

Concord, Massachusetts

Louisa May Alcott Manuscripts Go to Concord Free Public Library in Private Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Marsha Malinowski Fine Books & Manuscripts and Concord Free Public Library

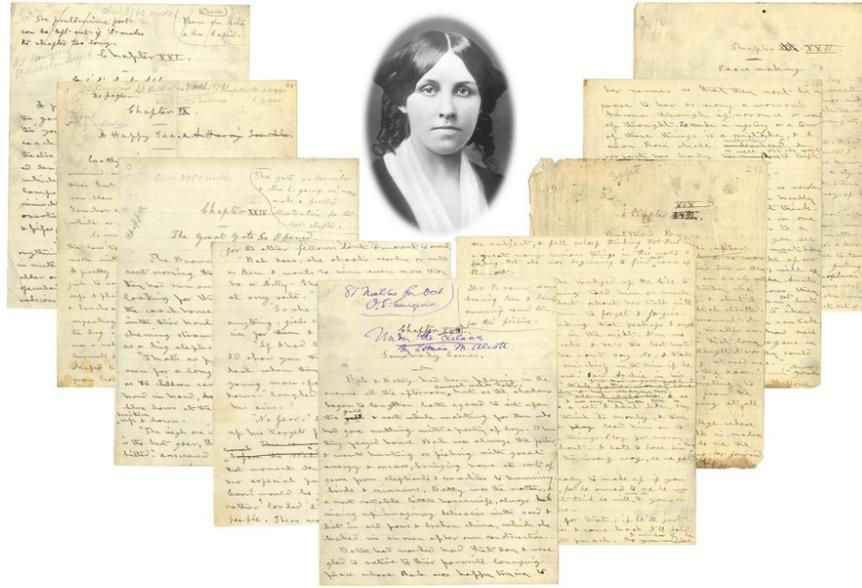
Over 500 pages of original working manuscripts by Louisa May Alcott, one of America's best-loved 19th-century authors, have been sold in a private deal brokered by Marsha Malinowski Fine Books & Manuscripts of New York City to the Concord Free Public Library in Concord, Massachusetts. About a fifth of the material comprises the last six chapters of Alcott's 1875 novel *Eight Cousins*. The rest consists of chapters five through 24 of a lesser-known novel, *Under the Lilacs*, published three years later.

"Such an enormous and important body of manuscript material entirely in the hand of Alcott has never been offered for public or private sale," declared Malinowski, who for nearly three decades was a member of the book department at Sotheby's, where she rose to the position of senior vice president in charge of manuscripts before founding her own firm in 2012. "To work with such an important pair of manuscripts was a privilege," she wrote in an e-mail. "To find the right place for them was my challenge. The minute I walked through the doors of the Concord Free Public Library, I knew I had found the perfect home for them."

Leslie Perrin Wilson, curator of the library's William Munroe Special Collections, said the decision to buy the material was made late in 2015. The payments in three installments were completed at the end of 2016. The price was not disclosed.

"When groups come here, I tell them, 'We're not a glorified *Antiques Roadshow*,'" Wilson said. "This is not about things that have artifactual value or dollar value; this is about things that have research value. And one of the ways you develop research value is by collecting the right kinds of material and by building on your strengths, so that you develop deep holdings over time. This particular acquisition allows us to do that in a big way."

Concord has always had a keen sense of history, perhaps largely because of its central role in events that took place at the start of America's Revolutionary War. Some of the "shots heard 'round the world" on April 19, 1775, were fired on Concord's North Bridge. The same sensitivity applies to the literary past, because of the town's famous writers-in-residence. Not only Alcott but Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson lived in Concord. Yet the town is small in the physical sense of the word. So it does seem extraordinary that its public library would be buying material with research potential—megaton potential in



Louisa May Alcott and some pages of the working manuscripts that were sold to the Concord Free Public Library.

this case—and that the institution doubles as a research library.

