

Shannon Deana Landreth and Anissa Lopez (editors)

*Family Matters in Post-Revolutionary War North America:
The Blackden-Stoddard Letters (July 8, 1800, to July 24, 1809)*

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Durkee/Blackden Correspondence.

July 8/10, 1800, to July 2/24, 1809.

Six letters (numbered 19 to 24 below).

Introduction

The six letters from early-1800s America that are edited here belong to the “Durkee/Blackden Correspondence” of the “War Memorabilia Collection” held in CSUF’s University Archives and Special Collections. The letters were donated by Miss Florence Durkee of Brea, California, in 1973. The condition of the letters varies from fine to extremely fragile (letter 20 has separated into three pieces at the bottom). Each letter also features the occasional ink blot or hole. The letters are written in cursive in black (occasionally faded) ink on stationery paper that ranges in color between yellow and beige. Some of them display traces of the red wax seals with which they were sealed originally.

Written between July 8/10, 1800 (letter 19), and July 2/24, 1809 (letter 24), the letters’ postal addresses (of both senders and recipients) include the states of New York, Connecticut, Virginia, and Vermont. In letters 19 and 20, Samuel Blackden writes to his wife Sally (Sarah) Blackden (née Stoddard); in letter 21, Sally Blackden addresses one of her husband’s business contacts, Mr. Leavenworth; in letter 22, Josiah Stoddard writes to his aunt, the aforementioned Sally Blackden (whose brother’s name had also been Josiah); and in letters 23 and 24, Sarah (Sally) Blackden (by now a widow) writes to her sister Lydia Eldredge. The correspondence covers a wide range of subject matters, namely, personal business, such as getting one’s laundry done (letter 19), a nephew (young Ben) who “swears like a Virginian” (letter 20), a financier who has absconded to France with one’s funds (letter 21), another nephew (Josiah) who greatly esteems a young lady (Sally Riggs) (letter 22), and family members who are gravely ill (letters 23 and 24), as well as national and international affairs, such as an assassination attempt on King George III in a London theater and the Yellow Fever epidemic in New York (letter 19), deliberations in Congress, and a possible reference to the construction of the U.S. Capitol building (letter 21).

The letters offer insight into various family and business matters in post-Revolutionary War North America, but also a bottom-up perspective on other

local, regional, national, and international affairs. Therefore, they should be of particular interest to social and cultural historians.

The transcriptions below preserve the lines, spelling, and capitalization of the original letters. Any additions are enclosed by square brackets.

*Edition: Letter 19, S[amuel]. Blackden to Sally Blackden,
July 8/10, 1800, New York, New York*

Front left: [traces of red wax seal] [hole/tear in paper] [modern hand] 6 - From New York July 8 1800 - From S.B.

Mrs. Sally Blackden
Salisbury,
Connecticut

Front right:

New York July 8.th 1800¹

My Dear Sally -

This morning I received your kind letter of the first instant, I have wrote you twice before this, which were consign'[e]d to the care of Mr. Cotton for conveyance, if you have received them they inform'[e]d you of everything that could [be?] said at the time, but as I did not keep copies I dont know the dates, in future they shall be put down in my memorand[u]m - Mr and Mrs. Cotton have call'[e]d to see me once, and Mr. Cotton by himself once more within three weeks, my cloaths were sent home on Saturday ~~which~~ as arranged with her to be wash'[e]d, I asked the girl to call on Monday for my things, but three weeks has slip'[e]d by and I have neither seen nor heard from them, - the person that washes for the house took them last Monday - Mr. Cotton told me Mr. Carfield was in town, and he would bring him to see me, which he never did and whether he is gone or not I can't tell - Mrs. Ryckman call'[e]d once, I believe she is gone into the Country - I have neither seen nor heard of Mr. Tolman, Rogers was here about a fortnight ago he said he was going for a few days to the Country

¹ The letter was written over several days and contains a second date: July 10, [1800].

