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Finding aid for the Davis family letters Collection 470

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Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids History and Special Collections
Department

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Summary Information

Repository:	Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids History and Special Collections Department
Title:	Davis family letters
ID:	Collection 470
Date [inclusive]:	1876-1909
Physical Description:	.5 Linear Feet 1 slim box
Language of the Material:	English
Abstract:	<p>This collection contains letters written between 1876 and 1909 by four daughters of early settler Isaac Davis, who moved into Kent County, Michigan, in 1836. The four sisters are Charlotte Adelia Davis Murray, Mary Davis Barkley, Elizabeth Davis Smith, and Catherine Aurelia Davis Wightman. They all lived in different Michigan towns, although one writes for awhile from South Dakota while visiting her son. One married a preacher, another ends up rather wealthy in Muskegon, while another begs for loans, and another is not healthy and dies at a young age. The letters are written by the sisters to each other, to their father, and to their brother Lewis. They contain the concerns of the time – visits to the old homestead and visits from others, celebrating the U.S. Centennial, illnesses and health, financial issues, their community involvement, references to presidential elections, and always, the weather and how the crops are doing this season. The letters help to form a picture of life on Michigan farms and in small towns in the late 19th century.</p>

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Isaac Dixon Davis

Isaac Dixon Davis (1818 – 1899) was born in New York but moved to the Detroit area in the 1920s with his family. After his father died, his mother moved back to New York. After she died a few years later, Isaac, the youngest son, lived with his grandfather, Thomas Davis. In 1836, Isaac, age 18, and his grandfather moved to Kent County, Michigan, and lived "about ½ mile south of Reeds Lake." He married Sophie Reed in 1843. After 20 years of marriage and bearing seven children, Sophie died in 1863. He then married Louisa Cane Barr, who came in the marriage with one son Charles Barr. Isaac and Louisa had two more children, Milton and John Loren.

Isaac Davis bought 80 acres in Paris Township (today Kentwood, on the SW corner of Kalamazoo Avenue and 44th Street). He managed a successful farm, which grew in size to 160 acres, and participated in civic organizations. He was a charter member of Paris Grange #19, served as Paris Township Clerk and Supervisor, served as officer of the district school board for many years, and joined forces with the Prohibitionists and the Democratic Party. Isaac is buried in Pine Hill Cemetery, Kentwood, Michigan, alongside many family members.

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Charlotte Adelia Davis Murray

Charlotte Adelia Davis Murray (April 22, 1845 – Feb 9, 1901). Known as Adele, Charlotte Adelia was the older sister to the other letter writers. We know little of her life on the family farm where we find her in the 1870 census. We know that she taught school in Paris Township, since she mentions that they needed to hold school on a Saturday to make up for the days off for the State Fair in September, 1873. Adele married John L Murray on April 8, 1875 and lived the rest of her life in Muskegon, where her husband was a wealthy lumberman.

They had no children so Adele used her time working in the First Baptist Church and in other social organizations and civic causes. She died in Grand Rapids as a result of a train accident on February 9, 1901. Traveling home to visit the family, she appeared to be fine right after the accident, but later was taken to the hospital where she died late that evening of a "cranial hemorrhage."

Because she died a sudden and tragic death at age 56 and because of her prominence in the city, the Muskegon newspapers reported in detail on her life, her funeral, and legacy. In addition to her work in several areas of the First Baptist Church, including service on an "advisory board," she was active in the Muskegon Woman's Club, serving in various offices and committees. Adele also served on the board of Home of the Friendless, on the building committee overseeing the construction of a new addition.

Although they had no children, the Murray home was open to nieces, her younger brother, and others who lived with them for a time. The last letter in the file is from John Murray addressed to Adele's sister Aurelia (Rillie). John Murray died May 5, 1907.

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Mary Davis Barkley

Mary Davis Barkley (Feb 19, 1848 – April 2, 1911). Mary, often referred to as May in the letters, was a school teacher for many years in southern Kent County until she married Alonzo Barkley in 1874. For the first few years they lived on part of the Barkley family farm in Ada. In an 1876 letter she writes from

Fruitport, Michigan. By 1883, the letters indicate they are living in East Saginaw and then in 1884, in Reed City, where they opened a grocery store and remained there until 1895 when Alonzo died.

