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The Persis Sibley Andrews Black Diaries

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FROM THE COLLECTIONS

The Persis Sibley Andrews Black Diaries *Manuscript Collection, #206*

THE DIARIES of Persis Sibley Andrews Black (1813-1891), constitute one of the most illuminating holdings in the Society's manuscript collections. Maine Historical Society has six volumes of the diaries (along with typed transcriptions) covering the dates from 1841 to 1853. Recently, microfilm copies of additional diaries at the Massachusetts Historical Society have been donated to the library, giving researchers more complete coverage of Persis Sibley's extraordinary life. The microfilmed diaries encompass Persis's later life, from 1853 to 1864.

Persis, the daughter of William and Charlotte Sibley, was a native of Freedom, Maine. In 1842 she wed Charles Andrews (1814-1852) an attorney from Paris Hill, Maine. They were a social, fun-loving and politically well-connected young couple. From political views to the particulars of daily life, Persis's daily accounts illuminate both the broad sweep and the fine points of rural life. Moreover, her writings provide details not usually found in nineteenth-century diaries. On April 14, 1844, she wrote:

Mrs. Washburn has had a "rug party" the past week—they make beautiful ones of rags here—all go & help each other. It is a good deal of work, but they are handsomer than anything I ever saw called "RUG"—the rags are drawn into canvas, cut off & brushed, look like velvet. If the lady who makes the party has not every shade it is bro't her if it is to be found in the village. They are real merry-makings.

Persis married Andrews at the relatively late age of twenty-nine, but her early diaries indicate that she was a happy and adjusted woman who did not pine for marriage. Her writing exhibits a well-developed personal philosophy, and she took a keen interest in politics. She noted in her diary, "I take too much interest in Legislation for a lady. I [should] like to spend all my time at the Capitol if it were consistent." Her interest in politics and literature is impressive and she expresses strong opinions about both, writing in January 1841:



Persis Sibley Andrews Black and her daughter, Persis N. Andrews. Miniature portrait, ca. 1844 by Caroline Hill Barker Wardwell. *Courtesy Maine Historical Society.*

I have rec'd two very pretty presents of expensive Annals, from my old-bachelor friends, for whom I have done many favors the past year. It is very gratifying to have them thus express their gratitude. But how astonishing that a man sho'd think of making so expensive a book as "The Token for 1841"—containing so much puerile, trashy matter, and not more that is valuable. "The Rose of Sharon" is better, but this contains too large a proportion of love—lover & beloved

Charles clerked in the law office of Hannibal Hamlin, represented the town of Turner in the state legislature, and served as Speaker of the House. The Andrews, who had two daughters, moved first to Dixfield and then back to Paris Hill. Charles was elected to Congress in 1850 but died of consumption two years later. Persis married Andrew's law partner, Alvah Black in 1855.

A keen observer, Persis commented in her diary on social events, child rearing, community disasters, religion, politics, agriculture, individual character, a gem hunting expedition, sitting for itinerant women artists, and all events that captured her attention. For example, on July 29, 1849 while living at Paris Hill she wrote,

Yesterday we went to ride taking the children visited the Bridge of the A & St L. Railroad now building at the expense of \$? across the Little Androscoggin. The Irish have formed a village there call'd Paddyville w'h is a place of resort and a great curiosity to this community—never having seen this people in their homes. Children are numerous—fair haired bright eyed & very pretty. Many of them are rather dirty—but not ragged or ill fed. It is funny to see how they live. They mix their flour in a barrel and when baked serv it from the top of the same instead of a table and enjoy their meal with merry—thankful hearts that they are in this land of plenty. Their children will grow up in this free happy land useful members of society.

In its collections, the Society also has a superb miniature portrait of Persis and one of her daughters, painted in 1844 by Rumford native and itinerant portrait painter Caroline Hill Wardwell Barker (1822-after 1894). Mrs. Andrews amusingly described sitting for this portrait in her diary on January 27, 1844:

I have been sitting the past week for my miniature. It is taken with my babe in my arms and both are s'd to be good likenesses.—the baby's perfect. The artist is a young lady of this Co. —Miss Wardwell of Rumford She has boarded with us and asks only \$5.00. Her company more than pays for a week's board. She was anxious to take a

miniature in this way before offering her services in the Capitol, and wished that it sho'd be mine because every body says I resemble her, and my baby is a beauty. The other eve'g I was call'd Miss Wardwell in company, by one who knows us both well, and she says that she is often called Mrs. Andrews. She and hus- are full of plots that they are going to enact—but I tell them I am none alarmed—they would both get sick of their bargain.

In addition, the Maine Historical Society has needlework, artwork, and paper patterns created by Persis, including a theorem that she did while a student at Mrs. Murray's High School for Girls. Together, these collections give a detailed view into the life of an extraordinary woman. It is hoped that the diaries can eventually be published for Sibley's descriptions of daily life in Oxford County are unmatched.

WILLIAM DAVID BARRY *and* STEPHANIE PHILBRICK