

...both want to see you much and for comfort
your own, us, my many, not now
often speaks of you, and little Will is constantly
asking if when I go to America I am going to
take him with me. I say yes, he says grand
grandma won't know who he is, and says
he would be ashamed to go because his hair is
not black. I have not heard any thing
from you yet as there has been no letters. But I
am looking to hear before long, you must all write
so often, there is a chance I will get letters.



"[The story] comes surprisingly,
and movingly, alive."
—TINA JORDAN, *Entertainment Weekly*



THE SEA CAPTAIN'S WIFE

A True Story of Love, Race & War in the Nineteenth Century

Marrages.
In Herald, Nov. 3. By Rev. Howe Patton
Wm. & Council of Grand Union, West St.
and Mrs. Kauler, 11th St. of Lowell.
In this city, 1851. By Rev. Horace J.
Mr. John F. Grogan and Miss Abbie F. A.
both of Lowell.

...But if Mrs. Blood, this is one
I would not remember and of what she has given
me. I should give her some things that I can spare
as well as not, and feel quite able to give, I can give
you over some of her things, we have nice warm
I think it would just suit you, I have some things that
you was here, but I can't let in too many go, even
bring you out yet. I must hear from you, first and see
if you will come or not. I must come to a close
with many things unsaid, I must close about a house
Parrot and I have also a pair of
beautiful I wish I could see
to see the bag of stuff Clara
for you, it is so cozy, or here that I do not care

Martha Hodes

Further acclaim for
THE SEA CAPTAIN'S WIFE

“Few researchers have the imagination or tenacity to reconstruct a lost life as carefully as Hodes has done...an absorbing account of a life reclaimed from obscurity.”

—Joyce Appleby, *Times Literary Supplement*

“[A] gem of historical writing and research.... [Hodes] has produced another outstanding work showing the complexities of 19th-century racism.... [A] compelling story and graceful writing.”

—*Library Journal*, starred review

“Hodes reconstructs the intriguing and unusual life of Eunice Richardson Stone Connolly.... [Her prose] is lucid and her account is engaging.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Told by award-winning historian Martha Hodes, Eunice Connolly’s story will fascinate you.”

—Book-of-the-Month Club

“What a terrific book! I could hardly put it down.... Eunice’s story is so poignant but at the same time, in many ways, a story of triumph over adversity.”

—James McPherson, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*

“[Hodes’s] remarkable new book, *The Sea Captain’s Wife*, resourcefully gathers scraps of evidence to stitch together the hard-scrabble life of one white woman.... [A] gripping tale of a courageous, resilient and unconventional woman.”

—John David Smith, *Raleigh News and Observer Sunday Arts & Entertainment*

“A touching and captivating story.”

—Paula Hunt, *San Antonio Express-News*

“An excellent history of a family as well as a time.”

—*Civil War News*

“Eunice Richardson Stone Connolly’s life is a road map to learning about 19th-century America.... Those who love books about history will revel in the book’s detail.”

—*Cape Cod Times*

“Hodes vividly tells of the life of Eunice Connolly.”

—*Harvard Magazine*

Recommended reading in Biography & Memoir by *Publishing News*, London

“Lends historical authenticity and the drama and characterization of fiction...making it a biography hard to put down.”

“An engrossing story—*The Sea Captain’s Wife* comes highly recommended.... A mesmerising story which truly brings past and present closer together.”

—*Nautilus UK Telegraph*

“[A] detective story, a history of the period and a travelogue all rolled into one...thought provoking, pleasure to read.”

—*Nautical Magazine*

“I couldn’t put it down. I was with Eunice, heart and soul, on every page. A gripping story.”

—Paulette Jiles, author of the national bestseller *Enemy Women*

“A monument both to a woman who otherwise would have been utterly lost to history and to the historian’s ability to do justice to the dead.... *The Sea Captain’s Wife* shows us how powerful an ordinary life can be in the hands of an extraordinary storyteller.”

—Jan Lewis, *Phi Beta Kappa Key Report*

“The fascinating true story of an impoverished 19th-century white widow who defies convention to marry a wealthy black sea captain.... Her story will fascinate you.”

