

A COMPANION TO  
EMILY DICKINSON

EDITED BY MARTHA NELL SMITH AND  
MARY LOEFFELHOLZ

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“Pretty much all real life”:  
The Material World of the  
Dickinson Family

*Jane Wald*

We dont have many jokes tho' now, it is pretty much all sobriety, and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that its pretty much all real life. Father's real life and mine sometime come into collision, but as yet, escape unhurt! (Emily Dickinson to brother Austin, December 15, 1851 (JL 65))

In 1930, the world celebrated the centenary of Emily Dickinson's birth. The following year, her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Amherst College. The citation acclaimed equally Martha's great-grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson as a founder of the College, her grandfather Edward Dickinson and father William Austin Dickinson who together had given six decades of service to the College as Treasurer, Emily Dickinson as a rare and original spirit, and, finally, Martha herself as a biographer, novelist, and poet, who had brought her aunt's poetry to renewed attention. Symbolic objects saturated with four generations of personal struggle, sacrifice, and dedication, Martha's purple and white academic hood and parchment degree remain among thousands of material objects at The Evergreens, the house next door to the Dickinson Homestead built by her grandfather in 1856 as a wedding present for her mother and father. Ironically, the honor conferred upon Martha and her forebears in the wake of Emily Dickinson's centenary signaled one of the final achievements of a long line of Dickinson family exertion – part “real life” and part “poetry” – that came to an end with Martha.

From her vantage point at The Evergreens two years after the centenary, Martha Dickinson Bianchi noted the many scholars and casual readers who, in a revival of her aunt's poetry in the second decade of the twentieth century, “became pilgrims, visiting her old home in Amherst, hoping even yet to steep themselves in her atmosphere.” They sought the long-departed poet “as a woman in her own setting – no mere collection of reputed eccentricities or collated husks of facts from the outside.” Her pilgrims wanted “a more intimate acquaintance with the human Emily Dickinson,”

one rid of misrepresentations of her as a “fantastic eccentric or as a genius throwing down cryptic utterances from her ivory tower.” In short, they wanted to know the real, “the *personal* Emily” (Bianchi xii).

Emily Dickinson’s verse has inspired interest in the circumstances of her life and experience as clues to the poetry’s meaning and the author’s intentions. Even today, both academic and general works about Dickinson often begin with an acknowledgment of the personal characteristics that made her a figure of mystery during her lifetime and into the present. In publishing her own versions of her aunt’s biography and poetry and in disclosing details of everyday life at “the Mansion” and in “the Beloved Household” next door at The Evergreens, Martha Dickinson Bianchi hoped to regain authority over the Dickinson family’s history, and to recast the most egregious characterizations of her aunt’s eccentricities in a more natural light. She complained that much literature published about Dickinson in the first quarter of the twentieth century “struggled breathlessly to compensate by conjecture and personal hypotheses, for the deficiencies of the customary biographical material in a life singularly devoid of outward incident” (Bianchi xviii–xix). Although the results of her efforts to set the record straight can be considered mixed at best, Bianchi was right on two counts. First, Emily Dickinson’s life offered little evidence of the poet as primary actor in events of historic proportions. Second, the absence of such obvious momentous events heightened the significance of re-creating, in Bianchi’s telling formulation, “the environment of the poet’s life” in a tangible way.<sup>1</sup>

No one, of course, portrayed the “woman in her own setting” better than Emily Dickinson herself, especially in her long, spirited letters of the early 1850s.

We are waiting for breakfast, Austin, the meat and potato and a little pan of your favorite brown bread are keeping warm at the fire, while father goes for shavings. . . . The breakfast is so warm and pussy is here a singing and the teakettle sings too, as if to see which was loudest. (Emily Dickinson to William Austin Dickinson, October 17, 1851, JL 58)

Will you let me come dear Susie – looking just as I do, my dress soiled and worn, my grand old apron, and my hair. . . . The dishes may wait dear Susie – and the uncleared table stand, *them* I have always with me, but you, I have “not always”. . . . (Emily Dickinson to Susan Huntington Gilbert, about February 6, 1852, JL 73)

If it wasn’t for broad daylight, and cooking-stoves, and roosters, I’m afraid you would have occasion to smile at my letters often, but so sure as “this mortal” essays immortality, a crow from a neighboring farm-yard dissipates the illusion, and here I am again. (Emily Dickinson to Dr. and Mrs. J. G. Holland, Fall 1853, JL 133)

The home scene in the few examples cited above is an important recurring theme in Dickinson’s poetic and epistolary outpourings. Dozens of objects associated with the ordinary conduct of Dickinson family life are painstakingly arranged on Dickinson’s verbal canvas to serve as the substance and symbol of personal and family relationships.

Dickinson’s letters are as replete with the language of objects as her everyday life was with their use. Here we are concerned with the great potential the Dickinson family’s material world holds for enhancing our understanding of the poet’s environment, her lived experience.

“No genius, however eccentric,” observed material culturalist Henry Glassie, “exists isolated from the conditions of his or her own milieu” (Glassie 1971). A growing number of cultural studies explore in increasing detail and sophistication Emily Dickinson’s lived experience within the social, cultural, economic, intellectual, and political context of her times. Several scholars have sought to locate and explain Dickinson’s position within the ranges of political involvement and disengagement and of public versus private voice. Joanne Dobson has argued that Dickinson’s gender and her family’s elite and conservative cultural orientation constrained Dickinson’s writing within familiar ideologies of womanhood and conventions of a female writing community; her reluctance to publish was mirrored by virtual silence on contemporary public issues. Betsy Erkkilä has countered that Dickinson’s class allowed her greater freedom in choices of work and leisure, a freedom she turned to advantage in her vocation as poet. Dickinson’s disruption of “social and symbolic orders of patriarchal language” in her poetry grew out of the privilege of her class position (Erkkilä 23). Aife Murray has elaborated on the role of class privilege and increasingly consistent access to domestic help in creating the temporal and leisure space for the poet’s writing life. Shira Wolosky, Vivian Pollak, and others have examined Dickinson’s internalization of the catastrophic strife of the Civil War and how her poetry expressed the manifold tensions of her times. Domhnall Mitchell has employed a series of case studies – the railroad, the concept of home, the culture of flowers, and print publication – to illuminate the tensions within Dickinson’s poetry produced by the pressures of social and economic exchanges on national, local, and even personal levels within her specific historical moment. His method, which emphasized minute historical detail, demonstrated quite effectively the “complexity of her engagement with the times in which she lived” in order to better understand “the range and also the limitations of her achievement.” (Mitchell, 10) Observing a cultural shift in the late nineteenth century toward the commodification of class, especially as it related to female self-presentation, Peter Stoneley has proposed that in her poetry Dickinson effected an escape from consumer-driven gentility through a carefully balanced, old-fashioned ambivalence toward the marketplace and its expectations of feminine display. Barton St. Armand and Judith Farr have recovered for Dickinson studies a wide range of Victorian cultural practice and expression, particularly visual art of the period, to illuminate the context within which Dickinson worked and to make sense of these references within her poetry. Close readings of Dickinson’s verse against a backdrop of social and cultural trends and personal and political events make these and other studies valuable contributions to an increasingly robust dialogue rejoining her, in Daneen Wardrop’s phrase, to her “native nineteenth century in its entirety.” (Wardrop 54)

