



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By Sierra Green, Archivist

Steamboats in the Archives: The Tale of Olive Winebiddle Brown

Beginning in April 2014, visitors to the Heinz History Center will be captivated by stories of the steamboat industry found in the museum's newest exhibit: *Pittsburgh's Lost Steamboat: Treasures of the Arabia*. Just as the *Arabia* traveled hundreds of miles from this region, so too did numerous Western Pennsylvanians venture from their childhood homes to the American frontier. Of the archival collections in the Detre Library & Archives that speak to the far reaches of Pittsburgh's steamboat industry, one voice in particular presents a fascinating glimpse into the lives of local residents swept up by the river economy.

The daughter of Philip and Susanna Roup Winebiddle, Olive Newton Winebiddle Brown was born on June 13, 1826. The youngest of seven children, Olive was raised on the family's estate and passed her youth with her elder siblings in Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood. Drawing from her correspondence, we know that Olive and her sisters actively contributed to the family farm by making apple butter, harvesting crops, and tending cattle.

At the age of 28, Olive made a decision that would forever alter her life. Willfully choosing to map the course of her future outside the confines of Allegheny County, Olive married

William Y. Brown, a steamboat pilot, on April 12, 1855. It is exactly one week later that we first hear Olive's voice in a letter she penned from St. Louis, Missouri. Earmarked for the family estate in Pittsburgh, Olive's primary correspondent was her sister, Rebecca, who she affectionately referred to as "Beck."

Among Olive's opening thoughts is a clear realization of her new, foreign surroundings: "Dearest Beck it seems so odd to be writing to you that I scarcely know how to commence my letter ... the weather is as warm now as it is in summer at home[.] the ladys and Gentlemen are dresst in summer clouse[.] it looks so odd to see them with thare lite pants and white vests and the ladys in thare white dresses."¹ As her husband William traveled about town to attend to business and prepare for embarkation, Olive wrote of her experiences as a young wife of a steamboat pilot.

For the first five months of her residency in St. Louis, Olive and William established a makeshift home in a local boarding house. Living amongst 20-25 other boarders, Olive filled the time during her husband's extended absences by forging new friendships. Her activities in St. Louis often carried her to church services and to the homes of other transplanted Pittsburgh families. Peppered amidst these descriptions of daily life are petitions for Rebecca to visit. In one such piece of correspondence, Olive

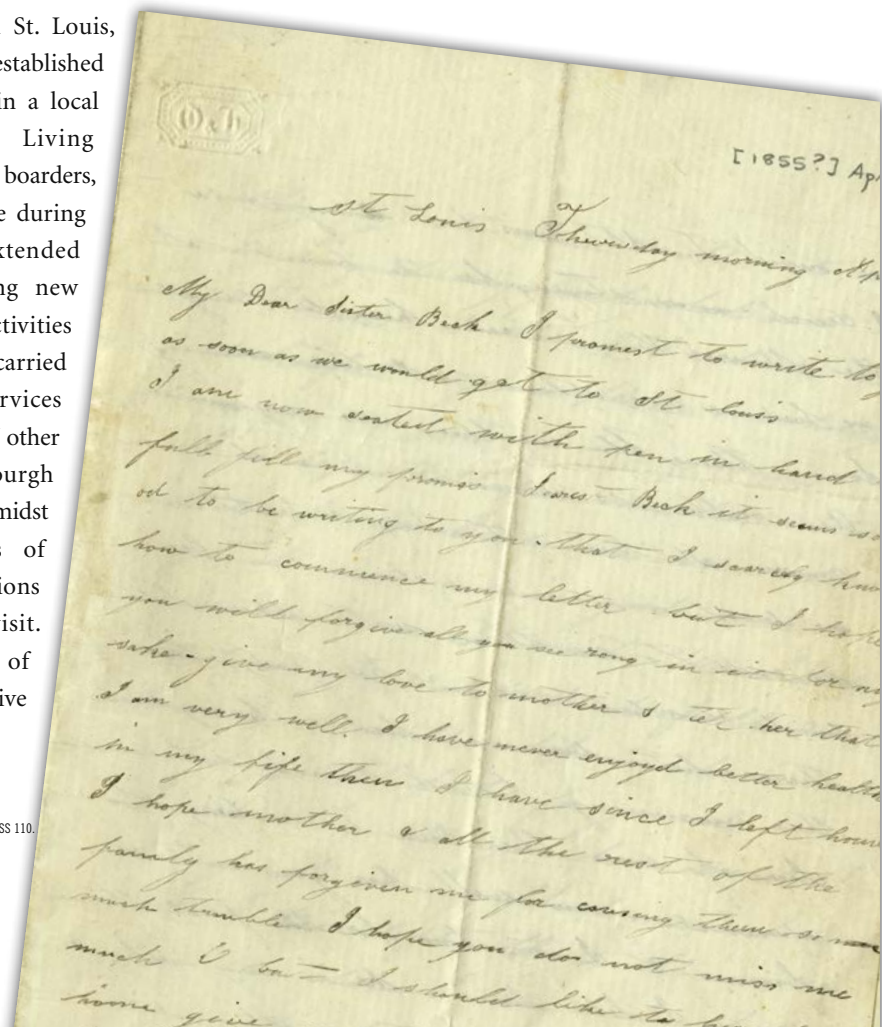
disclosed the following, "I would like to have you and all my Brothers and sisters to come[.] I cannot enjoy myself with any sattes faction thinking a bout home[.] O how happy we all might be if we could only live as we might[.]"²