—*Literary Guild*

“A marvelous book. It is brilliantly researched and beautifully written. With unerring artistry, Marth Hodes leads us through her archives and into the fascinating story of an American family.”

—Ann Fabian, author of *The Unvarnished Truth*

“[An] amazing feat of historical recovery.... Hodes’s engagement with documents, old houses, personal letters, and descendants is captivating, as is Eunice herself.”

—Patricia Cline Cohen, author of *The Murder of Helen Jewett*

“The book will by turns engage and surprise both those who know little about the history of that time and those of us who think we do. A wonderful read.”

—Leslie Harris, author of *In the Shadow of Slave*

“With extraordinary sensitivity, Hodes persuades old documents and living descendants to give up their heartbreaking and unsettling story....[*The Sea Captain’s Wife* has] the pacing and sweep of an epic film.”

—Scott A. Sandage, author of *Born Lose*

Also by Martha Hodes

*White Women, Black Men:
Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*

*Sex, Love, Race:
Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (editor)

The SEA CAPTAIN'S WIFE

A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century

MARTHA HODES



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For Bruce, as ever

For Ryn and Tal, my sisters

*and in loving memory of
Jane Allerton Cushman, 1938–2002*

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THE FAMILY OF EUNICE RICHARDSON STONE CONNOLLY

Eunice's parents and their families

LUTHER RICHARDSON SR.: Eunice's father

LOIS (WRIGHT) RICHARDSON DAVIS: Eunice's mother

BRADLEY DAVIS: Lois (Wright) Richardson Davis's second husband

ADDIE DAVIS: Bradley Davis's daughter

MARTHA (WRIGHT) JOHNSON: Lois (Wright) Richardson Davis's sister

Eunice's siblings and their spouses

ANN (RICHARDSON) PUTNAM MCCOY: Eunice's sister

DAVID MCCOY: Ann (Richardson) Putnam McCoy's second husband

HARRIET (RICHARDSON) HARVEY ("HATTIE"): Eunice's sister

IRA HARVEY: Harriet (Richardson) Harvey's husband

JANE (RICHARDSON) LULL: Eunice's sister

WESLEY LULL: Jane (Richardson) Lull's husband

ADELIA RICHARDSON: Eunice's sister

ELLEN (RICHARDSON) MERRILL: Eunice's sister

DUDLEY D. MERRILL: Ellen (Richardson) Merrill's husband

LUTHER L. RICHARDSON JR.: Eunice's brother

CHARLES HENRY RICHARDSON ("HENRY"): Eunice's brother

CLARA (PRAY) RICHARDSON: Charles Henry Richardson's wife

Eunice's first husband and family

WILLIAM C. STONE: Eunice's husband

CLARENCE STONE: Eunice and William Stone's son

CLARA STONE: Eunice and William Stone's daughter

MELISSA (STONE) RANKIN: William Stone's sister

MOSES RANKIN: Melissa (Stone) Rankin's husband

MARGARET (STONE) RUSSELL: William Stone's sister

ALONZO RUSSELL: Margaret (Stone) Russell's husband

ALBERT RUSSELL: Margaret and Alonzo Russell's son

MARY RUSSELL: Albert Russell's wife

Eunice's second husband and family

WILLIAM SMILEY CONNOLLY ("SMILEY"): Eunice's husband

LOUISA CHARLOTTA CONNOLLY: Eunice and William Smiley Connolly's daughter

CARAMIEL CONNOLLY: Eunice and William Smiley Connolly's daughter

JOHN BARRETT CONNOLLY: William Smiley Connolly's father

JOHN JARRETT CONNOLLY: William Smiley Connolly's father

THOMAS DIGHTON CONOLLY ("DIGHTON"): William Smiley Connolly's half brother

JOSEPH GAMALIEL CONNOLLY ("GAMALIEL"): William Smiley Connolly's son

JOHN CORNELIUS CONNOLLY ("CORNELIUS"): William Smiley Connolly's son

THOMAS JARRETT CONNOLLY ("JARRETT"): William Smiley Connolly's son

THREE NOTES TO THE READER

I have rendered Eunice's words in italic type, and without quotation marks, in an effort to integrate her perspective more seamlessly into the story.