The very definition of what constitutes a Dickinson text, either poetic or epistolary, has been prodded and expanded with a range of new approaches in Dickinson

studies that champion serious examination of physical dimension of her writing and, by extension, her material world. Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Louise Hart, Jeanne Holland, Marta Warner and Melanie Hubbard have shown that, precisely because Dickinson allowed few poems into print, her manuscripts, with variants that suspend conclusion and intentional and unintentional fabrications (sewn bindings, use of scrap paper, drawings, and clipped art), are significant material artifacts that demand to be studied as such. And, indeed, they are receiving considerable attention. Efforts to recover Dickinson's poetic intentions from detailed inspection of scriptural practices – delineation of poetry and prose, selection of writing materials, orthography, graphic presentation on the page, the scholar's role in editorial choices, and so forth – have provoked a vibrant debate. Robert McClure Smith, on the other hand, expresses concern about a tendency “to fetishize fascicle manuscripts, to pursue somatic contact with documents the poet fingered, to pilgrimage to Harvard and Amherst to touch the relics, to ponder lost and irrecoverable intentions in new hypertextual scriptures” (15). Domhnall Mitchell wonders whether, in the absence of direct access to the original manuscripts, two modern forms of publication (holographic representation and facsimile manuscript editions) merely reflect fascination with the “[r]omantic mystique of original presence – the authentic essence that fades with typographic reproduction” (Mitchell 512). The issue is not to get as close as possible to the ‘originary moments’ of Dickinson's poetic creation by studying the manuscripts. Martha Nell Smith makes plain that “though the material facts of a poem's reproduction, many of which I examine, are not in fact the poem, they do make vital suggestions about the poem, and, though they should not be idolized, neither should they be trivialized” (*Rowing in Eden* 7). The issue of intention is the irreducible reason that manuscripts are, without question, artifacts. Dickinson fashioned an object in which to express her meaning; some attributes may be full of meaning, others may be purely accidental. The manuscripts thus share some of the characteristics of other objects in Dickinson's material world, and it would be a grave error to classify this world as a reliquary.

In a verse sent to her sister-in-law Susan in 1865, Emily Dickinson observed “The Object absolute – is nought – / Perception sets it fair / And then upbraids a Perfectness / That situates so far –” (FP 1103). An object which has little intrinsic value accumulates worth from the application of human effort and affect – admiration, greed, respect, ambition. Setting a “price,” monetary or sentimental, can have the paradoxical consequence of both endowing it with value and placing it out of reach. Dickinson's comments on material life prompt the question, how self-conscious must an individual or society be in making, using, or attributing value to an object for it to be a rewarding, or even appropriate, area of inquiry for present-day scrutiny? In outlining the rise of American academic concern with objects in the nineteenth century, material culturalists Thomas J. Schlereth and Henry Glassie point to Dickinson contemporaries, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and social scientist Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, who urged that artifacts be considered the “outward signs and symbols of particular ideas of the mind.” More recently, scholars

of colonial American material life have argued that artifacts serve as the devices that individuals within a society use to “mediate their relationships with one another and with the physical world,” and that social history and its material expression should be considered “preeminently a history of relationships” (Schlereth 19–20). Focusing specifically on the nineteenth century when production and acquisition of “things” had reached an historic pinnacle, noted scholar of material life Kenneth Ames has invoked the “need to investigate the objects that were prominent parts of everyday life precisely because the Victorians themselves were fascinated with material culture. By studying the things that surrounded them we can not only better comprehend their physical environment but come closer to their psychological environment as well” (Ames 21).

References to material objects in Dickinson's poetic vocabulary have long been a subject of study. William Howard's early comparison of Dickinson poems with those of poets from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries suggested that words peculiar to her poetic vocabulary have mostly to do with physical objects and activities. A majority are related to technology and science: words such as electrical, hermetic, insulators, ornithology, perihelion, periphrasis, roof, adze and other tools, windows, and other architectural elements. Just behind Biblical and geographical place names comes the terminology of housewifery with words such as apron, broom, seam, wardrobe, cupboard, distaff, cup, saucer, pantry. Howard's conclusion that Dickinson “couched her thoughts primarily in words that were in themselves understandable to the reader in terms of his daily experiences” suggests that Dickinson's use of the language of artifacts was intended either to be sufficient in itself or to provide access to symbolic interpretations for an undefined audience (Howard 247). As Robert Merideth demonstrated, with over 150 poems reflecting the specific language of commerce, Dickinson's cultural references went well beyond the bounds of domestic chores and far into the realm of the acquisitive society in which she and her family were so thoroughly enmeshed. In her detailed study of the imagery of home, Jean McClure Mudge argued that an expansive vocabulary heavily biased toward the material world grew out of Dickinson's direct experience and provided her with access to an array of symbolic interpretations from her fixed position within a domestic environment.

For Emily as a housekeeper, the humble article of daily use, though its upkeep annoyed and postponed the ecstatic life, still pressed on her consciousness with its symbolic potential: bones, cobwebs, cups, brooms, aprons, balls of yarn, seams, baskets, but above all, windows and doors, pantries, chambers and rooms. (2)

It was natural for Dickinson to employ these “available external props to support insights of her inner life.” Taken together, the language of objects in Dickinson's letters and poetry can be considered both symbolic and literal, arising from individual experience within a culture and society dedicated to technological improvement and

escalation of comfort. It may be an obvious point, but one worth reiterating: objects as symbols were taken from the living language of her time, but these objects also had their own histories of invention, production, attachment, and use independent of the poet.

Investigation of Emily Dickinson's life, the social prominence of her family, the extent and limits of her education and reading, her experience of religion and construction of theology, is critical to a full understanding of the sources of her poetic brilliance. Yet without taking into account, as new work is beginning to do, Dickinson's material existence – the texture, clamor, tang, fragrance of everyday life, the physical boundedness of sensation and action – her life and experience remain two-dimensional, without full context. Explicating the differences between material culture and cultural history, Richard Grassby warns that cultural historians sometimes risk "ignor[ing] the physical environment in which culture is embedded," generalizing from "images and texts as though they were material commodities, focusing on how the world was represented and perceived, not on how it functioned or how it was physically emotionally experienced" (591). Without the leavening of material life, human experience is only partially revealed and imperfectly understood. Far from serving as "relics" or "fetishes," objects lend physical reality to understanding the products of earlier (or other) societies, cultures, even individuals, in order to demystify the past. When "poetry" and "real life" come into collision, in Dickinson's formulation, each helps to define the other.

Objects altered by human intervention constitute "an ordered medium for communication" (Grier 552) invested with utilitarian, aesthetic, religious, or relational purposes. Artifacts possess physical attributes – shape, size, color, distinguishing characteristics – which can be measured and described. This objective information allows for categorization and comparison with like or unlike objects. The value of an artifact as a luxury, an essential need, or as a carrier of sentimental attachment can be deduced from quantity and quality of production, monetary value, and patterns of acquisition and display. Objects as possessions constitute evidence of character, interest, and quality of life. Objects in their utilitarian functions convey information about provisioning, work life, domestic needs and routines, distribution of time and tasks, adoption of conveniences, and gender, class, and individual roles in these activities. Objects in their affective associations reveal how people understood themselves and their relationship to others. For example, design of furnishings and decorative finishes can, like architecture, be seen as a cultural performance. The number, style, and arrangement of furniture create deliberate social settings, "zones of activity in which individuals can pose or interact"; the way in which rooms are furnished determines the nature and ease of social contact or household production and whether objects are used, stored, or displayed (Grassby 594). Artifacts, especially

when studied with textual evidence, enrich the study of the past. Letters, inventories, and similar records can help to re-create the interiors of spaces and activate daily life that no longer exists. Detailed inventories of The Evergreens from 1895 and 1923, for example, provide a guide to the arrangement, movement, and flow of Dickinson family daily life.