Back left: [traces of red wax seal]

Mrs. Sanders call'[e]d also, she is gone to New Brunswick²
 Mr. Farrell is with us, he desires his kindest respects to
 you - Some of the former letters mention'[e]d in[-]
 form[e]d you that I had written to Mr. Platt upon
 the receipt of the letter and parcell which was sent
 and the letter was given to Mr. Avery -
 From the appearance of European news, it is
 Generally believed that our Commissioners have suc[-]
 ceeded³ and we may hourly expect news from them
 By the English papers it appears that Pudding
 head⁴ had hired a drunken, crazy journeyman silversmith
 to fire a charge of powder at him in the Playhouse⁵
 in order to make a noise and produce another Waggon[-]
 load of addresses to the throne while the wretched Island [?]
 10.th July - In hopes of a private conveyance the foregoing
 has lain by, but now if I dont find One it will go by
 post - It is not possible for me to make the arrang[-]
 ment for your return, and if it was, at this moment
 when the whole City⁶ are trembling under the apprehension
 of a revisit of the epedemic,⁷ it would be imprudent, it
 more probable if I dont go to see Mr. J-[efferso?]-n⁸ - if means
 can be found I shall come up the North River⁹ -
 Rogers has return[e]d and call'[e]d yesterday, he desir[e]d
 a thousand good things to you, from himself and family
 Take no notice of L. H. the time may come I shall

Back right: [traces of red wax seal] [hole/tear in paper]

have it my power to gall his kibe¹⁰ - I never had
 any connection with him but once, and his conduct
 did not display either honor or honesty -
 To Miss Fitch I beg you to express my

² New Brunswick, New Jersey.

³ Possible reference to the end of the XYZ Affair and the Quasi War with France (1798-1800).

⁴ Nickname for King George III of England.

⁵ On May 15, 1800, James Hadfield fired a shot at King George III at London's Theatre Royal (Drury Lane). The king remained unharmed. Hadfield was incarcerated for insanity.

⁶ Most likely New York City.

⁷ The Yellow Fever epidemic of 1798-1803.

⁸ Presumably then U.S. Vice President Thomas Jefferson.

⁹ The Hudson River which runs between New Jersey and Manhattan.

¹⁰ To tread on someone's toes. See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (act 5, scene 1).

grateful feelings for her friendly attention to you,
 nothing in the world could lay me under so
 much obligation, and it is with a pleasing hope
 I anticipate the hour, when I shall have it within the
 compass of my abilities to shew her how sensible
 I am of her kindness, to the rest of our friends say
 all the kind things that are due - give my [...] ¹¹
 respects to your Mother & Capt[ain]. Holmes, a[nd be assured?]
 of the affection of your S[amuel]. B[lackden].

*Edition: Letter 20, S[amuel]. Blackden to Sally Blackden,
 June 12, 1801, Norfolk, Virginia*

Front: [bottom of page split into separate pieces]

Norfolk June 12.th 1801-

My Dear Sally

We sail[e]d at half past four oClock
 on Friday from New York and we arrived here Tues[-]
 day at the same hour consequently we were just four
 days, and though we had, wind, and rain, and calm,
 it may be accounted a good Passage, it was as to
 company agreable enough -
 It has rain[e]d ever since I arrived and so
 hard there is no looking out of doors, as soon as the
 weather clears up I shall proceed to Washington¹² -
 The family are in Good health, Betsy is a very
 fine girl, and in a few years will be tall enough, she is
 slender, very straight, has beautiful eyes, and the finest
 Eye lashes I ever saw, her education has been as much
 as possible attended to - Olive is a fine healthy child
 and young Ben is a forward ~~lad~~ boy, talks very plain
 and swears like a Virginian -
 I beg you to remember me kindly to all
 our friends, and respond upon hearing from me as soon
 as possible after my arrival at Washington, by which
 opportunity I shall inform you of what may Occur
 and of my route back - Till Then Accept my Dear
 Sally of the finest good wishes for your health
 from yours affectionately
 S[amuel]. B[lackden].

¹¹ Illegible deletion.

¹² Washington, DC.

