

HISTORICAL GUIDES
TO AMERICAN AUTHORS

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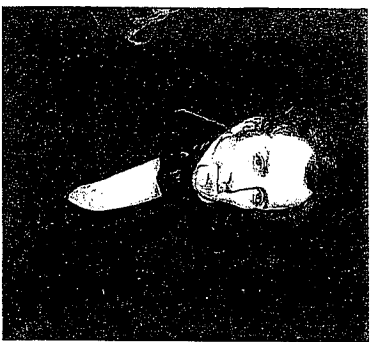
A
Historical Guide
to Emily Dickinson



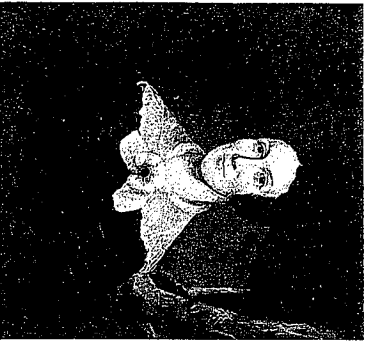
EDITED BY
VIVIAN R. POLLAK

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1830: In the fall, Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson and small son William Austin move into The Homestead, which they share with Edward's father and other family members. Birth of Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (December 10).



The poet's father, Edward Dickinson, painted by O. A. Bullard in 1840. By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



The poet's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, painted by O. A. Bullard in 1840. By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

1830: Birth of poet, novelist, and Indian Rights activist Helen Maria Fiske (Helen Hunt Jackson) in Amherst. Massachusetts residents no longer required to pay taxes to support churches. Abraham Lincoln moves with his father's family from Indiana to Illinois. There are thirteen million Americans.

1831: In Virginia, Nat Turner leads an unsuccessful slave rebellion.

1832: Andrew Jackson reelected president on the Democratic ticket.

1834: Abraham Lincoln elected to a first term in the Illinois legislature. Burning of Charlestown convent by anti-Catholic nativists.



Poet and novelist Helen Hunt Jackson, Dickinson's schoolmate and friend in her later years. "H. H." prided herself on her work as an Indian Rights activist. By permission, Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts

1831: The poet's maternal grandfather Joel Norcross remarries. The poet's mother is admitted to church membership.

1833: Birth of the poet's sister Lavinia Norcross Dickinson. Never married for fear of displeasing her father, she becomes Emily's indispensable friend and advocate in later years. "She has no Father and Mother but me and I have no Parents but her" (1873 letter to Elizabeth Holland).

Poor and broken-spirited, Edward's father Samuel Fowler Dickinson moves to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he supervises building construction at Lane Theological Seminary. His wife and several remaining children follow shortly thereafter.

1834: Lavinia Norcross, the poet's aunt, marries her first cousin, Loring Norcross.

1835: Edward Dickinson appointed treasurer of Amherst College, a post he holds for thirty-seven years. Emily begins attending school.

1838: Edward Dickinson begins a two-year term in the Massachusetts legislature. Death of his father Samuel Fowler Dickinson, his financial affairs in a "sorry mess."

1836: Battle of the Alamo, San Antonio, Texas. Ralph Waldo Emerson publishes *Nature*.

1837: Victoria becomes queen of England. Mary Lyon establishes Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Birth of Mark Twain. Financial panic, economic depression cause widespread unemployment.

1838: Edgar Allan Poe publishes his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, of Nantucket*. Melville's future father-in-law Lemuel Shaw becomes the last chief justice of Massachusetts to send a man to prison for blasphemy. Abner Kneeland, the victim of his decision, later founds a utopian community in Iowa. Trail of Tears, as the Cherokee nation is displaced beyond the boundary of the Mississippi River.

1839: First photo-daguerreotypes taken in the United States.

1840: William Henry Harrison elected president on the Whig ticket after a hard fought campaign ("Tippecanoe and Tyler too"). Orestes A. Brownson's "The Laboring Classes" contributes to Martin Van Buren's defeat. Margaret Fuller edits *The Dial*.

