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Text by Brice Stump – special to the *County Times*
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TEACKLE LETTERS TELLING OF LIFE 200 YEARS AGO

Highs, lows, people and places revealed in hundreds of letters

PRINCESS ANNE – Two people, 1,400 miles apart, are jointly working on one of the largest history projects undertaken in recent years on the Eastern Shore.

Ray Thompson of Salisbury, and Dreanna Belden of Denton, Texas, are revealing secrets of the past. Thompson, a former professor of history at Salisbury University, and co-founder of the Edward R. Nabb Research Center at the university, and Belden were strangers when Dr. Randy George, a retired neurosurgeon, and chairman of the Somerset County Historical Trust, asked them to work together to solve a mystery involving hundreds of letters, some written almost 225 years ago.



Portrait miniature of
Littleton Dennis Teackle

For years, the Trust had been working to get the letters of Elizabeth Upshur Teackle transcribed. She was the wife of Littleton Dennis Teackle. Both from Accomack County, they married and began construction of the landmark Teackle Mansion, or Teackletonia as they called it, in Princess Anne in 1801.

Elizabeth began writing letters, hundreds of them, to her sister, Ann Upshur Eyre, in Northampton County soon after she was married in 1800.

The originals of many of those letters have been kept at the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

The entire collection had never been previously transcribed, yet researchers knew they offered a detailed look into life on the Lower Eastern Shore from the late 1700s, until Littleton's death in 1850.

Equally important, the letters provided a one-of-a-kind autobiographical-style account of the lives of the Teackles.

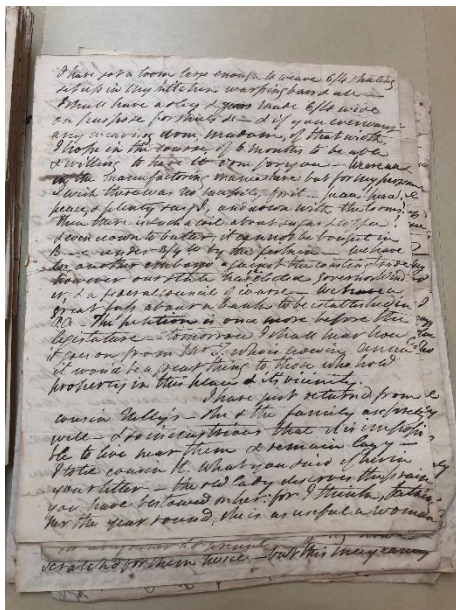
In 1959, members of Olde Princess Anne Days acquired a handful of copies of Elizabeth's letters from the university library to begin transcription but failed. In the mid-1970s OPAD tried again to rally support and funds to have the letters transcribed. Again, it failed.

In recent years, the late Gale Yerges, chairwoman of the Somerset County Historical Trust, guided a third effort to finally reveal the contents of those letters.

Through donations, the Trust acquired the services of a professional researcher, and over the years, almost \$40,000 was spent to get about 80 letters transcribed.



Alderman Library at Univ of VA, Charlottesville



George, now Trust chairman, and the organization's board, have made it their goal to see the project completed. It has rapidly evolved into one of the most important and complex projects undertaken by the Somerset Trust. George, destined to be the force behind the success of the project, contacted Thompson, professor emeritus at Salisbury University, to lead the project "Life at Teackletonia and Beyond the Letters of Elizabeth Upshur Teackle and Her Correspondence (1788-1850)."

Not only is Thompson qualified to make the transcriptions, as he has worked on thousands of 18th and 19th century documents over the past 50 years, most importantly he is familiar with the events, people, places and genealogies mentioned in the correspondence.

That is key to putting the letters in context, George said. It would be the inclusion of numerous footnotes that would inform the readers about the relationships of people and places mentioned by Elizabeth.

In an exemplary tour de force of professional research, Belden and Thompson are attempting to identify every name in every letter, including enslaved people, and have racked up impressive results. This is the key to making the letters come alive.

"Ray's knowledge of Eastern Shore history is probably unequalled," Belden said, which facilitates identifying individuals and family connections. Belden has also developed a genealogical tree for many families which aids in connecting the dots to family relationships.

In one of those remarkable, mysterious, unexplainable coincidences that sometimes happens in research, Belden is more than a willing partner; she is the fifth great-granddaughter of Littleton and Elizabeth Teackle. She has long been acquainted with the histories of Accomack and Northampton counties from which the Teackles came.

Another case of the right person at the right time, Belden, at the University of North Texas for almost 20 years, serves as a librarian, faculty member and assistant dean for external partnerships. Working with 480 partners representing archives, libraries, and private collectors across the state, she has the tools and expertise to get the job done.