Back: [bottom of page split into separate pieces, repair strips] [traces of red wax seal]
 [stamped postal seal] [modern hand] 4 -From Norwalk [sic] -June 12. 1801. - From S.
 B- to Dear Sally -25

Mrs. Sally Blackden
 Care of Mrs. I. Platt
 New Haven
 Connecticut

My Dear Sally
 Norfolk June 12th 1801 -

We sailed at half past four o'clock on Friday from New York and we arrived here this day at the same hour consequently we were just four days and though we had wind and fair, and calm it may be accounted a good passage, it was as to company agreeable enough -

It has rained ever since I arrived and so hard there is no looking out of doors, as soon as the weather clears up I shall proceed to Washington -

The family are in good health, Betty is a very fine girl, and in a few years will be tall enough, she is slender, very straight, has beautiful eyes, and the finest eye lashes I ever saw, her education has been as much as possible attended to - Olive is a fine healthy child and young Ben a forward ^{boy} talks very plain and means like a Virginian -

I beg you to remember me kindly to all our friends, and depend upon hearing from me as soon as possible after my arrival at Washington, by which opportunity I shall inform you of what may draw and of my health -

Sally of the finest good wishes for your health

from yours Affly
 (J.P.)

Figure 1: Letter 20, S[amuel]. Blackden to Sally Blackden, June 12, 1801, Norfolk, Virginia.

*Edition: Letter 21, S[arah=Sally?]. Blackden to [Mr. Leavenworth?],
August 29, 1801 [?], New York, New York*

Front: [modern hand] 8 -From New York -Aug. 29. 1802 [sic] -S. Blackden

New York Aug[u]st 29 - 1801¹³

D[ea]r Sir¹⁴

By the arrival of Mr. Sand [?],

I am made happy in hearing of your

Health and prosperity and most

sincerely do I wish for its continu[-]

ance

Hearing nothing worth -

communicating I hope you will

Excuse me if woman like I talk

about my self - I have for these seven

years past been tossing about from

place to place without any settled

habitations - Mr. Sw[a]n¹⁵ who Mr. B[lackden]

says owes him a great deal of money

has left the country having convey[e]d

away all his property, and I am

convinced he does not intend to return

On Issues of Congress the

particulars of which you can know

from Mr. Barlow letters¹⁶ have been

Requested [?] - but from an interview

Mr. Blackden has lately had with the

president¹⁷ we are flattered with

the hope of yet obtaining some -

thing the next session of Congress

Mr Blackden is y[e?]t cabable

of doing busyness but without a

Cupulal¹⁸ [?] it is impossible here

¹³ According to *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 36 (December 1, 1801, to March 3, 1802), 274, Samuel Blackden died before January 11, 1802, when his widow Sarah Blackden continued his petitions. Since Sarah/Sally still refers to Mr. Blackden as alive in this letter, it must have been written on August 29, 1801 (not 1802).

¹⁴ Based on the letter's ending, the addressee is probably Mark Leavenworth, one of Samuel Blackden's business contacts.

¹⁵ James Swan (1754-1830), financier.

¹⁶ Joel Barlow (1754-1812), poet, diplomat.

¹⁷ U.S. President Thomas Jefferson.

¹⁸ Possibly cupola (capital dome). The U.S. capitol building was under construction at the time.

Back:

to do anything to any purpose - but
 cou[l]d he be usefully employed he
 wou[l]d willingly come to France
 or if you are of an opinion that
 something might be recovered from
 D'allund on Sw[a]n the affairs would
 Be worth pursuing - in that
 my friend you already see my situation
 is peculiarly unpleasant and beg
 you on that account to pardon the
 liberty I take in writing to you
 thus freely and of asking a price
 from you by the first possible
 conveyance - present me in the
 kindest manner to Mrs. Le[a]venworth
 and Believe me your sincere
 friend S[arah]. Blackden

*Edition: Letter 22, J[osiah]. Stoddard to Sarah Blackden,
 May 15/16, 1803, Geneva, New York*

Front left: [traces of red wax seal] [modern hand] Geneva May 16th. - Paid 20 - 19 -
 May 15 1803 - From J Stoddard - Mrs. Sarah Blackden - New York

Geneva May 16th
 Paid 20
 Mrs. Sarah Blacken
 New York

Front right: [traces of red wax seal]

