

## **Vote Like a Girl 2020**

### **Voices of Girls at Sunnyside**

Have you ever wanted to know what life was like for girls in a different time? What did they do and what did they think about? These letters, written by the nieces of writer Washington Irving, tell us about what life was like in the 1800s. These are just a few of their many letters. As you read through them, think about:

How do their lives seem similar to your life today?  
How are their lives different?  
What would you do, if you were in their shoes?

While you read, keep a running list of what the sisters mention doing for fun, entertainment, chores, school, places they visit etc. Do any of these sound familiar to you today?

#### **Letter Writers:**

Catharine (Kate) (1816-1911), age 17-19

Sarah (1817-1900), age {almost} 16-18

Julia (1818-1861), age 15-17

Mary (1820-1868), age 13-15

Katrina (Little Kate) (1846-1915), age 7-8

#### **Letter Recipients:**

William Irving: Brother of Catharine, Sarah, Julia, and Mary, and father of Katrina

Sarah Mann Irving: Mother of Katrina, and wife of William

**Letter from Sarah Irving (16) to William Irving, June 19, 1833**

“My dear brother

We have been very busy cleaning house. We are now cleaning the parlors. I will be very glad when it is all done with. ..The President arrived here last Wednesday. I never saw such a sight in my life before. I believe every person that was in the city were assembled on the Battery and the lower part of Broadway....The military were out and there were a number of steamboats, vessels and small boats lying out in the bay.”

- What chore does Sarah mention doing? Do you think she enjoyed it? Why or why not?
- Who came to visit New York?
- If a celebrity were coming to your town, who would you want it to be? What would you do if you got to meet that person?
- History Detective Challenge: Can you figure out which President of the United States Sarah and her family waited to see? [Hint: look at the date of the letter]

**Letter: Catharine Irving (18) to William Irving, January [18], 1834**

“My dear William

...I have seated myself in the front room to write to you; we have quite a writing circle – Sarah Paris is writing to Helen Dodge and Sarah and I are writing to you. ..We have had a very merry New Year. We have had someone here almost every evening. Uncle Washington has got us in the habit of dancing every evening. He dances with all his might.

You do not know what a pet he has got to be with us all, he is very lively and is always playing with the children. He has been home ever since in the summer and we have become better acquainted with him that we talk to him as much as we can, you know we used to be very still when he was in the room; but we are not anymore. He has [*taken*] us to the opera five or six times since the new company have come out, for my part I have been perfectly delighted with it and could go every evening. Oh! I suppose you have not heard that we have a new Opera house. The Opera never was in a more

beautiful theatre in the city. It is certainly very beautiful, the lady's dress a sight to behold and the House altogether looks very brilliant. Uncle Washington determined that I should learnt to sing, and has taken the pains to get me the best teacher in New York. He took all the children to the theatre New Years to see *Cherry and Fair Star*.<sup>\*</sup> They enjoyed it very much indeed. Every morning after breakfast Uncle, Theodore, Sarah Paris, and I take a walk on the Battery, we go as fast as we can two or three times around, sometimes we find it pretty cold but we wrap up well and go through the whole of it...Sarah attends Mrs. Okill's school and seems to like it very much. As soon as I have finished my singing lesson I go to Theodore and take a lesson in Italian so that I may learn to sing Opera correctly, When you come home again you will scarcely know us we shall be so accomplished. We live in great style altogether in the back parlour and have fire in both of them...

Your affectionate  
Sister  
Catharine”

<sup>\*</sup> *Cherry and Fair Star* was a play published in 1831 based on a fantasy story from the eighteenth century.

- What does Catharine like about going to the Opera?
- What lessons is Catharine learning?

***Letters from Julia (16) and Mary (14) Irving to William Irving, May 7, 1834***

“Dear Brother

..We go to school to Mrs. Franklin's in Pearl Street. I expect we shall go there till August and then I hope I shall go to some other school as I do not like it much, there are almost all little girls that goes there, perhaps we go to Mrs. Okill's in the fall. Sarah goes there and she likes it very much...We are taking lessons on the piano I can play one or two tunes...

I remain your affectionate  
Sister Julia”

“Dear Brother

...We all learn to play on the piano, we have not forgotten your tune for Catharine Ann plays it sometimes for us....

I remain your affectionate  
Sister Mary”

- Why does Julia say she does not like school?
- What lessons are Julia and Mary learning?
- Is this something that girls today still learn?
- What do you notice about the way the girls start their letters and sign them? Is this different from how you would address your sibling or family member?

***Letter from Catherine Irving (18) to William Irving, August 8, 1834***

“My dear brother

...We went one evening to Niblo’s garden\* to a concert. The Italian company were there and we spent a delightful evening yesterday we went to Hoboken.

We have spent our summer very pleasantly. I have been in the country part of the time at Huntington... and when we are in the city Uncle is continually making little excursions for us, we take the little Whitehall boats very frequently ...

Your affectionate sister  
Catharine”

\* Niblo's Garden was a theater in New York City on Broadway and Prince Street, in a neighborhood known as SoHo today. This is an illustration of the theater:



*The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. "Interior of Niblo's Opera House, New York City" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-238d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>*

This is what the theater might have looked like when Catharine visited.

