

## Hair out of Place

### Cordelia A. Willett and her “Hair Book”

By Adam Hewitt-Smith

The Kansas State Library Special Collections houses a tattered dime-store notebook, cover torn off, held and handled to the point of decay. Hair, human hair, wriggles out of the bottom and sides of the book. A clump of hair rests disorderly in the book’s center, its frayed ends slither out as if straining to betray the secrets squirreled away within the pages. Leafing through the other forty-four pages, you discover more obedient strands of hair, still tied into ribbons and braids, and sewn into the pages with twine. In two places, pages peel apart and reveal unsightly glue stains, attempts to conceal the twine poking out of the back. Letters and poems adorn the pages in handwriting so ornate that it defies decryption.



Stains decorate the pages; thick grease blobs from human hands, rips and tears along the pages, and brown paint-like imprints which form mirror images of each hair ribbon, echoing the books' material mementos. The book's binding (a secondary binding, the original long removed) recalls the hodgepodge nature of Frankenstein's monster: an outer shell haphazardly thrown together out of discarded material. The same twine which fastens down the hair ribbons also slips through improvised holes to wring the pages together. The severed cover reads, in faded ink, "Delia A. Willett's 'Hair Book.'" A date, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1861, joins this simple introduction in the cover's bottom left-hand corner.

Too often, we focus so much on the works of the great masters that we ignore the literary expressions and importance of everyday people. This paper is about putting such a forgotten and marginalized work, the Hair Book, and its unremembered, quotidian creators front and center and into their artistic, historical, and local context. In doing so, I also seek to reconstruct the life of its original owner and silent protagonist, Cordelia A. Willett.

“Hair Books” and hair artwork have a long, complicated, and forgotten history. Though the practice of making artwork out of hair has existed for centuries, hair art hit its greatest popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The so-called “Victorian Hair Art” (quite possibly a misnomer) abounded in American culture. Such hair art took many



woven hair in lieu of twigs and leaves; so-called “sepia” artwork, paint made of ground-up hair often used to create portraits of the hair owner, always in a signature dark brown color; even hair jewelry: rings and earrings made with hair and bronze or copper as a base, or lockets adorned with a sepia portrait on the inside. Such intricacies were often the

product of a professional artisan, expert hairwork being far more popular at the time than that of amateurs.<sup>1</sup> The propagation of trained hair art production makes our Hair Book an exception to this rule, emphasizing its low-income, farming-class background.

Despite these historic roots and professionalism, hair artwork has always been deeply personal in nature. Creating art out of hair imbues the artifact with the spiritual essence of the original hair-owner; or *owners*, as is the case with the period’s magnificent hair wreaths, often crafted with the hair of dozens, at times even hundreds of people known to the artist. The act of weaving together the hair of loved ones represents a “melding” process in which the people themselves are bound together. Similarly, portraits made from sepia tones animate the portrayal

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<sup>1</sup> “In the eighteenth century, more hairwork was created by professionals than by amateurs.” See Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, p. 34.

with the spirit of its subject, and hair jewelry offers a way to give a piece of oneself to a loved one, most often a lover. Each piece of hair artwork is one of a kind, created with special care, and crafted of a unique, sentimental substance. As Mary Louise Kete insists in *Sentimental Collaborations*, hairwork jewelry was always “unique, handwoven, and composed of special material.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the ubiquity of hair artwork in the nineteenth century, hair artifacts never fully entered into the coveted space of “regular” art. Far from being an object of undirected self-



expression, hair artwork served as a sentimental tool for healing during the process of mourning. Mourning was often a response to the experience of death, but not exclusively; separation, whether from a lost home or in the form of a lost loved one, likewise merited the making of hair artwork. Objects such as our “Hair Book,” a mix-media artifact born of feeling, figure as

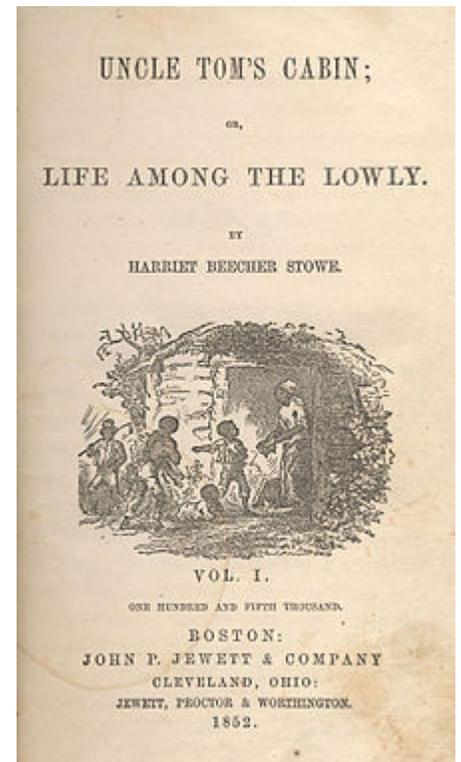
a part of a larger, often distinct literary tradition: sentimentalism. Sentimentalism, more specifically the “sentimental novel,” a literary form defined rather cynically by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as “any novel that exploits the reader’s capacity for tenderness, compassion, or sympathy to a disproportionate degree by presenting a beclouded or unrealistic view of its subject.”<sup>3</sup> Though “exploitation” may be going too far. Even if it is true that sentimental novels sought to elicit strong emotional reactions from readers. In contrast to Enlightenment principles of reason, sentimentalism embraces uncontained outpourings of emotions, such as tears, blushing, or fainting, especially when faced with challenges such as death, separation, or crises of faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, p.54.