"It certainly is unusual," said Wilson. "And it has everything to do with how the library was established by its founder, William Munroe." As Wilson explained, the Concord native spent most of his working life elsewhere, making a fortune in textiles and dry goods. (The William Munroe [1806-1877] who founded the library should not be confused with his father, William Munroe [1778-1861], who was a cabinetmaker and had a pencil factory in Concord.) At the end of his life, he returned, spending summers there while living the rest of the year in Boston. He hadn't married, had no immediate family, and wanted to do something with his money for the town. Initially he wanted to give it to Concord's first public library, established in 1851, but after he spent some time assessing it, he realized the place was inadequate for what he envisioned.

"Munroe wanted to create a repository that would document Concord's literary and historical importance," Wilson said. "So he set up an institution that had a public/private form of joint management that is still in effect today. Essentially there is a town component, which provides the funding for the staff and most of the ongoing operations. And then there is a nonprofit entity that owns the building and the special collections. That has allowed this place to grow in ways that most municipal libraries

couldn't think of doing."

The old library was folded into the current library at its founding in 1873. At the time, Alcott (1832-1888) was living in Concord with her mother, father, and sisters. The Alcotts had various Concord addresses from the 1840s through the late 1870s, but they are especially known for having resided at a place they called Orchard House after the apple trees growing on its acreage. That's where Alcott wrote her semiautobiographical classic *Little Women*, published in 1868, working at a "shelf desk" that her father, the teacher, writer, and reformer Bronson Alcott, made for her. That's also where she wrote the book's sequel, *Little Men*, published in 1871.

Orchard House, which is open for tours to the public (www.louisamayalcott.org), is about one mile from the library, where this new material joins already impressive Alcott holdings. Notable are portions of *Little Women* and *Little Men* in manuscript.

"We have had for many, many years—since the nineteenth century—two chapters from *Little Women* and two chapters from *Little Men*," said Wilson. "For a long time we didn't realize they were the working manuscripts, the ones that went to the publisher. I sat down with an Alcott scholar, Daniel Shealy, and compared those pages with the first editions and saw that the edits had made it into the books. Bingo! So we already had a small amount of the kind of material that was being offered in this purchase. That's why this new acquisition is so exciting to us. It's especially exciting because no one had any idea that such a quantity of working manuscript was out there. So now we are going to be able to offer scholars a large body of material that is going to greatly expand scholarship into her working patterns—how things happened in her writing process from manuscript to the printed book."

Readers familiar only with the most popular books in Alcott's oeuvre may not realize that there has been a major shift in perception about the author over the last three decades. Part of the credit goes to the scholarship of Shealy and Joel Myerson, co-editors of *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* (1987) and *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* (1989). Because of work by them and their colleagues, Alcott has gone from being perceived as a writer for children and young adults to being recognized as someone with a claim to much wider literary significance. Other developments bolstering that new perception have been the publication of a previously unpublished novel by Alcott, *A Long Fatal Love Chase* (1995), and of her previously unknown first novel, *The Inheritance* (1997). In addition, there have been a number



The reading room of the William Munroe Special Collections as seen in 1873 and in 2016. In addition to the Alcott materials, there are also items relating to other exemplary Concord residents, including Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne. There are as well some relating to important personages who crossed paths with the Concordians but lived elsewhere, including Hawthorne's sister-in-law, the innovative educator Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who from 1834 to 1836 assisted Bronson Alcott at his progressive Temple School in Boston.



Ralph Waldo Emerson was the keynote speaker when the Concord Free Public Library's original building was dedicated on October 1, 1873. In the 1930s it was expanded in several directions. "At that time its Victorian Gothic façade was transformed into something more Jeffersonian, reflecting appreciation of Colonial Revival architecture," said curator Leslie Perrin Wilson.

of new books about her, including two annotated editions of *Little Women* published by major presses.

