records, proclaiming that, “For the Beauty of her Person, the Embellishments of her Mind, the Brilliance of her Conversation, and the Sanctity of her Manners, she was an Honor to her Religion, and an Ornament to her Sex.” Elizabeth’s early death prevented Mather Brown from spending his childhood with this educated and spiritual woman, but Brown at least received a similar upbringing within his grandfather’s household. After his mother’s death, the young child went to live in the Byles family house on Nassau Street with Mather Sr., Rebecca Tailer Byles, and young Mary and Catherine.

In these early years, Mather Brown demonstrated an aptitude for painting and drawing, a vocation that would become the driving force of his life. His first tutor was his young Aunt Catherine; armed with her encouragement and the observations Brown made of Gilbert Stuart working in his Boston studio, his talents took root. As the American Revolution exploded in Boston in 1775 and 1776, Brown capitalized on these abilities. Choosing to sidestep the ideological conflict presented by the divide between his whiggish father and loyalist grandfather, aunts, and uncle, Brown chose to take his miniature-painting skills on the road in the early years of the conflict. 

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26 Scott, ed., New England Register 69, 107-108; Mather Byles Jr. to Mather Byles Sr., May 8, 1763, Byles MS.
27 The Massachusetts Gazette and Boston News-Letter, June 9, 1763 (Boston: Richard Draper), [3].
28 Evans, Mather Brown, 5.
29 Ibid., 10; Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, March 28, 1792, Byles MS.
30 Evans, Mather Brown, 11.
wandered the colonies for a few years, doing his best to avoid the devastation of the war. Finally, in 1780, after brief returns to Boston and then travel in the West Indies, he earned enough to book passage to London, where he could pursue his dreams without having them thwarted by his “go[ing] into the american Army or starv[ing] at Boston.”

After presenting letters of introduction from his grandfather to John Singleton Copley, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin West, and other loyalist friends in London, Mather Brown was able to establish himself as a promising young American artist in London society. He wrote of his prospects to Mary and Catherine in 1784: “I will let them see, if an obscure yankey Boy cannot Shine as great as any of them, my ambition shall prove my alliance with Apollo, and will produce a new Phenomenon, to make the rays of [Phoebus] shine and rise from the western Hemisphere.” Before too long, Brown was living up to his own expectations. In the 1780s, Brown painted a number of important Americans in London as well as various high-society Britons, including John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and George IV, Prince of Wales. His social capital increased with his fame as an artist; for example, in 1783, Brown went hunting with King George III and received a hunting bow from the monarch.

Brown’s career reached its height in the early 1790s as he turned to history painting,

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31 Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 19, 1780, Byles MS; Evans, *Mather Brown*, 11-14.
32 Mather Brown to Mather Byles Sr., Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 19, 1780, Byles MS; Mather Brown to Mather Byles Sr., Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, March 23, 1781, Byles MS; Mather Byles Sr. to Fredrick William Geyer, July 1, 1783, Microfilm Edition of the Mather Byles Letterbook, 1727-1787 (Bulk 1778-1784) at the New England Historic Genealogical Society Library (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota, 1995) (hereafter cited as Byles Letterbook).
33 Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, July 28, 1784, Byles MS.
34 Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 16, 1784, Transcribed Microfilm Edition of the Mather Brown Papers (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society) (hereafter cited as Brown MS); Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 13, 1785, Brown MS; Evans, *Mather Brown*, 42-46, 53-55, 84.
35 Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 6, 1783, Byles MS.
the visual recording of historical events with an attention to accuracy and a certain
tone of celebration. While he was successful in this endeavor for the first half of the
decade, by the late 1790s, his career took a downward turn from which it would not
recover. The Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812 contributed to this decline, as the
financial and political distress caused by the war led patrons from the nobility, upper,
and middle classes to downsize current collections, fail to honor commissions, and
avoid purchasing new paintings. Beyond this, by the turn of the century, “the heyday
of history painting was drawing to a close,” and, as a result, the one-time source of
Brown’s most magisterial and expensive commissions was disappearing. Brown
continued living and painting in England until his death on May 25, 1831, but after
the mid-1790s, he would never again enjoy economic and social prosperity.
Regardless of these frustrations, Brown’s artwork remained his life’s companion. He
never married or had children, and thus his and his mother’s branch of the family left
as legacies only the hundreds of paintings, drawings, and engravings he had created.

It would be a different branch of the Byles family tree that expanded outward
and onward. Mather Byles Jr. began what was to be his very large family with his
marriage to Rebecca Walter in 1761. The couple had their first child, Rebecca, in
1762; she was shortly followed by another Mather Byles (hereafter referred to as
Mather III) in 1764. From 1765 to 1774, Mather Jr. and Rebecca Walter’s lives would

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36 Evans, Mather Brown, 100, 116.
37 Ibid., 136-137, quote on 136.
38 Ibid., 136-137, 176. The art historian who has produced the most detailed analysis of Brown’s life
and career describes Brown’s artistry as both understudied and underappreciated. She writes, “Mather
Brown is among America’s four or five most imaginative, versatile, and talented early painters. In the
late eighteenth century, when little emphasis was placed upon originality, Brown was not an innovator,
although his subject matter had become unusually diverse. His real genius lay in portraiture; and, in his
heyday he developed into one of the most capable American portraitists of his time” (Evans 176).
be peppered with births and, tragically, more than a few deaths. Their second son Walter was born and died in 1765; twin girls, Anna and Elizabeth, were born in 1765, but only Elizabeth, nicknamed Eliza, survived. Another Anna – later known as Nancy – was born in 1768, and Sarah, or Sally, was born in 1770. Finally, Martha and Mary were born in 1772 and 1774, respectively; neither survived infancy.40

As if this period of quickly alternating sorrow and joy was not tumultuous enough for the young father, it was also one of the most trying decades of Mather Jr.’s religious experience. In 1757, Mather Jr. took up his family’s ministerial mantle at a post in New London, Connecticut and enjoyed a few short years of peaceful and rewarding preaching. In 1764, however, he encountered the first of his troubles with a local religious sect. This group, known as the Rogerenes, believed that all days of the week were “equal in sanctity” and therefore rejected observance of the Sabbath.41 Another characteristic of the Rogerenes was their apparent “determination to be persecuted” such that they “[obtruded] themselves upon the law, and [challenged] its power” by entering Congregational churches on the Sabbath and purposely disturbing the service.42 On June 26, 1764, Mather Jr. described the Rogerenes’ protests in a letter to his father: “On the Sabbath, the Rogerenes came to the Meeting-House, sewing & knitting, & make such an universal Disturbance, that I was obliged to make a full stop in the first Prayer of the Afternoon . . . their Insolence is so astonishing, that to bear it without Resentment, I must be either something more, or something

42 Ibid., 204.
less than a Man.” Mather Jr. bore this burden for a few years, but it seems that the social disorder propagated by the Rogerenes may have led to a crisis in faith for the young minister. In 1768, the Anglican Christ Church in Boston invited Mather Jr. to receive episcopal ordination in England and thereafter lead their services; he accepted.

While it is impossible to connect the Rogerenes to Mather Jr.’s conversion with absolute certainty, the chronology of the two events lends itself to that conclusion. Whatever the cause, Mather Byles Jr., descendant of some of the most elite and pious New England Puritan families, soon identified himself so thoroughly with the rituals of Anglicanism – the very pageantry that had always so bitterly animated Puritans against the Anglican faith – that he would later write “there is something very convenient & clever in the Doctrine of Purgatory; . . . Aspersions of holy Water tend greatly to improve the Religion & Morals of Mankind; & . . . it is by no Means idolatrous or indecent, but very useful & edifying, to walk in Procession after a Silver Crucifix.” While Mather Jr.’s family, especially his father, must have had some reaction to his decision, their response is not reflected in the historical record. In their letters to one another, father, son, and sisters continued to refer to their common Christian principles, faithfulness, and mutual calling to ministerial duty for the rest of Mather Sr.’s life.

43 Mather Byles Jr. to Mather Byles Sr., June 26, 1764, Byles MS. See also Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) Byles, July 2, 1764, Byles MS; Mather Byles Jr. to Mather Byles Sr., Dec. 8, 1765, Byles; and Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) Byles, May 7, 1766, Byles MS for further examples of complaints regarding the Rogerenes.
44 Invitation from Christ Church in Boston to Mather Byles Jr., May 4, 1768, Byles MS.
45 Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 10, 1783, Byles MS.
46 See, for example, Mather Byles Sr. to Mather Byles Jr., Apr. 14, 1787, Byles Letterbook.
Beginning in 1768, then, the Byles family was together in one city, flanking Boston with one household at the tip of the southern Neck and the other in the North End. They took advantage of their proximity. Mary, Catherine, and Mather Jr. visited each other in their respective parts of town, the children played together at their grandfather’s house, learning poetry and drawing from their aunts, and in 1775 the family together mourned the deaths of two of their members – Rebecca Tailer Byles in July and Rebecca Walter Byles in October. Their lives as a physically contiguous family coalesced as Mather Jr.’s years in New London when family life had been spent primarily in letters seemed to be a thing of the past. They did not yet know how crucial those early years spent developing a knack for epistolary relationships were to become.