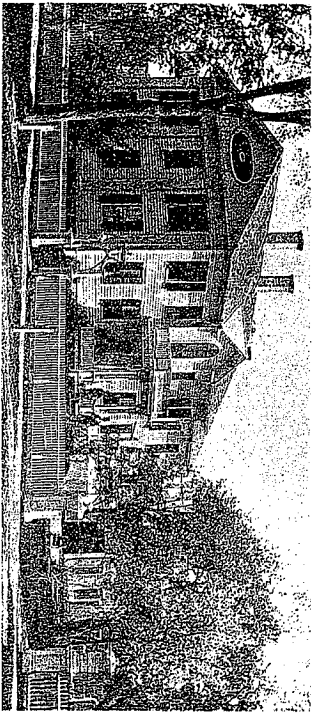
1841: Utopian community Brook Farm founded in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, near Boston. Later satirized by Hawthorne, one of the residents, in *The Blithedale Romance*.



Amherst Academy. By permission of the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.



Lithograph of Phoenix Row and Main Street, Amherst, 1840. By permission of the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.



The house on North Pleasant Street where the Dickinsons lived from 1840 to 1851. Photographed ca. 1870. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.

1840: The Dickinsons move into a spacious wooden house on Pleasant Street. Emily enters Amherst Academy, in "the English course," as does her sister Lavinia.

1841: In January, Edward Dickinson begins another term in the Massachusetts legislature; Austin's schoolfriend Joseph Lyman boards with the Dickinsons during Edward's absence. Emily enters "The Classical Department" at Amherst Academy.

1844: Depressed by the death of her schoolmate Sophia Holland, Emily Dickinson is sent to stay with her mother's sister Lavinia Norcross Norcross in Boston. The trip does her good.



The Dickinson children, Emily, Austin, and Lavinia, painted by O. A. Ballard in 1840. By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

1842: Abraham Lincoln marries Mary Todd in Illinois. Nathaniel Hawthorne marries Sophia Peabody in Massachusetts. Harriet Jacobs escapes North, from her garret in Edenton, North Carolina. P. T. Barnum's American Museum opens in New York City.

1843: Birth of Henry James, Jr., in New York City; Whitman's temperance novel *Franklin Evans* or *The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*.

1844: Nativist anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia. Mormon leader Joseph Smith killed by mob in Carthage, Illinois. Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes "A Vision of Poets." Emerson, *Essays: Second Series*.

1845: Irish potato famine accelerates immigration to America. Elizabeth Barrett elopes with Robert Browning; they take up residence on the Continent. Margaret Fuller publishes *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*.

1846: United States declares war on Mexico; Lincoln elected to Congress, his only term. Thoreau at Walden Pond; arrested for not paying taxes.

1847: Beginning in September, Emily Dickinson attends Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where she finds herself all engrossed in the study of sulphuric acid.

1848: Emily Dickinson completes her year at Mount Holyoke and returns to Amherst, her parents having decided that no further formal education is necessary.

1849: Writes satiric valentine letter to William Cowper Dickinson, valedictorian of Amherst College, class of 1848.



Emily Dickinson, daguerrotype. The only known photograph of the poet, probably taken in the winter of 1847 when she was sixteen. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.



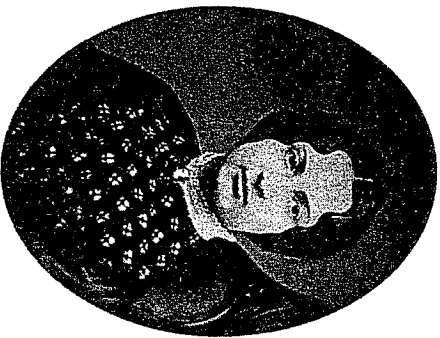
Emily Norcross Dickinson, daguerrotype, ca. 1847. The only known photograph of the poet's mother. After her death in 1882, the poet wrote to her friend Elizabeth Holland, "When she became our Child, the Affection came." By permission, Monson Free Library, Monson, Massachusetts.