Material culturalists sometimes use the term "collection formation" to distinguish various methods and motives in the creation of material assemblages for purposes of research, education, or appreciation. Collections, either independently or as a loose network, establish benchmarks in cultural identity; understanding the intentions and processes behind their formation provides further information about the culture that produced both the objects within the collection and, at another level, the value to society of preserving and collecting its products. A few examples of the variety of collection formation processes include but are by no means limited to the collecting activities of an individual with an interest in a particular painter; the acquisition of representative objects associated with a particular era, place, or culture; the accrual of a broad range of groupings of unrelated origins and meaning.

A brief chronology of the creation of the Emily Dickinson Museum collection is not meant simply to reiterate a story by now familiar to many readers, but rather to call attention to the more or less deliberate process of collection formation that accompanied the growth of the poet's reputation. As the last surviving members of the Dickinson family at Lavinia's death in 1899, Susan and her daughter Martha inherited the Homestead and became responsible for its disposition. After her mother Susan's death in 1913, Bianchi also became full owner of The Evergreens and kept it as her residence – her home ground in a literary and proprietary sense – until her death thirty years later. In 1916, pressed by financial exigency, Martha Dickinson Bianchi cleared the "Mansion" of the family possessions through gift, sale, or removal to The Evergreens, and sold the Homestead to another family. To Martha, The Evergreens and its furnishings and those retrieved from the Homestead represented both literal and symbolic ownership of her aunt's poetic legacy and control over the family's story. In a letter seeking Carnegie Corporation support for keeping The Evergreens open for public enjoyment, Martha's detailed description of objects that furnished "The Emily Room" at The Evergreens conveys her sense of authority and anxiety over the future of the first Dickinson collection.

Here are gathered all her books, the family portraits, her furniture and personal possessions: her piano, the cradle in which she was rocked, her mahogany writing table at which she sat when writing the poems, her bureau in which the poems were found after her death, her India shawls, the velvet snood she wore on her hair, the white and gold china and the pine-apple cut mahogany – part of her mother's marriage dower brought across the hills by oxen, her jewelry, etc. etc., and the manuscripts of her poems. For twenty years I have kept the place open to "pilgrims" who wished to realize the environment of the poet's life, and who have been welcome to enjoy the grounds and the memorabilia.<sup>2</sup>

That changes to The Evergreens' building fabric and finishes virtually ceased in the same decade the Homestead was sold, or that publication of *The Single Hound* in 1914 roughly coincided with opening The Evergreens to the poet's "pilgrims," is no coincidence. Dickinson family control over the twin legacy of literature and biography required both preservation and exposure.

Bianchi's heir Alfred Hampson occupied the house with his wife Mary, maintaining it much as it was during the Dickinson family's residence. In 1950, the Hampsons arranged for the transfer of many of the items furnishing The Emily Room, as well as numerous books and manuscripts, to Harvard University where they are now housed in the Houghton Library. When Amherst College purchased the Homestead in 1965, there was no collection of Dickinson-related objects associated with the house, but over the next three decades a small collection was assembled to help tell the story of Emily Dickinson in her own home. The most significant accession was a gift in 1970 from Mary Hampson of a group of objects belonging to the Dickinson family, some of which duplicated as nearly as possible the furnishings of Emily Dickinson's bedroom.

Upon Mary Hampson's death in 1988, her will provided for the establishment of The Evergreens as a cultural facility in honor of her friend Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Remarkably, The Evergreens remained fully furnished with Dickinson family furniture, artwork, household accoutrements, and personal items. Some of these objects had been among the contents of the Homestead; many originated with the Austin Dickinson family during the second half of the nineteenth century; still others were the Hampsons' personal belongings. Recognizing the interpretive potential of the trove of Dickinsoniana in the house, Mary Hampson further instructed that, with the exception of books and manuscript material which were bequeathed to Brown University, all other contents and furnishings should remain with the house. The formation of the Emily Dickinson Museum: The Homestead and The Evergreens in 2003 reunited the two Dickinson houses, their shared landscape, and collections of approximately 8,000 objects as the family's material legacy.

Represented among the Museum's collection are ceramics and silver of various styles and ownership; cooking and lighting equipment of different periods; furniture in a wide variety of styles (including seating for over a hundred people); artwork ranging from oil paintings and watercolors to engravings, lithographs, photographs, and sculpture reflecting the family's intense interest in art. There are trunks and chests for storage and travel; souvenirs of trips in the United States and abroad; musical instruments; an extraordinary grouping of children's toys; lengths of lace and articles of clothing; the confused contents of bureau and desk drawers; and many items that in another household might just have been thrown away. There are also obvious gaps: relatively few items of a personal nature associated with Austin, Susan, or their oldest son Ned are to be found. As is the natural history of household furnishings, objects broke, were repaired, were taken out of service and eventually discarded, only to be replaced by other furnishings and equipment as the household grew, or its needs changed, or new technologies introduced changes in lifestyle. The collection bears the

marks of the usual process of sorting, distributing, and discarding personal effects that fell outside of a set of as yet undefined criteria in the establishment of the kind of Dickinson memorial its creators had in mind. What was saved and protected must have been, in the minds of its guardians, the things that mattered most.

What mattered most – artwork, silver and china, children's toys, furniture, books and manuscripts, artifacts associated with Emily Dickinson – offers abundant opportunity to cast "perception" on "objects absolute," to explore the substance and context of the Dickinsons' everyday life. For illustrative purposes, three case studies from the collections of the Emily Dickinson Museum will suffice. The technology of heating and cooking at the two houses through the nineteenth century affords a snapshot of changing domestic circumstances and the rapidity, or recalcitrance, with which the Dickinson family embraced practical technological improvements. Souvenir spoons represent the transformation of utilitarian and status-enhancing goods within a local setting to symbolic markers of progress and historical consciousness on a national scale; their presence in the Dickinson household demonstrates how quickly, within an increasingly consumerist society, individuals became participants in larger cultural trends originally triggered by specific events. Finally, the equipment of the now-forgotten game of battledore and shuttlecock exemplifies the cultivation and practice of leisure within a domestic environment and offers clues to the values, status, and camaraderie of "my crowd," as the poet referred to the social milieu of Austin and Susan's household.

The poet's Homestead and The Evergreens preserve features of mechanical systems related to cooking and heating that served the residents of the houses from 1855 onward. The Homestead houses five extant fireplaces, several disassembled fireplace mantels, a Franklin stove, a coal-burning firebox inset, and chimney work for a kitchen range and set kettle. The Evergreens retains three working fireplaces, three additional decorative mantels, a Franklin stove, five early floor registers for heat distribution, two cooking ranges (one a c. 1907 cast iron model, the other a c. 1953 electric model), covered openings for stove pipes, and an early-twentieth-century space heater.

Precursors to these technological artifacts surface in correspondence between Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross over the details of household arrangements in the months leading up to their marriage in 1828. Only two weeks before the wedding, Edward reported:

Your stove arrived safely from Springfield, and is well set, and so far as I can discover, will operate as we could wish – it draws perfectly – and boils well. It is not the rusty thing which your father, in his peculiar way of producing an agreeable surprise in having things prove much better than he represents, would have us believe – but one of the nearest, & best looking stoves that I ever saw – it is much liked by all who have seen

it, and I think will prove exactly what you want – the fire place I have filled up – (Edward Dickinson to Emily Norcross, April 18, 1828, in Pollak 204).

A crate of looking glasses was delivered, chairs were sent up from Springfield, and, at last, two wagon loads of Emily's "goods" arrived to complete the furnishing of the newlyweds' first home.