Less than a decade after Mather Jr. moved his family to Boston, the American Revolution began, and the loyaltyism to which the Byleses remained dedicated quickly transformed the nature of the family member’s relationships. Mather Sr., Mary, and Catherine were some of the few loyalists allowed to remain in Boston, likely as a result of a combination of Mather Sr.’s ministerial pedigree and his advanced age. In

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47 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Aug. 22, 1780, Byles Letterbook; Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Dec. 7, 1784, Byles MS; Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, Oct. 30, 1804, Harvard Collection, vol. 1; Evans, Mather Brown, 5-9; Scott, ed., New England Register 69, 107, 111.
1777, when his sentence of exile was quickly commuted to house arrest, he was just shy of seventy, often suffered from fits of “palsey,” and therefore required his daughters’ presence as caretakers.

Mather Jr. was not afforded the same amnesty, and his family left for Halifax when British troops and about eleven hundred other loyalists fled Boston in March 1776, reacting to the patriot attack on the city.\

Perhaps it was at this moment that Mather Jr. developed an enduring bitterness towards the “Sons of Violence,” as he called them, which would prevent his ever returning to live in his country of birth.\

He recorded his reaction to his wartime migration in a letter to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, on May 4, 1776:

I now see myself, without any crime to occasion it, reduced, within the compass of a few days, to the most distressing circumstances imaginable – an exile from my native country – pent up in one wretched chamber, in a strange place, together with my five motherless children, one son and four daughters – deprived of every other earthly enjoyment, and entirely at a loss as to my future residence and subsistence. Such are the horrors of civil war!

If at the moment of this letter, Mather Jr. could see no recourse to provide for himself and his family, he shortly obtained a position as chaplain to the garrison at Halifax and assistant to the rector, John Breynton, at Saint Paul’s Church, also in Halifax.\

He also remarried in 1777 to Sarah Lyde, with whom he had four more children – Belcher, Sarah Louisa (known to her family as simply Louisa), and two different Samuels who both died in infancy.

49 Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles*, 29.\
50 Mather Byles Jr. to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Oct. 28, 1783, Byles MS.\
52 Scott, ed., *New England Register* 69, 111.\
53 Ibid., 115.
This increase in his family, however, could not prevent Mather Jr.’s initial frustration with his lack of stable professional livelihood for a number of years during the Revolution and after the conclusion of the war. His contempt for the patriots and thus the new United States prohibited him from returning to Boston beyond a short visit to settle his father’s estate in 1790, but that did not prevent his dissatisfaction with life in Halifax. A letter he wrote to his sisters in 1786 veritably drips with his discontent:

My life, my dear Sisters, has been for some Times past, so uniform & so insipid, so perfectly retired, & so totally unconnected with the busy World, who are on all Sides pursuing Measure of the highest Infatuation & Folly, & which human Language is not equal to the Task of expressing how much I despise . . . I am myself doing Nothing: most of those who encircle me are doing worse: & the Historian who should undertake the dirty Task of recording Actions . . . infinitely better . . . buried in Oblivion, would be incomparably the worst of all.

Finally, in 1789, Mather Jr. received a timely invitation to become the second rector of Trinity Church at Saint John in New Brunswick. He wrote to his sisters Mary and Catherine shortly after the move in October 1789: “Be assured that there is no Clergyman that I know, or that I ever did know, in America, with whom I would exchange my present Situation. Thus, after a long, tedious, tempestuous Day, it has pleased a good GOD to gild your Brother’s Evening Sky.” From 1789 until his death in the spring of 1814, Mather Jr. lived in a place where he had found his evening solace.

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54 See, for example, Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, April 8, 1786, Byles MS and Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, [Feb. or March], 1789, Byles MS. For discussion of impending visit to Boston in 1790, see Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Oct. 28, 1789, Byles MS.
55 Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, April 8, 1786, Byles MS.
56 In 1788, after the death of his second wife in 1787, Mather Byles Jr. also remarried for a third time to Susanna Reid just before he moved to Saint John. Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsey) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 18, 1788, Byles MS; Scott, ed., New England Register 69, 112.
57 Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Oct. 28, 1789, Byles MS.
58 Scott, ed. New England Register 69, 112.
Mather Jr.'s children, Rebecca, Mather III, Eliza, Nancy, Sally, Belcher, and Louisa also took winding paths to find the lives they wanted after the war. Rebecca, who was in her early twenties when the war ended, was perhaps the only child who came close to returning to Boston. On June 2, 1784, she wrote her aunts on the subject of her family's return: “I am confidant [peace] will open a Door for [my father] if he chuses to return [to Boston], but I know he will not if he can help it, he went [to England] with that resolution . . . my own wishes I have not dared to ask myself, I have some tender, very tender attachments, to America.”

Despite these early sentiments, however, when Rebecca met her soon-to-be-husband Dr. William Almon later in 1784, her attachments reoriented. Rebecca's decision is indicative of the choices each of her brothers and sisters made after the war. While they maintained undeniable affection for their aunts in Boston, which was demonstrated by the relatively consistent epistolary relationships that continued into the early decades of the nineteenth century, they found that they could live their own lives and still maintain affectionate family ties at a distance through the use of their letters.

The third generation displayed a number of other common patterns in addition to this epistolary commitment. Many of them branched out, both geographically and numerically, taking their spouses and children to various posts of the early nineteenth-century British Empire, thus continuing to underscore the importance of their access to their family-in-letters. Beyond this, they demonstrated a definite commitment to their familial ties in the naming of their children, cementing their connections to faraway relatives in strategies beyond letter writing (see charts two and three in appendix). Finally, nearly all of the Byles children experienced a death in

59 Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 2, 1784, Byles MS.
the immediate families they created after the war, during which moments dispersed correspondents attempted to assuage guilt as best they could.

The geographical movement of the Byles children from the late 1780s to the 1820s broadly reflected the boundaries and territories of the British Empire during that time period (see maps one and two in appendix). Canadian territories Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were best represented both in their capacity as points of departure as well as places of settlement. Rebecca, for example, lived with Dr. Almon in Halifax for most of her life, dying there in 1853 when she was ninety-one. Similarly, Eliza lived in Saint John, New Brunswick with her father and stepmother for all of her adult life; she died there in 1801 shortly after her marriage to William Scovil. Sally also lived in Saint John with her parents and sister until she married Captain Thomas Desbrisay in 1801. After their marriage, Sally and Thomas moved to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia until Thomas was assigned to a post at Saint Vincent in the British West Indies. After his death in 1807, Sally returned to her Dartmouth home, where she lived until her own death in 1855. The rest of the Byles children, however, went against the general family trend of ensconcing themselves in eastern Canada. Mather III, for example, spent most of his adult life in Grenada of the British West Indies, with brief visits to Boston, Canada, and England. Belcher traveled from New York City, where he met his wife, Sally Louisa Lyde, to London England in 1809, which the couple made their permanent home. Louisa also spent much of her life in the British Isles. In 1815, after her marriage to Major Thomas Hare, Louisa moved to Sussex, England, then to Limerick, Ireland, and finally settled in Portsea, England in 1822. But it was Nancy who did the most flitting around the British Empire. She
married Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Desbrisay (Sally’s husband Thomas’s father!) in
1799 in Saint John, after which time the couple moved first to Halifax, then Quebec,
next to Thurles in Tipperary, Ireland, then shortly thereafter to Ceylon (Sri Lanka),
then back again to Ireland, and finally to England where Nancy would spend the rest
of her life.\textsuperscript{60} Reflecting on her niece’s colorful life in 1809 to Nancy’s sister Sally,
Mary wrote “Nancy has had three children born in 3 quarte]rs of the Globe: few
women can say as much[!]”\textsuperscript{61}

While Nancy’s sisters and brothers could not lay claim to Nancy’s
cosmopolitan birthing experiences, they could and did participate along with their
sister in the practice of naming many of their children after family members.
Rebecca, Mather III, and Sally named a son Mather Byles, and Nancy named her
eldest son Charles Mather. The siblings also named their children after each other.
Rebecca named a daughter Sarah Ann (Sally’s first name was Sarah); Nancy named
one of her daughters Louisa; Sally gave her son Thomas the middle name Belcher;
and Belcher named his second daughter Elizabeth Anna (signaling Eliza and Nancy’s
true first names). Louisa even named a son after her brother-in-law William Almon,
calling the boy William Almon Robert. Finally, Belcher named his youngest daughter
Catherine Mary, in a clear tribute to the Boston aunts.\textsuperscript{62} These choices reflected a
desire and ability to signal continuous attachment to various members from multiple
generation of the Byles family, with a particular emphasis on the patriarch’s name,
Mather Byles, as well as consistent attention to siblings’ names. By choosing to name
their children after absent relatives, the Byles children were able to demonstrate the

\textsuperscript{60} Scott, ed., \textit{New England Register} 69, 113-116.
\textsuperscript{61} Mary (Polly) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Aug. 28, 1809, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
strength of their familial connections in yet another manner while also symbolically tying the next generation of Byleses to the dispersed family network.

