

**A Letter to the Students of Tourtellotte Memorial High School
and the Citizens of Thompson, Connecticut
From: Harriett Arnold Tourtellotte**

September 3, 2009

Dear students of Tourtellotte Memorial High School and citizens of Thompson:

Our 100th anniversary, what a wonderful day! I am happy to see what a fine institution our little school has become, and how many fine young adults it has helped along life's difficult journey.

For those of you who do not know me; I was born on Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1837 and I was raised in Thompson. My father was part owner of one of the larger textile mills here in town where many of your grandparents and great-grandparents worked. I have to admit that we lived quite well when compared against many other mill village communities, but my father worked very hard to earn his position in life. Mr. Tourtellotte was born two years earlier on December 26, 1835. Frank, as we called him, was raised in Wilsonville where his family was successful farmers.

We didn't know each other as children. We attended our own village school, and there were few opportunities for children from different sections of town to meet. My parents recognized the value of a good education, and as there was no high school in Thompson, they sent me to Nichols Preparatory School, located in Dudley, Massachusetts. This was an extraordinary opportunity for me, as there were few girls during those years that were able to attend high school. Federal, state, and local governments of the early 1800's acknowledged the need to further educate American children, but did little to provide the means. Some of the more fortunate children of Thompson traveled to other towns to attend high school, but those without money could only hope for an 8th grade diploma.

← his mother was Abby Ballard

While at Nichols Preparatory I met Jacob Francis Tourtellotte and we quickly became high school sweethearts. Upon completing high school, Frank attended Columbia College in New York City to study medicine, and I attended the Salem Vale Normal School for Music, in Salem, Connecticut to become a music teacher. We kept in touch through letters and it was through this means that we eventually knew we would spend the rest of our lives together.

Frank finished his studies at Columbia College and became a doctor. But soon after graduation he, like his brother John before him, accepted a commission in the Navy and went off to fight for the Union side of the Civil War. Dr. Tourtellotte, like many good gentlemen of the North, deeply believed in the noble struggle and was willing to place himself in harm's way to end slavery and to keep the country whole. What Frank witnessed during this time as a ship's surgeon must have been terrible. In our own little Town of Thompson every family knew of a soldier who lost life or limb. No one was safe and I worried myself sick about Frank and prayed daily for his safe return.

In April of 1865 General Robert E. Lee surrendered his forces at Appomattox Court House and the war was over. Dr. Tourtellotte returned to New York City, where I eventually met him, my music degree in hand. On June 26, 1865, we were married by Reverend Harold Crosby at the old Fourth Presbyterian Church located in the Bronx, New York.

After the war, the military was not quite finished with Frank, and he was assigned as ship's surgeon on a man-of-war and once again left, this time sailing off to South America in search of pirates. Approximately one year into this assignment, he became deathly ill off the coast of Chile. In 1868 he was finally discharged and came home to me in New York City. The doctors were

uncertain what ailed his heart and several with whom he had great trust recommended he move west to a cleaner and healthier environment.

At the end of the Civil War, his older brother Colonel John E. Tourtellotte moved to the Minnesota Territory to be with another brother Munroe, and we decided to follow. Minnesota was still a wild territory and Frank and I felt it would provide the environment Frank's health required and the challenges we both sought.

We settled in Winona, Minnesota, not far from John and went about establishing a life for ourselves. On August 10, 1869, while Frank practiced a little medicine and a great deal of investing, and I concentrated on making a home, our first little girl was born. She was such an angel. She had beautiful light blond hair, blue eyes, and was everything a mother could hope for. For nearly one year Frank and I doted over our little girl Lucy as if she was the only child on earth; we could not have been happier. But, sometimes life has a way of shaking you for unknown reasons. As poor Lucy approached her first birthday she fell ill with Scarlet Fever and quickly died. It left a deep hole in our hearts that would be difficult for Frank and me to fill. We did not have a single picture or photograph of her, so my husband carried my poor dead girl to a photography studio and from that one photo, I had a portrait painted of my baby Lucy showing what she looked like when she was alive.

In November of 1873, three years after the passing of Lucy, I became pregnant for our second child. It seemed that God granted me yet another chance at motherhood and on July 28, 1874 Frances Harriet Tourtellotte was born. The deep pain we felt from the loss of our first daughter, for the first time in many years, diminished. Hattie, as we called her, was as precious as her older sister. Frank and I fussed over little Hattie giving her the best we could. By that time Frank's investments were doing well and I too became quite a good investor, in land and real estate. As a mother, it was difficult for me not to think of the loss of our first daughter and I, like many women in my circumstances, slept with one eye open, knowing I would be devastated if young Hattie was taken from us.

In March of 1886 Frank and I took Hattie to the P.T. Barnum Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland. We hadn't traveled with Hattie much and we felt this would be a great opportunity for her. While in Baltimore, Hattie begged Frank and me for a hot dog, and as she had never had one before, we relented. That evening she became deathly ill and all the efforts by Frank and the other doctors, and all the prayers I could muster, did not save her. She passed away the next day, a few months short of her twelfth birthday. We do not know what took Hattie's life; food poisoning and appendicitis were among the many candidates. Whatever it was, we returned to Minnesota to bury our second little girl. The train ride home was extremely painful. I could not help but think of all the experiences both Lucy and Hattie would miss; going to school, making friends, learning music, falling in love, and eventually having their own little girls. No amount of comfort could calm my distress.