With the exception of minimal changes for the sake of readability, I have retained original spelling, punctuation, and grammar in all quotations from the family's letters.

Eunice's second husband spelled his last name "Connolly," whereas other family members rendered the name as "Conolly." Occasionally, people writing about Eunice and Smiley used one *n*; I have changed this for the sake of uniformity. Different descendants use different spellings.

A STORY AND A HISTORY

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
—Emily Dickinson*

Midwinter 1881, Ellen Merrill received a letter. It came from the West Indies, written by a man Ellen didn't know, and the news was bad. That was clear from the second sentence, in which the stranger spoke of "the late Mr. and Mrs. Connolly." When Ellen reached the end of the letter, she read it again and then again, before she took out a sheet of paper. "My Dear Brother," she wrote to Henry Richardson, "I have at last succeeded in learning the fate of Mrs. Connolly and family." She asked Henry to impart the news to their mother and to their sister Ann McCoy. As Ellen signed off, she thought about dangerous weather. "We had a Storm here last week which blowd the tide in and nearly washed us away for three days." She posted the letter from Mississippi to Massachusetts.

THE HURRICANE that swirled off the Miskito Cays of Central America in September 1877 took the life of an American woman named Eunice Connolly. Eunice was an ordinary woman who led an extraordinary life by making momentous decisions within a world that offered her few choices. Eunice Richardson Stone Connolly was born white and working class in New England in 1831. She married a fellow New Englander who took her to the South and fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War, while Eunice's two brothers fought for the Union. After the war, Eunice married a well-to-do man of color and went to live in a settlement of former slaves on the British Caribbean island of Grand Cayman. This book tells her story.

I discovered Eunice in a box full of letters. Loving and hostile, revealing and mundane, the Lois Wright Richardson Davis Papers, preserved at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, span the 1850s to the 1880s. Archivists named the collection for Eunice's mother because much of the correspondence flowed to her. Of the five hundred family letters saved from the trash heap or the fireplace, Eunice wrote about a hundred of them. Others were composed by her mother, sisters, brothers, brothers-in-law, children, second husband, and a few miscellaneous relatives and acquaintances. From all that Eunice wrote, it's clear that she received at least as many letters in return, yet the family papers contain fewer than ten pieces of correspondence addressed to her. Most of Eunice's mail was left behind somewhere, thrown out, or deliberately destroyed.

I first met Eunice in the course of researching relationships between white women and black men in the nineteenth century, but at the time I was concerned exclusively with the history of the South. Years later, with a dissertation finished and a book published, I decided to go back to Duke and look again. There were many more letters than I had remembered, hundreds more, in that brimming box, the words evenly spaced or crowded onto mostly white and cream-colored pages, the black ink long ago faded to brown. I had forgotten just how faded and hard to decipher some of Eunice's letters were, but seeing them again renewed my sense of her presence: the paper she had creased and folded, the ink she had blown dry. I transcribed forty-one letters onto my laptop that first day, and that wasn't even

one folder's worth. Eunice's sister Ellen had just moved to Alabama when I had to leave. I returned later that summer, staying until Eunice, alone and poor, began to worry about the approaching New Hampshire winter of 1863. I visited again in December and stayed until Eunice's sister Ellen imparted the terrible news to their brother Henry in 1881.

Poring over the collection, I understood how unusual it was that these letters had been preserved. The middle and upper classes wrote to one another voluminously in the era before telephones became commonplace. With a ready supply of paper and ink, men and women closed deals, courted lovers, debated politics, and charted travels. Ordinary folks wrote letters too—especially in New England, where literacy rates were high—but less frequently kept their mail. Poorer families like Eunice's moved often, from one cramped set of rooms to the next, scratched on cheap paper with inferior ink, and seldom imagined their daily rounds to be of interest to anyone else. But Eunice's brother Henry, who became a successful businessman in the Appleton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, after the Civil War, cared about family history. He carried wartime mail back to New England, then harbored the family papers and passed them down, until the bundles of envelopes came into the possession of a great-granddaughter. One day, almost a century after Eunice's death, a gentleman knocked at her door. The young mother had fallen on hard times and called a collector who bid on valuables from old New England families. That day, she traded the letters for cash. Soon she regretted the sale, but the documents had swiftly changed hands and already proved untraceable. Twenty-five years later, I was able to tell Eunice's great-grandniece that the letters rested in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library of Duke University. Purchased for their value to Civil War researchers, the Davis Papers are today preserved in optimal conditions of temperature and light, neatly arranged in that single sturdy archival box.