<sup>3</sup> “Sentimental Novel.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

This emphasis on feelings and the expression of a moral interiority makes sentimentalists oddly given to reformist causes. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the "most popular American novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century," stands as a well-known example of the sentimental novel.<sup>4</sup> The novel employed sentimental discourse, such as depictions of suffering and appeals to emotion and Christian sensibilities, to denounce the practices of slavery. Far from just an abolitionist manifesto, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also showcases typical sentimental modes of dealing with suffering. Death and suffering in the novel inspire immoderate bouts of crying and



displays of emotion from the work's main characters. On her deathbed, Eva, the young sentimental heroine and Tom's best friend, has her beautiful curly blonde hair cut off. She distributes various strands of hair to her family and their slaves, telling them to "look at it, think that I loved you and am gone to heaven, and that I want to see you all there."<sup>5</sup> Though this action may seem melodramatic, over-the-top to some, Stowe in fact portrays a very common practice at the time. Hair of the deceased was often distributed to loved ones. In doing so, Stowe effectively ties together the sentimentalist fashion of mourning with the practice of Victorian Hair Art.

In this sense, sentimentalism can be understood as a coping mechanism. It concerns itself with grieving emotions generated by loss. Sentimentalism, as Kete convincingly argues, attempts to address the issue of loss through community and collaboration; by giving people license to feel their emotions alongside others, it changes grief (a personal experience) into mourning (a communal experience.) Community, the simple solidarity, the idea that we are not alone in our

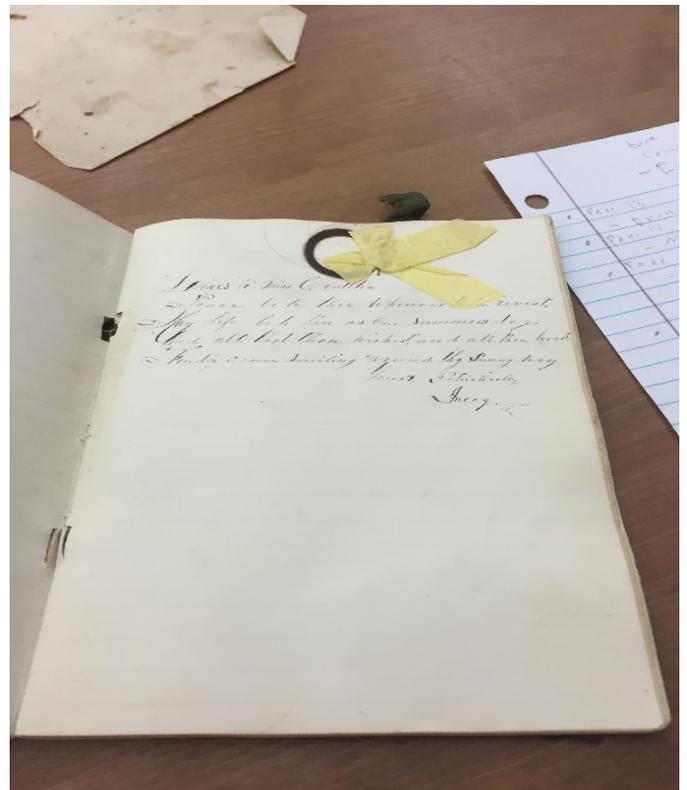
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<sup>4</sup> Samuels, Shirley. "Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction." *Oxford Bibliographies*.

<sup>5</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, chapter 26, page 5.

