



## MEGAN MARSHALL

# Donating Family Archives to Schlesinger Library

It started with the paper dolls: the small green box filled with astonishingly detailed, subtly hued, three-inch-long dresses that fit precisely, anchored by tiny foldable tabs, onto the forms of several five-inch-tall paper girls clad in lace-edged slips and pantaloons. Hand-cut and hand-painted during the Great Depression by my mother's aunt Euphemia ("Fame" for short)—a woman with many sons and no daughters who had welcomed my mother's family into her home during the lean years—the dolls had been an endless source of amusement to my mother as a child. I imagine her sorting through the dozens of outfits with their striped and polka-dotted fabrics; embroidered hems and collars; and dropped, cinched, or high waists at ages seven, eight, and nine—years when she was suddenly without much of a wardrobe herself or even, sometimes, enough food in the chaotic household of boy cousins and one older brother. I imagine her learning from Aunt Fame what a woman could do with a paintbrush and black ink.

My mother let my sister and me play with the dolls in our childhood in the early 1960s. But by the time my own daughters were born, in 1984 and 1990, I had decided the paper girls and their extravagant dresses and accessories (hats and fans and parasols) were too precious to be handled. Last year, facing a move from a large house to a small apartment, what was I to do with the paper dolls? Did it make sense for them to stay shut up in their green box, only to be moved from one house to the next, never played with and rarely viewed?

They were only the beginning. For the 20 years I'd lived in the big house, I'd also been researching and writing a biography of three 19th-century New England sisters: Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia Peabody. Word spread among my family members that I cared about old things, old papers in particular. My house became the family archive as well as the archive of my work on the Peabody family. In cardboard

boxes at the backs of closets I stored one grandmother's Paris diary recording the early years of her marriage to my grandfather, an officer in the Army Press Corps during World War I, and my other grandmother's love letters to her young husband, a sonar operator in the Navy during the same years. There were my mother's letters to her parents from summer camp in the 1930s, and my father's courtship letters to my mother, posted from South American ports on shore leave when he served in the Merchant Marine during World War II.

The days spent playing with Aunt Fame's paper dolls had their payoff: my mother became a watercolor landscape painter and, later, a book designer. I had her sketches, business correspondence, and the books themselves. There were my own letters home, written as a college student in the 1970s and saved by my mother. With my daughters in college and communicating with me only by text and e-mail, I suddenly saw my own girlish scrawls as rarities too.

I'd used the Schlesinger Library in my research on the Peabody sisters—locating key documents from the century before my own family archive began. I'd brought my graduate students in creative writing to the library, where they became entranced with the past and began to incorporate historical themes and personages into their poems, stories, and nonfiction narratives. I knew the extraordinary range of the collection and its singular value to scholars, writers, and artists of all sorts interested in re-creating American women's lives. Would my family papers—and paper dolls—find a place there? When the answer was yes, I could not have been more thrilled.

A year ago, as I packed up my cardboard boxes to take to the library for processing, I realized it wasn't just my mother's career that began with those paper dolls—my own did as well. My engagement with the past through the paper documents that keep history alive started with those early

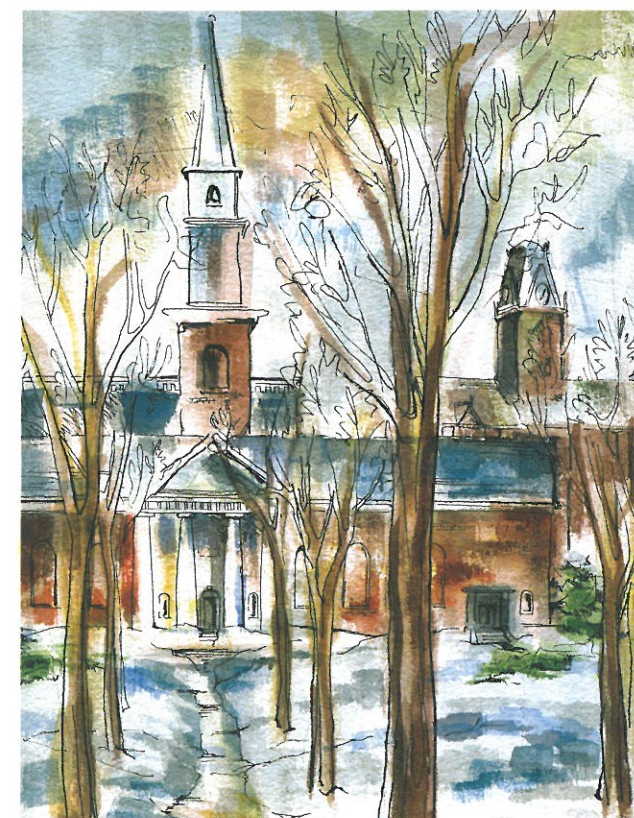
years of quiet play and vivid imagining—an experience that the Schlesinger Library offers anyone who enters its reading room, fills out a call slip, and receives an archival box, its contents ripe for discovery.

*Megan Marshall '77, RI '07 is the author of The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism (2005), which won the Francis Parkman Prize, the Mark Lynton History Prize, and the Massachusetts Book Award in Nonfiction and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography. She teaches narrative nonfiction writing and the art of archival research in the MFA program at Emerson College.*

Above right: Elva Spiess Marshall with her children (left to right) Megan, Amy, and Woody Jr., Christmas 1955.

Right: Watercolor of Memorial Church in Harvard Yard by Elva Spiess Marshall.

Below: Etching by Elva Spiess Marshall.



All images are from the Marshall-Spiess Family Papers.