1847: Publication of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

1848: Women's Rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Gold discovered in California. In Europe, revolutions in France, Germany, and Italy that influence democratic thinking in the United States. Herman Melville publishes *Typee*; Walt Whitman edits the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* and travels to New Orleans, where he edits *The Crescent*. Death of Emily Brontë, in Yorkshire, England, of consumption.

1850: In January, Benjamin Franklin Newton, her father's former law clerk, gives her Emerson's *Poems*. In February, Dickinson's first known publication, a comic valentine letter, appears in *The Indicator*, a new publication edited by Amherst College students. In March, Dickinson sends a comic valentine to her father's law partner, Elbridge Gerry Bowdoin. This is her first known poem (Fr 1).

1852: Dickinson sends a love letter to Susan Huntington Gilbert, who is teaching in Baltimore. Austin Dickinson teaching Irish immigrants in Boston. Edward Dickinson elected to the U.S. House of Representatives on the Whig ticket.



Lavinia Norcross Dickinson (Vinnie), the poet's sister, in 1852. By permission of the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.

1849: Death of Edgar Allan Poe under tragic circumstances, in Baltimore, Hawthorne writing *The Scarlet Letter*; after losing his job in the Salem Custom-House.

1850: Compromise bill enacted that restricts slavery in the territories. The Fugitive Slave Law is passed following Daniel Webster's speech. Death of Margaret Fuller, now the Marchese Ossoli, returning from Italy with her (perhaps) husband and small son, off Fire Island, in a storm. Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes her politically radical poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point."

1851: Amelia Bloomer suggests in her feminist publication that women wear a kind of short skirt and pants, to free themselves from the encumbrances of traditional dress. *Moby Dick* and *The House of the Seven Gables* are published.

1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; first edition of five thousand copies gone in two days.

1854: The nativist Know-Nothing Party is organized. Thomas Wentworth Higginson a war correspondent in "bleeding Kansas." Thoreau publishes *Walden*.

1853: Austin Dickinson attends Harvard Law School; he becomes engaged to Susan Gilbert, who is Emily's best friend. Death of Benjamin Franklin Newton, who wanted to live until Emily was a poet. Railroad comes to Amherst.

1854: A meeting to organize the antislavery Republican Party held in Washington, D.C., in rooms shared by Edward Dickinson and Thomas D. Eliot of New Bedford, granduncle of another American poet. Edward, however, remains a Whig and supports the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Quarrel between Emily and Sue; Sue leaves town for seven months.

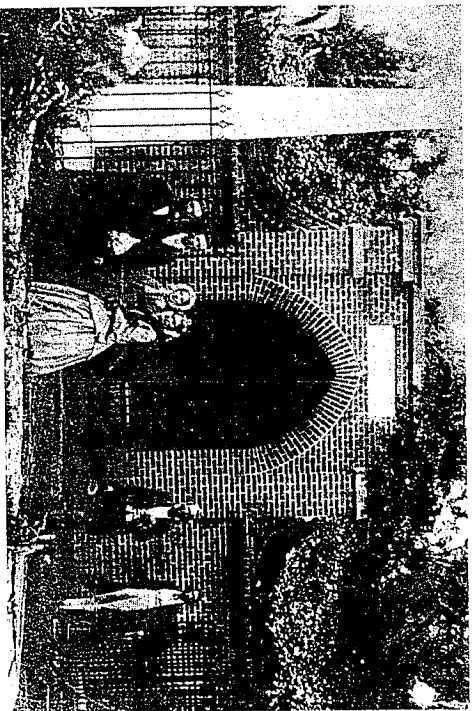
1855: Edward Dickinson unsuccessful in his bid for reelection to Congress. Emily and Lavinia visit Mount Vernon and spend several weeks in Washington, D.C., where Emily attends fashionable dinner parties and impresses the company with her wit. On the way home, they stop to visit in Philadelphia and Emily meets the Rev. Charles Wadsworth, pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church. He becomes her "Shepherd from Little Girlhood" and probably the recipient of her "Master" letters. In November, the Dickinsons move back to The Homestead on Main Street in Amherst. Emily's mother suffers a depression that continues for years after the move.