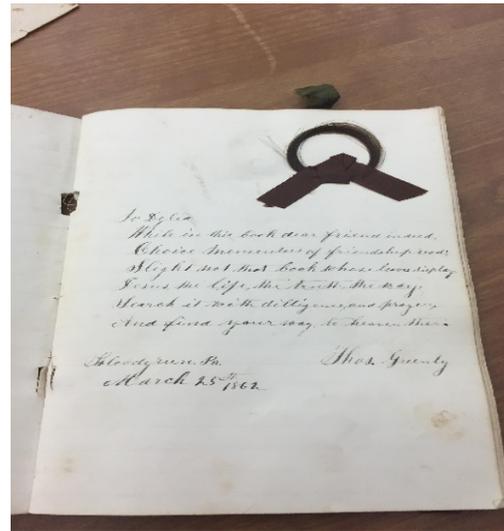
pain, can weaken the effects of distance and death. As such, sentimentalism goes hand-in-hand with collaboration, and hair artwork. Especially our “Hair Book” is a perfect example of such sentimental collaborations. In fact, our album was made because Delia’s brother (aptly named Harry) shipped off to fight in the Civil War on the Union side. In anticipation of her brother’s departure, Delia addressed her grief by collecting hair, a unique physical token, from him and extended family members, solidifying the shift from grief to mourning. Hair books and hair wreaths deal with loss through the construction of bonds and community, physically weaving people together in solidarity of experience.

What emotions did the Hair Book provoke in Delia? Despite having very little record of Delia herself—her writing only appears on two pages: the cover, and the page for her mother, father, and cousins—we can divine much from the Book itself. Far from spur-of-the-moment signatures in a yearbook, the closest living relative to the Hair Book, the messages in Delia’s album betray a tender compassion shared between her and her loved ones. Take for example Harry’s passage, where he assures his sister “though on land, or broad blue sea, I’ll think of you where ever I be.” Here, Harry, in two lines of verse, evaporates the immense imminent distance between him and his sister. We imagine Delia reading the lines over and over again, perhaps caressing her brother’s hair, feeling his presence the way one might when viewing a photograph of a lost loved one.



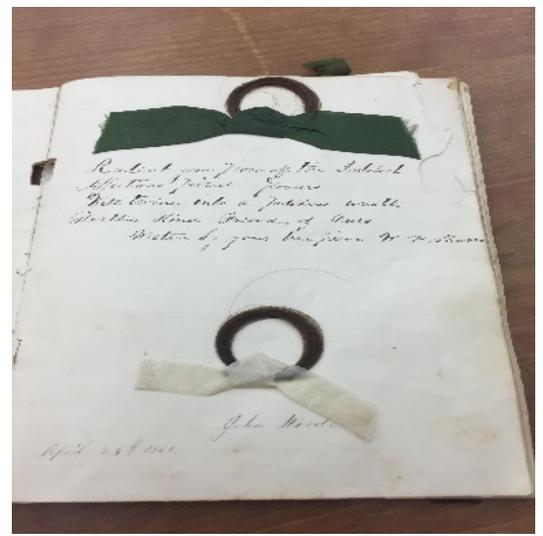
The album's poems and messages also evidence Delia's deeply religious background. A note from a M. M. Horton, likely a soldier in the war, asks Delia with deep spiritual confidence "if I fall my friend, will you not meet me where parting will be no more?" A writer boasting an illegible signature wishes Delia swift entry to heaven, to "bask in the sunshine of unapproachable perfection." A poem on the following page from a Thos. Greenly implores her, with ironic irreverence, not to spend too much time with the Hair Book, and instead reminds her to focus on the much more important book, the Bible:

While in this book dear friend indeed,  
Choice mementos of friendship read;  
Slight not that book whose leaves display  
Jesus, the life, the love, the way,  
Search it with diligence, and prayer,  
And find your way to heaven there.



Every message in the Hair Book brims with warmth, sentimentality, and sometimes with great personality. C. H. K. writes: "Cordelia, underneath this lock of hair which you so unceremoniously clipped from off my cranium, I would inscribe a few words ... ," going on to wish her ascension to Heaven. One entry zooms in on the follicular aspect of the Book; Dr. H Shorser pens a free verse poem which, despite some misspellings, evidences quite well the sentimental import of hair tokens:

Radint gem from off the intellect  
Affections fairest flowers  
Will twine into a fadeless wreath  
For this kind friend of yours.



Cordelia A. Willett was, without a doubt, a well-loved and loving woman. Perhaps that is why she spent three years, from 1861 to 1863, compiling this physical record of her close friends and family. Evidenced by the extensive wear and tear on the pages, the entries in her album, and the countless memories attached to them, lost along with the book's compiler, clearly touched Delia's soul. The abused leaves tell of a woman leafing through each and every page—especially Harry's letter, which displays a particular wornness—searching for affection and guidance in times of hardship, and finding them there.