Unfortunately, the joy of these many births was interspersed with quite a number of deaths. Rebecca, Nancy, and Louisa each lost two children in their infancy; neither Mather III nor Belcher lived past forty; and Rebecca, Nancy, Sally, and Louisa each lost their husbands long before their own deaths. Finally, Eliza’s death in her forty-first year followed her marriage ceremony by only six months. While family members could only do so much for one another in their absent capacities during these times of tragedy, they certainly attempted to provide soothing balms. After Eliza’s death, for example, in response to the “sublime & impressive scene [Sally] presented to [Mary and Catherine’s] view in the peaceful . . . departure of [their] beloved [Eliza],” Catherine wrote to Sally that she was “happy for us, however scattered, that we are enabled to mitigate the pang of separation while blest in each others correspondance; a sure testimony of attachment, which soothes us under our afflictions & assists us in supporting the burdens of life by dividing & shareing them with each other.”

Back in Boston, then, Mary and Catherine Byles kept the dispersed third generation of Byleses in their thoughts and letters. The nieces and nephews were central to the women’s lives, as neither Mary nor Catherine married and had children of their own. They lived with their father for the balance of his life, remaining in Boston throughout the war as well as after peace was proclaimed. In 1783, Mather Sr. suffered a paralytic stroke, leaving him a complete invalid during the last five years.

63 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Jan. 29, 1809, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
64 See Mary (Polly) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Aug. 28, 1809, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
of his life. After his death in 1788, Mary and Catherine remained in the old family house, taking on boarders, renting out property, accruing interest from bank deposits, and accepting small monetary gifts from their nephews in order to maintain their household.

This independent lifestyle was perhaps not the easiest road the two women could have chosen. While Mary and Catherine's correspondence from the years 1784 to 1793 is lost, in 1789, Mather Jr. asked the sisters: "what are your Circumstances, your Plans, & your Prospects? Do you wish to remain in Boston? or had you rather remove to me? Be free Agents: consult your Own Interests & Inclinations: & tell me, without Reserve, what you wish." While Mary and Catherine's response to Mather Jr. is lost, all indications point to their having informed their brother of their choice to remain in their childhood Boston home, bitterness towards the new republic notwithstanding. Rather than moving to Nova Scotia, the sisters chose to be "the only [Byleses] remaining in Yanky land" despite their enduring and unrepentant loyalism, which they made no effort to hide from early republican society at large. An indicative example of the sisters' humorous brand of royalist dedication appears in a story from a young reporter's visit to Mary and Catherine's house in the 1830s, when the sisters were both over eighty years old:

I was invited by Miss Mary Byles to take my seat in the large armchair, which she assured me was a great curiosity, being more than a hundred years old, having been sent over from England . . . The chair was of oak, nearly black with age, and curiously and elaborated carved. The back was very tall and straight, and the carving on its top terminated in a crown . . . as soon as I had placed myself on it, she enquired if I found it an easy seat? On my replying in

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65 Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, Sept. 27, 1811, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
67 Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Oct. 28, 1789, Byles MS.
68 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, Sept. 1, 1810, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
the affirmative. ‘I am surprised at that’ - said she, with a smile - ‘I wonder how a republican can sit easy under the crown.’

Luckily for the aunts, they were not always the only two in “Yanky land.” At one time or another in the decades after the Revolution, Mary and Catherine were able to see Mather Jr., Mather III and his wife Mary, Belcher and his wife Sarah, as well as Rebecca. These reunions occurred only once in each case and were very brief, but they were important in that they provided the family with one further face-to-face experience to ground the more critical letter writing relationship. Certainly, they continued to mourn being separated from loved ones, but, despite this, the overall response to reunion was typical of the Byles family, as can be seen through a letter Catherine wrote Rebecca after they saw each other in 1815:

> With what various emotions, our beloved neice, have we received your kind affectionate letter, the pleasure we experienced at the sight of the dear well-known hand, was soon succeeded by the painful reflection that we were now far asunder, could no longer see you & converse together without restraint from the impulse of the moment, or be enfolded in each others arms... but we dare not trust ourselves long indulging these reflections—The Great Father of the family has appointed the bounds of our habitation & it is our indispensable duty to submit... Away then every murmuring thought, we will now turn to the bright side of the picture, we have, a blessing we never expected to enjoy upon earth, we have indeed seen you, clasped you to our fond hearts & heard the kind accounts of affection uttered by the voice so familiar to us in early life.

The letter acknowledged the physical separation inherent in the relationship, lamented it, and moved forward with the support of the family’s religious beliefs as well as the availability of the epistolary channel. In sum, then, Mary and Catherine’s lives until both of their deaths in the early 1830s centered on each other, their small Bostonian social circle, and the relatives they constantly visited “in Idea” through their letters.

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70 Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca (Becca) Byles Almon, Oct. 24, 1815, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
71 Scott, ed., *New England Register* 69, 108-109. For references to Mary and Catherine’s visits “in idea,” see Mary (Polly) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Lyde Byles, Feb. 10, 1807, Harvard Collection, vol. 1; Mary (Polly) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Dec. 16, 1807, Harvard Collection, vol. 1; Mary
Section Two. “three thousand miles from my native home”: Letters of News and Familial Support

The American Revolution was the violent catalyst of a family migration that crisscrossed oceans and continents and deposited individuals to far-reaching points around the Atlantic basin and beyond. The initially political nature of this movement was significant for the Byleses on a number of levels. Psychologically, the war caused the Byleses to forever after associate political upheaval with the Revolution in their letters – and quite a lot of upheaval there was. Moreover, from the Revolution forward, the Byleses found the most important aspect of the various wars of this period to be any disruption they caused in their ability to send and receive letters. Additionally, any bitterness that might have been aimed at family members who had chosen to leave their homes in Boston even if the Revolution had not occurred was aimed instead at the patriots and subsequently the early republican United States. The Byleses became frustrated with one another for not responding to letters quickly or often enough; they did not express anger towards each other’s decisions to remain apart after the conclusion of the war.

The Revolution also set in motion a transformation in the socioeconomic positions of Mather Byles Jr. and his children as well as Mather Brown, after which time carrying out the lives begun in the 1780s during wartime was a natural post-war

(Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Sept. 6, 1811, Harvard Collection, vol. 2; 72 See, for example, Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, May 28, 1804, Brown MS; Mary (Polly) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Feb. 10, 1807, Harvard Collection, vol. 1; Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mrs. [Eliza] Brooke, Sept. 25, 1807, Harvard Collection, vol. 1; Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca (Becca) Byles Almon, July 28, 1812, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.

73 See, for some examples, Mather Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 10, 1797, Byles MS; Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to William-Bruce Almon, Sept. 6, 1811, Harvard Collection, vol. 2; and Mary (Polly) Byles to Mather Brown, April 5, 1812, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
course of action for these men and women. Mary and Catherine’s socioeconomic position rested at status quo before and after the war, but they remained bound to Boston as their place of birth and the only home they had ever known. The letter writing network built by the family during the war therefore became increasingly important in the late 1780s and beyond as much of the family embraced the tumbleweed lives the Revolution had triggered.

In order to construct that network, the Byleses correspondence applied late-eighteenth-century letter writing trends and strategies, thus a close analysis of their letters underscores in detailed application the more general ways in which separated families of this time period used letters as cultural tools of maintenance. The Byles correspondence employed such standard letter forms as could be found in typical eighteenth-century letter manuals. These letter manuals and the lessons they imparted were particularly well suited to the Byleses’s situation. As Eve Tavor Bannet pointed out in her study of the manuals, “both in Britain and in the American provinces, household-families (not individuals) were considered the fundamental building blocks of society,” and thus the manuals strove to use the exemplary letters found therein to improve “the household-family’s conduct and interactions.”74 Manuals were structured to provide examples of ways in which family members within their own circle – and other members of society whose own concentric circles flowed outward from the familial model – could regulate each other’s actions. To accomplish this end, letter manuals classified letters by their different functions, and accordingly provided examples for each in order to dictate the content and tone of the epistle.75

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74 Bannet, Empire of Letters, 38.
75 Ibid., 56.
While there was a seemingly endless list of letter classes—letters of business, letters of invitation, letters of complaints, and so forth and so on—a few classes in particular informed the structure of the Byles letters. The first was known most generally as “letters of news,” which were intended to “[provide] their correspondents with necessary information or intelligence.” As such, “they were the most frequent, and among the most prized, of eighteenth-century letters.” Bannet associated these types of letters with merchants and government officials, to whom consistent and reliable intelligence was essential for the success of their occupations. For the Byleses, however, a constant flow of information regarding each other’s affairs was the only way in which they could continue to support, guide, and worry about one another.

