

Laura Mack Kephart's Letter  
to Leonard W. Kephart  
February 16, 1946



Transcribed and Edited by  
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### Outline of the Series

This transcript and its bibliography, footnotes, and explanatory material was prepared as a final assessment in ENG 618: Research Methods in English, a compulsory gateway course for the M.A. in English at Western Carolina University. This project is the culmination of the work done in ENG 618, deferring to our judgment regarding the viability of our editorial decisions, revolving around the following learning objectives:

1. By the end of the semester, students will be able to conduct appropriate, effective, and ethical scholarship.
  - a. Effectively locate, assess, and use *advanced research tools* (handbooks, databases, guides, bibliographies, etc.) appropriate to a subject.
    - Students will be able to use a wide variety of such tools and evaluate those tools.
  - b. Locate and assess appropriate *advanced scholarship* (print and electronic scholarship) and apply that research to specific disciplinary questions or issues.
    - Students will be able to find a variety of scholarship, assess both the appropriateness and rigor of that scholarship, and incorporate that scholarship correctly and effectively to the scholarly work at hand.
  - c. Construct accurate bibliographic citations and incorporate reference citations according to standard styles for the discipline.
    - Students will be able to annotate, abstract, and cite materials following standard MLA format as well as other citation styles common to their area of study (APA, CMS).
2. By the end of the semester, students will be able to conduct basic editorial work and evaluate the editorial work of others.
  - Students will be able to understand the process by which the texts we use are available.

The following transcription project is presented as submitted by the student editor. While great care was taken in conducting research and assembling the text and annotations, errors are always possible. Good scholarship requires checking of sources and corroboration by authoritative sources. It is hoped that the annotation and transcription of these materials will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, faculty members, and other patrons and users of WCU's Special Collections resources.

## Introduction

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The edition that follows is created from the manuscript of Laura Mack Kephart's letter written to her son, Leonard W. Kephart, on February 16, 1946. In this letter Laura recounts the conditions of her living situation, including the coming and going of fellow boarders, at the Rileys' boarding house where she is living. She discusses the overall living conditions around Cornell University, describing them as quite poor. She also gives information on various family members' whereabouts and academic or professional pursuits. The letter ends with a quote from Confucius and a cryptic message about a box Laura found with a wedding dress and old letters inside. Laura encloses an advertisement from the Herson Funeral Home, which she refers to in her letter. The advertisement enclosure is included in this edition as a scanned copy located in the Appendix of this document.

Laura Mack Kephart was the wife of the acclaimed writer Horace Kephart, who was instrumental in the creation of Smoky Mountain National Park ("Timeline"). Married April 12, 1887, in Ithaca, New York, the couple had six children ("Family Tree"). Horace was a troubled man, and after the birth of his six children, he had a mental breakdown and left the family to pursue his outdoor adventures (McDade). Laura never left him, and always remained steadfast in her support of her estranged husband (McCue). Horace Kephart eventually died in a car crash in 1931 (McCue). At the time of the letter's writing, Laura was 84, and again lived in Ithaca, New York, at her sister, Julia, and brother-in-law, Howard Riley's, boarding house (Kephart 2). Laura lived another eight years before her death from a long illness at 92 on December 20, 1954 ("Find a Grave").

Leonard Kephart, the letter's recipient, is Laura and Horace's third child and first son, born in 1892, in Ithaca, New York ("Family Tree"). Leonard studied agriculture at Cornell University, graduating in 1913 ("This Week"). In 1916, Leonard married Frances Jane Frazer, eventually having three children together, Jane, George, and Barbara ("Family Tree"; Blevins iii). He eventually took a job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and wrote several books on the subject of plants, including *Growing Crimson Clover* and *Poison-Ivy, Poison-oak, and Poison Sumac: Identification, Precautions, and Eradication* ("Books"). An avid outdoorsman as well, Leonard spent time outside conducting his research. On one research trip to Africa in 1927, Leonard scaled Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain, becoming the first American to do so, and discovering three new types of clover on his way ("This Week"). Leonard and his mother appear to have a close and open relationship, as she wrote him many times over the course of her life, recounting everything from her last will and testament, to her views on certain historical and political events, to her accounting on the furniture whereabouts during her stay at her sister's boarding home (see Western Carolina University Special Collections).