When not reminiscing about her childhood home, Olive set about establishing a new homestead in St. Louis. In late September 1855, Olive wrote to inform her sister that she and her husband had settled into their first home. "Will had rented a house before he went and left mony for me to furnish it. O how I wish you ware here to help me to choose my furniture[.] I am so sorry I did not get a stove like the one at home and bring it with me but it is to lait now to think about it."³

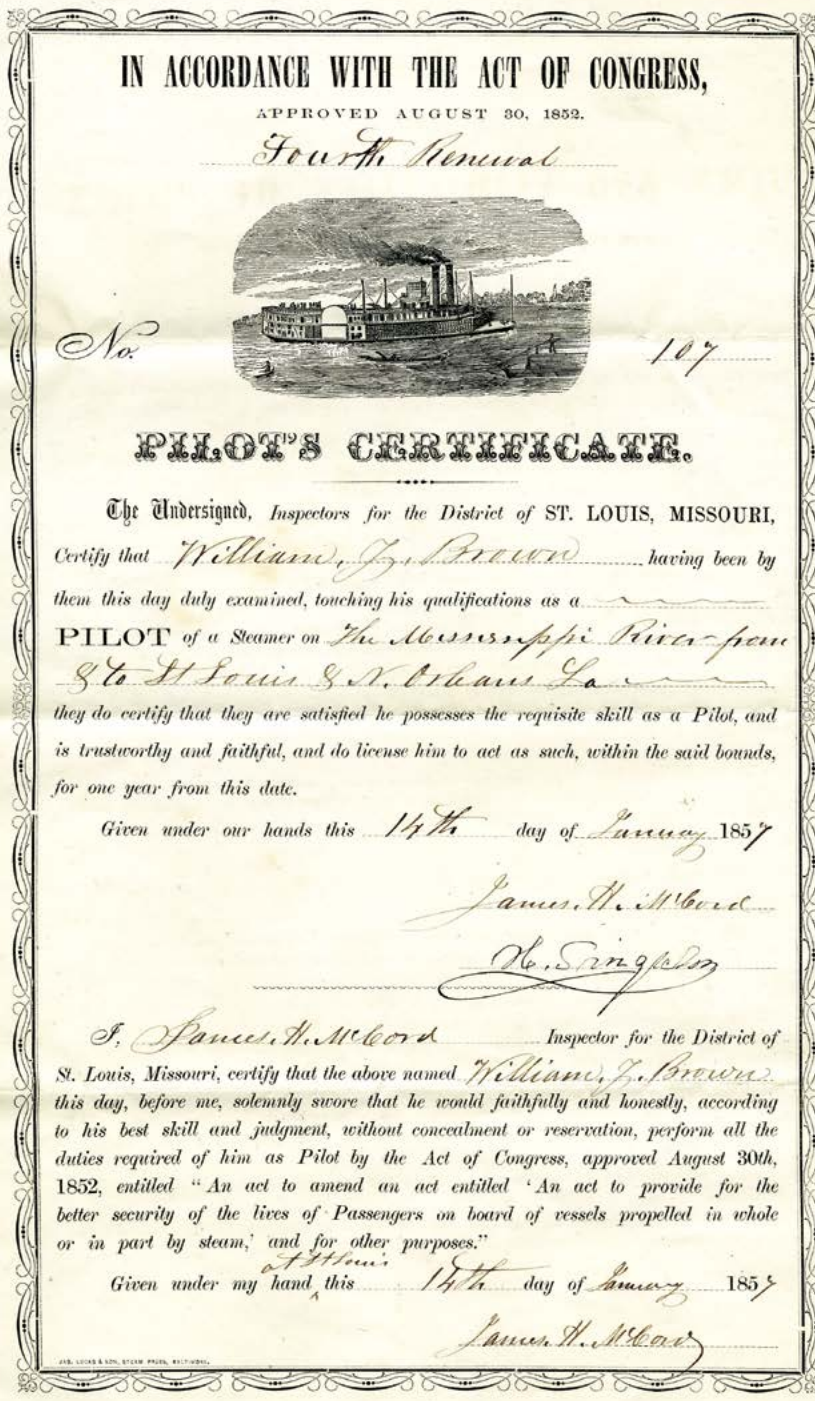
William and Olive filled the rooms of their home with the birth of their only daughter, Susanna, in 1857. In her own captivating manner, Olive conjured clear imagery of her infant daughter for Rebecca.

