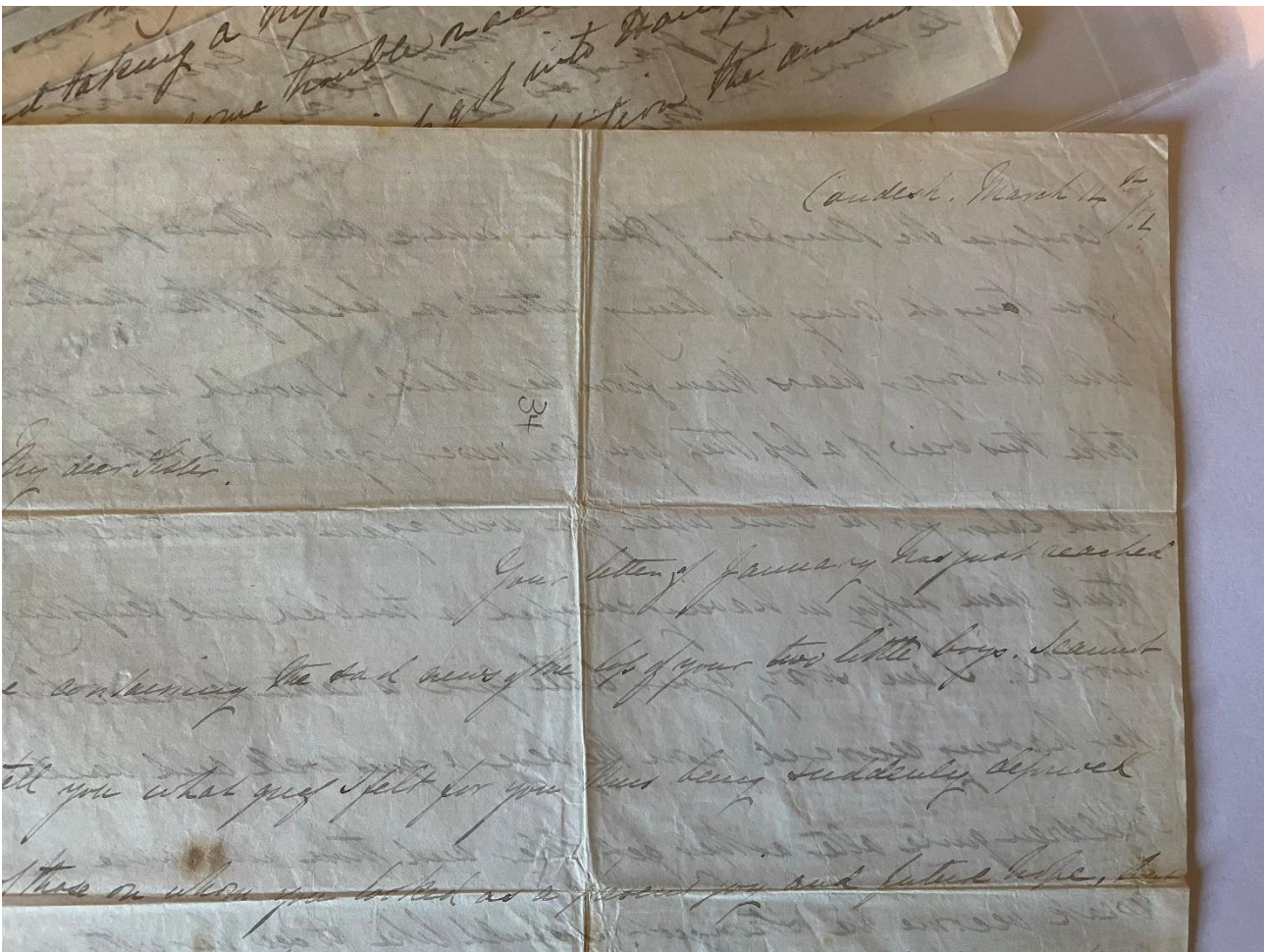


Letter 12: Gunpowder, explosions and scarlet fever



Candesh march 14th
/54

My dear Sister,

Your letter of January has just reached me containing **the sad news of the loss of your two little boys**. I cannot tell you what grief I felt for you thus being suddenly deprived of those on whom you looked as a present joy and future hope, but your own feeling as a Mother must I am sure be beyond the power of anyone else to imagine. All came too in the midst of sickness and trouble that prevented you having the sad consolation of attending your poor little boys. **But such was the will of Providence and it affords me some consolation to see that you endure your severe afflictions with Christian resignation which is the only true fortitude** - nor are there wanting other sources of hope as that those who have left you are such as compose the Kingdom of Heaven where now those prayers you taught may be being uttered on behalf of the Mother who no longer hears them from her child. I would have you take this view of a loss that you can never forget and look forward and labor for the time when you will again meet them and think them happy in having escaped a troubled and tempting world. I am sorry your little girl is rather delicate but her having recovered from the fever argues well and besides children quite alter as they get older and those who were weak become the strongest. I should like to see her little face which must now be the resting place of your hope but mind not to be too kind but rather study that course of simple food and exercise

which is nearly all children want with their own natural spirits and youthful health. I am quite sure from your letter that she has a good Mamma and Father too tho' it is beyond me to imagine you as a Mother and must leave the realization of the idea to the aid of my eyes, when I can manage to come and see you. Fever in your part of the world appears nearly as bad as the ordinary fever here while I am half inclined to think you have not the same amount of medical knowledge to cure it and certainly not the same facilities for here every considerable Station has Government Medical Officer whom if you belong to the Companys Services you can consult gratis.