Within this form, another important eighteenth-century cultural value influenced the Byleses’s letters. “Familiarity,” according to historian Sarah Pearsall “was a central [eighteenth-century] value, in life and letters,” meaning informal, “unceremonious,” “free,” and “unconstrained.” Moreover, a “familiar style, when carried off well, showed familiar love. Familiarity allowed families to enjoy ‘ease, freedom, and friendship,’ even when far apart.” A familiar letter was supposed to imitate a spontaneous conversation between friends, reflecting the supposition that “only speech and gesture [were] more direct modes of communication than the

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76 Bannet, Empire of Letters, 57.
77 Pearsall, Atlantic Families 56-57.
78 Ibid., 79.
letter. This conversational prose embodying familiar love was the style that framed the Byleses’s news-bearing epistles.

"Letters of news" were some of the most pervasive within the Byles correspondence. Intended to impart familial events, occasionally it was as simple as describing some small episode from the day that allowed the reader to participate in the life of the letter writer as immediately as was possible given the distance. For example, on September 10, 1781, Catherine wrote Rebecca, "Your Grandpappa is at this Instant seated in his easy-Chair, & eating a fine peice of Water-Mellon, which he has just cut. Your aunt Polly too, with the Knife in her Hand, is in act to demolish a second Slice. But [pause?] I must now rise, & take care of myself." This of course lent itself to Rebecca’s "saucy" reply: “there was a kind of Magick or powerful Charm, in the very fine Slice of Watermelon, that produced Emotions, very different from any other part of your Letter. I believe you mention’d it on purpose to tantalize me, well – I dont care – I will be revenged on you, the very next time I sit down to a fine Mooses-Nose.” The novelistic, narrative tendencies of these letters did indeed impart news (however seemingly trivial), but their greater and more significant purpose was their ability create a sense of immediate participation in the domestic and quotidian activities of family members. The Byles correspondents therefore broadly employed the “letter of news” form to write their letters, but they also adapted the strategy to their own purposes in creative and crucial ways.

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80 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca (Becca) Byles, Sept. 10, 1781, Byles Letterbook.
81 Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Oct. 3, 1781, Byles MS.
Sharing news meant that the family members also included events of more recognizable familial significance in their letters. In the first sense, this denoted serious events of great joy or great sorrow. On May 9, 1782, for example, Eliza wrote her aunts, “It is with not a little pleasure that I inform you, of the Birth of another Brother, & I would be glad to know, if you don’t think it is almost time for some of us, to begin to look out, Especially as Mamma intends to have as many Boys, as there is Girls.” In these instances of happy tidings, of course, the Boston family members responded with enthusiastic lines noting their love and affection for the newest Byles additions.

The Byleses also transcribed their losses. On March 15, 1787, Mather Jr. wrote to his father and sisters, “The black Wax, my venerable Parent, & dear Sisters, will fore-warn you that this Paper comes charged with heaving Tidings. Once more I have been called to that tendrest of human Trials, parting with a beloved Wife.”

Beyond the text, the material significance of the letter, envelope, and black wax communicated in equal parts to receivers the heavy weight of the news. By using a small blot of black wax to indicate a death, Mather Jr. participated in a culture of letter writing practices and symbols contained within the materiality of the medium that had existed for centuries in early modern Europe.
On these mournful occasions, the Byleses filled their black-wax-sealed letters with strong spiritual reassurances. Mather Sr., in response to the news of his second daughter-in-law’s death in 1787, wrote his son, “My dearly beloved son, & First-born . . . I feel for your Distresses, but can only carry you afresh to Him into whose Hands I have so many thousand times committed you. You Preach to others, Preach now to yourself.” He need not have charged his son to do so, as Mather Jr. wrote before his father’s letter was penned, “there is something in the Religion I profess, sufficient to support & to animate me under the tendrest Trials of human life. It cannot be very long, before I trust I shall again embrace my dearest Connexions, where there shall be no more Sorrow nor Death.” This quote is particularly distinctive in its religious utility within the letter writing relationship; by spiritualizing tactility with words and phrases such as “carry you,” “Hands,” “support,” and “embrace,” father and son used written but still physical expressions of faith to lessen the other’s grief and concern.

The Byleses’s expressions of religiosity during these times of trial remained constant through decades of the letter writing relationship, which allowed the family to develop a consistent and successful method of assurance. On the sending side, transcribing the sorrowful news to text both confirmed it had occurred and anticipated a statement of compassion from the receivers. On the receiving end, the letter allowed the respondents to participate in the event from afar by attempting to assuage the burden of loss with the expected assurance of support. That statement, in the case of the Byles family, would naturally refer the sender to God. This exchange demonstrated the family members’ ability to fulfill such tasks – in this instance, the

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86 Mather Byles Sr. to Mather Byles Jr., Apr. 14, 1787, Byles Letterbook.  
87 Mather Byles Jr. to Mather Byles Sr., Mary (Polly), and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Mar. 15, 1787, Byles MS.
aiding of family members in times of sorrow – as they would if they were physically present in one another’s lives. In another example from 1802, after Mather III’s death, Aunt Mary wrote to Mather Brown: “though our tears flow fast, we mourn not without strong consolation, he was a most exemplary character, a sincere & steadfast believer in the Christian religion, & I can have no doubt it has been said to him—Well done good & faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of the LORD.”

This religious epistolary practice in itself was not exceptional; as Sarah Pearsall notes, “religious invocations appeared often [in letters] when the subject was death, a place where individuals met, never to part again.”88 The Byleses were perhaps particularly ardent and sincere in their invocations, as a direct result of the long line of clerical patriarchs that composed their heritage. Arguably more important than a statement on the religiosity of the responses, however, is an understanding of the support they lent. It is less crucial to comment on the distinctiveness of the Byleses’s religious sincerity, which, strong as it was, was by no means atypical to this society, than to recognize the task they were performing for one another in sending, receiving, and responding to familial news.

Economic loss was another type of trying news that the Byles family members communicated through their letters. As with news of family deaths, the letter allowed the sender the opportunity to fully acknowledge the event in prose as well as anticipate advice from their relative. Beyond this, however, letters became a vehicle through which family members could inform of their intent to support one another materially, adding a financial layer to the support mechanism of the letter. In 1792, for example, Mather III sent his aunts sixty pounds to supplement their household

88 Pearsall, Atlantic Families, 97.
income. In response, the aunts wrote back to their nephew, "We are under the greatest obligations to you my dear Mather for the very generous assistance you have afforded us by which means we have been enabled to make so speedy a settlement of our affairs...Your aunts unite in wishing every blessing temporal, spiritual, & eternal may be the happy portion of their beloved nephew." Money flowed out from the Boston household as well. In 1811, when Mather Brown was in the midst of financial difficulties as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, Mary and Catherine enclosed a bill of exchange for twenty pounds within one of their letters. While the amount sent was not large, it was enough to help, and Mather Brown was duly appreciative. His response to his aunts is worth quoting at length, as it communicates the emotional and specifically family-oriented reaction such a letter of economic support inspired:

With the warmest gratitude, and with transports of Joy, I recd. your truly affectionate letter of 29th of April enclosing the . . . bill of exchange . . . which was immediately paid me. . . . [W]hen to my inexpressible delight I saw the bill which proved, so strongly, Your attachment to me which seems to be indelible, and which same just at the moment of time I so much stood in need of it—A thousand times over I thanked You, a thousand times I blessed You—You cannot perhaps exactly conceive the rapture of receiving pecuniary aid unless You imagined Yourselves in my situation, three thousand miles from my native home, without a Relation to assist me, or to advise with, with expenses going on, a Bailiff’s Officer on one side touching me with one hand, and in the other presenting me with a copy of a Writ... if such was Your own situation with what feelings of transcendent Joy would You open a letter which brought You an unexpected and adequate relief?

By underscoring the aunts’ ability to “imagine” themselves in Mather Brown’s situation, Brown demonstrated yet again the ability of letters to provide correspondents with a sense of immediate participation in each other’s lives. In this instance, that strategy became particularly crucial, as the imagining allowed the aunts to feel the proper amount of sympathy necessary to understand the depth of Brown’s

89 “Account Book,” entry from June 8, 1792, Byles MS.
91 Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, April 29, 1811, Harvard Collection, vol.2.
92 Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 5, 1811, Brown MS.
economic desperation. The Byleses's letters most basic purpose was their capacity to act as a medium through which the family could send support, including, when necessary, material sustenance.

