

Preface

After the death of my aunt Mary Castle Clark in 1962 there was discovered in the personal effects bequeathed to my sister, Sarah Fassett Castle (II), a box of miscellaneous papers and old family letters. Some months later at the home of my brother, Walter Castle, Jr., in Worthington, Ohio, we three siblings made a cursory examination of the contents of the box. We found an assortment of items of great interest, most exciting amongst them a series of letters written by some of the children of Dr. Harry Fassett and his wife Clarissa (Peck) Fassett of Johnstown, Ohio. Three of their children, Ann Fassett Germain, Noah Chittenden Fassett, and Harris Harding Fassett, had emigrated to California starting in 1852. As I was approaching the years of my retirement and it seemed most likely I would have more leisure to make a more extensive examination of the papers, the box was turned over to me, and I brought it back to Virginia.

I made little effort to organize the contents of the box until the time of my retirement from teaching in 1969. But I did find that the "California" letters consisted of a series of 100 letters written back from California during the period 1852-1862. I made typed copies of these during the period 1969-72 in the hopes of preserving them in particular for my children. As I showed them to various friends and acquaintances it began to appear that they are of sufficient interest that perhaps they should be made available to a wider audience. My sister in a visit to California met a number of the descendants of the California emigrants and in 1973 transmitted Xerox copies of some of the letters to them. Their enthusiastic interest has amounted to almost a demand that the letters be made available, and it is this as much as anything that has persuaded me to attempt to complete the project.

The way in which these letters have come down to their present owners appears first to be reasonably certain. They appear first to have been treasured and preserved by the parents to whom they were addressed. When the parents themselves left for California in 1872 it seems likely they were left in the hands of their daughter Sarah (F. Castle)—who was the only one of the children living in an established home in the vicinity of Johnstown. After about 1900 Sarah and her husband William A. Castle (my grandparents) made their home with my parents on the family farm where I grew up. My aunt Mary Castle was a member of that household portions of the time. To the collection in the box were added many letters to Sarah F. Castle and to Mary received during the period up to about 1910. Subsequent to the death of William A. Castle, Mary and her mother moved to East Bridgewater, Massachusetts to make their home with Mary's brother Edward H. Castle. There I visited them during the fall of 1928. My uncle Edward died during the spring of 1929. My aunt Mary remained at East Bridgewater, Massachusetts where my wife and I visited her on several occasions during the following years. In about 1932 she closed her house and went to Danbury, Connecticut to care for the ailing wife of a cousin, Merritt Clark. Some months after the death of the first Mrs. Clark, my aunt Mary and Merritt Clark were married. They lived together at Brookfield Center until his death some five years later. My aunt Mary subsequently removed to California to live with her widowed brother William E. Castle in Berkeley.

It would appear then that the box of letters and papers that is our present interest passed from the hands of Sarah F. Castle (I) to her daughter Mary who retained them through the rest of her life and then by her will bequeathed them to her niece Sarah F. Castle (II), my sister, along with

other personal effects. None of us of a younger generation were aware of their existence. I did know that my aunt Mary was a keeper of some family records as she had given me at the time of one of my visits to her in New England a box of pictures dating from the late 1800s through the early 1900s.

It remains a mystery to me why there are no “California Letters” subsequent to 1862. If Clarissa Fassett had so carefully preserved them up to this date it seems likely that she would also have saved those continuing up to the time that she and her husband “Dr. Harry” went to join their children in California. The series appears reasonably complete for the period covered. Missing ones could easily be accounted for by the none too reliable postal service of the day. Most of the letters were in what appeared to be their original envelopes, from which the stamps have been removed—presumably by some amateur philatelist of possibly my father's generation. Some letters were sent overland by stage and others by boat by way of the “Isthmus” where they were carried overland. After “Chit” (N. C. Fassett) became established in his successful enterprises he repeatedly sent money to his parents by way of “Bills of Exchange” payable through a New York bank. He made note of the danger that they might be lost in transmission, and as a precaution often sent both a “First” and a “Second” Bill of Exchange—one overland and the other by boat. I find one such unused “Second” bill in the papers that was not cashed as the “First” must have been received. It appears likely to me that the hundred of letters in this collection may have been set aside in a box for safe keeping and another box started for letters subsequent to 1862. Through some quirk or mischance of fate the first box was preserved and given to daughter Sarah and the second misplaced or lost—or Clarissa may have taken the second with her to California where it may have passed into the hands of descendants there and been lost. Who Knows? It seems to me more appropriate to spend time rejoicing that these one hundred segments of living personal family history have been preserved, than to bemoan the loss of the others.

In the pages that follow, I propose first to present a brief summary of the Fassett family history as a means of identifying the main “characters” referred to in the letters. The main body of the manuscript will consist of a transcription of the “California Letters,” as they are with no corrections of spelling or grammar and with no more explanatory comment than necessary. They tell their own dramatic story in more vivid terms than any can offer. After all they were there! Then I propose to offer some further material concerning the lives of some of the individuals involved, of their fate, and of their families and descendants. I can at this point only offer apologies for my ignorance and the incompleteness and inadequacy of my knowledge. I can only hope that some of those into whose hands these pages may fall will see fit to correct, amplify, and extend the record.

I acknowledge my indebtedness to my sister, Sarah F. Castle (II), for her assistance in preparing this account. She has made available the raw materials that have been used as well as other family records and artifacts in her possession. These include the family Bibles of the Fassetts and Castles with their many recorded names and dates, and a whole trunk full of old family pictures. Through my father Walter Castle in his last years did his best to identify the

pictures there are still in the collection many faces that remain unknown to me.

William A. Castle

Transcribed and edited from a hand-written copy (undated but presumably written about 1972) by Roger P. Kohin, July 1992. Typed copies of the following material as well as the original and typed copies of the Fassett Letters from California 1852-1862 were among the effects found at the home of William A. Castle following his death in 1990 in Fredericksburg, Virginia.