Upon returning to Minneapolis, Dr. Tourtellotte and I tried with all our might to move past the sorrow. We traveled a bit in a veiled attempt to provide distraction, but it was unsuccessful. He had his job and investments to distract him and sometimes I thought he was handling the emptiness better than me, but seeing him in his study, sitting by himself with tears in his eyes told me he deeply missed his little girls.

In 1885 I met Mrs. Sarah Knight. She was a very pleasant woman of the Methodist faith who dedicated her whole life to the sick and injured. She founded the Deaconess Hospital in Minneapolis and seemed to have a very happy life caring for others. Considering my own emptiness I asked her during one of our first meetings, 'Mrs. Knight, what do you do with your time and why are you always so content?' She told me about Asbury Hospital and her work providing for others and I asked, 'Will you take me down there to see it?' She said 'I would be delighted to do so.'

So we made arrangements and I visited her hospital. Immediately I could see that she was a woman consumed with her work. She was one of the most joyful individuals I have ever met. She found happiness by giving to others and I gave this considerable thought.

My friendship with Mrs. Knight grew. During one of our afternoon teas in 1906 we spoke of my home town, Thompson, Connecticut and the very different communities that were contained within its borders. I told her that, '...one part of that town is given up to the palatial homes of the rich people of Boston and New York, and the other part to the folks who worked the mills.' I told her about the many friends I had made as a young girl with these mill folks and an inspiration suddenly came over me. I knew what I was going to do! Mrs. Knight looked at me puzzled and asked, 'Mrs. Tourtellotte, are you alright?' I looked at her smiling and said, 'You know the law compels children to attend school [in Thompson], but provides no school for them to attend unless they take the trolley into the next town.' Using her good work as an example, I told her that the good Doctor and I were going to build a high school for those children, and those children would have every facility that the millionaires' children could have. It would be a memorial where Lucy and Hattie would be forever remembered and could watch over those seeking higher learning. I asked Mrs. Knight, 'What do you think of that idea?' She said, 'Mrs. Tourtellotte, I think that it is a magnificent idea!'

I could barely contain myself and could not wait to inform Dr. Tourtellotte. I was so excited and the ideas and thoughts came to me in droves. I would build a great auditorium for the arts and a state-of-the art gymnasium to create sound bodies. I would build a magnificent Memorial Room for my girls and family and fill the room with personal treasures that everyone in town could enjoy. For the first time in a very long time, I felt alive.

I visited Thompson in 1907, and with the help of interested Thompson citizens, family members, and associates of my father, we went about the hectic task of planning and designing a new memorial school.

Now I have to tell you, there were many in town who felt that a structure of this nature would best fit among the many mansions on Thompson Hill, but I remembered with great fondness all my friends from Grosvenordale and North Grosvenordale who did not have the opportunities I had as a girl. I wanted this school to set the standard in New England, and I wanted it right in the middle of town where all children could attend. I wanted it to be the finest equipped place of learning in the country, and I insisted it be outfitted with the latest technologies to include electricity and plumbing. I wanted the school to accommodate the cerebral and the physical, the sciences and the arts. I would send my beloved Steinway piano to the school so all children of Thompson, present and future, could have the opportunity to learn and hear music from this great instrument. The children of mill workers, store owners, firemen, and farmers would have opportunities typically reserved for the wealthy. My legacy would be my music, my desire to educate, and my children, all contained in that great stone structure sitting like a fort upon the hill, for all to see, for all use, for all to learn. On December 21, 1907, a bitterly cold day, our hearts could not have felt any warmer as the first stone was laid. The work began.

Two years later, on September 3, 1909, 100 years ago this week, the Tourtellotte Memorial High School was dedicated. There was an empty seat on the stage as Dr. Tourtellotte was unable to attend. The sickness he developed while serving in the Navy was taking its toll, but we felt it fitting he be reserved a spot on this momentous occasion. Without his support the school would not have been possible.

Frank passed away in 1912 and I found myself alone. I concluded my business in Minneapolis and built a small home on Main Street in North Grosvenordale so I could be close to the school and in some small way, my girls. I remained involved in the school until my death in

1919. The work added great meaning to my life and I never regretted coming home to Thompson. Somehow I always seemed to fit here.

As I look back I still greatly miss the opportunity of growing old with my own children and only hope this gift, the gift of learning, is used to its fullest extent by the children of Thompson. I hope they see the path to self-fulfillment lies in continuous learning.

To those students and citizens of Thompson who sit here listening to this letter 100 years after we dedicated the school to my two little girls, there is one thing that I ask; learn, live, and grow to your fullest potential. Respect the knowledge imparted upon you at this fine facility and use it as a means to make the world, and our small community, a better place to live.

Signed,

Harriett A. Tourtellotte

*Author: by someone at the high school, Alumni Association
or Thompson Historical Society*