A son, Glenn, is born in 1878. At some point they adopted a daughter, Carrie, who was born in 1885, although the 1900 census records say that the place of birth and parents' names are unknown. She worked hard alongside Alonzo in the store and the letters give us the impression that despite her hard work, things did not go well for them regarding their business and Alonzo's health.

After Alonzo dies in 1895, Mary moved back to Kent County – in the 1900 census she was living in Paris Township with her daughter Carrie. Glenn had married and had moved west to the Dakotas, where she visited since her letter dated Nov 25, 1907 was written from Grand Forks, N.D.

The 1910 Census records that she was living with her sister Aurelia Wightman on S. Division and, indeed, her last letter in 1909 is from this location. When Mary died in 1911, her obituary states that Glenn is living in Minnesota and Carrie, who had married Hiram Darling, is living in Lapeer, Michigan.

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Elizabeth Davis Smith

Elizabeth Davis Smith (March 17, 1850 – July 18, 1891). Elizabeth, or Libbie was the fourth child born to Isaac and Sophia Davis. Her letters range from 1876 to 1880, then one more in 1890, eleven months before she died.

Libbie married John T. Smith sometime in the early 1870s (Kent County marriage records, book 4, p.15 1867-1877) and moved to a farm in Leighton Township, Allegan County.

She bore two sons, Roscoe George in 1875 and Robert in 1880. From the letters one can gather that her life was difficult with hard work, helping with harvesting and butchering, and often ill health, once declaring that "she can't write anymore." She often laments the fact that she can seldom go home (the Davis Farm in Paris Township) for holidays and misses seeing family members.

The last letter, dated August 21, 1890, is written in a totally different hand to her sister Mary. Perhaps someone wrote it for her. She jokes about how well she looks and that everyone must think she's just lazy instead of sick. She died at age 41 in 1891 from cancer (death certificate). She was buried in the Hooker Cemetery in Wayland, Allegan County.

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Catherine Aurelia Davis Wightman

Catherine Aurelia Davis Wightman (July 27, 1854 – March 13, 1919). Aurelia, also called Rill or Rillie, was the youngest sister of those who wrote these letters. In her early 20s she married Ormel Wightman. Since Ormel was a clergyman, they moved quite frequently, but always within the state of Michigan. The first letters are written from Bowen in 1876, but in one they are all packed up and ready to move to Coopersville, Michigan. After that they lived in Martin, Hubbardston, Woodland Center, and Remus.

Aurelia and Ormel had two children, Emmet in 1878 and Clara in 1880. Aurelia was very involved in church activities as president of the Benevolent Society, taking part in a missionary benefit concert, and Ormel's regularly scheduled prayer meetings and revivals meant she entertained many overnight visitors in their home.

There are no letters in the collection from 1884 up to March, 1899 when there are two letters following the death of their step-mother Louisa. Aurelia wishes she could be there, but will have to wait, since she is suffering from shingles. In other letters she refers often to a nagging "Neuralgie." In October of that same year her father died.

Strangely, the 1900 census shows Ormel, Emmett (22) and Clara (20) living in a household in Wheatland, Michigan, but the household does not include Aurelia. An error or she may have been living somewhere else during the time of the census taking.

After Ormel died in 1909 in Grand Haven, Michigan, Aurelia moved to Grand Rapids. In the 1910 census she records that she earned a wage as a nurse for a private family. At times over the next 10 years until her death in 1919, she lived with her sister Mary Barkley, on Division Avenue or boarded with her daughter Clara Horning and her family in the city.

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Collection Inventory

Title/Description	Instances	
Charlotte Adelia Davis Murray letters (Adele), 1873-1901 <u>Date [inclusive]:</u> 1873-1901	Box 1	Folder 1
Aurelia Catherine Davis Wightman letters (Ril or Rillie), 1876-1899 <u>Date [inclusive]:</u> 1876-1899	Box 1	Folder 2
Mary Julia Davis Barkley letters (May), 1876-1909 <u>Date [inclusive]:</u> 1876-1909	Box 1	Folder 3
Elizabeth Davis Smith letters (Libbie), 1876-1890 <u>Date [inclusive]:</u> 1876-1890	Box 1	Folder 4
Isaac D. Davis (1818-1899) research	Box 1	folder 5
Elizabeth Davis Smith (1850-1891) research	Box 1	Folder 6
Mary Davis Barkley (1848-1911) research	Box 1	Folder 7
Aurelia Davis Wightman (1854-1919) research	Box 1	Folder 8
Adele Davis Murray (1846-1901) research	Box 1	Folder 9