This delightful correspondence, which presents a full account of a young couple's attention to the material surround of their domestic environment, took place at a critical time in the development of New England manufacturing prowess and habits of consumption. As neighborhood admiration attests, the young couple's acquisition of a stove for their first kitchen was highly desirable and placed them at the forefront of rural New Englanders taking advantage of greater efficiency in cooking and heating to be realized from design improvements. The first truly successful cooking stove design, developed by Troy, New York, manufacturer William T. James in 1815, offered a full-size oven, folding doors that provided a place for roasting and broiling meat, extensions on either side for heating water kettles, and the satisfaction of gazing at an open fire that had been jeopardized by earlier, imported cooking stove designs. The going rate for cooking stoves in the 1820s was between \$15 and \$50, roughly a month's salary for a professional household (Ierley 142). The many stove dealers' advertisements of the period pointed out the numerous conveniences afforded by cooking stoves: relief from lifting heavy pots and kettles over a fireplace, greater comfort than working directly over a blazing fire, constant readiness for baking, and more even heating. The Dickinsons' new stove was a good investment that economized on fuel and labor and very likely reinforced Emily's successful resistance to Edward's interest in hiring a girl to help with housework.

Stove design and casting improved so rapidly during the 1830s and 1840s that New Englanders were increasingly attracted to their virtues not just for cooking but also for heating. In 1825 approximately 5,000 stoves were manufactured to serve a United States population of 9 million. Within three decades, roughly half a million more stoves had been manufactured to heat the homes, public buildings, and offices, and cook the food of 31 million residents. The local Amherst newspaper, the *Hampshire Franklin Express*, began carrying the advertisements of stove and tin shops in the mid 1840s, but as early as 1832, Amherst's First Parish church agreed to procure stoves for the meetinghouse if the money for purchase and installation could be raised by subscription. The "iron monsters," as stoves came to be known in some quarters, were not entirely satisfactory, for just three years after installation the smoke and leaking pipes had become so inconvenient that the parish considered removing them.<sup>3</sup>

Against an advancing tide of enthusiasm for heating by close stoves, influential writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and architect/designers such as Andrew Jackson Downing backed the open fireplace as "the most agreeable and healthful mode of warming an apartment." Hawthorne's light-hearted diatribe against the stove in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (one of Austin's favorites while teaching school in Cambridge) claimed that "the inventions of mankind are fast blotting the picturesque, the poetic,

and the beautiful out of human life. The domestic fire was a type of all these attributes, and seemed to bring might and majesty, and wild Nature, and a spiritual essence, into our inmost home." Traditionalists worried that the almost universal exchange of the open fireplace for the cheerless and uncongenial stove was bound to bring with it the decay of upright moral influences, loss of social grace, decline of patriotism, true religion, and family life. More alarming consequences awaited unfortunate new generations who, lacking the open fireplace and even the "sullen stove," would grow up "amid furnace-heat, in houses which might be fancied to have their foundation over the infernal pit, whence sulphurous steams and unbreathable exhalations ascend through the apertures of the floor."<sup>4</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, whose work Austin is known to have admired, complained that "there are few 'notions' of which our people are fonder than *stoves* – of all descriptions – but we protest against them boldly and unceasingly. Close stoves are not agreeable, for they imprison all the cheerfulness of the fireside; and they are not economical, for though they save fuel they make large doctor's bills."<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of all this contradictory advice, the Dickinsons eventually made room for the fireplace, the stove, and the furnace. The many references to housekeeping and daily routines in family letters of the 1840s and early 1850s demonstrate the Dickinsons' firm attachment to labor-saving cooking stoves and more efficient heating at their North Pleasant Street home. In descriptive and affectionate letters to Austin, Emily mentions the need to rise early to make the fires (JL 89), the comforting warmth of the sitting room stove during an unexpected October snow storm (JL 60), the intimate "stove-side" talks she and Austin enjoyed in their kitchen after Sunday meeting (JL 116). Like many other New England families, the Dickinsons apparently retained fireplaces in public rooms and open stoves in bedchambers as an indispensable part of the comfort and security of "home and hearth." Echoing Hawthorne's sentiments, Emily Dickinson was her family's most vocal advocate of this connection.

Our fire burned so cheerfully I couldn't help thinking of how many were *here* and how many were *away*, and I wished so many times during that long evening that the door would open and you come walking in. Home is a holy thing – nothing of doubt or distrust can enter its blessed portals. I feel it more and more as the great world goes on and one another forsake, in whom you place your trust – here seems indeed to be a bit of Eden which not the sin of *any* can utterly destroy. (Emily Dickinson to William Austin Dickinson, October 25, 1851, JL 59)

A typical mid-nineteenth-century chronology of introducing stoves into a household began with a cooking stove in the kitchen, then a close stove or Franklin stove in the back parlor or family sitting room, then one in the master bedroom and front parlor, and sometimes one in the front hallway. The North Pleasant Street home reflected at least part of this pattern, but in 1855–56 the parallel renovation of the Homestead and construction of The Evergreens allowed the Dickinson family to consider anew the most desirable cooking and heating arrangements for their households. At the Homestead Edward evidently had decided to balance the efficiencies

of heating and cooking stoves with the aesthetic qualities of open fireplaces. Among the renovations to the Homestead were reducing the size of the fireboxes in the more public first-floor rooms in order to retain heat, conserve fuel, and preserve the romantic pleasures and comforts of an open hearth. Meanwhile, the fireplaces on the second floor of the main block of Homestead were bricked up and fitted with Franklin stoves. The dining room too, Martha notes, was fitted with an "open Franklin stove where in winter a bright blaze leapt up." This stove may have been similar to the one in Emily Dickinson's bedroom, made by the William A. Wheeler foundry in Worcester which produced a variety of sizes and styles of cooking stoves, furnaces, and fancy parlor stoves. The bedroom stove was manufactured in the 1840s, suggesting that the family brought it among Emily's "effects" from the North Pleasant Street house in 1856.<sup>6</sup>

Building on the work of Richard Sewall and others, Diana Fuss and Domhnall Mitchell conjecture that, along with the arrival of efficient lighting, the installation of Franklin stoves in the Homestead's bed chambers "dramatically reconfigured social relations within the home, decentralizing the family and creating new zones of privacy," which freed the poet to retreat to her own room (Fuss 28; Mitchell 115–16). The poet's niece recalls that the winter struggle for comfort continued within the family homes when the mercury in the hall barely rose above fifty degrees, the west-facing parlors remained closed awaiting more favorable seasons, and the delicate plants in the windowed conservatory received extra attention from Emily and extra heat from the nearby stove. Emily's observation that the servant "Margaret objects to furnace heat on account of bone decrepitudes" (JL 285) is similar to other complaints of the period concerning the dry heat of close stoves; no evidence of a furnace at the Homestead has yet been found.

Another improvement to the family's regained Homestead was a new two-story brick addition to the north side of the house outfitted with kitchen, scullery, and shed in a highly serviceable style.

The wide kitchen spread across the back of the house from east to west. There were two windows on the west and two more in the big pantry opening from it, as well as another window on the east, and a door opening on a side porch which was never shut except on account of the weather. At the back was a big scullery, where all but the actual cooking went on unseen. . . . The range was an ornamental adjunct, built into the wall. Altogether the kitchen was a cheerful and much-frequented quarter – the arena of much-varied family event. (Bianchi 18–19)

To be sure, the capacious kitchen, scullery, and pantry were luxurious by contemporary standards. A copper boiler was built into the firebox and chimney structure on the scullery side of the addition to ease the task of laundering. Martha remembered the range as an "ornamental adjunct," a curious description for an appliance which no doubt entertained a great deal of activity, and possibly Martha referred to a range that was installed only after her aunt's death. The cast-iron ash pit doors still in

evidence at the Homestead matched a six-burner cabinet-style range manufactured by the S. M. Howes Company of Boston, a firm that appeared in the business directory after 1885. The advantages of a thoroughly modern kitchen arrangement must have been welcomed by family members and domestic help responsible for household cooking, baking, and washing chores.

