

Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House Online (OHO)

“OBJECT LESSONS”

Welcome to “Object Lessons,” a distance learning activity for elementary school students, parents, and teachers! Take an inside look at some of the artifacts in our historic site's collection and do one or more of the following exercises:

- Use the sample questions provided for writing prompts or discussion; you may also want to add your own questions to the list
- Make a drawing of the artifact
- Write a poem, play, or story, using the artifact for inspiration
- Find out more about the artifact: Who would have an artifact like this in their homes? How did they use it?



In the KITCHEN at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

***Artifact # 1:* Mrs. Alcott's Breadboard with May Alcott's drawing of Raphael**

May Alcott (1840-79), the youngest of the Alcott sisters, was the model for the character of "Amy March" in Louisa May Alcott's most famous book, *Little Women*. Just like Amy, May was an artist who liked to experiment with her talent. The picture on this breadboard is an example of "pyrography," which means it is burned into the wood with a hot implement, such as a fireplace poker. Here, May was drawing a portrait of her favorite artist, Raphael. Her sisters nicknamed May "Little Raphael."

Questions to ponder:

- Why do you think May used a breadboard for this work of art?
- How would an artist in the 1800s keep a fireplace poker hot enough to make a drawing?
- May used a picture of Raphael as her model for her drawing on the breadboard. If you were able to make a work of art like this, what would you like to draw?
- How did families in the 19th century use a breadboard? Do we have breadboards in our homes today? If not, what do we use instead?

(see image on page following)