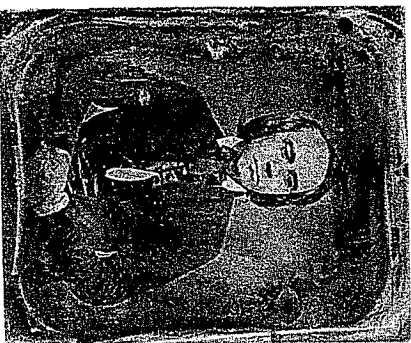
Austin Dickinson in 1850, photographed at the time of his graduation from Amherst College. By permission of the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.



The poet's close friend and sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, ca. 1855, shortly before her marriage to Austin. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.



Washington's Tomb, visited by Dickinson in February 1857 during her visit to Washington, D.C., while her father was a member of Congress. Vivian Pollak Collection.



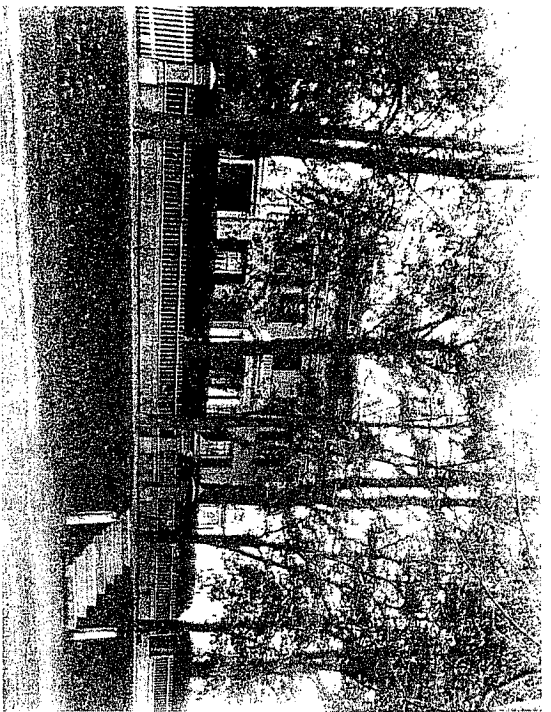
Charles Wadsworth, minister of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, undated photograph. By permission of the Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.

1855: "Fanny Fern" (Sara Payson Willis) publishes a sensational roman à clef, *Ruth Hall*. *Leaves of Grass* published, containing twelve untitled poems in free verse. Longfellow publishes *Hawththia*.

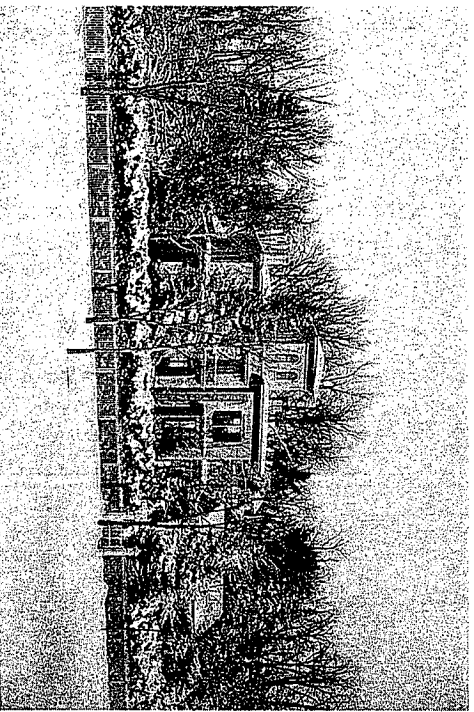
1856: Second edition of *Leaves of Grass* published, as is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's feminist novel in verse, *Aurora Leigh*.

1857: Economic depression grips the nation.

1858: Lincoln-Douglas debates. Douglas wins reelection to U.S. Senate from Illinois.