Next door at The Evergreens, Austin and Susan's thoroughly modern house was completed in 1856 with smaller fireboxes in the more public and social spaces in the house on the first floor. However, in contrast to the Homestead's reliance on fireplaces and stoves, those on the main floor of The Evergreens merely supplemented heat provided by a furnace in the cellar. Cast-iron registers in first-floor rooms at The Evergreens, manufactured in the mid-1850s and hardware in the cellar to support heating pipes, suggest that the furnace was installed when the house was built. The basic components of cellar furnaces at mid-century included an air chamber built of brick fitted with doors for tending the fire, an air intake duct at fire-box level, and pipes extending from the top of the chamber to rooms above. In 1845, Boston manufacturer Gardner Chilson introduced a humidifying tank to the coal-burning furnace, which provided relief from extremely dry, overheated air as a matter of both comfort and health, and raised the metal heating surfaces well above the firebox to moderate the air temperature and reduce noxious impurities. The Evergreens' central heating system appears to have corresponded in structure to the Chilson furnace, commended by Andrew Jackson Downing as "the best air-warming furnace in this country." Downing recommended an eight-foot-square brick air-chamber to house a moderate-sized furnace. Clues to the structure of The Evergreens' heating system suggest a chamber of about nine by ten feet. A coal fire heated air that was carried through a series of pipes and ultimately ejected into a chimney flue. The hot pipes, in turn, warmed fresh air drawn into the chamber from the outside; the warmed air passed into the house through larger tin pipes connected to floor registers above. The air heated by the fire never mixed with the air warmed by the pipes, thus reducing the entry of unpleasant gasses and soot into the living areas of the house (Ierley 162–64).

Second-floor chambers at The Evergreens were fitted with traditional painted wood mantels; since there were no hearths, these features of room architecture were purely ornamental, providing a traditional and familiar frame for the fire in the stove below. Even though the heating technologies at The Evergreens were functionally modern, the aesthetic forms surrounding the technology remained stubbornly and romantically anachronistic. Austin's exclamation over the roaring library fire as his "thousand dollar painting" signals the conflation of aesthetic and technological values in the Dickinson cultural world. Despite this romantic outburst, both father and son placed themselves on the forward-looking side of domestic technology.

While overseeing technological changes on the home front, Edward and Austin Dickinson, each in his own way, advanced the cause of technological progress in the larger



interests of bettering the lives of citizens of the Commonwealth. Both were deeply engaged in political, civic, technological, educational, and cultural affairs that were part and parcel of a century of transformation. Edward's advocacy for the Amherst and Belchertown railroad line, the Hoosac tunnel and Central railroad are well known. Other episodes in his civic life – advocacy for establishing the Massachusetts Agricultural College in Amherst, his incitement of public observation of the aurora borealis, his pride in the town's new fire engine – typify his sincere and active concern for public welfare. For his part, Austin received from his father the mantle of "leading every forward movement, moral or material, in parish and town."<sup>7</sup> Among many other civic responsibilities, his involvement in the Amherst Gas Light Company, Amherst Water Company, Village Improvement Society, and town meeting bore along the family's interest in improving public services through technological improvement. The energetic public lives of Emily Dickinson's family were one means that kept the poet in touch with progress in the world around her. And in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, two massive world's fairs – the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition – gave all Americans extravagant opportunities to examine the progress of their national culture and its aspirations. These fairs were designed to bring together all different aspects of civilization, with an emphasis on technological innovations for workplace and home, art, architecture, and entertainment. Thomas Schlereth argues that they were critical moments in Americans' self-awareness of their own material world. Austin and Ned Dickinson attended the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in October 1876. Austin traveled to Chicago in 1893 to the Columbian Exposition. Both events offer opportunities to focus on how members of the Dickinson family understood their relationship to these displays of national culture.

The goal of the Centennial Exhibition was ostensibly to commemorate one hundred years of American independence. The recent trauma of Civil War, reconstruction, and economic depression focused organizers instead on the future, coaxing into being renewed national unity, prosperity, and optimism. Nearly one-fifth of the US population visited the 240-acre exhibition on the "pleasure park" grounds of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. The Main Exhibition Building – the largest building in the world at the time – held many of the 30,000 exhibits celebrating the mechanical and industrial transformation of everyday life. The most impressive exhibit of all was the immense Corliss steam engine, a fifty-six-ton machine whose flywheel, thirty feet in diameter, revolved almost silently. Admired by *Atlantic Monthly* correspondent William Dean Howells as "an athlete of steel and iron with not a superfluous ounce of metal," its forty miles of belts and twenty-three miles of shafting linked the mammoth generator to hundreds of other machines on display, powering everything from saws and lathes to looms and sewing machines. So impressive was the American showing in industrial advances and conveniences of everyday life that observers readily concluded that the national genius spoke most freely and volubly "in these things of iron and steel" rather than in artistic endeavor or great literature. But American strengths also represented limitations. "Inventions, modern improvements, machin-

ery, patents, and the last Paris fashions, are the only objects and ideas which surround us from the cradle; there is nothing in our country as in older ones to give contrast." The focus on everything new provoked light-hearted complaints about the presentation of the past and a petition drive to correct the placard describing George Washington's clothing as "Coat, Vest, and Pants" rather than waistcoat and buckskin breeches. Was it boast or lament that "nobody else has a country where everything is new"?<sup>8</sup>

"Treasurer W.A. Dickinson of Amherst College is doing the Centennial this week," announced the Amherst *Record* on October 11, 1876. Nine-year-old Martha Gilbert Dickinson duly noted the report in a teasing letter to her brother Ned who accompanied his father to what Mattie termed "the exhibithon." Conferring special status on the fifteen-year-old representative of their small farming and academic community, Martha mused, "I serpose you prefer to be called by your most dignefyed name as you are at the Centention at last but if you knew what fun we are having here you would be glad to come back and be called E. A. [Edward Austin] and Ned." The role of the fair as an engine of consumer interest was well understood even by children as revealed in Martha's prediction to Ned, "I serpose that you will wear advertisements of boys and gents tailers frome all over P[hiladelphia] when you come home."<sup>9</sup> Another Amherst observer of the Centennial Exhibition recalled, less than charitably, Austin and Ned "wandering about in an apparent daze. They looked more like an Amherst Cattle Show than anything else we saw."<sup>10</sup> If true, Ned and Austin were not alone in straining to take in the vast displays of American genius, and it proved too much for Austin's stamina. Early in 1877, his sister Emily wrote Thomas Wentworth Higginson that "My brother has been very ill for three months, of Malarial Fever – which he took at the Centennial and we have feared he would die" (JL 486). Assured of his recovery by the spring, Dickinson appeared to incorporate language and images of widely touted American technological achievement into an expression of comfort and encouragement.

Hope is a strange invention –  
A patent of the Heart –  
In unremitting action –  
Yet never wearing out –

Of this electric Adjunct  
Not anything is known  
But its unique momentum  
Embellish all we own –  
(FP 1424)

The structure and themes of science and technology, hope and faith revisit a verse of 1861: "'Faith' is a fine invention / For Gentlemen who see! / But Microscopes are prudent / In an Emergency!" (FP 202)

While the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 rallied Americans to put the Civil War behind them and celebrate their progress as a nation in the intervening decade, the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in its scope and scale showcased a newfound sophistication and confidence in the American world-view since 1876. The Exposition covered 685 acres in Chicago's Jackson Park, painstakingly recovered from sand and swamp-land and redesigned by Frederick Law Olmsted into an elaborate urban development. Scores of temporary buildings were constructed within the fairgrounds to house exhibits, demonstrations, and works of art. The two most arresting features of the Exposition were the 265-foot-high rotating wheel designed by G. W. G. Ferris and the wildly popular Midway Plaisance, a mile-long "corridor of amusements." Included among the diversions on the Midway were countless exhibits of other cultures, viewed partly as curiosities, partly as anthropological data for an emerging field within the social sciences, and partly as consumer "idea-book" for further incorporation of an exotic aesthetic into domestic and public décor.