Beyond informing each other of their day-to-day lives and significant familial events, the third generation of Byleses was always sure to keep their Boston relations abreast of their latest achievements, and, later, those of their children, such that the Boston correspondents were able to duly encourage their young relatives. It was within this vein that Eliza Byles had sent the verse with which this paper began with the accompanying phrase, “I began to learn to write in May, and have wrought a Samplar . . . a Line from you would greatly encourage, & make me very happy.”\(^9^3\) Her Aunt Catherine enthusiastically responded, “Indeed, my dear Betsy, I am so [Astonished?] with your sweet Letter, that I have set down to answer it already & are you sure, you did not begin to write till last May?”\(^9^4\) This simple exchange served a significant purpose for niece and aunt alike. For Eliza, inscribing her accomplishment to a loving relative first served the purpose of reaffirming that accomplishment (especially in this case wherein the new skill was writing itself). In addition, the conversation provided Eliza with access to encouragement at the essential, slightly unstable moment when she had just begun learning. Beyond this, a newly literate Byles had just added herself as a new line within the web of connection provided by letters.

For Catherine, receiving news of her niece’s new abilities allowed her to partake in the joy and pride that she felt as Eliza’s emotionally invested aunt.

\(^{93}\) Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsy) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 29, 1778, Byles MS.

\(^{94}\) Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Eliza (Eliza/Betsy) Byles, Oct. 23, 1778, Byles Letterbook.
Moreover, Catherine praised and encouraged Eliza’s efforts and accompanied those effusions with expressions of affection, as she would continue to do in subsequent letters to both Eliza and her younger sister, Anna (or Nancy, as the family generally called her). On March 22, 1780, Catherine wrote each of the girls a letter. To Nancy, she wrote: “And did my dear N. write all that sweet Letter herself? You are a charming Girl, and your Aunt loves you dearly. If you are as careful of your things as you used to be, when I see you again, you will be able to show me your Samplar with those fine lines in it.”\(^5\) And to Eliza: “I am highly delighted with the second performance of my dear B. & am very glad to see that you make such improvements, as I find you do comparing this and the last together.”\(^6\) Mather Sr. added his praises as well: “Tell all the little Corrispondants How their Grandpappa is delighted with their talents & improvements.”\(^7\) Mary and Catherine continued these letters with the next generation, writing to Nancy’s son Charles in 1816: “We are very much pleased with your pretty writing, & shall rejoice to hear that you all pay great attention to the instruction you receive, & that you continue to be dutiful children to your dear Mother who is so kind & good to you.”\(^8\)

The aunts and “Grandpappa” served a critical purpose in the lives of the Byles children and grandchildren. They were an enduring and constant source of love and support when the family was faced with instability and uncertainty, especially in the first few years of their exile, and continued to act as consistent nurturers even once stability had been re-established in the post-war years. At first, encouraging letters

\(^{5}\) Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Anna (Nancy) Byles, March 22, 1780, Byles Letterbook.
\(^{6}\) Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsy) Byles, March 22, 1780, Byles Letterbook.
\(^{7}\) Mather Byles Sr. to Mather Byles Jr., May 25, 1782, Byles Letterbook.
\(^{8}\) Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Charles [Mather] Desbrisay, May 14, 1816, Harvard Collection, vol. 2.
were simple praises of the young children’s (and later the grandchildren’s) early
successes in writing, needlepoint, poetry, and drawing. As the children grew, so did
the maturity of the praise and the diversity of the subjects. One of the best examples
of these later letters comes from Catherine to Rebecca in 1835:

How blest you are, my dear Niece in yr. children & grandchildren! Long, very long, may you
all be continued comforts to each other, & smiling together feel yourselves quite happy. I
perceive you hint something about your being aged—Why my good niece how mistaken you,
you are quite a Young Lady . . . [and] I have not yet read the ‘life of Mrs. Hannah More.’ but
from all I have seen of her writings, excellent & pious as they are, I have not a doubt I shall be
delighted with it.99

This letter demonstrates Catherine’s celebration of Rebecca’s abilities as a mother
and grandmother while also including a joking normalization of Rebecca’s age.
Finally, by participating in a conversation with her niece about their common
interests in current literature, Catherine created the opportunity for Rebecca to engage
in a female-driven educated discourse in which she might air her thoughts and
opinions regarding popular subjects of note.

The Byleses thus used their epistolary channels to perform what C. Dallett
Hemphill defines as “kin-keeping,” which “was neither a backward-looking activity
nor one that served family hierarchy. It was not concerned with attending to ancestors
or elders but to the present generation and the future.”100 This “kin-keeping,”
Hemphill writes, was an element of the tendency of “middle-aged siblings . . . [to
keep] track of and [assist] each other’s children and grandchildren . . . [as part] of the
larger effort of adult brothers and sisters to support the generations following
them.”101 In this regard, the instability bred by the Revolution did not beget the

99 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca Byles Almon, April 5, 1835, Harvard Collection, vol. 3.
100 C. Dallett Hemphill, Siblings: Brothers and Sisters in American History (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2011), 49.
101 Ibid.
Boston relatives’ desire to parent; it only demanded that they change the method in which they did so. They guided the children with love, affection, and encouragement, reflecting a broader late eighteenth-century transformation of the ways parents (or parent-figures) and children expressed themselves in their interaction with one another.\textsuperscript{102} The Boston relations fully embraced this more expressive mode of affection for children and thus consistently included their familial support for young Byleses in their correspondence. In doing so, they became essential, nurturing sources of stability and confidence in the third and fourth generations of Byles family members’ lives despite their inability to be physically present.

\textsuperscript{102} See, for example, Susan E. Klepp, \textit{Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2009), especially chapters two and three, “Old Ways and New,” and “Women’s Words,” respectively.
Section Three. "a weary traveller returning to the dear domestic circle":
Letters of Visit and Textual Emotion

While the "letter of news" was an important epistolary form for the Byles family, another letter class was just as significant in the correspondence. These "Letters of Visit," often also referred to as "Letters of Friendship" stemmed from "the conviction that to be far from sight was to be far from mind" and thus "the topoi in such letters . . . turned on issues of remembering and forgetting, often as demonstrated by whether or not letters had been written or answered . . . the writer . . . had to reassure his absent correspondent that their erstwhile affection remained unaffected by absence, time, or distance."\(^{103}\) The Byles family’s separation caused certain anxieties as they learned to redefine their familial relationship to accommodate its new epistolary space. In the early years of the war, these anxieties were especially compounded by the unreliability of their mode of communication, as war often interrupted maritime postal deliveries.\(^{104}\) Even outside of wartime when correspondence could move freely, however, continued separation demanded the development and application of affection-in-prose.

One strategy the Byleses employed to lessen the burden and anxiety surrounding their separation was to invoke proofs not of their own affection, but rather of God’s, who could always be present, even if they could not be. These letters in general purpose – anxiety over separation and a responsive proof of affection – fit the form "letters of visit." However, the Byles family pushed beyond the form in the manner in which they wrote these letters by using their faith as an important

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\(^{103}\) Bannet, Empire of Letters, 60.

\(^{104}\) For a representative and humorous example of a letter addressing this issue, see Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Jan. 29, 1779, Byles’ Letterbook.
foundation for written manifestations of familial relations. The sincerity of the 
Byleses’s religious belief allowed for the hope that they would reunite as God’s elect 
in Heaven, even if they were never able to, as they often said, “fold in [their] Arms” 
their relations in the temporal world.105 Lamentations at their continued separation 
persisted, no matter how well they performed their familial duties through their 
letters, and were soothed with the balm of the afterlife. Mather Byles Sr., for 
example, sent to his son through his daughter Catherine’s hand on September 2, 1783, 
“his many Blessings, & hopes to meet you in a Blessed Heaven!”106 In an even more 
poignant example, Eliza Byles wrote to her Aunt Catherine in the spring of 1787:

my Dear Aunt knows by long Experience, that there is no true Joys to be found here, I have 
liv’d but 20 Years, & I am fully convinc’d of it, [&?] I do not look for happiness here, but I 
look forward to a Blessed Eternity where I shall be ever in the Arms of my Redeemer; where I 
shall meet with all those fond endearing Friends & Connexions, whom I have been so long 
separated from upon Earth, never to part again . . . this Glorious Prospect revives my 
Drooping Spirits, & I am willing to wait the appointed time when God shall call me to 
himself.107

This rather despairing little epistle demonstrates important qualities of the Byleses’s 
correspondence. Most fundamentally, it reflects that no matter how successful the 
Byles family was at reconstructing their family in their letter writing, they often could 
not help but lament their separation. Their epistolary connection afforded them the 
opportunity to inscribe their emotions, express their support and encouragement, and 
ease each other’s burdens, but it could not completely replace their physical 
presences. However, even in the face of this dejection, letter writing offered critical 
solutions.

