



The New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

Edith Brevoort diary

1848-1849

MssCol 24250

Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2017

Summary

Creator: Brevoort, Edith, 1832-1891

Title: Edith Brevoort diary

Date: 1848-1849

Size: .21 linear feet (1 volume)

Source: Purchased from Swann Auction Galleries, 2017

Abstract: Edith Brevoort (1832-1891) was the youngest of the eight children of Henry Brevoort Jr. (1782-1848), a wealthy New York City landowner and friend of Washington Irving, and Laura Carson of South Carolina (died 1845). In 1853 she married Pierre Corné Kane (1828-1870). The Edith Brevoort diary, 1848 May 8-1849 May 20 (1 volume in slipcase) recounts the daily activities, thoughts and feelings of an intelligent young New Yorker from a prominent family. Diary entries, dated 1848 May 8-1849 January 31, start from the reverse end of the volume, the volume beginning with a text on The Object of Life, and her record of sermons given at Grace Church, 1848 July 16-1849 May 20, interspersed with quoted poetry and text. The collection includes a typescript commentary on the diary (11 p.) by George S. Hellman, and manuscript diary excerpts (34 p.) by Rose Kane Greer, with notes.

Preferred citation: Edith Brevoort diary, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library

Processing note: Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2017

Creator History

Edith Brevoort (1832-1891) was the youngest of the eight children of Henry Brevoort Jr. (1782-1848), a wealthy New York City landowner and friend of Washington Irving, and Laura Carson of South Carolina (died 1845). Called Fifi, she was born in France on July 10, 1832 during the family's extended residence in Europe. In 1853 she married Pierre Corné Kane (1828-1870) a businessman who later served as a Union army officer in the Civil War. Grenville Kane (1854-1943), a noted banker, sportsman, and book collector, was their eldest son.

During the period covered in the diary, Edith resided with her family in the Brevoort mansion on Fifth

Avenue (corner of 9th Street). At the time of Henry Brevoort's death on May 17, 1848, the household included her unmarried sisters, Elizabeth (Sis), Margaret (Meta), and Constance (Totance or Tot), and her brother Henry (Hen), at school. Their brother William died in childhood, and their mother died in 1845. Occasional companions, such as Mrs. Elliot and later Mrs. Sewell, lived with the young women, and when Edith completed her schooling, she received private tutoring from Miss Bridgen. The family often visited their sister Laura (Lo), her husband Charles Astor Bristed, and their infant son John at the Bristed estate, "Hell Gate," just north of Archibald Gracie's property in the rural upper east side of Manhattan. Edith's eldest brother and guardian, James Carson Brevoort (Carson or Cars), his wife Dolly (Elizabeth Dorothea Lefferts), and their infant son Henry are also mentioned in the diary. James Carson Brevoort (1818-1887) had earlier served as Washington Irving's secretary in Spain, and would eventually become a trustee and superintendent of the Astor Library. Edith's sister Meta Brevoort (1825-1876) would later join their sister Elizabeth Brevoort Coolidge's family in England, gaining renown as an Alpine mountaineer.

Scope and Content Note

The Edith Brevoort diary, 1848 May 8-1849 May 20 (1 volume in slipcase) recounts the daily activities, thoughts and feelings of an intelligent young New Yorker from a prominent family, as she turns from 15 to 16 years of age. The diary marks Edith Brevoort's last day at school, the end of her father's life and resulting family changes, her growing self-awareness, and her gradual participation in adult New York society.

The diary, with entries dated 1848 May 8-1849 January 31, is paginated 1-53, 56-57, 54-55, 58, [59-97], starting from the reverse end of the volume, which was rebacked at a later time. The volume, with Edith Brevoort's ownership signature dated May 8th, 1848, begins with a text on The Object of Life and her record of sermons given at Grace Church, chiefly by Dr. Thomas H. Taylor, 1848 July 16-1849 May 20, interspersed with quoted poetry and text (p. 1-18, [19-21]).

Edith Brevoort's diary entries reflect the emotional world of a thoughtful teenager trying to understand the behavior of her siblings and herself in the months following the loss of their father. While reviewing activities such as reading, sewing, visiting, and caring for her nephew John, Edith Brevoort dissects her sisters' characters and her own, and those of their family and friends. There are references to untold resentments, rival jealousies, unhappy marriages, flirtations and infidelities, and illness and death, as she tries to make sense of the world in a religious and moral context. Much of the diary is concerned with visits to her sister Laura's family at Hell Gate. Descriptions of life there include the people they encountered during a long walk to Jones's Woods (1848 July 7, p. 25-30), and brief mention of a family session in which they "read smoked & talked for some time in the library" after the visit of Mr. Cary, a family friend (1848 August 13, p. 51). In the diary's last entry, Edith ponders the question of "whether it was right or wrong to go to parties, etc." as she embarks on the next stage of her life.

The collection includes a typescript commentary on the diary (11 p.) by American author and editor George S. Hellman, and manuscript diary excerpts (34 p.) written by Grenville Kane's daughter Rose Kane Greer for her sister Edith Kane Baker, with loose notes.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Diaries

Geographic Names

New York (N.Y.) -- Description and travel -- 19th century

New York (N.Y.) -- Religious life and customs -- 19th century

New York (N.Y.) -- Social life and customs -- 19th century

Subjects

Young women -- New York (State) -- New York -- Diaries

Names

Brevoort, Edith, 1832-1891

Greer, Rose Kane

Hellman, George S. (George Sidney), 1878-1958

Brevard family

Grace Church (New York, N.Y.)