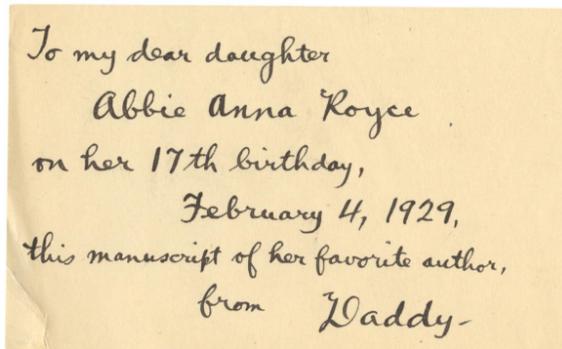
"What's been missing, though, is evidence of her craft," Myerson said. That's because so few of her literary manuscripts survive. "A few complete short story manuscripts are scattered at various libraries, and individual manuscript leaves are fairly common, but, to my knowledge," Myerson stated, "no institution or private collector has so much intact material as the Concord Free Public Library now has with this acquisition."

The working manuscripts that the library bought are so-called printer's copies, the form from which the published works were set. There are numerous revisions, and scrutiny of these will determine which are Alcott's and which are those of editors, printers, or even graphic designers, since many of them pertain to the illustrations. Such printer's-copy manuscripts are extremely scarce because they were usually discarded after type was set.

"Scholars will use these to study Alcott's writing and revision habits in ways that have been hard to do before," Myerson said, especially since Alcott herself downplayed the work that went into her writing, preferring readers to believe it was dashed off with little revision.

Before the library acquired them, the manuscripts had been in the same family for nearly 90 years. This provenance traces back to William Hobart Royce (1878-1963), a native of Springfield, Massachusetts, who was an author, bibliographer, book collector, and member of the rare-books trade in Manhattan. Royce's great literary love was Balzac—he was founder of the Balzac Society of America—but his two teenage daughters were Alcott fans, and he gave each of them one of these manuscripts as birthday gifts in 1929.

Two note cards in the hand of Royce, included in the sale, provide the documentation. One says: "To my dear daughter, Eva Allen Royce, on her 19th birthday, January 22, 1929, this manuscript of her favorite author.



One of the note cards that document the manuscripts' provenance.

"Such an enormous and important body of manuscript material entirely in the hand of Alcott has never been offered for public or private sale."

Papa." The second says: "To my dear daughter Abbie Anna Royce, on her 17th birthday, February 4, 1929, this manuscript of her favorite author, from Daddy."

A third note card hints at how the pair of manuscripts descended in the Royce family to the anonymous seller. Written by Eva Allen Royce, it states: "To dear Sarah Graham Ketchum because you're a devotee of Louisa May Alcott as is your loving Aunt Eva. Eva Allen Royce March 19, 1979."

Marsha Malinowski gave these further details: "The seller, who lives in New England, believes William Hobart Royce stumbled upon the manuscripts in

Manhattan when he was dealing in rare books and manuscripts in the 1920s. Without a doubt," she added, "the seller is thrilled the manuscripts went to a research library, especially one that prides itself on making its rich holdings available to the public."

The library's plans for the new manuscripts are ambitious. "Growing collections is all about research use, and if you don't have that, it makes the whole process meaningless," said Wilson. "Collecting only works if there's something dynamic that can happen with the material. And for us, that dynamic thing is research."

To that end, she continued, "We'll be alerting multiple audiences to the fact that we have this material. We'll be starting with the Alcott scholars. We want the manuscripts to be used. So first of all, we'll catalog them as part of our Louisa May Alcott papers. It has a finding aid, and that's on the Internet. People use it all the time, then they come here and ask to see things. Scholars are used to working like that. We may do a digital version of the manuscripts online, but it will probably only be a partial. We do want people to see the actual pages. When you're on site at a place that has deep collections, one question leads to another, and that allows people to use dovetailing materials to tell a great story."

The library owns an impressive collection of original material relating to other members of the Alcott family, too, including some of Bronson's books in manuscript. There are even several watercolors by Louisa's sister May, the model for the artistic Amy character in *Little Women*—although Wilson cautions those who would put too much emphasis on what her sister Louisa borrowed from life. The novels are after all properly labeled fiction.

For more information, see the library's website (www.concordlibrary.org) or contact Wilson via phone at (978) 318-3342 or e-mail (lwilson@minlib.net).



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