105 The Byleses often expressed this desire in their correspondence to one another. Anna Byles, for 
example, wrote her aunts on June 15, 1789: “Oh my dear Aunts, how do I long to fold in my Arms two 
Women; whose Characters I have ever been taught to love & esteem, Heaven bless you & believe me 
with sincerest affection, your Anna” (Anna (Nancy) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, 
June 15, 1789, Byles MS).
106 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Sept. 2, 1783, Byles Letterbook.
107 Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsy) Byles to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, May 14, 1787, Byles MS.
The Byleses often tended to treat their letters to one another as akin to diary entries, as with Eliza’s confession of her “Drooping Spirits” above. Letters such as these forced their authors to articulate their emotions by transforming their abstract sorrows to communicable concepts. Letters to family members acted as semi-private channels wherein correspondents could air their most troublesome emotional conundrums and seek release in the act of translating those emotions into text. If this in itself did not lessen the burden, the fact that these texts were not diary entries, confessional qualities notwithstanding, they were letters that presupposed a kind, sympathetic, and supportive pen on the other side of the exchange would likely have been an appropriate balm.

Additionally, the letter offered the occasion for the family members to profess and record their religious devotion as a method of collective solace. While the aunts’ response to Eliza’s letter is lost, a different exchange between Mary, Catherine, and Mather Jr. regarding the poor health of their father illuminates the nature of such an interaction. On August 18, 1783, Mather Jr. wrote his sisters, “Your Brother, thro’ the Humanity of the Times, can do little more than drop his unavailing Tears at a Distance: What can I do to releive, or what can I say to soothe you? Pray tell me, for my Heart bleeds.”

Catherine responded: “Why my dear Brother do you tell me that you can do little more than drop the unavailing Tear at a Distance? Yes! You can do more, You can Pray, & and You can yet speak to me, tho’ absent.” The epistolary connection served to reassure the woeful correspondent and to reaffirm a reliance on prayer and trust in God, for, as Rebecca aptly noted, “since the divine disposer of all

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108 Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 18, 1783, Byles MS.
109 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Sept. 2, 1783, Byles Letterbook.
Things, has seen fit to separate us, it becomes us cheerfully to submit, nor [ere?]
allow ourselves in one anxious Wish, one murmuring Thought."\textsuperscript{110}

Another aspect of the "letters of visit" was the correspondents' fear of
diminished affection, or worse, being forgotten altogether. While the Byleses did not
have any real fear of their relations not remembering them, they consistently
reprimanded each other for not writing more often and sometimes for not writing long
enough letters. On February 5, 1784, for example, Mather III wrote Boston, "there
certainly must have been a very unfortunate concurrence of accidents to prevent our
hearing from you for near four months. I can scarcely, even now, realize it to be true
– Believe me, we have not been negligent; this is the fourth letter I have wrote since
we heard from you."\textsuperscript{111} Their anxiety at these moments derived from the difficulties
of losing the ability to express their affection in person, and the ensuing necessity that
their relationships could only be expressed through text. They lamented this
constriction of their familial space, as demonstrated by Rebecca’s August 16, 1780
letter to her Aunt Catherine that "I long to see you & to do every Thing in my Power
to soften & alleviate all your Distresses, & divide with you all my Pleasures."\textsuperscript{112} As a
result, they began to learn how to textually enlarge this constricted space of
expression, working hard to avoid any notion of diminished affections. Catherine’s
January 29, 1779 letter to her brother demonstrated this epistolary mindset: "I wish
you could realise, my dear Brother, how Happy I am made by these frequent
Repetitions of your unabated Affection: I assure you I often reperuse the endearing
expressions with the highest Satisfaction, & exult in the Idea that they are not Words

\textsuperscript{110} Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 16, 1780, Byles MS.
\textsuperscript{111} Mather Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Feb. 5, 1784, Byles MS.
\textsuperscript{112} Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 16, 1780, Byles MS.
of mere Form, but deliberately Thought on, & committed to Paper." This letter, written in the early years of separation, reflects a growing confidence that letters could convey authentic feeling akin to physical expressions of the familial bond. To assure a consistency of these affectionate letters, they entreated each other to write as often as opportunity presented itself, for, as Mather III noted, “As a vessel sails for Boston this week, I cannot for bear sending a few lines from a fond idea that Your anxiety to hear from your connections is equal to my own.” And when letters arrived, as Catherine said, the receivers, “in a scribbling Attitude,” quickly responded, so that an ink-and-paper current began to flow around the Atlantic.

The Byleses developed certain recognizable strategies to set this current in motion. The most prevalent was the family’s extensive use of the language of debtor and creditor to refer to their epistolary relationship, keeping track of who owed whom how many letters. The discussion of credit and debt within the epistolary exchange caused an awareness that there should exist a balanced fairness in the relationship, thus not placing the responsibility for familial maintenance too heavily on any sole correspondent. In the Byleses’s case, humor invariably attached itself to these discussions for the purpose of toning down the nature of the complaints, so that

113 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Jan. 29, 1779, Byles Letterbook.
114 Mather Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Feb. 5, 1784, Byles MS.
115 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Jan. 29, 1779, Byles Letterbook.
116 Sarah Pearsall also finds this language within the bodies of correspondence she studies, arguing that “the entire nexus of familiar letter-writing in these families was informed by the need to balance epistolary accounts and to be ‘in credit’ in terms of letters” (Pearsall, Atlantic Families, 126). Pearsall’s chapter on this subject, “Credit in Life and Letters,” 111-148, focused much more on the connection this language must imply “between the market and the family” (126), and the educative prescriptions of this language, noting that the “intermingling of feeling and tenderness, with the language of credit and debt, demonstrates the ways in which metaphors of debt and credit were deeply embedded even in the sensible family” (130). For the Byles family, I find it more important to focus on the importance of simple inscription of numbers of letters that goes hand in hand with this language, as they do not seem to use the language to educate in the value of credit, per se, but rather as yet another strategy to strengthen their epistolary connection. Regardless, however, Pearsall’s insight is an interesting one and deserves further scrutiny in application to other family correspondence.
“demands” for letters were in fact closer to chiding reminders than anything else. This
is not to imply that they thus lessened the seriousness with which they took each
other’s devotion to writing letters. Rather, they used their joking scolds to prevent the
tone of their letters from seeming overly accusatory, this being a medium without the
aid of facial expressions or vocal patterns. Ultimately, for the Byleses, the
significance of these humorous exchanges was not so much any socially derived
mercantile lessons they were either embodying or attempting to impart. Instead, they
were appropriating a culturally available language that was particularly useful to their
situation. Credit-and-debt exchanges caused family members to repeatedly inscribe
each other’s contributions to the relationship. A representative example of these
exchanges began on August 31, 1780, when Catherine wrote Rebecca:

You appear much mortified my dear Becca, at not receiving Answers to all your Epistles, &
seem to imagine that I am four or five Letters in your Debt. Indeed, my dear, I fancy you are a
little mistaken in your Calculations, as by an exact Computation, I find out that I have eight of
your Letters & have wrote you seven including this . . .  so that with a great [stretch?] of
Genius, & the Assistance of a little Arethimetick, I find that I have sent you Letter for Letter,
once only excepted . . .  And now, [having?] accurately stated the Affair between Debtor &
Creditor, & ballanced, our Accounts, I will give you a Receipt in full & begin a new score.1 1 7

Rebecca responded with a grateful acknowledgement, “To attempt to describe the
pleasure with which I receiv’d my beloved Aunts, welcome Epistle, would be in vain,
it can only be realis’d by those who love with the same tender affection and who have
impatiently waited for a Letter.”118

This exchange is significant on a number of levels. To begin with, it
demonstrates quite well the melding of “credit and debt” diction with humor typical

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117 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca (Becca) Byles, Aug. 31, 1780, Byles Letterbook.
118 Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 18, 1780, Byles MS.
to the Byles family correspondence. More importantly, it allowed the correspondents to quantitatively review both sides of the equation of involvement and thereby acknowledge its balance. This accounting was critical to the Byleses’s ability to successfully accomplish the maintenance of their family through their letters. There could be no simpler, more concrete demonstration of commitment to the epistolary connection than what would be necessary to write this exchange: first, saving each other’s letters so as to be able to prove how many letters had actually arrived on either side; second, each correspondents’ keeping a record of how many they themselves had written; and, third, in a proclamation of the numbers, a recounting and remembrance of each other’s investitures. In the final sense, then, Rebecca’s loving and grateful reply was no more than could be expected, and this too was typical of the Byleses’s acknowledging responses within this kind of textual interaction, reminded as they were of each other’s affection in both prose and basic “Arithmetick.”

