

2022.009 Fanny Anne Kemble Collection

Frances Anne Kemble Butler 1809-1893

Scope & Content

The collection consists of multiple gifts given to the Lenox Library between 1912 and 1945 by various donors. It includes books written by and about Fanny Kemble, images of Kemble family members (sometimes as characters played on stage), broadsides advertising Kemble's Covent Garden stage career in the early nineteenth century, drawings, photographs of her various homes, letters from Henry James, a sketchbook of Berkshire sites, and objects from her Lenox home, The Perch. Most of the early donations relate to Fanny Kemble's time as a Lenox residence while later donations concentrate on her time in Georgia with Pierce Butler.

The collection includes research material on Fanny Kemble, gathered by Amelia M. Watson and Grace Wilson between 1915 and 1938. Watson collected material on visits to Kemble's former homes and took photographs of the Butler estate and St. Simon's Island, where Kemble had written her "Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation." There are hand-drawn maps of the properties. Watson interviewed and photographed residents previously enslaved during Kemble's era. She used her photographs and watercolors to supplement Kemble's books and to create photograph albums that contain additional information about the plantation.

Material dealing with women on plantations or involved in the Arts was part of the donations from Amelia Watson's sister, Edith, and Grace Wilson. It included information about Patience Pringle, Cora Harris, Helen Hyde, Elaine Goodale Eastman and her daughter, Talate, and the Chicora Woods plantation but had little connection to Fanny Kemble. This material was moved to a separate collection, 2011.1-9.

Biography

Frances Anne Kemble (1809-1893) was an actress, author, and abolitionist. She was born in London, England into a famous theatrical family that included her father, Charles Kemble and aunt, Sarah Siddons. She performed on the stage in Covent Garden and throughout the British Isles but travelled to America in 1832 where she appeared in plays and presented dramatic readings, often from Shakespeare. Throughout her life she often travelled back and forth between Europe and America.

On June 7, 1834 she married Pierce Butler in Philadelphia, PA, and lived at Butler Place, outside of the city. They had two daughters, Sarah (Mrs. Owen Wister) in 1835 and Frances Anne (Mrs. James Leigh) in 1838. Butler inherited a large rice and cotton plantation on Butler and St. Simon's Islands in Georgia. It was there in the winter of 1839 that Fanny observed the activities connected to slavery that she would later describe in her Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation. Her observations of the institution strengthened her attitude about abolition and caused a rift with the Butler family. In 1847,

Butler began proceedings which would result in divorce in 1849 for desertion when Fanny returned to London. The children stayed with Butler except for summer visits with her mother until they were grown.

As early as 1835, Fanny met Catharine and other members of the Sedgwick family and traveled to their home in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts. She considered herself part of the Berkshire community, contributing to Lenox institutions and performing readings in support of local organizations. Fanny Butler preferred writing to acting. But she played an integral role at Elizabeth Sedgwick's school for girls by working with the students. In 1844 she participated in the Berkshire Jubilee by writing an ode which was read at that celebration by Charles Sedgwick.

She became part of the local social circle whenever she was in the area and socialized with not only the Sedgwicks but also Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Sumner, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Louis Agassiz, the proprietor of the Curtis Hotel in the center of the town and later, Henry James. In 1848-1849, she hired a house in Lenox from John Brown which she later purchased. The property, known as the Perch, was sold in the 1860s to John Thomson.

Arrangement

Because the collection is a combination of several donations and has been moved and reorganized several times, there is no original arrangement. Series were determined by format (books) and topic (theater).

Series I: Personal papers

- Sketch book of Berkshire sites
- Correspondence
- Reviews of writings
- Divorce notices

Series II: Images

- Kemble Family members
- Kemble homes
- Negatives

Series III: Theater material

- Broadsides
- Reviews

Series IV: Books.

Many of the original editions were purchased by Watson or Wilson for their collections. They had the books rebound to include photographs or drawings by Amelia Watson relating to Kemble in the text of the books.

- Books by Fanny Kemble
- Books used as reference re: Theater

Book by Frances Butler Field

Books about the Kemble family

Series V: Artifacts.

Includes furniture and decorations from the Perch. Most were given to the Library by John Thomson when he sold the property.

Series VI: Research

Research by Amelia Watson in the early 20th century with additional information by Grace Wilson.

Notes

Correspondence

Reminiscences

Photographs & albums

Auburn cemetery

Maps

The bulk of this collection is housed in the Keator Vault or Special Collections Room while some items are on display throughout the Lenox Library's rooms.

Dates

1815- 1938

Size

12 linear ft + framed drawings & artifacts (on display throughout Library rooms)

Additional Subjects

Theater *Slavery* *Georgia*

Judge Henry Bishop

Pierce Butler

William O. Curtis

Nathaniel Hawthorne

Henry James

Charles Kemble

Frances K Leigh

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Judge Julius Rockwell

Catharine Sedgwick

Charles Sedgwick

Elizabeth Sedgwick

Sarah Siddons

Booker T. Washington

Grace Wilson

Owen Wister

Sarah K Wister