The Homestead on Main Street, built by Samuel Fowler Dickinson in 1893 and photographed at a later time. The bedroom where the poet did most of her work is to the upper left. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.



The Evergreens, the elegant home of Austin and Susan Dickinson, which was located next door to The Homestead, was built by Edward Dickinson for the young couple as a wedding present in 1856. Photographed by Charles Proby at some later time. By permission, Jones Library Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.

1856: Austin and Sue marry on July 1 in Geneva, New York. They move into The Evergreens, which becomes a center of Amherst social life. Emily wins second prize for her rye and Indian bread at the autumn Cattle Show.

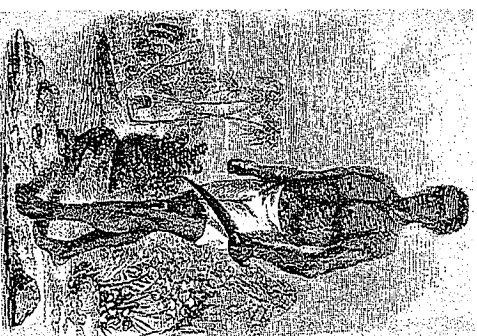
1857: Virtually undocumented, a transformative year in the life of the poet. A strategic retreat. Emerson lectures on "The Beautiful in Rural Life" and stays overnight with Austin and Sue, but Dickinson does not meet him.

1858: Dickinson begins organizing her poems into booklets, or fascicles, a practice she continues into 1864, eventually compiling some forty of these handsewn gatherings and a smaller number of unbound "sets." Drafts the first of three letters to someone she calls "Master" and experiences an intensifying crisis of self-definition.

1860: In August, Charles Wadsworth visits Emily: "There came a day at summer's full." Massachusetts Governor Nathaniel Banks attends the Dickinsons' annual Commencement Tea and stays overnight in The Homestead. Emily impatiently compares him to the pope, whom she wishes to Rome. Edward Dickinson declines the nomination of the Bell and Everett Party for lieutenant governor. Dickinson and Lavinia visit their friend Eliza Coleman and her husband in Middletown, Connecticut, Emily's last social visit away from Amherst.

1859: Unsuccessful antislavery raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, led by John Brown, who is captured and executed. Higginson is one of his financial backers.

1860: Abraham Lincoln elected on the Republican ticket. Third edition of *Leaves of Grass* published, containing "Calamus" poems of male-homoerotic love, together with controversial heterosexual poems, "Children of Adam." In England, George Eliot publishes *The Mill on the Floss*.



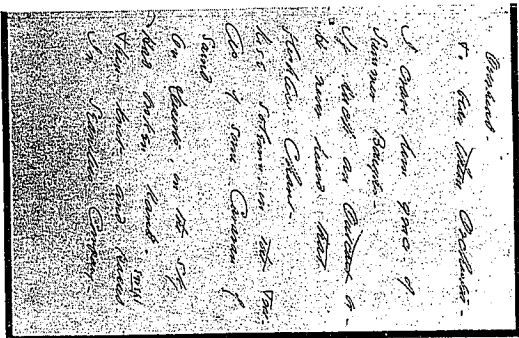
Drawing of a dark-skinned pearl-diver from an article by J. W. Watson, "Pearls and Gems," *Harper's Monthly* 21 (November 1860). A possible source for Dickinson's "The Malty" - took the Pearl, "the image suggests the importance of regional and national newspapers and magazines as a daily social and cultural context for her writing. Vivian Pollak Collection.

1861: Birth of Austin and Sue's first child, Ned, in June. In September, Dickinson experiences a mysterious "terror" which has been variously attributed to a range of psychosocial and physical problems.

1862: Dickinson responds to Higginson's essay in the April Atlantic Monthly, encouraging young writers to submit their manuscripts for publication. She sends him four poems: "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers," "The nearest Dream recedes - unrealized," "We play at Paste," and "I'll tell you how the Sun rose." Samuel Bowles, friend and journalist, in Europe for his health. Rev. Charles Wadsworth is in San Francisco. Higginson departs for South Carolina, as Colonel of a black regiment.