To write Eunice's story, I followed her from New England to the Deep South and across the Caribbean Sea, searching for clues to her daily life and changing sensibilities in the different places where she lived. Like hundreds of thousands of working-class women in the nineteenth century, Eunice rarely appears in formal historical records beyond the most commonplace documents: a birth certificate, a marriage registration, a census listing. I gleaned everything I could from vital records, city directories, and village maps, then pieced together context from town records, newspaper reports, and regimental histories. The writings of others who worked in northern mills, who visited the South from New England, or who traveled to the Caribbean in the nineteenth century shed further light, as did nineteenth-century novels about race and romantic love. Studying the Civil War, labor history, the history of women and gender, and African American and African Caribbean history also filled in the contours of Eunice's life. Finally, and unexpectedly, conversations with descendants contributed to the unfolding of Eunice's story and enriched the search for meaning within that story.

THE WORLD CHANGED enormously over the course of Eunice's life, offering her occasion to ponder the grand themes of American history: class and opportunity, faith and religious practice, slavery and freedom, politics and war, racism and equality. As the cotton mills of industrial capitalism grew denser along the riverbanks of New England in the years just after Eunice was born, the residents of rural hamlets boarded steam-powered railroad cars to visit once-remote cities. President Andrew Jackson neared the height of his popularity during those years, riding the crest of an expanding democracy that nonetheless excluded white women and all African Americans. The Protestant religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening held out spiritual equality to those who lived on the margins, inspiring both righteous and self-righteous Americans to think hard about problems like poverty and immigration. Most especially in 1831, the year of Eunice's birth, the problem of slavery

loomed in the nation's consciousness. On January 1, a radical white Bostonian named William Lloyd Garrison published the first issue of the *Liberator*, echoing the call of black abolitionists for the immediate emancipation of slaves in the southern states, thereby fueling a growing debate in the young nation. That summer, a Virginia slave led the most successful and alarming uprising the South had ever known, killing fifty-five white people and citing the Bible as justification. That autumn, Nat Turner was executed. Eunice was born in December.

When Eunice toiled in the New England mills or labored as a servant, the details of her life echoed those of many other women in the nineteenth century. Her story is conventional too, in that she strived for the stability of marriage and ultimately found great comfort in the domestic sphere. But Eunice also realized her visions of happiness in a way that cast her far from conformity. In its barest outlines, hers is a story of a woman who descended into poverty and then climbed out. What makes Eunice's version of that tale unusual is that she was a white woman who rescued herself from destitution by marrying across the color line.

Eunice's story and the choices she made expose the complexities of racial classification across geographical borders. Her family traced their lineage back to England and France, but as Eunice worked in the mills and labored as a servant, she came precariously close to the degraded status of impoverished Irish and black women. Later, when she married a "man of color" (that was the phrase invoked at the time), she found out that reputation also counted in a person's racial status and that for women, whiteness depended upon specific ideas about purity. Then, when Eunice took up residence on a West Indian island, she realized that labels like "white," "black," "mulatto," and "colored" carried different meanings in different places. Eunice's story illuminates the complexities of racism too: Her unusual experiences make clear just how mercurial racial categories could be in the nineteenth century, but her life also proves just how much power those mercurial markers could exert to confine—or transform—a person's life. In her voyages from New England to the Deep South to the British Caribbean, Eunice also made a journey from the life of an impoverished white woman in the United States to the life of an elite woman of color in the West Indies.