Exhibits throughout the fairgrounds demonstrated improvements in domestic life and the conveniences that could support it. Besides demonstrating new electrical appliances such as stoves, ironing machines, doorbells, and phonographs, the fair's Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building (half a mile long and a quarter mile wide) showcased an array of consumer goods in the style of modern department stores and recommended strategies for acquiring these goods. American ingenuity and innovation promoted at the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 had grown into a mature consumer mentality, which, at the Columbian Exposition, reached further down the income ladder. "The enormous range of goods at the Chicago fair provided a cornucopia of material culture that catered to middle-class taste and helped to form that taste. Not only were Americans educated as to what to buy but also they were taught to want more things, better quality things, and quite new things" (Schlereth 283). Unlike the Centennial Exhibition, the Columbian Exposition capitalized on a nation-wide movement to record, preserve, and express American historical identity in thorough-going consumerist forms. Historical societies and pageants were newly popular, commemorative postage stamps appeared for the first time, and countless historic events, places, and persons were represented on the bowls and handles of souvenir spoons, a craze that swept the country in the wake of the Chicago Exposition.

Three such souvenir spoons in the collection of the Emily Dickinson Museum show just how the new fad was experienced in Amherst. The Dickinson souvenir spoons stand out among the family's more serviceable sets of silver flatware, serving pieces, and table accoutrements, some of which date back to the 1820s. Emily Norcross Dickinson began her marriage with a silver set that included tablespoons, salt spoons, ladles, sugar tongs, teaspoons, and serving spoons. Made by silversmith firm John J. Low, in business in Salem, Massachusetts from 1821 to 1828, all pieces in the set are monogrammed with the initials "EN" on fiddle handles ornamented with a basket decoration quite in step with prevailing tastes in the 1820s. Martha Dickinson Bianchi recalled her charge at the family's annual commencement tea to carry "the

thin old silver spoons with baskets of flowers on the handles" on a small silver tray, clenching it so firmly that her fingers were white from the strain (Bianchi 8). A set of twelve forks in the olive pattern, popular from 1830s through the 1880s, also engraved with the initials "ED," are among the Museum collections. Made by silversmith Eben Cutler of New Haven, Connecticut and Boston (1828–46), these forks are unaccompanied by any other silverware forms of the same pattern and maker, and were probably supplemented by non-matching flatware (Lange 1999).

Susan Dickinson also had two sets of silver flatware. A reasonably full set of sterling silver dinner and dessert forks, teaspoons, tablespoons, and ladles, in a simple threaded fiddle handle, monogrammed with the initials "SHG," was made by Jones, Shreve, Brown and Company silversmiths of Boston around 1854, before her marriage. Susan Dickinson's second set of flatware was electroplated silver in a vaguely Egyptian pattern made by Tiffany and Company of New York. The Tiffany Company carried an electroplated line of merchandise for a relatively brief period after 1885, making the set at The Evergreens somewhat unusual but certainly consistent with other choices Susan made in refurbishing her home during this decade. An inventory of 1895, the year of Austin's death, lists in solid silver a dozen after-dinner coffee spoons, two dozen teaspoons, a dozen dinner forks, four table spoons (serving spoons), four dessert spoons, a fish set, a pair of knives, ladles, three settings for children, water pitchers, napkin rings, tea strainer, salt cellars and spoons. Among the plated wares, Susan listed a dozen teaspoons, a dozen forks, and two dozen knives. In addition, family and guests made use of four dozen wine glasses, six dozen tumblers and glassware for punch, two sets of dishes for dining, a Chinese export porcelain coffee service for a dozen guests, a Canton dessert set for a similar number, four dozen doilies, eighteen tablecloths, and seven dozen napkins.<sup>11</sup> The requirements of hospitality and social leadership observed by the Dickinson family at The Evergreens a decade and more prior to Austin's death were supported by this serviceable but, as Amanda Lange notes, not ostentatious, supply of flatware both sterling and plate.

In the midst of this array of dining equipment, three small souvenir spoons, designed for use with citrus fruit, attract notice. Each is approximately four and a half inches long, with a slender, patterned handle and an undecorated bowl with a pointed end. One depicts an image of a witch on a broom, three pins, and the words Salem, Mass.; the reverse side of the handle is engraved with the initials "SHD." The second displays symbols of the 1893 Columbian Exposition and is engraved with the initials "MGD." The third portrays scenes of furniture manufacturing in Grand Rapids, Michigan; the phrase "Sir Edward" appears on the reverse of the handle. While the identity of the individual owners is quite clear, even a spare description of these objects prompts a raft of questions: Who purchased these spoons and when? How expensive were they? Were they given as gifts? What meaning did they have to the owners? Why should each be a citrus spoon? Were these spoons used or were they purely ornamental? What was their role as souvenir items in preserving or conveying a significant event? What was the quality of the relationship between giver and recipient?

In the United States, souvenir spoons became popular only in the 1890s after Salem jeweler Daniel Low hit upon the idea of mass production of souvenir spoons based on examples he noticed while traveling in Germany. Recognizing the marketing potential of such a product, Daniel Low and Company introduced the Salem Witch Spoon in 1891 just in time to commemorate the bicentennial of the witch trials and launch a popular collecting craze. Typically decorated on the bowl or handle with low-relief scenes, enameled crests, engraving, and even gold plating, souvenir silver appealed to increasing numbers of travelers eager to make a commodity of their brief encounter with a particular place, historic person or anniversary, event or exhibition, special product or manufacture. From their initial entry onto the market until the outbreak of World War I, souvenir spoons were designed and produced at a very high level of quality, usually in sterling silver. Daniel Low's first pattern witch spoon was relatively simple, bearing the image in relief of a witch and broom, the three pins (with which victims were supposedly bewitched), and the word "Salem." Within a short time, Low brought out forks, knives, thimbles, watch fobs, brooches, hat pins, scissors, and many other items in the same pattern. By 1893, he introduced a much more elaborate second pattern with open-work and a design wrapping around front and back of the handle. Later, a variety of moderately priced plated, ceramic, glass, and celluloid items helped satisfy a growing tourist trade. The witch spoon alone sold nearly 7,000 units and provided inspiration to scores of manufacturers who, within a year of its first appearance, produced another 2,500 spoon designs, and in years following literally tens of thousands of designs (McGlothlin 1985). Salem was only four miles distant from Swampscott, a habitual summer retreat for Susan and the children among her relatives. As the owner of only one of the first American-manufactured souvenir spoons, Susan apparently was not swept up in the collecting frenzy that followed. Nevertheless, the spoon alone invites further inquiry into the Dickinson family's views and activities in a number of relevant areas: interest in historic events, entanglement in an increasingly consumer-driven society, tourism, travel, and sightseeing.