- How would you describe the theater?
- Imagine if you were in the audience. Where would you want to be sitting?
- Catharine and her sisters have had a busy summer with their uncle. What activities have they been doing? What places have they been?
- Are any of these things that you might do or places you have visited?

**Letter from Sarah Irving (18) to William Irving, January 16, 1835**

“My dear Brother

...Cousin Helen has come to stay here this winter. I believe she is copying for Uncle Washington. Our house is never empty for as fast as one goes, another comes. Father has but four of his children home with him this winter, but we have not a spare room for all.

Your affectionate sister  
Sarah”

- How can we tell that there were lots of people visiting the house where Sarah was living?
- Would you like to live in a busy house with lots of people? Why or why not?

**Letters from Sarah (18) and Catherine Irving (19) to William Irving, June 10, 1835**

“My dear Brother

...I have time only to write a very few lines as Irving Van Wart wishes Kate and I to go in the country with him this afternoon and we are very busy getting ready....Irving was gone down to the store to ask Father whether he will give us permission to go I do not now whether he will let us go for he said we should not go in the country until we had cleaned house...We expect to commence cleaning next week and after it is through with we shall go up to Saugerties...I must now finish this beautiful scrawl...

Your affectionate sister,

“My dear Brother,

I believe that Sarah has told you all that is possible to tell, for now that we are alone we live along the same way from day to day....our house cleaning woman cannot come as soon as she had promised I am quite out of patience



for I am only waiting for that to be over before we go to Saugerties....In haste  
your affectionate sister

Catharine”

- What responsibilities did the girl have around the house? What will happen if they do not finish their chores?
- Who else helped with the housework?

**Letter from Katrina Van Tassell Irving (“Little Kate,” 8 years old) to William Irving, April 12, 1854**

“Sunnyside

April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1854

My Dear Father

I thought I would write a few lines to you. Aunt Kate Commenced last week to teach me on the piano and I like it very much. Won't you please to tell me when my birthday is, because I have a little tea-sett Cousin Helen gave me on Christmas. And I am going to have a little tea party. I thought I would tell you what I got on Christmas. I got a workbox from Uncle Washington a workbasket from Liddie Holdrege and from Georgie a pair of scissors. A pin cushion, an emory, and wax, a china doll from Cousin Julia. Santa Claus gave me a little clothes horse. A game of solitaire, peter purlewigs game and dominoes and a silver pencil. I like dancing school very much and can dance several dances. Aunties are going to take me down to town next week to get me some shoes and a bonnet.

Give my love to Mother and Frank.

Your Affectionate Daughter

Kate”

NOTE: Little Kate's birthday was April 20th

- What things did Little Kate received from her relatives and Santa Claus?
- What do these gifts tell you about what little girls were expected to do for fun?
- Do any of them connect to chores or work she might also do?
- How do the activities Little Kate is doing compare to the activities her aunts describe in other letters? Did you notice what Aunt Kate is teaching Little Kate?

***Letter from Katrina Van Tassel Irving (“Little Kate,” 8 years old) to Sarah Mann Irving, September 8, 1854***

“Sunnyside, September 8, 1854

My dea dear Mother,

I stayed in New York about a week and Grandpa came down for me last Thursday, I spent a day over to Mrs. Holdrede's the day before yesterday and had a very pleasant time. The weather is very hot and every thing is drying up in the garden and are hardly any apples. I have not begun my lessons yet because Aunties are very busy mantua\* making but I will begin next week. If you see my gold ring anywhere ~~please to take~~ care of it for me Aunty says this is such a short letter I had better write a ~~letter~~ little more but I do not know what else to tell you. Uncle Washington is going to tomorroro to new Brighton to make a visit to cousin Anna's and will stay till Monday I go up to the gardeners house every day they have two little twins and have another little baby since I was gone. I began my letter last Thursday but it takes me so long to write it I had to write it over twice because I made so many mistakes. Give my love to Willie and Frank and Aunties and Grandma

Your affectionate Daughter  
Kate”



- Have you ever stayed over at a relative's house or had a relative stay with you for a while? What did you do? Did you go to any special places or introduce them to friends or neighbors?
- Did you enjoy the visit? Why or why not?
- How do the things Little Kate tells her mother compare to what you and your family did (or what you would do if a relative traveled to stay at your house)?

\* A mantua is a style of women's dress. To learn more about what Irving's nieces would have worn, check out this [blog post](#) on women's fashion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Now that you've looked at the letters individually think about what you have learned by bringing all of the information together.**

Look at the list of activities you made that the nieces reported doing. Are any of them things you still do today? Are there any that are very different or that you had never heard of?

Based on the letters from these girls and young women, do you think that the Irving family was a happy family? How can you tell?

What questions would you ask the people writing or receiving these letters, if you could meet them today?

Would you have liked to have lived with them in the 1800s? Why or why not?

***Want to keep thinking about life in the nineteenth century? Here are some activities you can do to celebrate the lives of the Irving nieces.***

**Activity:** Write a letter to a family member or friend who lives far away. You can tell them about what you have been doing recently, what you think about what's going on in the world, or anything else you like. Maybe 150 years from now your letter will be in a museum!

**Activity:** Draw an illustration of your favorite part of one of the letters.

**Activity:** Imagine we find more letters hidden somewhere at Sunnyside the sisters wrote William. What might the letters say? Write your own.

**Activity:** Write a story about what happens to the Irving sisters when they are grown-up.