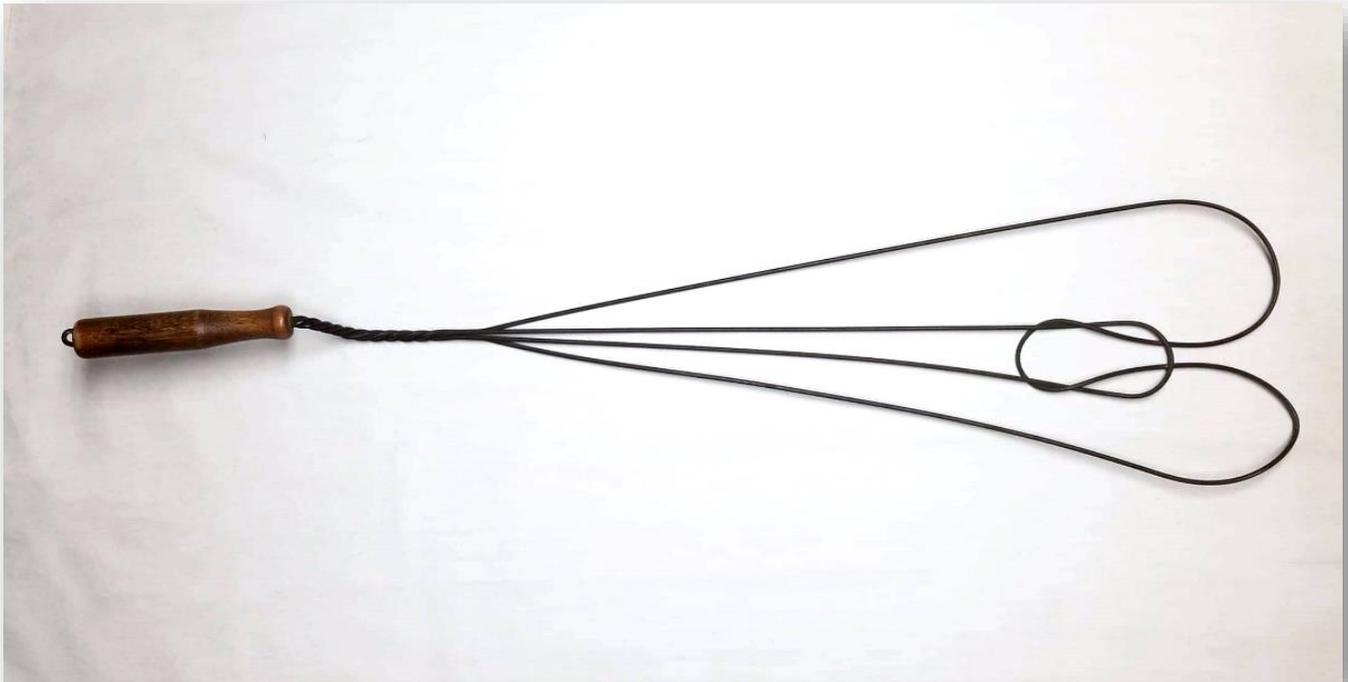


Artifact #2: Rug Beater

A rug beater (also called a dust beater or carpet whip) is a hand tool that was used in the 19th century to clean carpets and other household items. A carpet would be taken outside and hung up or put on the ground, and the rug beater would be used to repeatedly hit the rug to get the dirt out of it. This would be part of a regular housekeeping routine.

Questions to ponder:

- Who in the Alcott household might use a rug beater?
- What do we use today to clean carpets? Do you think it would take more time or less time than today's cleaning method to use a rug beater?
- What other materials could be used to make a rug beater?
- What other household items might be cleaned with a rug beater?



In the DINING ROOM at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

***Artifact:* Lizzie's Melodeon**

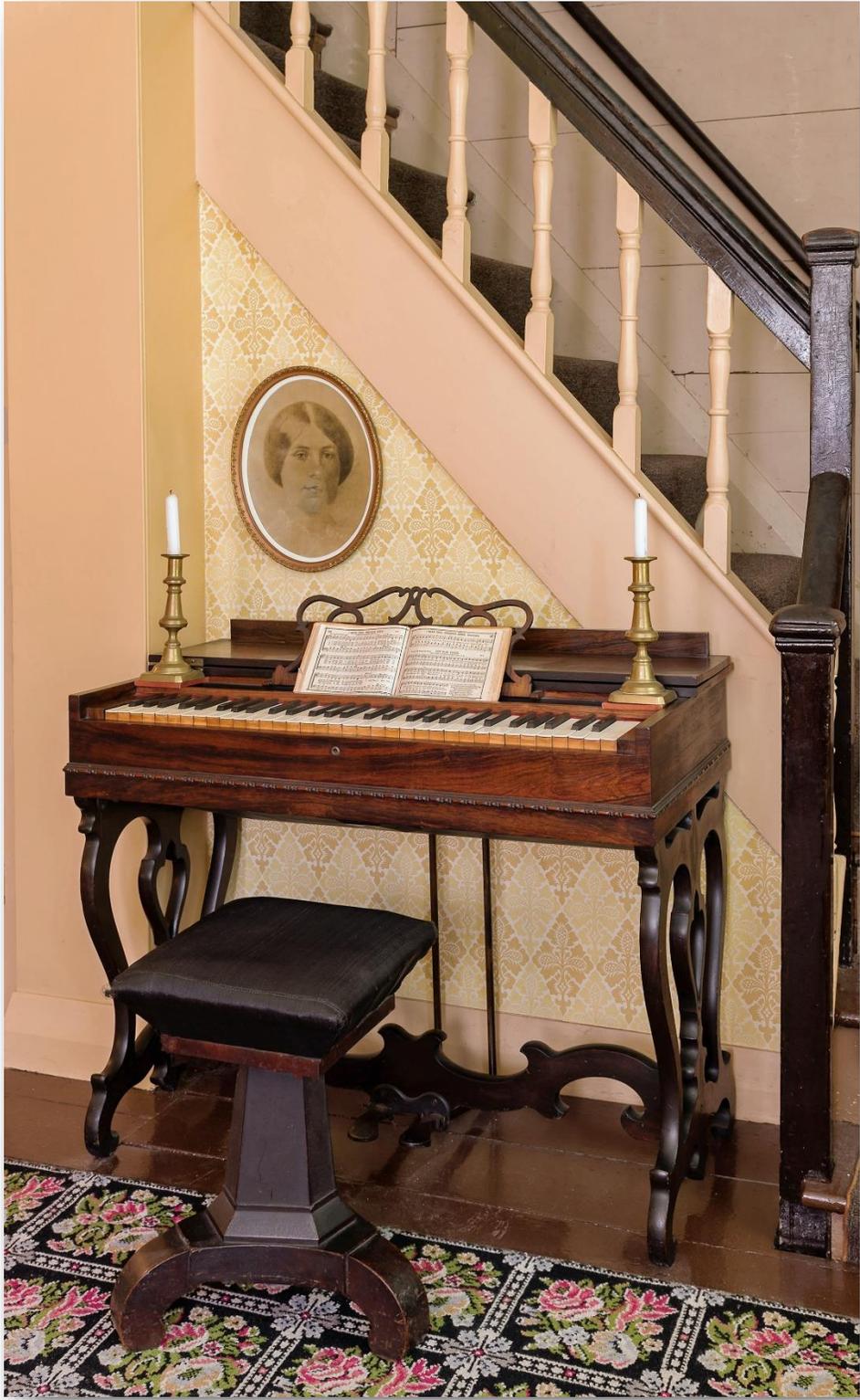
Elizabeth Alcott (1835-1857) was the third oldest daughter in the Alcott family. Lizzie, as her sisters called her, was the model for "Beth March" in Louisa May Alcott's book *Little Women*. Like the character in the book, Lizzie was very fond of cats, dolls, and music. Her portrait hangs on the Dining Room wall above the melodeon, a musical instrument which Lizzie enjoyed playing.