## Editor's Note

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The edition of this letter from Laura Kephart to Leonard Kephart uses a diplomatic format to preserve the original document's authenticity (Bodard). For this letter, the diplomatic style of transcription does not interfere with the original manuscript's readability. This edition has been transcribed in the same format as it appears written in the letter, including any extra marks, deletions, misspellings, mistakes, indentations, and mark-throughs. The date, heading, and greeting are also placed to replicate the original manuscript. This edition follows the original manuscript by page, and footnotes are used to allow quick access to background information, without risk of the reader losing context or their place within the letter. Additionally, the use of [MS Page #] signals transitions within the original layout of the manuscript.

Laura Kephart has several characteristic penmanship, syntax, and grammar features. These features are included here as a reference for future readings of Laura Kephart's letters.

- The letter *p* is left open and at times can appear similar to a cursive *f*
- Laura often crosses her *t* to the right of the letter, rather than within it
- "And" is abbreviated at times within the manuscript as "+"
- The lowercase *e* appears similar in many places to the capital *E*
- A few words have been underlined to signal emphasis
- The dot over a lowercase *i* may sometimes appear shifted to the right, rather than above
- Several words have been abbreviated within the letter, and remain abbreviated within the transcription
- Sometimes an Em dash is used at the end of the sentence with a period behind it to signal a trailing off similar to an ellipsis

## Manuscript Description

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Laura Kephart's letter is written on the front and back side of two pages of stationary that appear yellowed with age. The measurements of both pages are eight inches wide by ten- and one-half inches tall. The paper appears thin, as the back of the correspondence can be seen through on the reverse side. The letter has been folded in half vertically and then folded nearly in half again horizontally, likely to fit into an envelope.

The text is black and appears darker in some areas than others, indicating possible changes in writing pressure. The writing is neat, and mostly legible. The third page is marked with a "2" at the top signaling it is the start of a second sheet of paper.

The manuscript also includes the original envelope in which the letter was mailed to its recipient. The envelope is quite yellowed, with some creasing and wear marks along the edges. On the envelope's front L.M. Kephart and address are located as the sender, while Leonard W. Kephart and address are located as the receiver. There is a purple postage stamp which reads: "United States Postage, Thomas Jefferson 1891-1899, 3 cents 3." There is also a black ink stamp which reads: "Ithaca, N.Y., Fee 17, 9-PM, 1946."

[MS Page 1]

Feb. 16, 1946

Dear Leonard,<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Dickie told <sup>^that</sup> your letter was received.<sup>2</sup> Wouldn't I just love to get hold of that rascal.

Compared to you I have not been busy, but have been so, up to my capacity to enjoy. The last of the cows left the farm ~~last~~ the 4<sup>th</sup> + the Palmers moved out last Mon.<sup>3</sup> It surely seems deserted up there. Julia + I went up Tues. to see how things were.<sup>4</sup> They proved to be was to such an extent that Julia's Mary + I went up Wed.<sup>5</sup> She spent all day hoeing out downstairs, while my time was spent moving out upstairs.<sup>6</sup> The rooming condition being what it is, I offered to stay here until the Univ. closes in June, or go to the farm now, depending on which place was wanted by some one else.<sup>7</sup> It never occurred to me that would mean moving out entirely upstairs but - . The Palmers left some furniture for me

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard W. Kephart, the third child and first son of Horace and Laura Kephart ("Family Tree"). He would have been 54 years old at the time of this letter.

<sup>2</sup> Dickie is unable to be identified.

<sup>3</sup> The Palmers are unable to be identified.