Opening just two years after the introduction of the Salem witch spoon, the 1893 Columbian Exposition prompted the next major wave of souvenir spoon production and acquisition. The Chicago fair instigated the creation of over 300 new designs, more than for any other event in history. Motifs ranged from representation of major figures — Columbus and his landing party, Queen Isabella of Spain, and even philanthropists who sponsored exhibits at the fair — to instruments of navigation, exhibition buildings, and historic sites associated with Columbian explorations. Martha Gilbert Dickinson's sterling silver spoon was a moderately priced, relatively restrained arts and crafts design among the literally hundreds of choices available: two globes, one atop the other, bore the legend "World's Fair"; acanthus and laurel leaves decorated the handle upon which "Chicago Ill" appeared in playful, interlocking lettering. In addition to engraved initials "MGD," the reverse of the handle bears the dates 1492 and 1892. Austin Dickinson spent a week in July at the fair, in company at least part of the time with Mabel Todd (with whom he pursued a long-term romantic liaison) and her husband David Todd, a member of the Amherst College faculty. According to the school newspaper, Amherst College was well represented at the fair with about

a quarter of the student body, alumni, and faculty visiting during the summer of 1893. Perhaps Austin brought this spoon from the Exposition as a present to his daughter, but it could have been a gift from another friend.

The engraved "Sir Edward" makes the Grand Rapids souvenir spoon perhaps the most whimsical of the three. It carries an intricate low-relief decoration that includes the rapids of the Grand River with railroad bridge and industrial buildings in the background, the words "Grand Rapids" prominently situated midway down the handle, and a cabinet, rocking chair, and stool representing local manufactures. Because of the city's prominence as a center of furniture production, souvenir items commemorating its industry were common during the late nineteenth century. From 1878 until well into the twentieth century Grand Rapids hosted a semiannual trade show that featured the products of hundreds of American furniture factories, and was attended by thousands of buyers from furniture and department stores as well as writers on architecture and design. Local retailers sold a variety of plates, spoons, ashtrays, puzzles, and other souvenirs that proclaimed Grand Rapids as Furniture City and Furniture Capital of America. The factories portrayed on Ned's spoon are not specifically identifiable buildings, but rather are representative of the many brick furniture mill buildings that lined both sides of the river in the nineteenth century. The style of the lettering and the furniture suggests that the spoon was manufactured in the 1890s.

The family connection with Grand Rapids was a close and significant one. Susan Gilbert Dickinson's two older brothers, Thomas Dwight Gilbert and Francis B. Gilbert, were among the earliest settlers of the town of Grand Haven in the 1830s, building business careers in lake shipping, lumber, and warehousing. In 1855 the brothers moved to Grand Rapids, not far distant, and quickly became leading citizens of the growing city as officers in the Grand Rapids Gas Light Company and in various other business enterprises including banking and manufacturing. Dwight's record of public service and philanthropy equaled that of his Dickinson in-laws, with terms as state legislator, city Alderman, Regent of the State University, member of the Boards of Education and Public Works, and founder of what became the public hospital. Letters and visits between Grand Rapids and New England make plain the mutual regard of the Gilbert siblings and the brothers' continuing solicitude for their youngest sister's personal and financial well being. But what of the personalized inscription on the spoon to "Sir Edward"? Nicknames abounded in Ned's generation: early in life, he was addressed as "Jacky," later as "Dick," and "Court" in correspondence with his sister. The phrase "Sir Edward" must have carried a personal story or perceived individual attribute which invests the spoon with particular poignancy. The decade of the 1890s was a difficult one for the family with the deaths of Thomas Dwight Gilbert, Austin Dickinson, and Ned Dickinson following in quick succession. Sir Edward's spoon remained carefully preserved among the family silver, one of which Ned referred to in an 1894 letter to his mother in New York City: "Aunt Angie's organge [*sic*] spoon came Monday . . . The spoons are beautiful—Each of us have one."<sup>12</sup> From the peculiar marketing of the witch trials' anniversary in a small New England town, to the massive assembly of world cultures and technological innovations in the nation's

most modern city, to an inside family joke seated in an overt celebration of manufactured goods, the three souvenir spoons are material representatives of the variety of ways the Dickinson family was caught up in the culture of their time.

In their journeys to places such as Swampscott and to events such as the world's fairs, as well as activities at home, the Dickinson family indulged in leisure activities typical of their time and class. But, as Susan Dickinson pointed out in an essay on "Society at Amherst Fifty Years Ago," what was "typical" depended a great deal on which side of the Connecticut River one lived (Writings by Susan Dickinson, <http://emilydickinson.org/susan/socdex/html>). In Amherst, there were lectures and levees, sugaring and sledding parties, teas and dinners, and rides in the countryside. Eventually there came to be outings to the opera, concerts, and museums, theatrical productions, whist parties, musical ensembles, lawn tennis, dances, regular trips to the seashore, extensive European travel and more, but for long the cosmopolitan nature of Northampton, not to mention Boston or New York, stood out in stark contrast to Amherst's vestigial Puritanism. What Amherst lacked in urbanity it made up for in authenticity. Family friend Kate Scott Anthon described "rare hours" enjoyed by Dickinson family intimates at The Evergreens, "full of merriment, brilliant wit, and inexhaustible laughter." (Bianchi 157).

A pair of battledores is among objects in the Emily Dickinson Museum collection that offer now mute testimony to the merriment of such evenings. Martha Dickinson Bianchi recalled games of battledore and shuttlecock running shockingly into the midnight hour so that her grandfather Edward Dickinson had to come across from the Homestead to retrieve Emily from the company of family friends Maria Whitney, Samuel Bowles, Kate Scott Anthon, and Susan's brother Dwight Gilbert, visiting from Grand Rapids. Dwight, in Martha's reminiscence, "played battledore and shuttlecock better than any of them, and I often went to sleep hearing the ting – ting – ting of the shuttle cock hitting the vellum side of the battledore, – a hundred times, they said, without dropping. Aunt Emily came over to play with him, and sometimes she stood on the stairs and counted for two of the others, – and how I wished I dared go and look over the upper hall balustrade at them!"<sup>13</sup>

Battledore and shuttlecock can be characterized as an indoor/outdoor version of badminton without a net. The battledore was a slender-handled, small-headed racket, measuring approximately eighteen inches in length and six inches in width at the racket head. The long handles of late-nineteenth-century battledores such as those at The Evergreens were wrapped in thin leather embossed in gilt. The head of the racket consisted of two vellum sides approximately half an inch apart stretched over a frame – essentially a small "drum" which produced the pleasant "ting" sound Martha described when it struck the shuttlecock. The shuttlecock itself was originally simply a cork, eventually a celluloid ball, stuck with feathers and sometimes covered in velvet. The object of the game was to use only the battledores to hit the shuttlecock back and forth as many times as possible without allowing it to touch the ground.

Originating in ancient Greece, the game became popular first in Asia, then in Europe as a children's game and ultimately as an adult pastime in the seventeenth century. By the nineteenth century, battledore and shuttlecock, lawn tennis, and the newly popular game of badminton had become a triad of popular racquet sports. While passing the hundred bat mark was something of an achievement, at least for the Dickinsons, dedicated players could apparently reach over 2,000 hits.<sup>14</sup> Toward the end of the century, the game entered the realm of honored tradition as memorialized in poetic tribute by poet Amy Lowell:

The shuttlecock soars upward  
In a parabola of whiteness,  
Turns,  
And sinks to a perfect arc.  
Plat! the battledore strikes it,  
And it rises again,  
Without haste,  
Winged and curving,  
Tracing its white flight  
Against the clipped hemlock-trees.