It is crucial to note, however, that strategies such as credit-and-debt diction were not always successful at keeping the letter writing relationship constant. Ultimately, Mary and Catherine and the nieces and nephews maintained epistolary relationships that spanned their lifetimes, lasting two, three, four, and five decades. The rhythm of that maintenance, however, did suffer from periods of staccato, or, worse, silence. Catherine, for example, wrote Nancy in 1805: “[O]ften, very often, have we deplored the long & painful interruption in our correspondance, & an

119 Other examples of the Byleses’s humorous manner of handling “letter debts,” so to speak, abound within both outgoing and incoming correspondence, but to list a few: Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., May 22, 1778 Byles Letterbook; Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Anna (Nancy) Byles, Aug. 29, 1780, Byles Letterbook; Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 11, 1783, Byles MS; and Mather Byles III to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Apr. 12, 1785, Byles MS.

120 Again, examples abound, but a rather extraordinarily humorous one is found in Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Jr., Sept. 16, 1778.
involuntary sigh has accompanied the reflection that the last date we possessed in
your hand writing was as far back as May – 1802.”121 In the same year, she wrote to
Mather Brown: “Sensible as you must be of my very early & steady affection for you,
you must naturally suppose I have felt myself hurt by the long cessation in our
correspondence.”122 The emotional strength with which family members responded to
moments of pause in the relationship only serves to highlight how important it was to
them. Moreover, despite periods of respite by certain correspondents, who were often
embroiled in the details of their immediate circumstances, the seasonally-withered
relationship never died. And thus Catherine could write: “The renewal of a
correspondence with those we love cannot fail to awaken a thousand tender emotions
in a mind of sensibility . . . like a weary traveller returning to the dear domestic circle
after a toilsome journey, we forget the anxieties we have experienced during our
painful distance from each other in the kind . . . affections of our encircling
friends.”123

For the Byleses, letters became crucial emotional and physical objects that
allowed them to create a certain immediacy in their decidedly not immediate
relationship. Intense written affection was key to this illusion of proximity. In this
sense, it is important to understand that the Byles family pushed beyond typical
eighteenth-century letter forms and their structural boundaries both in the language
that composed their letters as well as in the purposes their correspondence served.
Each of the Byleses constantly and repeatedly expressed their love for one another in

121 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Anna (Nancy) Byles Desbrisay, Aug. 10, 1805, Harvard Collection, vol. 1.
122 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, Feb. 19, 1802, Harvard Collection, vol. 1 and Brown MS.
123 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Sarah (Sally) Byles Desbrisay, Nov. 30, 1802, Harvard Collection, vol. 1.
their letters. Assurances of their love, the sending of hugs and kisses, and expressions of how dearly they cared for and missed one another were in the openings and closings, bodies, and postscripts of practically every letter in the collection of their correspondence. More importantly, in addition to these quite typical sentiments of affection, the Byleses developed particular modes of epistolary expression. They began to describe their emotional relationship to their letters themselves, infusing the medium itself with sentimental language. The simplest examples of this practice were such as that of Polly’s October 22, 1778 letter to Eliza, in which she stated, “I am highly delighted at receiving so pretty a Letter from my dear Betsy, & I cannot help feeling very proud to think I have so accomplished a Neice.”124 In a similar tone, Catherine wrote Rebecca in the same letter packet, “With the fondest emotions, my dear Rebecca, I open &, peruse your affectionate Epistle, [while?] the agreeable Style, & delicate sensibility (so conspicuous thro’ the whole) merrits my instant Attention.”125

Because the space and context of the Byles family’s relationship had changed so drastically at the time of the family’s separation, part of the family’s ability to reinvent themselves within the new space was to create a vocabulary surrounding the emotion associated with the medium. Even Mather Brown, who was best with pictures rather than words, embraced the epistolary language of affection. In 1811, he began work on a self-portrait intended for his aunts wherein he painted himself holding one of his letters addressed to Mary and Catherine on which one can read the words: “My Dear Aunts, / Neither time nor / distance have / diminished my /

124 Mary (Polly) Byles to Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsy) Byles, Oct. 22, 1778, Byles Letterbook.
125 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca (Becca) Byles, Oct. 23, 1778, Byles Letterbook.
affection." (See Plate One) But perhaps the best written articulation of this emotional connection to letter writing was in Mather III’s October 20, 1784 letter to his Aunt Catherine:

Need I ask you often to write one [letter] or tell you that your expressions of regard afford me infinite satisfaction? – ‘Tis a pleasurable idea that in places which we are not allowed to visit there exist persons who are warmly interested in our welfare; whose spirits keep pace with our own, and ‘turn at the touch of joy or woe,’ as the vicissitudes of life affect us. Connections like these give a zest to the enjoyments, or soothe the mortifications of life. – they give to existence its’ value – and it is for these alone that I feel anxious to live, or ambitious to rise in the world.127

By ascribing emotion to letters as well as the letter writing relationship more generally while stating the centrality of the letters to their lives, family members were able to transform physical displays of affection to explicitly textual expressions.

The Byleses did not produce this language within a cultural vacuum. Much of their correspondence seems to have been shaped – or at least influenced – by the eighteenth-century cultural mind-set known as “sensibility.” Sensibility was a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century value generally understood to be a “mode of self.” Its definition is complex and elusive, but Sarah Knott in her study of sensibility during the revolutionary era describes it reasonably well:

Sensibility was based, not in strict oppositions of head and heart, reason and passion, but rather in a naturally sensitive, briskly responsive, and thoroughly holistic self . . . The self’s sensitivity . . . was to the surrounding world, its external environment. The sensible self was simultaneously made and expressed in social interaction by sensations of sympathy and fellow feeling.128

Unfortunately, however useful Knott’s definition might be in a general sense, sensibility remains a slippery and problematic concept. It is indeed difficult to define,

126 Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, July 4, 1812, Harvard Collection, vol. 2; Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 26, 1822, Brown MS. Evans, Mather Brown, 160.
127 Mather Byles III to Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Oct. 20, 1784, Byles MS.
and it is nearly impossible to prove that the eighteenth-century authors of apparently “sensible” language were exposed or indoctrinated into writing in such a manner by reading specific texts rather than by picking up a mode of emotional expression more casually and less self-consciously. While this leaves the historian dissatisfied, it is undeniable that families such as the Byleses embraced certain tenets that correspond with historians’ broad understandings of sensibility. For example, a “sensible” awareness of one’s self, one’s environment, and one’s social interactions would have been especially important for separated families such as the Byleses. As has been mentioned above, family members’ abilities to narrate their lives to one another, and, correspondingly, to read each other’s accounts, sympathetically and “with feeling” was an important component of how that family functioned within a textual medium.129

Sympathy was a particularly important element of sensibility for the family as sympathetic awareness allowed family members to shrink the distance between them and participate more immediately in each other’s lives. The Byleses can therefore be seen as having employed what Sarah Pearsall terms a “feeling heart,” which she connects to the construct of sensibility stating, “[sensibility] is best defined as the ability to possess and to display a feeling heart.”130 Within contexts of physical togetherness, “the body – with its tears, its expressions, its convulsions – could display authentic affection.”131 For letter writers, however, sensibility demanded that “epistolary prose . . . take the place of physical feeling . . . Writers of letters had to

129 Quote from Pearsall, Atlantic Families, 90.
130 Ibid., 84.
131 Ibid., 89.
exchange feelings for texts; readers of letters had to exchange texts for feelings."132
Simply stated, the correspondents needed to employ strong language of love and affection to exhibit their emotional attachment to one another. The Byleses’s emotional epistolary language can thus be interpreted as falling squarely within the context of a broader eighteenth-century cultural phenomenon.

The sensible language of feeling was therefore one important element of the framework of sensibility within the Byleses’s letters. But definitions of sensibility also stressed the importance of one’s ability to respond to one’s environment perceptively and “sympathetically.” This ability to connect with one’s surroundings was an important skill set for the family members to develop in order to successfully maintain connection within their letters. The family relied heavily on the individual correspondents’ aptitude for describing their surroundings. Descriptions of this sort gave the family members the ability to transcend the physical distance between them and exist on an imaginary plane where closeness became immediate. Catherine best described the necessary attitude in her letter to Mather Brown on March 8, 1782: “I am exceedingly pleased, my dear Mather, with the Accounts from your own Pen . . . I assure you you have employed much of my Thoughts since your Departure, & My Heart with an unusual Degree of Sympathy has attended you thro’ the various Vicissitudes you have [met?): I now participate in all your Pleasures.”133 Letter writing allowed for vicarious participation through the use of imagination.