"I don't think we could have obtained any better qualified people than Ray or Dreanna to do this," George said.

It is a research team made in heaven. It is a source of wonder that the stars aligned themselves just right to set the stage for George, Thompson and Belden to come together.

The best has yet to come for the Trust – Thompson and Belden have not only transcribed almost 500 letters in the past four months, they agreed to the job without payment. Proof that "good people" are still out there.

Thompson and Belden hold the golden key to unlocking the life of Elizabeth Teackle. Both began the project from scratch and, from the onset, began adding critical footnotes. Their "institutional" knowledge is indispensable because it helped them create background information on almost 95% of the people mentioned in the correspondence.

Through the use of footnotes, hundreds of footnotes, the team brings history alive and suddenly "it all makes sense."

Each Thursday, from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m., Thompson and Belden meet through the internet and begin their work, dealing with hard to read sentences, words, phrases and inferences.

Through letters written between 1778 and 1850, Elizabeth and her family members become living characters. It is the largest single source of eyewitness accounts of daily life in Somerset County and on the Lower Shore yet discovered.

“People have erroneously believed for years, even back then, that the Eastern Shore was a backwater area. That’s simply not true as these letters reveal. The Teackles, and most families of the Shore, were very much a part of the fabric of American life,” Thompson said.

Because they were meant for her relatives’ eyes only, Elizabeth felt free to discuss details of her concerns and fears and dreams in a candid, frank, and conversation-like style.

What Thompson and Belden discovered has brought history to life, with all the honesty of an intimate conversation between members of her family.

Belden found a letter from Elizabeth to Ann about Littleton’s sister, Sarah Upshur Teackle (1783-1843). “It’s very juicy, very gossipy and hilarious,” Belden said.

“Elizabeth basically tells Ann, ‘Oh my goodness you wouldn’t believe the drama happening here,’” she said.

“Sarah, as it turns out, behind her parent’s backs, is being courted by a neighbor, one of the Jacksons of Westover. The relationship has been hot and cold. It seems like he likes her, then doesn’t pay any attention to her for three months at a time. The relationship has been going on for more than two years.



“Sarah, while in New York City, met Charles Nichols Bancker and he really likes her. Back in Princess Anne, Bancker soon visits her at the Teackle’s home. He wants to marry Sarah and informs her parents of his intent. She runs off upstairs crying because she had apparently gotten engaged to the Jackson neighbor,” Belden related.

“Obviously the parents were really upset when they got the whole story and upset that Jackson was playing with the emotions of their daughter. A lot of drama. In 1804, Sarah married Bancker.”

An early 19th-century potboiler worthy of *The Young and the Restless*.

There are letters, too, of loss, loneliness and pain. In a profoundly moving account, Elizabeth writes Ann, after 11 years of marriage, with stunning news. “It’s my 14th ‘laying in,’” Elizabeth wrote. “She had 14 miscarriages by the time she was 30. She would only have one daughter, Elizabeth Ann (1801-1875), and maybe even an infant son,” Belden said. “Losing a child is a devastating event that haunts you for the rest of your life. I can imagine the emotional toll it took on her.” And Elizabeth alluded to the possibility more were to follow.

Through the scrawling of a quill pen, heartaches, aspirations, fear, sadness and pain were turned into tobacco-colored words. Feeling from a gentle and delicate heart became sentences.

Both researchers are moved by their strength and perseverance under constant trials and tribulations of her life, as a woman, wife and mother.

To this day, the intimate details of Elizabeth’s life still have the power to break the heart and make readers smile.

Over the years the letters mention the financial ups and downs of their lives and financial ruin that shaped their destiny toward poverty.

It simply was not in the cards of life for Littleton to become as financially successful and secure as had his brother-in-law, John Eyre of Northampton County.

“Littleton experienced the national economic downturns in 1819 and the 1830s,” Belden said, “and one was so severe that at least a third of merchants in Baltimore and Philadelphia were put out of business.”

“At one point, Littleton Dennis Teackle was probably the most well-known businessperson in Princess Anne, if not in all of Somerset County. I have transcribed most of his ‘letter book,’ (1805-1807) which contains correspondence to his business associates,” George said.

Littleton, a merchant in Princess Anne and Baltimore, was a co-founder of the Bank of Somerset, was also a member of the General Assembly of Maryland between 1829 and 1832.

“In Baltimore, he is wheeling and dealing, making connections with the ‘right people’, I think he was a bit of a dilettante. He was in the shipping business, was interested in developing the railroad business on the Shore, and was involved in the Bank of Somerset and operated a sawmill in Princess Anne,” Thompson noted. “He was always interested in new technologies and ideas of his time.”

Today, he would probably have embraced e-commerce and become an overnight millionaire.