I was sorry to hear James has been troubled in the money affairs again. You have some reason for saying you think Mr W's friendship only amounted to £ -s -d (pounds, shillings and pence) from the exact way in which he makes his demands, but still I think it is only his manner. He would forget all about the debt for a whole year perhaps and then remembering it write about it as tho' all his earthly prospects were resting on its immediate payment. He sends me out books every month or so and writes very kind letters nor can I think but what he likes to assist all his friends but he has an exact way of doing things that rather tries ones gratitude. You must not think that you are the only ones who get displeased at his severity – only the last mail brought me news that such a serious quarrel had taken place that part of his own family if I may so call it were on the point of making a move to some other roof. I never enter into these domestic weaknesses and so keep on good on good terms with all parties. Nothing would be more pleasant than to hear the debt was paid off tho' I fear James has already found difficulty in paying it so soon as he expected. For my part I never thought it would be paid at so short a notice but shall be glad to hear what has been done towards it. With regard to dogs and horses I am only sorry I should have ever occasioned your having to write about such things in a letter which contained other subjects of such real grief. I received a newspaper of the 13th January for which best thanks. The papers here copy out all your leading news so unless there is anything particular I do not think it is worth a while sending the papers. It must have been a dreadful fire at Hobart Town, it was somewhere in the neighbourhood Fanny was living in. I hope none of your friends or acquaintances have suffered. The hot season is fast coming on here but tho' oppressive I think it is generally more healthy than the cold or rainy seasons. It is dreadfully dull work in tents all alone but one gets on better and feels the heat less if occupied all through the day. I shall look forward for your next letter and hope it will bring news that you and your Husband are quite recovered the fever and endure the sad loss it occasioned with resignation since the will of Providence cannot be reversed. With kind love to all

Believe me my dear Sister

Your affectionate Brother

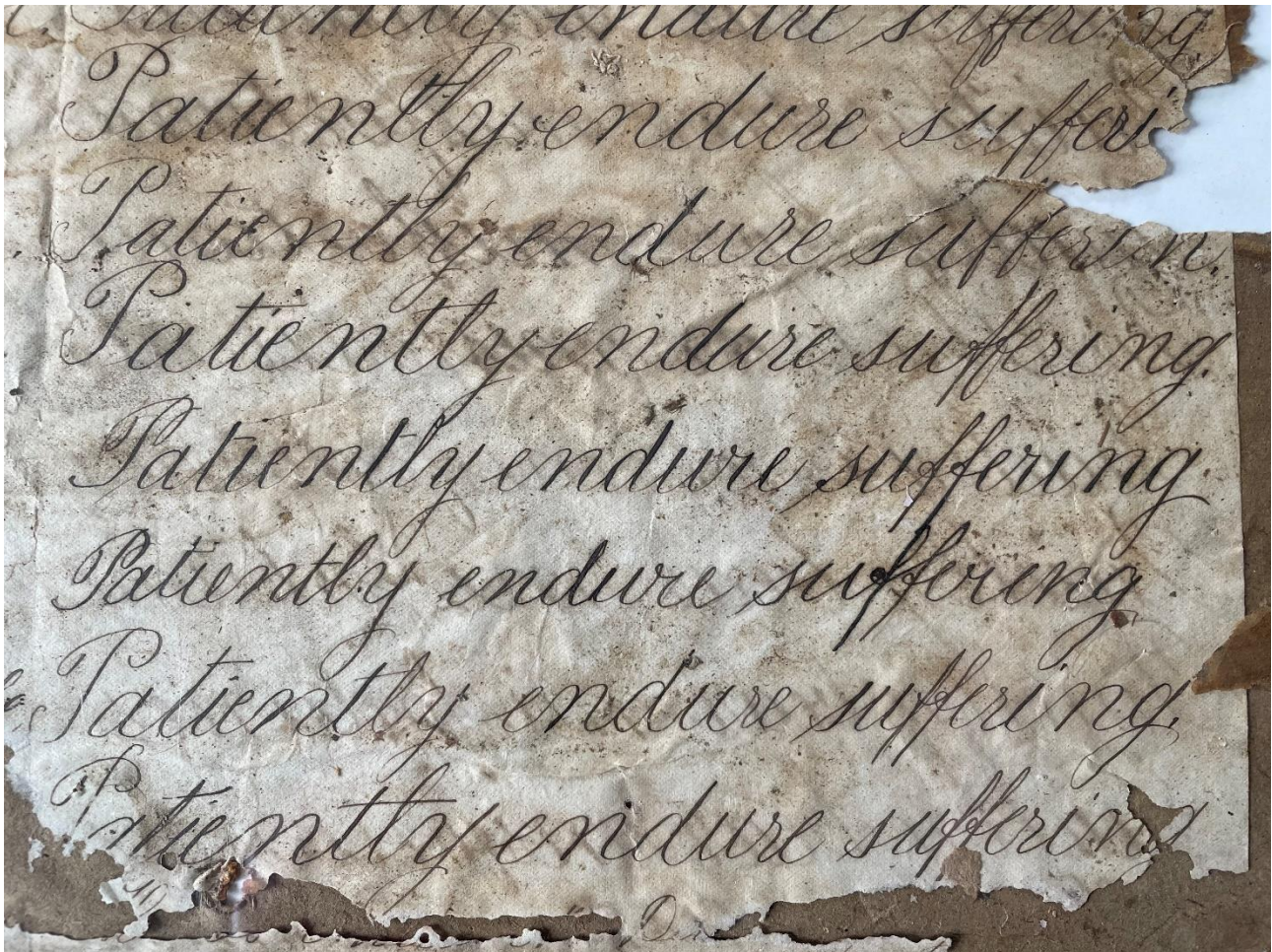
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“the sad news of the loss of your two little boys”