Armed with this sympathetic sensibility and the skill of creating images through words on paper, the Byleses were able to construct an imaginary space in

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133 Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Brown, Mar. 8, 1782, Byles Letterbook.
which they could experience each other’s lives as immediately as possible. In some instances, they described their immediate surroundings as they wrote each other letters, occasionally referring to such immediate objects as their pens, study-desks, or the letters they had before them. They also inscribed other simple scenes such as in Catherine’s to Eliza on April 20, 1782: “I am writing by a dim Lamp, in my Chamber; Tis past Eleven oClock, & all is hushed, & silent around me;” or Rebecca’s to Catherine and Mary: “Standing at a Window, observing a large number of well-dressed Troops, marching to a Review, was your Dutiful Neice, when the sound . . . ‘Pappa has got Letters’ caught my attention, in a moment I found myself at the study Door.”¹³⁴ On the other hand, sometimes they more elaborately painted the scene as Mather III did in his February 5, 1784 letter to his aunts:

the Clock has just struck two and the night is beautiful. The Moon shines remarkably [bright?] the Air is calm, and every thing around me is hushed in the profoundest silence. There is a mild, serene, – (I want an Expression; – I cannot call it Melancholly, it is something more pleasing) – what such a scene inspires the mind with – a calm elevation of Soul, which is the most delightful Sensation I am acquainted with.¹³⁵

Beyond describing their immediate surroundings as they wrote, they more often transcribed the scenes of their daily lives, so that each other’s “thoughts . . . [might] steal across the Atlantic, and follow . . . in . . . various Pursuits, and wish ‘however vainly’ to participate.”¹³⁶ It was within this body that Mather Brown rather comically enumerated the sights of his London in his first few months there for his family members back in Boston, writing, “Has St. Pauls aspiring Dome, or the Abbeys solitary Gloom, most attracted my Attention, has the Curiosities of the muse or the enchanting Walks of Stowe, or Kensington engrossed my Leisure Hours? . . . I have

¹³⁴ Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Elizabeth (Eliza/Betsy) Byles, Apr. 20, 1784, Byles MS; Rebecca (Becca) Byles to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, June 11, 1783, Byles MS.
¹³⁵ Mather Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Feb. 5, 1784, Byles MS.
¹³⁶ Mather Brown to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Aug. 5, 1782, Byles MS.
seen the Lyons and the King, and have alternately gasped, gasped and laughed, like
any other Simpleton.”\footnote{137} Similarly, upon Rebecca’s request Catherine recounted
aspects of the Boston landscape immediately visible from their home:

> On one side (if you remember) we have a fine open Prospect of the Neck . . . forming a most
delightful Landscape: On the other side, the great City of Boston presents itself to your View,
in a most beautiful arrangement of Magnificent Buildings, stately Domes, or ample Theatres:
On the Back you behold a well-regulated Garden . . . On the Front . . . [whither?] you look,
the blooming Verdure, or the zig-zag walks engage your Attention.\footnote{138}

These textually constructed scenes granted the family members the power to
remove themselves from their own physical settings and be transported to those of
their absent relations. These descriptions were sometimes contained within letters that
the family members, and most especially Mather Jr., wrote as “journal entries;”
wherein they used a journalistic frame to better aid in following the day-to-day
processes of each other’s lives. Significantly, the journals were written with the
intention that would be read out loud to the entire family on the receiving end.\footnote{139} One
such example was in the journal-letter Mather Jr. wrote his sisters on February 6,
1783, which enumerated daily occurrences from October 16 to the day it was sent.
The letter included such phrases as: “imagine to yourself a Man, near Fifty Years of
Age, sitting in his Study, before a good Fire, with a Book in his Hand and Spectacles
upon his Nose, & you have an exact Picture of me ‘till Dec. 6” and “[Nov.]13.
Baptised a Child which makes the thousandth upon my List.”\footnote{140} By inviting

\begin{footnotes}
\item[137] Mather Brown to Mather Byles Sr., Mary (Polly), and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 10, 1781,
Byles MS.
\item[138] Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Rebecca (Becca) Byles, Sept. 10, 1781, Byles Letterbook.
\item[139] Mather Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Dec. 24, 1783, Byles MS; Mather
Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, May 5, 1784, Byles MS; Mary (Polly) and
Catherine (Kitty) Byles to Mather Byles Almon, Nov. 8, 1816, Harvard Collection, vol. 3.
\item[140] Mather Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Feb. 6, 1783, Byles MS. There are a
number of these journalistic letters written between the family members. A few examples: Mather
Byles Jr. to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, Sept. 23, 1783, Byles MS; Mather Byles Jr. to
Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, [Apr.?] 8, 1784, Byles MS; Catherine (Kitty) Byles to
\end{footnotes}
participation in each other's daily activities as closely as was possible given their separation, these journals and descriptions – simple and elaborate alike – and a sympathetic eye on either end of the connection served to build yet another crucial conduit through which the Byleses constructed their familial networks of support.

Rebecca (Becca) Byles, [Dec. ? 1784], Byles Letterbook; [Catherine (Kitty) Byles?] to Mather Byles Jr., Sept. 14, 1782, Byles Letterbook.
Conclusion

In order to successfully reconstruct and maintain their family after being separated by the American Revolution using the texts of their epistolary connection, the Byleses used recognizable, pattern-forming strategies. They consistently wrote within the eighteenth-century letter forms “letters of news” and “letters of visit/friendship” and guided their correspondence with the contemporary societal values of familiarity and, to a more important degree, sensibility. “Letters of news” provided the family with a platform to communicate both significant and trivial events in each other’s lives and to participate as much as they were able in their encouragement, support, and advice to one another as events dictated. In these cases in particular, familiar conversational prose gave the structure a tone of spontaneity that lent itself to the telling of these events. The second form, “letters of visit/friendship,” consisted of the body of letters that dealt with the family’s anxieties surrounding the navigation of their separation. These letters used the language of credit and debt – with a dash of comedy – and invocations of religious assurance to “prove” to one another their enduring affection as well as remind each other of the inevitability of their reunion when they all rejoined in God’s Heavenly realm. Finally, the Byleses were able to demonstrate each other’s continuing love for one another, inscribing their “feeling hearts” to their letters; as well as narrate and sympathetically read descriptions of their physical settings so as to imaginatively follow each other in their daily pursuits.

The American Revolution caused the beginning of a separation that, excepting a few very brief reunions after the war’s end, endured for the rest of the Byleses’s
lives. The family was separated by mile upon mile of land and water, and they lived very separate lives in their different dots upon the globe. And yet, at the same time, they did not. They were informed of each other’s moments of bliss and anguish; they knew through their mind’s eyes what their family members’ homes and surroundings looked like, at least in narrative sketch; and they were an enduring source of encouraging support for one another. The sense of immediacy cultivated by the letter writing relationship thus provided a critical conduit for familial connection and construction. Beyond this, the years of separation never dimmed their expressions of love and concern for one another. Through their lasting epistolary connection, they were thus able to reconstruct and maintain an emotional togetherness that transcended the reality of physical distance. Moreover, letters became a physical component of the material existence of the Byles family. The letters became collections of a family history that was saved and shared and, most crucially, kept within the family circle. When Catherine wrote her will in 1832 five years before her death in 1837, she made specific provisions that family “manuscripts,” among her other belongs, “be kept as family memorials once belonging to me and my beloved and departed sister Mary.”  

It was through this material inheritance that a female descendant later painstakingly transcribed the letters in the 1910s, thus preserving Mary and Catherine’s words for posterity. For multiple generations of Byleses, letters became the manner in which

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142 The collection currently housed at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Letters of Catherine and Mary Byles of Boston, daughters of Rev. Mather Byles: Vols. 1-3, 1793-1835, was transcribed by S[usanna] W. A. Almon, who seems to be a descendent of Rebecca Byles Almon through her father, Cotton Mather Almon (NovaScotiaGenealogy.com, Historical Vital Statistics), from 1913-1916. She was thus Mary and Catherine’s great-great grandniece. I have not been able to locate any record of the originals of these letters; it would seem as though they have been lost.
their family was constituted. And so it was that Mather III could write to his aunts on July 21, 1797, “the setting down to write a [you a] letter . . . gives me much the same emotion which I should feel on just landing in Boston and knocking at Your door.”

143 Mather Byles III to Mary (Polly) and Catherine (Kitty) Byles, July 21, 1797, Byles MS.
Appendix

Chart One: Genealogical Chart of the Byles Family, Generations One—Three

Note: Boldface indicates primary contributor to Byles family correspondence
Chart Two: Genealogical Chart of the Byles Family, Mather Byles Jr.'s First Marriage with Fourth Generation

Note: Boldface indicates primary contributor to Byles family correspondence
Chart Three: Genealogical Chart of the Byles Family, Mather Byles Jr.'s Second Marriage with Fourth Generation

Note: Boldface indicates primary contributor to Byles family correspondence
Plate One: Mather Brown, “Self-Portrait,” 1812

Figure 1: Mather Brown, "Self Portrait," 1812, Oil on canvas, 30.25 in. x 25.25 in. This self portrait was sent as a gift to Brown’s aunts Mary and Catherine Byles in 1822 with the message "My Dear Aunts/Neither time nor/distance [has]/diminished [my] affection." inscribed on the letter held by Brown in the bottom left corner of the portrait, indicating Brown’s intentional connection of the painting with his letter writing relationship. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.
Map One: Major Geographical Movements of the Third Generation, 1789-1822

Map Two: Detail of Major Geographical Movements of the Third Generation, 1789-1822

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