A melodeon is a keyboard instrument similar to an organ, and is also called a reed organ. A musician plays the keyboard while working the pedals close to the floor underneath the melodeon. Operating the pedals pushes wind through a bellows across reeds to make the sound. This rosewood melodeon was made in about 1852 in New Haven, Connecticut.

Questions to ponder:

- What other musical instruments resemble the melodeon? What makes those instruments different from the melodeon?
- Lizzie Alcott was very shy. How might playing the melodeon help Lizzie to express herself?
- In what different creative ways do your friends and your family members express themselves? How do you express yourself creatively?

(see image on page following)



In the PARLOR at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

Artifact: Louisa May Alcott's "Mood Pillow"

This sausage-shaped pillow appears in an 1840s Alcott family journal, in a drawing by Lizzie. Her assignment was to make a vocabulary list with a drawing and a definition for each word. Lizzie drew a picture of the pillow to illustrate the word "bolster," which she defined as pillow. Her sister Louisa also wrote about the pillow in Part II of *Little Women* (Chapter IX, "Tender Troubles"): "If 'the sausage,' as they called it, stood on end, it was a sign that [Laurie] might approach and repose; but if it laid flat across the sofa, woe to the man, woman or child who dared disturb it."

It was said that Louisa herself used the pillow to let friends and family know what kind of mood she was in before they saw her. If the pillow stood upright on the sofa, it signaled that she was in a good mood and willing to talk to people. However, if the pillow was found to be lying down, people should not bother Louisa that day, since she was not likely to be very good company—or perhaps she just needed some "alone time" to get her writing done.

Questions to ponder:

- How do you let people know how you are feeling?
- Do you think Louisa's mood pillow was a good way to tell others how she was feeling?

(see image on page following)



In LOUISA'S ROOM at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

Artifact #1: Louisa's Writing Desk

This simple, half-moon-shaped desk, next to the wall between the two front windows, was built for Louisa by her father, Amos Bronson Alcott. Even though it was unusual in the 19th century for a young woman to have a desk of her own, both Mr. and Mrs. Alcott encouraged their children to pursue the creative activities they enjoyed. Having her own place to write helped Louisa in her effort to make money for her family and in her chosen career as a writer.

Louisa also made money for her family through other types of work. She tried her hand at teaching children, both in small neighborhood schools in Concord and in kindergarten classes in Boston. She made money as a seamstress, taking in sewing from friends and other clients. When her family lived in Boston, Louisa briefly had a job as a housekeeper and serving girl, as well as a governess. She even went to Europe with a young lady who needed a traveling companion.

Her favorite work was writing. When Louisa first began writing stories, she would usually receive \$5 or \$10 per story (worth about \$150 or \$300 today) when they were published in a magazine. After working at her writing for many years, Louisa was surprised and pleased to discover that her book, *Hospital Sketches*, in which she told about her experiences as a nurse during the Civil War, had become very popular. Several years later, when *Little Women* was published and became an overnight sensation, Louisa's career as a writer was assured.