Geneva 15th May 1803
 My Dear Aunt
 The length of time that has elapsed
 since we have interchanged letters has deprived me
 almost of a subject on which to write you.
 I shall only make one apology for this seeming
 neglect, which is that I have been frequently told
 that you were going to France and from the reports
 believed you were there until my brother Rich[ar]d
 told me he saw you in N[ew]. York this spring.
 I am certain there is not one of your friends that
 holds you in higher estimation than I do and
 hope we may be in future more liberal with
 our pen ink and paper. I was at Rich[ar]d[s] house

last week where I found Father and Richards wife very unwell, the latter so much so that I think it doubtful whether she ever recovers her health again. Richard contemplates sending her to N[ew]. York and Long Island for the benefit of the sea air, I shall probably accompany her and shall make it my business to find you immediately on my arrival in the City. If it should so happen that I should not accompany my sister I hope you will do me the honour to write

Back left:

me. I am a[-]shamed of my neglect in this instance, but I do think you are also a little dilatory in these matters too.

Those of your friends and acquaintance in this Country are in general in very good health and often speak of you. Mylan Holly is in Canandaigua¹⁹ and proposes settling in that town in the profession of Law, he appears to be a very good young man and I think will do business to advantage.

There is now in this town a young Lady from Mendham N[ew]. Jersey by the name of Sally Riggs who will return in a few days to New Jersey by the way of N[ew]. York she is a very fine worthy young lady and is much respected by our friends and acquaintance in this Country. I shall not hesitate to tell so good a friend as you are to me, that I esteem hir very much and if accident should throw hir in your way I hope you will take particular notice of hir. Hir parents are wealthy and respectable people and live about 25 miles from N[ew] York She is a very fine Girl tho not very handsom, poseses

Back right:

a good mind and is very friendly She will be proud of an acquaintance with you and I am certain she will derive much benefit from an acquaintance with a person that has seen as much of the world and mixed with the

¹⁹ Location in New York state.

polite circles as you have, I do not know that
 you will ever see hir but if you should
 do remember hir on my account. I shall
 do all in my power to persuade Sister
 Sally to go to New York where if I accompany
 her I hope to see you -
 Accept my best [?] wishes for your
 future hapiness -
 Yours sincerely
 J[osiah.?] Stoddard

*Edition: Letter 23, Sarah Blackden to Lydia Eldredge,
 January 8, 1808, New York, New York*

Front left: [traces of red wax seal] [hole in paper] [stamped postal seal] New York
 Jan. 9 [?] [modern hand] - 23 - From Greenwich Str N.Y. - Jan[uary]. 3. 1808 - From
 Sarah Blackden

Miss Lydia Eldredge
 Burlington
 Vermont

Front right:

Jan[ua]ry 8th 1808 - Greenw[ic]h Street²⁰ n[o.] 266
 My dear Sister,
 I have within a few days written
 to Sister Bennett and inclos[e]d my letter in
 one to Mrs Stanton two days after I receiv[e]d
 one from Mrs Stanton, and as she mentions her
 intention of going soon to Connecticut I
 fear She will not get my letter till her
 return to Vermont - it is therefore best I
 think for Bettey to write her and let
 her know the contents of my letter in
 case she is to be absent for a long time
 This however I consider of no great
 consequence and is by no means the
 cause of my writing to you I write
 Because I have long contemplated the
 propriety of addressing you once more
 Before the opportunity - is past of saying

²⁰ Historic street in Manhattan.

Back left: [hole in paper]

to you that I am well informed of the very
 alarming state of your health and that it is
 my most earnest desire to see you once more
 whether I do or not depends on the progress
 of your disease - and getting the means
 to accomplish the journey but all is
 uncertain and while I am meditating upon
 an Event that may take place and which
 to me would be Sorrow indescribable I may
 Be laid upon a sick bed and go to my Grave
 long before you, wou[l]d to god it migh
 Be so - and that you may be yet spared to
 your friends spared to your family that god
 wou[l]d lead you that he wou[l]d make thee such
 as he wou[l]d have us all to be, gives us daily
 increase of charity strengthen our faith
 confirm our hope, may he see thy children
 and all those that wou[l]d come to him even if they
 Be afar off and bring us all to the full
 fruition of the glory and perfection of
 god and