Mon. is Laura's abbreviation for Monday.

<sup>4</sup> Julia is Julia Riley, Laura's sister. Julia is married to Howard Riley.

Tues. is Laura's abbreviation for Tuesday.

<sup>5</sup> Wed. is Laura's abbreviation for Wednesday.

<sup>6</sup> Hoeing out is a term that refers to cleaning or clearing out; to get one's things in order ("Young Folks" 359).

<sup>7</sup> In this passage Laura is referring to staying at the boarding house that her sister, Julia, runs with her husband ("Census" 10). Based on later letters, it appears Laura chose to stay at the boarding house.

Univ. is Laura's abbreviation of University, likely Cornell University.

[MS Page 1]

personally. This includes a kitchen cabinet in  
which I had my dishes etc. The young woman  
moving in down stairs wants the cabinet - <sup>8</sup> she has a

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<sup>8</sup> Down stairs is Laura's original spelling.

[MS Page 2]

big pantry with window + all, but she wants the cabinet. It never entered the Rileys heads that it was mine + promised it to her without consulting me, which made it necessary for me to move all my things into the attic.<sup>9</sup> They did not mean for me to be disturbed, but the folks coming in are C.S's so - .<sup>10</sup> This is a very minor matter but I did think it would not be necessary for me to move again, until time for me to take advantage of the enclosed ad.<sup>11</sup> The rooming conditions are so bad here that a "Baby, to be born in April wants 3 or more rooms for ret. + mother available Mar. 1. Will pay \$10 – for any information..."<sup>12</sup>

Sam Bird is coming back next month.<sup>13</sup> He has two terms more for graduation. If Laura is Roy Ferris, Sam + Marnie are all here next Fall won't they have a grand time! They all are fine youngsters.<sup>14</sup> Your family news was surely full of go. As it seems very improbable that we could get

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<sup>9</sup> Rileys is Laura's original spelling.

<sup>10</sup> The manuscript is unclear here. "C.S's" could also be "C.5's," as the capital "S" is inconsistent with Laura's other iterations of capital "S" in this letter. "C.S's" may likely refer to Christian Scientists, particularly students in Christian Science at Cornell University ("Titles").

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix. Laura is referring to the enclosed funeral services ad from Herson's Funeral Home. Herson's Funeral Home is still in business in the same location, as of November 2020. However, Laura did not end up using Herson's funeral services. Rather, Bang's Funeral Home conducted the services. Bang's Funeral Home appears to no longer be in business but was located, at the time of services, at Laura's childhood home ("Find a Grave").

<sup>12</sup> Background information for this quote was unable to be identified. However, it appears to be a joke Laura is making, that rooms are so sparse, one must seek a rental before they are even born.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Bird is the son of Laura's daughter Barbara Bird and Barbara's husband, Royal Gould Bird (Blevins 2).

<sup>14</sup> Roy Ferris is the son of Laura's son George S. Kephart, and George's wife, Pauline Maisch ("Family Tree"). Marnie is the nickname for Margaret Bird, the daughter of Laura's daughter Barbara Bird and Barbara's husband, Royal Gould Bird (Blevins 2).

[MS Page 2]

the family together for a reunion, I want each unit to have a picture taken then I can union them with little trouble. I have a Chicago family taken in Boonville last Christmas time.<sup>15</sup> See what you can do about getting your unit, before they are all away at College.

E. Lansing plowed me on the 14<sup>th</sup> that they snowed under as they were 26 yrs. ago.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It is unclear what this sentence is referring to. However, it may be mention of a photograph of family members living in Chicago at the time on a trip to Boonville, which is possibly Boonville, Indiana, located roughly 300 miles south of Chicago. It could also possibly be Boonville, Missouri, as the family has ties to the area.