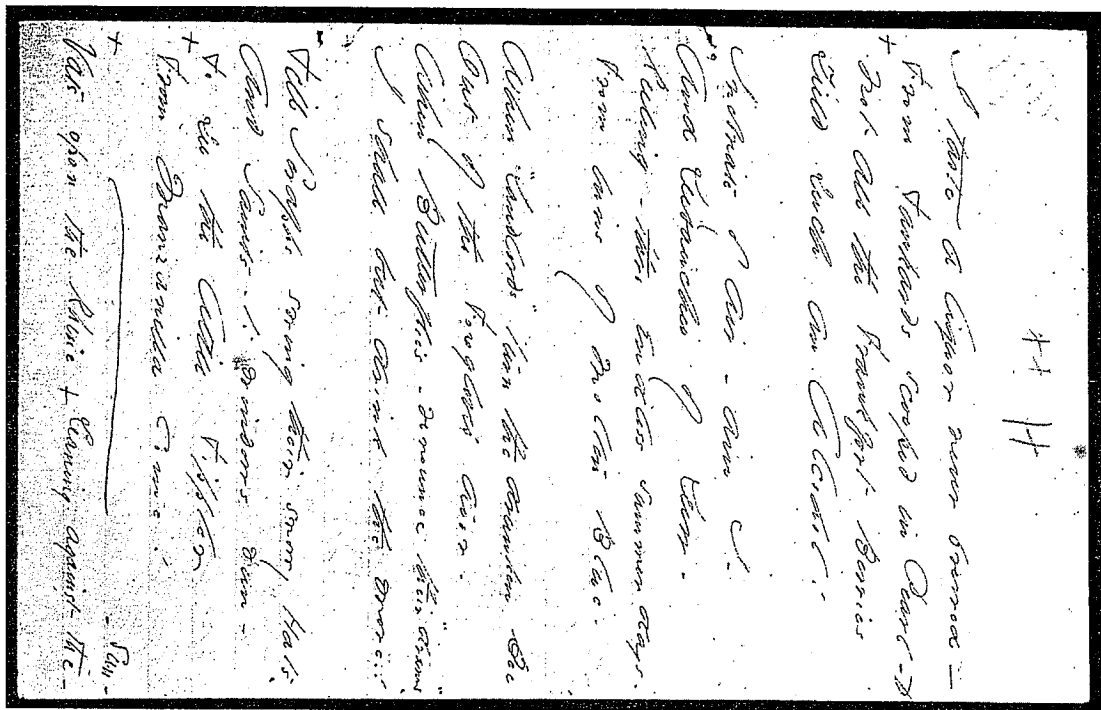
Samuel Bowles, the nationally prominent editor of the Springfield Republican. Emily wrote him that he had "the most triumphant face out of paradise." By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



Manuscript version of "Of all the Sounds despatched abroad," a poem composed ca. 1862. By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.



Thomas Wentworth Higginson, New England reformer and man of letters, in uniform as the colonel of a black regiment. Dickinson initiated a correspondence with him in April 1862 that turned into one of the mainstays of her writing life. Frontispiece, 1898, Outlook. Vivian Pollak Collection.



Manuscript version of "I taste a liquor never brewed," a poem composed ca. 1861. By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

1863: Dickinson's most productive year. She writes or transcribes almost 300 poems.

1864: In February, accompanied by her sister Lavinia, Dickinson returns from Boston, where she has consulted a distinguished ophthalmologist about her eye problems. In March, two of her poems appear in *Drum Beat*, a Brooklyn newspaper designed to raise funds for the Union cause. In April, Emily moves into a Cambridge boarding house where her cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross are also living. She is depressed, suffers from intermittent eye pain, and fears that she is losing her sight. Works in her "prison" and makes "guests" for herself, that is, she continues to write poetry. Austin Dickinson drafted, but he buys his way out with a substitute. In November, Dickinson returns to Amherst. The sunlight still hurts her eyes, but she is able to take up some of her household tasks, although she still suffers from low spirits and her family cannot understand why she does not get well. Begins reading eagerly.