A combination of poor business decisions, financial and economic collapses of his day and loss of revenue sources made him poor and kept him poor.

“In keeping with the norms of the day, Elizabeth hesitates to second guess his business ventures and risks, but does ever so gently offer advice, under the guise of “I’m just a poor woman, what do I know.” Ever so politely she reminds him on numerous occasions to address a list of concerns she’s presented. I think she was the smarter of the two,” Thompson proposed.

“She was well educated, had a lot of knowledge about literature and philosophy of the time, a sophisticated lady. There’s no doubt she was lonely, as Littleton was away most of the time on business. She always wanted to be with her sister, Ann. Elizabeth was always writing to her family, extended family and friends from Accomack County,” he said.

By the early 1820s, the woman who came from one of the most influential and richest families would have to write to her sister that she had no bed or even a table and dishes to eat from. The woman, once at the height of Virginia society, was reduced to sleeping on the floor.

She was publicly humiliated, going from riches to rags. She was reduced to begging her husband, struggling in Baltimore, for money to buy food and clothes. Her story is not unlike the experiences of women in our time. Elizabeth’s life now reads like a modern soap opera.

Teackletonia, with its 10,000 square feet of space, was and is among the grandest homes on the Eastern Shore and among the finest in Somerset County. The prestigious imposing house that was to showcase their early financial

successes and social standing would slip through the fingers of the Teackles.

“She was a very smart woman. I think she realized her husband had his hands in a lot of entrepreneur things. There were numerous financial problems, and at one point, his debts and business failures hit so hard, so deep, that the Teackles lost their mansion. They were in dire straits, but brother-in-law John Eyre bailed them out, and because of him, they were able to get it back. The amount of money John Eyre had was astounding,” Thompson said.



Eyre Hall
credit: David Edwards/DHR, 2022

“Randy was telling me that even Littleton’s father, John, had lent him ‘astronomical’ sums of money to survive financial crises.”

“Littleton even ended up in debtor’s prison for a couple of weeks and Elizabeth was working to get him out. When he died in 1850,” Belden said, “he only had \$25 to his name.”

As more and more letters were transcribed, it was evident, Thompson said, that Elizabeth Teackle struggled to maintain household expenses.

The two researchers read heartbreaking details of Elizabeth’s struggles to hold her world together.

“She wrote to Ann and told her they didn’t even have enough money to pay for ground meal. She asks her husband repeatedly to send her money,” Belden said.

“She knew Littleton, in Baltimore, didn’t have much money, and that he had pressing obligations, but hoped he could spare enough to buy glass to replace broken windows, or send enough money to allow her to buy necessities like candles and sugar,” Thompson said.

“She tried to figure out ways to show and clothe the enslaved household and feed them. Even when she had no money, her main concern was to be able to buy cloth to make clothes for them,” he added.

“The letters help illuminate the complicated relationship the Teackles had with their enslaved servants and reveal details of the lives of enslaved people.”

“Times for her were so hard,” Belden commented, “one can still cry reading of her sense of urgency, loss of control and life as she tries so hard, all alone, to keep her world together.”

Her health steadily deteriorated, and like so many people of the day, sought the curative powers of the mineral water at Barren Creek, probably traveling by carriage to the springs in what is now Mardel Springs. “Elizabeth, like many others, were concerned about the ‘unhealthy climate’ of this area,” Thompson noted.

The years passed so fast, from 1801, the high point of Littleton building the mansion to the rapid end of their world by the time of his when they lost everything. Even their daughter would know poverty as an adult.

“Elizabeth Ann was living in penury ([poverty, destitution) and relied on financial gifts from friends and relatives. She constantly was asking for money,” Belden revealed.

In a peculiar twist of irony, she would inherit Warwick, the birthplace of her mother, from her generous uncle, John Eyre. It was enough to enable her to ‘get by.’”

As for the initial challenge to transcribe 300 or so letters, the team has discovered more letters relating to the Teackles – a whole lot more.



Warwick
Upshur’s Neck/Quinby, VA

George, Thompson and Belden were caught off guard by the sudden abundance of Teackle-related letters they have found independent of the University of Virginia collection.

In a discovery nothing short of astounding, Belden said, the team has discovered a total of about 1,250 letters relating to the Teackles and Elizabeth.

“When I was first contacted by Randy, to be part of this project, he asked me if I had Teackle letters. As it turned out I had a lot of letters and other material the Trust didn’t have – about 6,000 Teackle-related documents. It’s overwhelming,” Belden said.

A large part of the additional letters found came from an unlikely source, what appears to have been a long-time admirer of Elizabeth.