<sup>16</sup> Lansing is a neighboring town in Tompkins County, New York, about 10 minutes from Ithaca. Laura could be referring here to the record snowfall of February 1914, which was the largest snowfall in one day ever recorded in the area, dropping 26 inches of snow on the city (Almendarez). However, that date is roughly six years from the date that Laura would be referring to by saying "26 years ago."



[MS Page 3]

(2)<sup>17</sup>

Cornelia managed to get to the office in the morning, but was sent home in a truck at 11 a.m.<sup>18</sup> Carleton is in Fla.<sup>19</sup> Some folks are lucky. Jeanette is on terminal leave at the Tulls, “until they turn me out.”<sup>20</sup> I wrote her to come right down to me, if – or not – that happened.

Manton + Dorothy are setting up house-keeping again in Rochester.<sup>21</sup> Guess she has given up her “career.”

Roy Ferris is on his terminal leave, seemingly headed for Germany.<sup>22</sup>

Give my love to the Cates + tell them to expect me to descend on them, when I get rich enough to travel, but Ted need not make up my bed now, because it would get damp by the time I can come.<sup>23</sup>

It was not my intention to write such a tale of woe as this document as has disclosed, but it has upset me a bit, as it would be so

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<sup>17</sup> A “2” is placed at the top of this page in the original manuscript to indicate the second page of the letter.

<sup>18</sup> Cornelia K. Kephart (1888), first child of Horace and Laura Kephart (“Family Tree”).

<sup>19</sup> Carleton is unable to be identified.

Fla. is Laura’s abbreviation for Florida.

<sup>20</sup> Jeanette is Laura’s daughter Cornelia’s daughter with husband Henry Moore (Blevins 2).

It is unclear what Tulls is, or if it is an abbreviation for something else.

<sup>21</sup> Manton is the son of Julia and Howard Riley (“Census” 10).

Dorothy is unable to be identified, but presumably Manton’s wife.

<sup>22</sup> Based on latter letters, it is known Roy Ferris enlisted in the army, however a draft card or enlistment location was unable to be identified.

<sup>23</sup> The Cates and Ted are unable to be identified.

[MS Page 3]

comfy to have my things + me stay put for a while. However as old wise Confucius says “It is not the mountains we stumble over, it is the mole hills that trip us.” + this is a very small mole hill.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The quote generally associated with Confucius is, “Men do not stumble over mountains, but over mole hills.” However, as with many “ancient quotes,” it is difficult to track down a primary source. It is interesting to note, that Laura changed the masculine “men” to the gender neutral “we”. Punctuation is Laura’s original from the manuscript.

[MS Page 4]

Well, it is time for the postman + this has  
 taken plenty of your time so here's lots of  
 love for you all + xxxx...for the babies.

Mama<sup>25</sup>

Julia + I were looking over something  
 less than a ton of old letters etc., wham a box  
 marked "Laura Mack in Kermiss dress

H.M.

owls,"<sup>26</sup>

Horace Mack took them\_ the dress is  
 Russian Honeymoon.<sup>27</sup> No one knows  
 where they came from but the enclosed  
 were made from the old plates.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mama is Laura Mack Kephart (1862-1954).

<sup>26</sup> A Kermiss is a traditional Belgian festival which celebrates the harvest. During the festival, the community gathers to eat, drink, and dance to music. The festival is associated with Catholic mass and combines the Dutch words for church and mass (Kobin).

<sup>27</sup> Horace Mack is Laura Mack Kephart's father.

The reference to Russian Honeymoon is likely related to a play popular with students at the time. Cornell University put on the play at least once, in 1886, with a Horace White cast as the lead role ("Death"). In the costume list are several references to a dress (Scribe 5).

<sup>28</sup> The only enclosure with this manuscript is the Herson Funeral Home advertisement. It is unlikely this is the enclosure Laura is referring to here.

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## Appendix

Kephart, Laura Mack. Herson Funeral Home Advertisement. 13 Feb. 1946. Horace Kephart Collection. Hunter Library Special Collections, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, N.C., Enclosure.