TO GIVE READERS a sense of Eunice's voice, each chapter that follows, save the final two, opens with a single letter that she composed. A great deal was at stake in the production of a letter in Eunice's day. In mid-nineteenth-century New England, a young man could board newly inaugurated rail lines to find work elsewhere for a season or forever, a bride could follow her new husband aboard a steamship sailing for the South, a father could take advantage of increasingly well-surfaced routes to scout out land far to the west. Where dirt roads, passable only in dry weather, had once kept communities fairly insular, the transportation revolution put great distances between loved ones. In a world that permitted the fast and efficient separation of people, writing a letter often became the sole means of maintaining intimacy. But writing a letter was also a formidable enterprise. For working-class people like Eunice and her family, the endeavor of sending a single piece of communication brought both frustration and satisfaction.

To begin with, time for literary production was brief. *I cant rock the cradle and write too*, Eunice warned. Or as her mother sighed, though each passing day brought the resolve to write the next, "when tomorrow came it brought its work and cares," leaving not an extra hour. The Sabbath was the most common day to repay epistolary debts, and one Sunday Eunice owed letters to her mother *and Henry and Ann and Williams folks and some of my acquaintances*, while on another, she had before her *seven unanswered letters*. With her sons in the Union Army, Eunice's mother wrote "evry sabbath," first to Luther, then to Henry, "in turn." Indeed, the Civil War years became a historical moment in which

families and friends wrote unprecedented numbers of letters—to and from the battlefield but also to and from those on the home front who lived too far apart for daily or weekly get-togethers.

Before pen could be set to paper, supplies had to be gathered. For wageworkers, paper itself constituted a luxury, and space on each sheet became precious. *Dont think because I send you my refuse paper that it is any lack of respect to you*, Eunice made clear to her mother, *but I had rather send it to you than to strangers, for you know the circumstances*. As soldiers in the Union Army, Henry and Luther sent messages on whatever stock came their way: stationery distributed by northern charities, “a leaf from an old account Book,” even Confederate notepaper. Ordinarily a letter ended only when the blank page ran out (“well I have about finished my paper so must close”); by the same token, filling only part of a sheet demanded an explanation (*It is a shame to waste so much paper, but I have no more sence or nonsense*). More commonly, margins and corners came crammed with messages. Sometimes Eunice resorted to cross-hatching. She first filled the page, then turned the paper ninety degrees and wrote across the lines just set down. Once, in a pinch, she turned the paper upside down and filled the spaces in between each line.

Pens were always superior to pencils, though never a guarantee of flowing narration. One day, Eunice tried out a variety of implements in an effort to *find one I can write decent with but guess I shall not succeed*, she lamented, while soldier Henry rejected the steel pen his mother sent from the home front, reasoning that it was “too coarse pointed.” Ink, homemade from powder mixed with water, shaken and strained, could turn equally fickle, with blotting and spilling a constant threat. From the barracks, Luther confessed that “one of the boys tipped over my ink and I have not got mutch left.” Eunice’s trials with a bottle of dark liquid were exacerbated one New England day when her tenement mate’s young son *came in and turned my ink over into my lap and all over the side of my dress*. With the vessel nearly emptied, Eunice’s vexation rose, then turned to wrath when the boy’s mother shrugged off the mishap with *it aint as if your clothes were nice ones*. A crestfallen Eunice had dressed in a *delaine shirt that I think every thing of*, and the cruel remark *provoked me more than all the rest*, she wrote, as she tried for an hour to get the stains out. After all that, the final ingredients were envelopes, wax and gum for sealing, and postage. At mid-century, the writer paid three cents for a half ounce. *It costs a little every letter you know*, Eunice reminded her correspondents.

Every letter left unwritten for want of an hour, a candle, a sheet, or a pen edged Eunice’s family closer to silence and invisibility, for only with time and supplies at the ready could one compose a record of a day or a week, of a successful or failed endeavor, an important opinion, a pressing sentiment. Yet the very act of writing could prove discouraging for those of little schooling. Eunice’s insistence on calling the contents of her letters *nonsense* echoes a common refrain of female self-effacement in the nineteenth century (Lois sometimes characterized her own attempts as “insipid”), but Eunice also cared about the literary quality of her letters. *She writes very pretty indeed*, she once commented wistfully of a family friend. *I like her style of writing*.

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