1865: In April, Dickinson returns to Cambridge for another seven-month stay and for further eye treatments. Again, she lives in Mrs. Bangs's boarding house on Austin Street, near present day Central Square.

1861: Harriet Jacobs publishes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by herself. Civil War begins in April, after American troops are fired on by Confederate forces at Fort Sumter. Whitman's youngest brother George enlists in the New York State Militia. Mark Twain enlists in the Marion Rangers, a Confederate militia unit in Missouri, but resigns after two weeks. Rebecca Harding Davis publishes *Life in the Iron-Mills* in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickinson's favorite contemporary poet and the subject of several poems. Battle of Bull Run.

1862: Birth of Edith Wharton, later a powerful critic of Old New York. Battles of Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. Homestead Act gives public lands to settlers; Morrill Act creates land grant colleges.



Adjutant Frazier Stearns, son of the Amherst College president, died in the battle of Newbern, North Carolina, in 1862. Vivian Pollak Collection.

In November, Dickinson returns to Amherst in better spirits and no longer complaining of eye pain/strain. She is able to return to tasks such as sewing that require visual concentration.

1866: The *Springfield Republican* features "The Snake" on its front page, February 14. Dickinson continues her clandestine correspondence with the Rev. Charles Wadsworth, enlisting friends such as Elizabeth Holland to address the letters and to mail them from out of town. Birth of Martha, second child of Austin and Sue.

1868: Dickinson goes out at night with her brother to see the new church on Main Street, which could be viewed from the edge of the Dickinson property.

1869: Higginson invites Dickinson to a literary salon in Boston; she refuses, stating, "I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town."

1870: Higginson visits Dickinson in August.

1873: At her father's request, the pastor Jonathan Jenkins examines Emily and pronounces her sound, despite her failure to attend church services. Higginson pays a second visit.

1865: Lincoln issues Emancipation Proclamation. Whitman in Washington, D.C., visiting wounded in Civil War hospitals. Battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. Draft riots in New York City. Henry James drafted and is exempted by reason of physical disability. Death of abolitionist hero Robert Gould Shaw at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, leading a regiment of black soldiers.

1864: Death of Hawthorne, in a hotel room, accompanied by his friend, former president Franklin Pierce. Lincoln reelected. Sherman's march through Georgia.

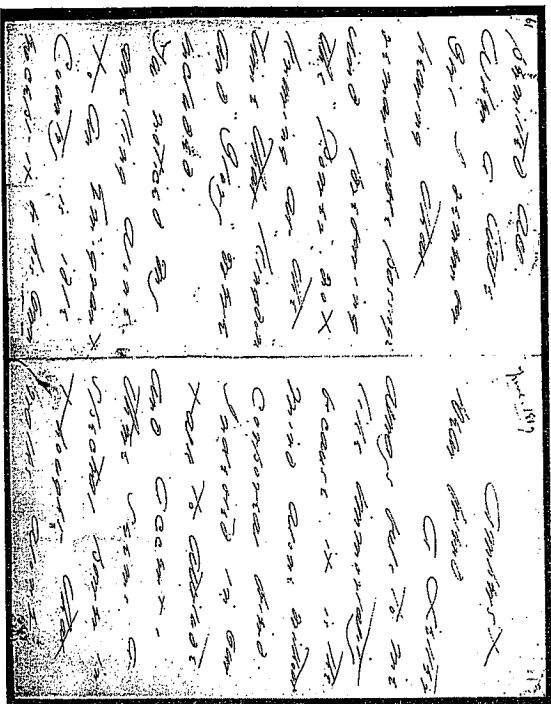
1865: In April, Lincoln assassinated while attending a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theater with his wife; shortly thereafter, Whitman begins to draft the elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Civil War ends.

1868: Whitman publishes "Personalsm," the second installment of *Democratic Vistas*.

1869: War hero Ulysses S. Grant inaugurated as president. Transcontinental Railroad completed at Promontory Summit, Utah.

