

September 15, 1997

The following is a letter written in 1838 from Mrs. Harriet Schenck, wife of John Schenck, to her younger sister Jane and another woman whose name I can't make out. A photocopy was among the materials collected by Iva Deane (Bumgarner) Stoker and loaned to me, Bob Shull, by her daughter, Lenore Henninger. Harriet and her older half-sister Maria had gone to Alabama from New London, Connecticut, to teach school. There she met and married John, or, as she calls him in the letter, Mr. Schenck. John was the son of Michael Schenck III, scion of a well-to-do family in North Carolina. John's grandfather had built the first water-powered cotton mill in the South. John moved to Alabama, bought land around some sulfur springs near Jacksonville, and built a hotel and health resort. He was short, slight and of fragile health. Harriet and John were grandparents of Lillian Erdeane (Smith) Bumgarner, the mother of May (Bumgarner) Beasley and Iva Deane (Bumgarner) Stoker.

The letter is striking for Harriet's understatement of her constant anxiety and sense of isolation, and for its glimpse of how the frontier South must have seemed to an educated woman from New London, Connecticut. She was the next-to-youngest of 12 children. Her sister Rebecca, mentioned in the letter, had died about a year earlier, in May 1837. Harriet was almost 36 years old when she wrote this letter. She lived another seven years; she died in 1845, leaving her husband with several young children, including our great-grandmother Bumgarner's mother.

The letter has a few blotches that obscure the text, indicated here by blanks and question marks. It begins with a note above the heading, obviously a sort of post script written where she still had some room:

I have not had a letter from Sister M _____ [Maria?] for some time. I learned the other day by a letter from Mr. S's [Schenck's?] sister, her family were all well and I suppose she is "Grandma" by this time.

Jacksonville, Ala., August 17th 1838

My Dear Sister,

I have been looking in my folios, Atlases, etc. where I generally place unanswered letters but cannot find your last one to me, having misplaced it I suppose in some of my hurried moments – as I recollect taking in my hand several times to answer it. So that if this letter should have no connection at all with your last one I hope you will excuse me – it is a long time since I received your letter, and tho I read it with much interest and more than once, I cannot now recall its contents. My memory is by no means such as our dear Rebecca possessed.

This morning I've received letters from Brother Olmstead and Cornelia, which rejoices us very much. It had been a very long time since we heard from them. Brothers family must be very interesting – so many of them hopefully pious, and well [educated?] children. It seems Frank and Howard are travelling for their health. I am sorry they are obliged so early to resort to artificial means for this greatest of blessings

Mr. Schenck is now confined with an attack of bilious fever. He is recovering but so weak he is not able to sit up but a few moments at a time. He brought on the attack by exposure and fatigue. He was at his plantation 6 miles from town preparing buildings, etc., for the accommodation of the sick, at the Sulphur Springs. He was two days sick before he reached home. I think now with care he will be able to ride out next week. I trust he may. The sickness of our near and dear friends is at any time very grievous and distressing, but when we are at a distance from all relatives and surrounded entirely by strangers, we suffer more from anxiety and distress of mind than under any other circumstances. I have had this trouble several times. Mr. Schenck has a very weakly constitution, and has frequent attacks of sickness. The rest of us enjoy uninterrupted health. I never was in as good health in my life as since I lived in Ala. Frank and Tom are both as fat and rosy as they can be.

August 26th

Since writing the foregoing I have had my hands and heart full. Mr. Schenck has been very bad with the fever. He is now but just able to get across the room. There is more sickness in this section of country this season than there has been since we resided in Ala. But our summer has been extremely warm. The nights are getting to be a little cool now, and I trust health and strength will soon visit us again.

There has been considerable excitement in Jacksonville on the subject of Religion. We have had a protracted meeting in the Presbyterian Church which lasted more than three weeks – preaching every day and at night. The church was well filled every meeting. We had prayer meeting at the church at sunrise besides. I expect you have no idea how meetings of this kind are managed at the South. Every family lays by their worldly concerns as much as possible during the time of the meeting and attends church as much as is in their power. I did not want to like the plan at all but since I have become more acquainted with the situation of the country, and people, I believe it is best, where the population is scattered, and [they?] cannot enjoy the presence of ministers, and church [attendance?] privileges often.

I want to ask many questions about N.L. [New London] and friends about you, but have not time to write. ??? and mention everything you think will interest me. I still call N.L. home when I speak of the place, although have been much longer absent from there than I ever lived in the town. Still, it is the place of my nativity and I am partial to it on that account. Remember me affectionately to brother Frank and family, brother ??? and sister Nancy – and all who may inquire after me.

Mr. Schenck joins me in love and respects to yourself and brother Jones – Frank and Jane send much love to their Uncles and Aunts in Connecticut and would like to see their cousins and tell them about the Indians, wolves and big bugs in Ala. Where are our dear R's children? I should like to know something about them. If I had any way to convey one of them to my home I should be very glad to raise it with my children.

Do write soon – and if you can, give me some idea of the latest fashions for bonnets and dresses.

Your affectionate sister Harriet H.