By the 1890s battledore and shuttlecock was nowhere to be found in the Sears Company or Montgomery Ward mail order catalogs, having been replaced by inexpensive sets of the popular racquet sports of badminton and lawn tennis. In a sign of the times, older battledores were borrowed to equip the novel game of table tennis, which gained popularity under the more casual name "ping pong." The pair of battledores from The Evergreens opens countless questions about how the Dickinson family with its range of cultural, recreational, and leisure pursuits embodied the shifting boundaries between high culture, mass culture, and popular culture in the late nineteenth century. While as a girl Martha went to sleep to the sounds of the batted shuttlecock, she also notes that her own generation turned to lawn tennis and entertained her father with the sounds of active games on summer evenings. At the height of its social leadership, the style of life at The Evergreens provoked criticism of its emphasis on leisure and recreation. In 1883, for example, as Austin maintained careful balance between the appearances and realities of his relationship with Mabel Loomis Todd, he gently mocked his family's plans for a country vacation. Exasperation with Susan's social gamesmanship (brought to bear against Mabel Todd) elicited his declaration that he would "smash the machine," the superstructure of his family's social pretense supported by his own "industry" (Sewall 179). Austin's frustration was doubtless attributable, in part, to his own delicate personal situation and the demands of a rising generation of offspring eager for diversion and recreation. But in some ways his reaction illustrated strains experienced more broadly in society surrounding the division of work and leisure as well as middle and privileged class values. Historians of leisure posit that Americans of the Dickinsons' era and status confronted the dissolution of the carefully constructed divide between domestic and professional spheres.

As consumer-driven society outflanked these conventional boundaries, traditional society struggled to rationalize leisure, to make it purposeful and appropriate, before giving it substantial value and attention. Overcoming ambivalence concerning the respectability of recreational pursuits was a prerequisite to creating a mass leisure industry in the twentieth century (Butsch).

Between Edward Dickinson's birth in 1803 and the death of his youngest child, Lavinia, in 1899, the United States expanded from the eastern seaboard across the entire continent and grew exponentially in population as multiple waves of immigrants arrived. Fueled by a worldwide industrial revolution, invention and technological improvement careened across the century. Revolutions in methods of printing, communications, transportation, and manufacture catapulted a young ambitious nation onto the world stage and linked local, regional, and international networks of production, trade, and consumption in a seamless web. Factories drew working men and women from the countryside into burgeoning urban centers, transforming social and economic systems. From an increasingly stratified workforce there rose a defined professional and middle class whose taste for "things" seemed almost insatiable. And the reach of "things" into homes of all income levels, and in greater number and variety than previously imaginable, provided an outlet for the technological innovation and aesthetic elaboration that fueled a new consumer culture.

Material objects of everyday life are both functional and symbolic communicators for the individuals and cultures that employ them. While the processes of production, distribution, acquisition, and deployment reveal much about social, economic, and cultural movements, learning about the values of individuals as revealed by practical and aesthetic choices available to them is of equal importance to history. This essay has described a very few examples of how members of the Dickinson family may have perceived the acquisition of a new technology, of an object made popular by emergent mass culture, or of growing opportunities for popular leisure pursuits. Ordinary objects that survive in such abundance can illuminate much about the values and everyday life of the Dickinson family at both The Evergreens and the Homestead. Austin and Susan Dickinson lived relatively public lives; they were intensely and overtly involved with politics, social stasis and change, public welfare, and cultural leadership. Their material legacy is similarly full, and reflects self-consciousness about the public and private faces of their lives. Emily Dickinson's location on a spectrum of engagement and isolation continues to confound her twenty-first-century readers. Curiously, and perhaps fittingly, the richness of her material legacy resides primarily in manuscript poems and letters; other personal effects are relatively few in number.

Context – in its political, social, cultural, and material dimensions – helps to inform a more expansive understanding of Dickinson's poetry. Because the lives of Emily Dickinson's brother, sister-in-law, nephews, and niece were inextricably linked

with her own, the materiality of those lives impinges on the materiality of the poet's. As Robert Merideth, Vivian Pollak, and James Guthrie have shown, Dickinson's attitude toward common definitions of commerce, property, and possessions was sophisticated, skeptical, and evasive. "My friends are my 'estate'," she wrote to Samuel Bowles in 1858. "Forgive me then the avarice to hoard them!" (JL 193). However, the language of title (absorbed from her exposure to and experience with her father and brother's profession) and the language of objects (expressing attitudes and values of control, or lack of it, over the physical environment) are not quite the same in Dickinson's expression. There is still more to fathom about her material existence and it may be fruitful to examine Dickinson's views of *things* and *property* from a chronological perspective as she gained life experience within an increasingly consumerist culture. One brief example of such a chronology, based on Thomas Johnson's notes to the letters, may be suggestive. Enclosures in Dickinson's letters through the mid-1850s were either material objects, other letters, or flowers; few poems or culinary gifts accompanied her letters. In the 1870s the vast majority of enclosures were poems of Dickinson's own creation, followed distantly by flowers or other natural objects. In the last years of her life, flower enclosures almost equaled poem enclosures, and food as an article of sentimental import accompanied notes much more often than before. Dickinson's choice of enclosure helped to articulate the message conveyed to the recipient whose "Perception sets it fair."

The material world of the Emily Dickinson Museum offers a benchmark against which to measure Dickinson's responses to a signal aspect of her own context and language. Martha Dickinson Bianchi recounts a telling example of material culture and its meaning to her enigmatic aunt:

Her [cooking] utensils were private, those exquisite moulds from which her wine-jelly slipped trembling without a blemish in pattern of a rose or sheaf of wheat; and the round bread pans she used to ensure crust in baking her father's "daily bread" for which he asked each morning at Family Prayers. An imaginary line was drawn about all her "properties" which seemed to protect them against alien fingers – lent a difference in taste to the results she produced. She was rather precieuse about it – using silver to stir with and glass to measure by. (Bianchi 15)

Even in performing what might be considered routine household tasks, Emily Dickinson balked at predictable distinctions between utilitarian equipment and fine wares, but instead consecrated both through use for their particular revered service.

#### NOTES

- 1 MDB to Dr. Frederick Paul Keppel, Carnegie Corporation, March 30, 1934, copy. MDB Collection, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Brown University.
- 2 MDB to Dr. Frederick Paul Keppel, Carnegie Corporation, March 30, 1934, copy. MDB Collection, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Brown University.

- 3 White, Frank G. "A Cure for Smoking Houses and Scolding Wives," *Old Sturbridge Village Visitor*, January 1980. The *Hampshire Franklin Express* carried an announcement of I. W. Montague's new business in stoves and tin in its issue of April 30, 1846 (Jones Library Special Collections). A *History of the Town of Amherst*, Massachusetts, Carpenter and Morehouse, 1896, pp. 206–12.
- 4 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse*, New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846.
- 5 Downing, Andrew Jackson. *The Architecture of Country Houses*, Appleton & Company, 1850; Dover Publications Inc., 1969, p. 472.
- 6 Frank G. White, OSV Curator of Mechanical Arts, correspondence, 1998.
- 7 Wm. Austin Dickinson, "Representative Men of the Parish, Church Buildings and Finances," quoted in Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1974, p. 120.
- 8 "Characteristics of the International Fair I," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 38, no. 235 (July 1876), pp. 85–91. William Dean Howells,
- "A Sennight of the Centennial," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 38, issue 235 (July 1876), pp. 92–107.
- 9 Martha Gilbert Dickinson to Edward Austin Dickinson, October 1876, MDB Collection, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Brown University.
- 10 Quoted in Jay Leyda, ed., *Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 1, p. 258, "A faculty wife to her son, October 16, 1876," New Haven: Yale UP, 1960.
- 11 "Inventory of the Evergreens 1895, M&B Collection, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Brown University Library.
- 12 Edward Austin Dickinson for Susan Huntington Dickinson, February 15, 1894. Harvard Am 1118. 95. Box 10.
- 13 Martha Dickinson Bianchi, "Recollections of a Country Girl," unpublished manuscript, p. 86. Special Collections, Brown University.
- 14 Sources: "Online guide to traditional games" (<http://www.tradgames.org.uk/games/Battledore-Shuttlecock.htm>) and the website of the Cambridge Badminton Club.

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