1870: Higginson publishes *Army Life in a Black Regiment*.

1871: George Eliot begins publishing *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, one of Dickinson's favorite novels.



A letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1869 refusing his invitation to visit him in Boston and again inviting him to visit her in Amherst, which he did the following year. Higginson's account of their 1870 meeting is an important source for the poet's biography. By permission, Boston Public Library/Rare Books Department—Courtesy of the Trustees.



The poet's eminently respectable father Edward Dickinson, ca. 1874, the year of his death. By permission, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

1874: Edward Dickinson again serving in the Massachusetts legislature; he dies in June in a Boston hotel room after an injection of morphine; the Dickinsons believe that he was the victim of medical malpractice.

1875: Dickinson's mother has a stroke on the anniversary of her husband's death. Emily Dickinson signs her own will, saying nothing explicit about her manuscripts.

1877: Death of Higginson's first wife, Mary Elizabeth Channing.

1878: Helen Hunt Jackson visits, with her husband, "Success"

published anonymously in *A Masque of Poets*. Dickinson's romance with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, whom she describes as her father's best friend.



Judge Otis Phillips Lord, who proposed marriage to Dickinson in the late 1870s. He was a friend of her father's and a staunch political conservative. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.

1874: Birth of Gertrude Stein, daughter of Jewish immigrants, in Allegheny, Pennsylvania.

1875: Smith College (for women) opens in Northampton, Massachusetts.

1876: George Eliot begins publishing *Daniel Deronda*, "That wise and tender Book."

1879: Henry James publishes *Daisy Miller*.

1880: George Eliot marries John Walter Cross and dies seven months later. "The Life of Marian Evans had much I did not know."

1881: Helen Hunt Jackson publishes *A Century of Dishonor* and sends a copy of this treatise to every member of Congress at her own expense. President Garfield assassinated; Chester A. Arthur inaugurated. Henry James publishes *The Portrait of a Lady*.

1884: Helen Hunt Jackson publishes her novel *Ramona*, urging justice for Indians in California; Twain publishes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

1879: In February, Higginson marries Mary Potter Thacher of Newton, Massachusetts.

1881: Mabel Loomis Todd, a young and ambitious faculty wife, begins recording her impressions of the Dickinsons, including Emily, whom she calls "the myth."

1882: Death of the poet's bedridden mother.

1883: Sudden death of the poet's eight-year-old nephew Gilbert, from typhoid fever. Dickinson goes to The Evergreens and suffers from "revenge of the nerves." That fall, Austin and Mabel Loomis Todd consummate their romance, in The Homestead dining room.

1884: Death of Oris Phillips Lord, following a long period of ill health.

1885: Helen Hunt Jackson, who had asked to be Dickinson's literary executor, predeceases her; Dickinson "unspeakably shocked."

1886: On May 15, Emily Dickinson dies at around six o'clock in the evening. The official diagnosis is "Bright's Disease," a kidney disorder, but hypertension is more likely to have been the primary cause. Higginson attends her funeral and reads Emily Brontë's poem, "No coward soul is mine." Susan Gilbert Dickinson writes the obituary that appears in the *Springfield Republican*.



The charming and duplicitous Mabel Loomis Todd, coeditor with Thomas Wentworth Higginson of the 1890 *Poems*, ca. 1882. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.



The poet's nephew Gilbert, the gifted and charming child whose sudden death in 1883 devastated the entire family. Courtesy of the Todd-Bingham Picture Collection, Yale University Library.



The poet's beloved sister Lavinia with one of her many cats in 1896. By permission, Jones Library, Inc., Amherst, Massachusetts.

1888: Amherst resident Mabel Loomis Todd is transcribing the poems; she is assisted by her husband and several others. This activity is kept secret from Sue.

1890: *Poems*, edited by Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, published by Roberts Brothers. It contains 115 poems.

1886: Henry James publishes *The Bostonians*, a novel of homosocial and homoerotic female friendship. James calls it "a study of one of those friendships between women which are so common in New England."