Thanks to the research of John Goold, we know who these boys are: Herbert Nichols, died 14 December 1853 age 3 and his brother Francis Nichols, died 24 December 1853 aged 4. Note the dates – the two boys died just ten days apart, from “the scarlet fever [now] prevalent in Oatlands; there is scarce a house in which some of the inmates are not suffering under this fearful visitation” (*The Courier*, 16 December 1853 page 2)

“But such was the will of Providence and it affords me some consolation to see that you endure your severe afflictions with Christian resignation which is the only true fortitude”

Child mortality rates in the 19th century were pretty bad (although much better in Van Diemen’s Land than back home). Nonetheless, deaths such as this were not uncommon, and at these times most parents turned to religion for consolation. About ten years after Thomas wrote of Fanny enduring her sufferings with Christian fortitude, the children of James Mcdermott in Stanley Street Oatlands were using those same precepts to practice their handwriting:



Copybook fragment ca 1860, found under approximately 20 layers of wallpaper, Mcdermott's Cottage, Oatlands

It must have been a dreadful fire at Hobart Town, it was somewhere in the neighbourhood Fanny was living in.

As always, Thomas is very well informed. The fire he refers to took out almost a block of inner city Hobart Town in January 1854, and cost insurers well over £100,000. Oddly, this fire occurred in Liverpool Street very near the Brunswick Hotel, which burnt down last week, and only a few doors down from the 2007 Myer fire which also caused huge damage.

The 1854 fire was first noticed by Mrs Catherine Smith, who told the subsequent inquiry that she was awoken in the middle of the night by knocking on her window, and cries of “Up you get, or you will be burnt in your bed!” Smith lived in the Cat and Fiddle Alley, and soon noticed that the flames and smoke were coming from the direction of several wooden shops built over the Hobart Rivulet. One of these shops

belonged to Richard James Edwards, a tobacconist, who also traded in gunpowder. Incredibly, it seems Edwards actually stored kegs of gunpowder in his wooden shop in the middle of densely populated Hobart Town.

Mrs Smith was lucky she got out of bed in a hurry; just moments later she heard an explosion, and the roof of an adjoining building was blown off and landed on her house, which promptly burnt to the ground. By this stage, burning embers were igniting neighbouring properties and half the town came out to rubberneck. A number of witnesses said that they came across Mr Edwards in the street, begging them "for God's sake to help him to get some barrels out as quickly as possible or they would all be blown to atoms". Other witnesses reported throwing gunpowder kegs into the rivulet in a desperate attempt to prevent more explosions. It didn't work.

The second and third explosions were felt quite some distance away. One man who lived at the other end of the street reported that "about 5 or 6 minutes after there came another explosion which blew out the ceiling of the room in which witness was; knocked the glasses off a table, blew out the window sashes, etc....Mr McGregor's store blew up about 20 minutes after, witness saw some pieces of burning timber flung up from it as far as Elizabeth Street". The following morning, kegs of gunpowder were found washed up under the Wellington Bridge (now mostly covered by the Elizabeth Street Mall).

Not surprisingly, Mr Edwards maintained that he didn't have gunpowder stored on his premises, and that if he did, it was removed before the fire. The fire was eventually determined to be accidental, but not without considerable opprobrium coming Mr Edwards' way. Several months later, what was left of that part of Liverpool Street was mostly razed by late summer floods which burst the banks of the Hobart Rivulet.



J.M. Beal
HOBART

Cat and Fiddle Lane Hobart ca 1900



Myer Fire, Liverpool Street, 2007 (courtesy ABC)