Back right: [hole/tear in paper]

the Father the Son and the holy Ghost to whom
 Be praise honor and adoration given by all angels
 and all men and all Creatures now and forever
 more - give my most affectionate regard
 to Sister Bennett and tell her she little
 knows how much I rejoice at any good that may
 happen to her and her children and that
 I hope her present prospects may be
 [en]larged [?] - Let me hear from you al[l?]
 [and?] that without delay - love to Char[...]²¹
 and Lydia and Polly Mr & Mrs Smith
 to there children and Suitable regards
 to your good and much respected
 Husband - and believe me with the
 most earnest solicitude for your health
 and life your very affectionate Sister
 Sarah Blackden

²¹ Illegible deletion.

There will [be?] no war²² - tell the girls
to write immediately -

*Edition: Letter 24, S[arah]. Blackden to Lydia Eldredge,
July 2/24, 1809, Salisbury, Connecticut*

Front left: [traces of red wax seal] [hole in paper] [modern hand] 1 - July 24 1809
From S.... - Salisbury - July 24th 1809 - 1

Salisbury July 24th 1809

17

Mrs Lydia Eldredge

Burlington

Vermont

Front right:

Salisbury July 2[n]d 1809

This letter My dear Sisters is equally
addressed to you Both I write because it is
my duty to write and let you know what
~~you~~ I am sure you both wish to know
and can learn from no one So well as my[-]
self, I give you no information with
respect to our Mother with any idea of
making you uneasy because more is not
done for her, she knows and we all
know that you do all for her that
is in your power, were you both nearer
to her you now might be of great
assistance to her, that assistance and that
aid and help that she lent to us when
we were unable to think or ask for
our selves - I have now been with her better
than two months and in all that time I
think she has been rapidly declining
her voice is extremely feeble her
memory has fail[e]d her very much and
at tim[e]s is quite unable to get to the
Bed or Back to the same [?] without
help she has indeed fallen down
several

²² Presumably with Britain.

Back left:

tim[e]s and then observes to me that she shall never walk any more that the grave is open for her and that she shall soon go and be united to her children and then is extremely grieved that she cannot see Lydia and Olive once more and then gets your stockings and will have them on and the cap you sent her and takes down my towel and hangs up yours to let me see that I must not think so much of what I do for her, sometimes she puts her finger on the darn²³ in the stocking you sent - says that it looks just like you and that she means to keep them - but she has worn them almost out, after all this she falls a[-] sleep and then wakes up full of gratitude for what I have done she says she must have died if I had not come to her reliefe it is true I have done a great deal for her and never have I known any pleasure or satisfaction equal to that of preparing a little victuals and sometimes

Back right: [traces of red wax seal] [hole in paper]

feeding her as you wou[l]d feed an infant she frequently makes me read to her and often gives me the 12 part of the 119 psalms²⁴ (Watts) to read - saying that is her case and will god pardon will he forgive will god have mercy on her this is what she says and is no doubt sensible of her approaching end I do not however think she will die so soon as many apprehend - Some are of opinion that

²³ Mend.

²⁴ Presumably a reference to Psalm 119, Part 12 ("My God, consider my distress"), written by Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and published 1806.

she will not live till September whether
 she does or not I must le[a]ve her[.] the misirable
 state of my own health and other cares
 oblige me to quit for the present
 we are now trying to get some one
 to take care of her and if I get better
 and she shou[l]d live I will endeavor to
 come again as soon as I can
 Present my tender regards
 to your Husband and children to the
 Sister amos Eldredge & her children
 and Believe me your
 Affectionate Sister
 S[arah] Blackden
 Mrs J[onat?]han & Mrs
 Amos Eldredge

ABOUT THE EDITOR: Shannon Deana Landreth of Fontana, California, earned her A.A. in History at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, California (2013), her B.A. in History at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) (2015), and her M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) (2020).

ABOUT THE EDITOR: Anissa Lopez of Moreno Valley, California, earned her B.A. in History at California Baptist University in Riverside, California (2019). She is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). The primary-source edition published above originated in the "History and Editing" course offered by CSUF's History Department.