Over her lifetime, Louisa May Alcott wrote 30 books and hundreds of short stories. With the money she made from her writing, she was able to pay off all of her family's debts and make sure they were well provided for the rest of their lives. *Little Women* remains her most popular book. For more than 150 years, it has never gone out of print, and has been published in approximately 50 languages.

Questions to ponder:

- In the 19th century, it was unusual for a young woman to have a desk of her own. Why do you think Louisa's parents thought she should have a desk?

- Louisa liked to express herself through writing, just as Lizzie liked to express herself through music, and May through art. What creative activities do you use for self-expression?
- Louisa began working when she was a teenager to help her family financially. What kinds of work could young women do in the 1850s?
- What jobs were women not allowed to do during this time period? Why were they prohibited from those jobs? Are there any jobs today that women are not allowed to do?



~ continued ~

Artifact #2: Anna Alcott Pratt's Wedding Gown

This simple, grey silk dress was the gown Anna Alcott (1831-1893) wore when she married her fiancé, John Bridge Pratt, in the Parlor of Orchard House on May 23, 1860. That date was also the 30th anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Alcott's wedding, which took place in King's Chapel, Boston. The marriage of "Meg March" and "John Brooke" described in *Little Women* is largely based on Anna and John's real-life wedding.

In the mid-1800s, it was not typical for a bride to wear a white dress. Most chose more practical colors, such as grey, brown, green, or navy blue, so that they could wear the dress again for special occasions after the wedding. In fact, they would usually not buy a new gown, but would wear their best dress for their wedding day. White gowns only started to become popular after Queen Victoria's wedding in 1840, when she wore a white silk and lace gown that was made especially for the royal event.

Anna's sister Louisa wrote in her journal about the wedding: "A lovely day; the house full of sunshine, flowers, friends, and happiness. . . . She [Anna] in her silver-gray silk, with lilies of the valley (John's flower) in her bosom and hair. We in gray thin stuff and roses, --sackcloth, I called it, and ashes of roses, for I mourn the loss of my Nan, and am not comforted."

Questions to ponder:

- Wearing "sackcloth and ashes" refers to an ancient Hebrew custom of showing humility to God by wearing coarse linen cloth (sackcloth) and dusting oneself with ashes. Why do you think Anna's sister Louisa said that the wedding party was wearing sackcloth and ashes?
- Anna considered wearing a white gown for her wedding, but chose instead to wear her best dress, a grey silk riding dress. Why do you think she made this decision?
- When Anna married John, she was 29 years old, which was considered an older age for a bride in the mid-1800s. Why do you think most young women in that time married when they were much younger?

(see image on page following)



In MAY'S ROOM at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

Artifacts: Trunk of Theatrical Costumes and May's Drawing of Louisa as "Roderigo"

A small trunk was used by Louisa and her sisters, Anna and Abby May (May's name before she shortened it to just "May"), to hold the costumes they wore in theatrical presentations they performed for friends and family. The pair of rust-colored leather boots were worn by Louisa when she portrayed dashing heroes, such as "Rodolpho" in *Norna; or, The Witch's Curse*, a play she and Anna wrote together when they were young. The boots are often called "Roderigo's boots," since that was the hero role "Jo March" took on in the play described in Chapter I of *Little Women*, "Playing Pilgrims."

The drawing done by May, visible on the shelf near the trunk, shows Louisa playing the hero role of "Roderigo" and wearing the same boots displayed in the trunk. Meanwhile, Anna is up above in a homemade "tower" (a wooden window cut-out placed atop a dresser) playing the heroine role of "Princess Zara."

When the Alcott sisters were young, they performed their plays in the barn of Hillside, the house next door to Orchard House that they lived in during the 1840s. Years later, their plays were performed in the Dining Room of Orchard House for audiences of friends and neighbors gathered in the Parlor. The sisters would run up the back stairs to May's Room to change costumes for different scenes in the play.

Louisa, Anna, May, and several of their friends were also part of The Concord Dramatic Union, a group of Concordians who enjoyed acting and often put on plays for the benefit of charitable causes. It is said that Anna and John Pratt fell in love when they were cast opposite one another in one of these plays, *The Loan of a Lover*.