What else can we know about Delia and her Hair Book? The album's cover indicates that Delia was born in Wells Township, Fulton County, Pennsylvania. Knowing her place of residence as well as her maiden name allows us to find her in documented censuses.<sup>6</sup> In 1860, she lived in Pennsylvania in a moderately sized family. But by 1870, Delia has left Fulton County and is living in Fairmount Township, Kansas. Here in this new farming township, she has adopted the last name of her husband, the Pennsylvanian farmer Benjamin Rop. Comparing the censuses of 1860 and 1870 also reveals Delia's birthday. Though she is listed as 21 years old in 1860 and 32 years old in 1870, the discrepancy is explained by the fact that the censuses were taken 9 days apart. Her birthday therefore must have been sometime between June 15<sup>th</sup> and June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1838.

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<sup>6</sup> Pennsylvania Census, 1860.

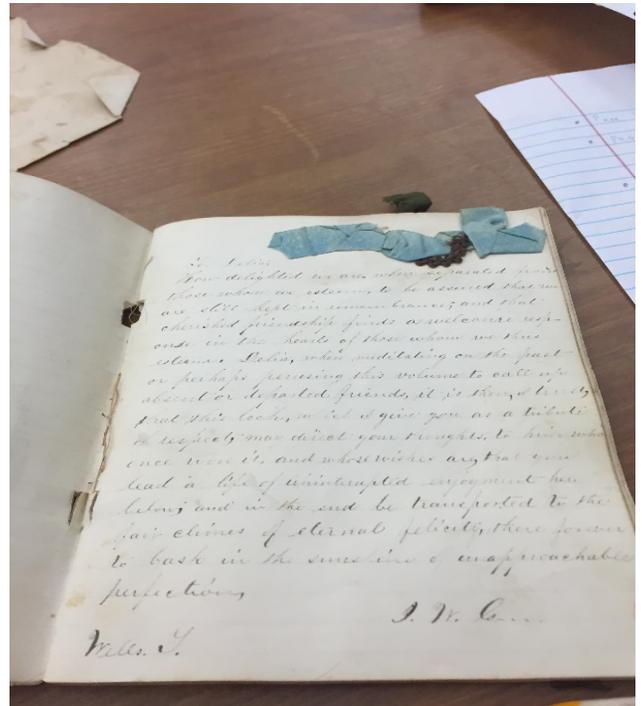
Delia's religious background offers yet another avenue to explore. It is useful to discover, for example, that only one denomination of Christian faith had a church in both Wells and Fairmount Township: Methodism. This fact strongly suggests that Delia was a Methodist. Divided on the issue of slavery in the period, the Methodist church split into two sects at the outbreak of the Civil War, a possible motivation for Delia to move to Kansas. What is more, the Homestead Act of 1862 freed up significant affordable land in Kansas for Delia and her husband. These revelations mark a shift in the book's purpose; though Delia likely originally created the album to deal with her brother's imminent departure, the book however also became an object meant to commemorate the departure from her home and family in Pennsylvania and her marriage and move to Kansas.

There remain, however, things we do not know. Though Delia is the focus of this paper and the focus of my research, she writes the least of any other person in the book. What we know about Delia comes from the letters and poems written to and about her. While they evidence great affection, they often lack in specific detail. Even the census records, which provide the most concrete picture of Delia's life, are not without flaws.<sup>7</sup> And of course, eleven written messages, from close friends and family can never do justice to an entire life. What we have thanks to the album is an incomplete string of facts and vicariously-supported conjecture about her life and personality.

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<sup>7</sup> There is, for instance, no evidence of a Benjamin Rop living in Pennsylvania around the time that Delia did, as 1850 censuses did not take the names of anyone but the head of household, classifying everyone else as free whites, free blacks, and slaves. Even further, a census from 1850 shows a 19 year old "Cordilea" Willett living with the same family in the same place, at a time when Cordelia should have been 11 years old. Neither document shows any signs of misinterpretation by any government officials, as the numbers show clear as day on each one. There is also no record of Cordelia nor Benjamin in any census after 1870.

Does this lack of information render the account of the life of Cordelia A. Willett incomplete? Yes, of course. But does it render it useless? I do not believe so. It is a miracle that we know what we *can* learn about her through the album. Regular folk like Cordelia A. Willett typically write no autobiographies and hardly ever leave a paper trail in the archive. Thus, her Hair Book acts as the sole keeper of otherwise lost memories, It also serves as a record of the strong affection shared between Delia and her



loved ones, of their common religious devotion, and of her life story. In fact, remembering and being remembered are central themes in the entries of Delia's Hair Book. An unidentified friend writes, "How delighted we are, when separated from those whom we esteem, to be assured that we are still kept in remembrance." It is perhaps the ultimate fulfillment of these wishes that 150 years later Delia's Hair Book still exists today. A reminder of both all too easily forgotten early Kansas lives and a peculiar American tradition.

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