Olive's first letter to her sister
Rebecca, April 19, 1855.

All HHC Detre L&A, Baum Family Papers, 1769-1976, MSS 110.



Steamboat pilot's
license of William
Y. Brown, 1857.



have not arrived yet[.] the river is so high that I am very anxious about them.”⁶ In passages such as these, the river presents itself as a clear protagonist in the saga of the Brown family.

One other intriguing protagonist in the Browns’ family story is none other than famed American novelist, Mark Twain. Before introducing the world to Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain labored alongside Olive’s husband as a steamboat pilot’s apprentice on the steamboat *Pennsylvania*. In fact, Twain immortalized his time aboard the *Pennsylvania* in *Life on the Mississippi*.

Twain aside, the letters between Olive and Rebecca offer compelling snapshots of the timeless bond between two sisters. In her endeavors to share her new world with her “Dearest Beck,” Olive constructs a genuine and captivating glance into the quotidian experiences of the wives of river-faring men.

Those interested in discovering the dramatic conclusion of Olive and William’s story and the impact of the steamboat industry on Western Pennsylvanians throughout the 19th century are invited to the Detre Library & Archives for a workshop on this topic on Saturday, November 15, 2014.

“Susie is seting on the floor eating [an] apple[.] I had no horse collar so I stuffed a pare of old pants with straw to set her in & you would laugh to see her seting claping her hands.”⁴ In correspondence dating to late May 1858, Olive once again regaled her sister with anecdotes of Susie’s early childhood. Bubbling over the praise of visitors,

Olive informed Rebecca that a recent caller christened Susie the “greatest girl this side of Pittsburgh.”⁵

Almost in the same breath, Olive’s thoughts transitioned from her daughter to her river-faring husband. “I am looking for Will every moment[.] thay ought to have been here this morning but thay

¹ Olive Newton Winebiddle Brown to Rebecca Roup Winebiddle, April 19, 1855. All HHC Detre L&A, Baum Family Papers, 1769-1976, MSS 110.

² Olive Newton Winebiddle Brown to Rebecca Roup Winebiddle, September 30, 1855.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Olive Newton Winebiddle Brown to Rebecca Roup Winebiddle, May 16, 1858.

⁵ Olive Newton Winebiddle Brown to Rebecca Roup Winebiddle, May 29, 1858.

⁶ Ibid.