Questions to ponder:

- What other kinds of artistic activities did the Alcott girls enjoy?
- Read Chapter I of *Little Women*, "Playing Pilgrims." What happens during the play in the story? What do you learn about each of the girls as they rehearse together? (Read Chapter II of *Little Women*, "A Merry Christmas," to find out what happens when they perform the play!)
- Only professional photographers owned cameras at the time May drew the picture of her sisters performing a play. Why do you think she chose

to make this drawing? What memories would you best like to capture in a drawing right now?



In the PARENTS' ROOM at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

Artifact: "Order of In-door Duties for Children"

Amos Bronson Alcott created a daily schedule for his daughters in 1846, when the family lived next door to Orchard House on Lexington Road, in a home they called "Hillside" (now called The Wayside, a National Park site). At that time, Anna was 16, Louisa was 14, Lizzie was 11, and Abby May was 6 years old. Although now and then the girls did attend school, most of the time they were taught by their parents at home. A schedule helped to keep order in a household that could be chaotic at times, with everyone home and attending to work, play, and school lessons. Mr. Alcott made sure that the schedule included time for all those activities.

Miss Foord and Mr. Lane, whose names appear on the schedule, were two teachers who helped to educate the Alcott girls at home when they were living in Hillside. Miss Foord also taught the Emerson children, while Mr. Lane had lived with the Alcotts at "Fruitlands" (Harvard, MA) with the Alcotts and was staying with them again at the time this schedule was written.

Questions to ponder:

- What time does the family get up? What time do they go to bed?
- After everyone is out of bed, the first thing on the schedule is "Bathe"—which meant a cold shower each morning! Why do you think Mr. Alcott thought that was important for his family?
- What time are the children's lessons on the schedule?
- How much time is set aside for reading?
- How much time do the children have for play? Why do you think the parents felt that was important?
- What time is scheduled for chores (called "Duties," "Labor," or "Chares")? What else does the schedule say about chores? What chores do you do to help your family?
- What other activities are scheduled?
- What rules are listed at the bottom of the schedule? Why do you think Mr. Alcott felt those rules were important to list? Do you think his children followed the rules?
- Is there anything else you think should be on the schedule, or anything you think should not be there? What would you put on your own schedule?

(see image on page following)

Willside 1896

Order of In-door Duties for Children.

Morning	Fore noon	Noon	Afternoon	Evening
<p>5. Rise, Bathe, Dress. 6. Breakfast Housewifery Recreations, (Chares) in care of Miss Foord</p>	<p>9. Studies with Mr Lane. 10. Recreations. 11. Studies with Father</p>	<p>12. Dinner.</p>	<p>1. Rest. 2. Sewing, Conversation, and Reading, with Mother and Miss Ford. 4. Errands and (Chares) Recreations.</p>	<p>6. Supper. Recreation, Conversation, Music. 8. Bed.</p>
<p>Bathing Hours 5. 10$\frac{1}{2}$ 5..</p> <p>Study Hours 9$\frac{1}{2}$ 10$\frac{1}{2}$. 11 to 12</p>	<p> Vigilance, Punctuality, Perseverance Prompt, Cheerful, Unquestioning, Obedience. Government of Temper, Hands, and Tongue. Gentle Manners, Motions, and Words. Work, Studies, and Play distinct. No interchange of Labors.</p>			<p>Labor Hours 6$\frac{1}{2}$ to 8. 2 to 4.</p> <p>Play Hours 8 to 9. 10 to 10$\frac{1}{2}$. 4 to 6</p> <p>Eating Hours 6 to 6$\frac{1}{2}$. 12 to 12$\frac{1}{2}$. 6 to 6$\frac{1}{2}$.</p> <p>Sleeping Hours 8 to 5. 8$\frac{1}{2}$ to 5.</p>
<p>Observe Silence and Witness</p>				

In the STUDY at LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S ORCHARD HOUSE

Artifact: Quote above the Fireplace

Mr. Alcott's youngest daughter, May, painted two lines by the poet William Ellery Channing above the fireplace in the Study for her father:

*The hills are reared, the seas are scooped in vain,
If learnings' altar vanish from the plain.*

Amos Bronson Alcott grew up on a farm in Connecticut and as a youth had very little formal schooling. However, he loved to read and was self-taught most of his life. Later, when he became a schoolteacher, he believed that children should be participants in their own education, learning by discussing ideas and asking questions, not just by memorizing facts. His classrooms contained many books, beautiful art, and even individual desks for the students, instead of long, hard benches. Mr. Alcott thought that physical exercise, field trips, and nature studies were important to learning as well.