“Right now we are focusing on the correspondence she had with Alexander Campbell of Scotland. Though married and a friend of Littleton’s, Campbell’s passion for writing to Elizabeth, for so many years, suggested to Belden and Thompson that the relationship was a bit beyond friendship. They know that Campbell wrote profusely over the years, and one letter alone had 40- pages. Belden and Thompson are hoping that the letters to him from Elizabeth are in the Campbell family collection in Scotland.

What started out as a challenge to transcribe 300-plus letters had suddenly snowballed into thousands of documents.

All three project members are hoping the end is in sight to produce at least the first volume of a proposed multi-volume set within the next year or its equivalent to be posted online in a digital format. The Trust, in cooperation with the Somerset County Historical Society, is currently focused on obtaining funding for proposed publication.

Thompson and Belden also see the project as the nucleus for one of the most ambitious far-reaching history-oriented projects yet undertaken on the Shore.

“As we increase the scope of this project, we are amazed just how important this time period (1750 to the Civil War) really is in context with American history. We see things happening here on the local level, that was involved with the state level and that in turn followed on the national level,” Thompson said.

No doubt this letter project has grown to be so important that it will be part of Thompson’s and Belden’s legacy.

“This has the potential of being the most historically important project that I’ve undertaken in my career,” Thompson said.

“Just the letters part of the project reveals new details about medicine, society, gardening, sickness and death, farming, commerce – incredible subject diversity. There is no other known account of life in Princess Anne covering so many topics over so many years as these writings of Elizabeth Teackle,” he said.

She tells the reader about life in Somerset County almost 225 years ago. “This is not just about letters,” Thompson said. This project has so many layers; cultural, financial, medical, genealogical, social interactions. The end product looks to all of us to be amazing.”

Soon everyone may be able to visit the world of the Teackles.

The goal from the onset, George said, was to produce a book. George acknowledged that the project of underwriting the publication will be costly, but he said it’s necessary. He doesn’t want to see the letters “watered down” or published solely as “abbreviated” versions.

George acknowledged that things have moved at an unprecedented pace and as they near a milestone in the work to date, there are still issues to be resolved prior to hardcopy publication or online sharing.

“A historian will be needed to put the letters in historical context, but the inclusion of hundreds of footnotes is absolutely essential to a thorough presentation of the letters,” George said. “It all comes down to human energy, we are volunteers pushing as hard as we can.”

Thompson and Belden, he said, offer the best hope the Trust has for completion. “At some point, for practical reasons, we are going to have to call it quits, and publish what we have,” he said, “whether in book form or online.”

Belden said while one person could probably finish the project it could take half a lifetime to do it, and welcomes the support of others. "Ray and I both have a lot of skills and expertise in many areas and working together to achieve a goal is really moving things along like in a way which has never happened before," she said, "but we will need help as we expand the scope of the project."

All three agree that the letters project will be ongoing well beyond their initial contributions as more documents surface.

"It's essential that getting volunteers involved in the future will push things along in a way that has never happened before," Belden said. "What is really exciting to me, about this project, is that it's going to be 'out there' online, in a way to be extremely discoverable and accessible for people to use in all sorts of ways. That's really cool."

There's even more good news. The pages will contain hyperlinks. Technology will resurrect the Teackles and their families and histories and launch them into digital eternity.

"Any person, any event mentioned in these letters will be discoverable through Google. People interested in history, genealogy and education will benefit from these hyperlinks."

"I'm glad the news about this project is getting out," he said, "it's been a long time in the making and people are going to realize the importance of these letters for the total picture of the Eastern Shore of their time."

"Anybody who was anybody at the time, from the mid-Shore to end of the peninsula, are in these letters and the connections between the most important families is phenomenal," Thompson said.

"What I have discovered was the connections Elizabeth talked about between those families, like the Steels, Upshurs, Goldsboroughs, Lloyds, and Henrys. These families must have a luster that appealed to the society of their times. My jaw drops open when I think about these people, that they knew each other intimately, and were so connected."

George is hoping that the letters project will be released in its entirety when completed and not issued in "drips and drabs." "This is going to be an academic project, not a journalistic one, and that's very different. "It is readily apparent," he said, "that the publications of the data will require several volumes. Everything that we acquire is being digitized. We want this available to the whole world. Over the years generous people donated money to try to get this work into a book, and as I see it, ownership of the Teackle Letters Project belongs to everyone."

George, Thompson and Belden are making history.

Belden and Thompson agree with George's intent, that the entire body of work should be made available on the internet, which will generate yet more discoveries and encourage others to participate in future transcriptions of documents yet to be found.

Are there Teackle journals, letters, even business records yet to be found even in Somerset County?

George is hopeful that someone will come forward with previously unknown material, maybe even a painting or locket.