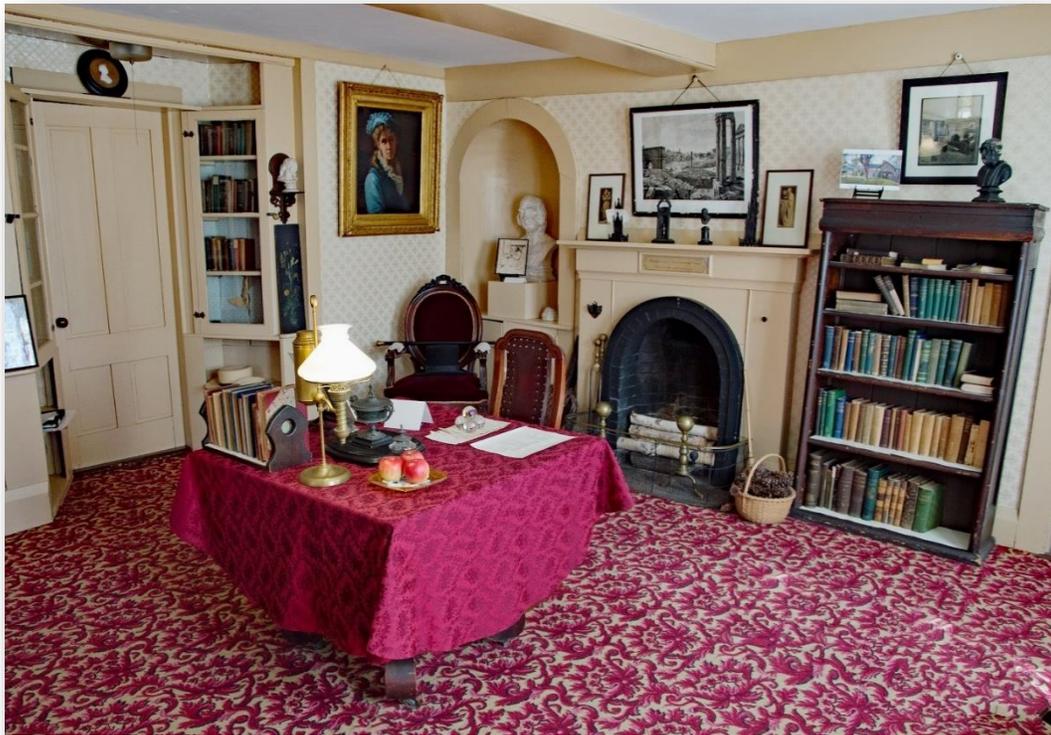
Mr. Alcott also believed that all children should receive an education, regardless of gender or race. During the 1830s, a young black student named Susan Robinson attended one of the schools Mr. Alcott had opened in Boston. Despite the criticism he received for admitting her, Mr. Alcott kept her as a pupil. Later, Mrs. Alcott and Louisa helped black adults learn to read at a time when it was illegal in some states for them to receive an education.

One of the most important educational lessons Mr. and Mrs. Alcott taught their daughters was to begin to keep a journal as soon as they had learned to write. Both of them felt that writing in a journal helped children to think, to record their thoughts, and to express their feelings by the act of writing them down. They both kept journals themselves, and encouraged their daughters to share their writings with each other. Mrs. Alcott also instituted a "post office" within the family so the girls could write letters to each other during the day.

Questions to ponder:

- What does the quote over the fireplace say about the importance of education?
- If you could write a favorite saying or poem on the wall, what would it be?

- Why did Mr. Alcott feel that children should participate in their own education?
- Why did Mr. Alcott furnish his classrooms the way he did?
- How did keeping a post office in the house help children with their writing? What would you write in a letter to a member of your family?
- What educational ideas that Mr. Alcott believed were important for his students do we still have in our schools today?



"The hills are reared, the seas are scooped in vain.
If learnings' altar vanish from the plain."