

# The Child Letters

*Public and  
Private Life  
in a Canadian  
Merchant-  
Politician's  
Family,  
1841–1845*

J. I. Little

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*Public and Private Life*  
*in a Canadian*  
*Merchant-Politician's Family, 1841-1845*

Marcus Child, who came to Lower Canada from Massachusetts in 1812, made his fortune as a smuggler during the war of 1812. He later became a merchant and druggist and then entered politics, serving as MLA for Stanstead County. This volume collects the almost daily correspondence between Child and his family during the early 1840s while Child was attending legislative sessions in Kingston.

The Child letters provide an intimate glimpse into the daily life of an MLA in the town of Kingston during an era of rapid political evolution. A long-serving, liberal-minded politician, Child became increasingly conservative after the Rebellions, a change that reflected in part the changing opinions of his constituency. His major contribution was in the area of education, but his letters comment upon other issues of the time, from railways to roads to wildlife preservation. The Childs also touch on a number of nonpolitical issues in their letters: religion and moral reform, daughter Elizabeth's search for a husband, local life in Stanstead village, and vignettes of social life among MLAs in Kingston.

The Child letters present the first detailed history of Eastern Townships politics during post-Rebellion era, providing increased insight into the important constitutional crises of the early 1840s and exposing readers to the thoughts of a nineteenth-century Canadian family outside the well-known but small British-born elite. Breaking the public/private divide, the letters show how family and politics are linked and reveal the family support which underpinned the rise into political prominence of men such as Child.

J.I. LITTLE is professor of history, Simon Fraser University

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J.I. LITTLE

McGill-Queen's University Press  
Montreal & Kingston • London • Buffalo

© McGill-Queen's University Press 1995  
ISBN 0-7735-1260-8  
Legal deposit second quarter 1995  
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Social Science Federation of Canada, using funds provided by the social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Funding has also been received from the Bélanger-Gardiner Trust of Bishop's University

McGill-Queen's University Press is grateful to the Canada Council for support of its publishing program.

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**Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Little, J.I. (John Irvine), 1947-  
The Child letters: public and private life in a  
Canadian merchant-politician's family:  
1841-1845  
Includes bibliographical references and  
index.

ISBN 0-7735-1260-8

1. Child, Marcus - Correspondence. 2.  
Politicians - Canada - Correspondence. 3.  
Canada - Politics and government - 1841-1867.  
I. Title.

FC2945.S83Z48 1995  
971.04'2'092 C94-900725-0  
F1054.S7L48 1995

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*For Andrea*

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## *Acknowledgments*

This publication is the product of a joint effort. Howard Dresser of Coaticook completed the arduous task of transcribing the cramped hand-writing of Marcus Child before the collection came to my attention. After Anita Mahoney word processed this transcript, research assistant Stephen Moore painstakingly checked the resulting draft against the original documents. Also invaluable to one so far removed from the sources was the intermediary role played by Monique Nadeau-Saumier of the Eastern Townships Research Centre. The enthusiasm and kindness of these individuals ensured that my work on this project would be a genuine pleasure, as did the fact that my mother and extended family in the Townships once again provided me with a home away from home. I would also like to express my appreciation to Pierre Jean, Director of the Musée Beaulne, for granting access to the Child letters as well as permission to publish them; to Pamela Miller for allowing me to research the Hale Papers while the McCord Museum was closed for renovations; to Helen Colby of Stanstead for graciously opening the family's ancestral home and archives to me; and to the Stanstead Historical Society for permission to photograph Marcus Child's portrait. Also unfailingly courteous and helpful were the staff of the National Archives in Ottawa, the Archives Nationales branches at Sherbrooke and Quebec, the Eastern Townships Collection and United Church Archives in the Bishop's University Library, and the Stanstead and Sherbrooke Registry Offices. My thanks as well to Jan Noel, Joy Parr, Ruth Sandwell, and Peter Ward for their helpful advice and comments and to Frances Rooney for her skilful editing. The research was funded largely by a grant from the Social Sciences Research Council administered through Simon Fraser University. Additional funds for research and publication were generously provided by the

Bélanger-Gardner Trust of Bishop's University. Finally, once again, my gratitude goes to Andrea, Mark, and Brett for their patience and understanding.

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## *Child Family Chronology*

- 1792 Marcus Child born, West Boylston, Massachusetts  
1795 Lydia F. Chadwick born, Worcester, Massachusetts  
1812 Marcus moves to Stanstead  
1819 Marcus and Lydia marry  
1821 daughter Elizabeth born  
1822 Marcus becomes a trustee for Stanstead's Royal Institution of Learning school  
1828 son George born  
1829 Marcus elected to Legislative Assembly  
1830 Marcus becomes a trustee of Stanstead Seminary  
Marcus becomes postmaster and commissioner of the peace  
Marcus declines to run in provincial election  
1833 Marcus declared loser in Stanstead by-election; Assembly supports his appeal in February 1834  
1834 Marcus retains seat in provincial election  
1838 Marcus flees to Vermont after dismissal as postmaster and magistrate  
1841 Marcus and Horace Cutting open Coaticook's first store, pearlsh factory, and carding mill  
Marcus elected to the Legislative Assembly  
1844 Marcus defeated in provincial election  
1845 George enrolls in High School of Montreal  
1846 Marcus becomes senior magistrate for Stanstead Township and chair of Stanstead Township school commission  
1847 Elizabeth marries Lewis Sleeper  
1848 (or earlier) the Child family converts from Methodism to Anglicanism  
1851 Marcus defeated in provincial election  
1852 Marcus appointed school inspector for St Francis District

- 1855 Marcus and Lydia move to Coaticook
- 1858 Elizabeth dies
- 1859 Marcus dies
- 1878 Lydia dies
- 1900 George dies

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## *Characters*

### RELATIVES

Ann – last name unknown. Member of the Child household and apparent niece of Lydia. Worked as a teacher. Not to be confused with Ann Burke (see Acquaintances below).

Andrus, Susan – Marcus married sister (b. 1809) who lived in Derby, Vermont.

Bigelow, Lawrence – son of Levi and therefore a cousin of the Childs. For details see the introduction.

Bigelow, Levi – Marcus' original patron and maternal uncle of both Marcus and (apparently) Lydia. For details see the introduction.

Chamberlain, Nancy S. – referred to Lydia as her sister, but must have been a half sister or step sister. She was an unmarried teacher who lived with her mother in Worcester, Massachusetts. Not to be confused with the Nancy who is referred to as the daughter of Levi Bigelow.

Child, Annis – Marcus' brother (b. 1805) who lived in Derby, Vermont.

Child, David Lee – Marcus' New York brother (b. 1794). For details see the introduction.

Child, Levi B. – Marcus' brother (b. about 1792). The letter from Lydia's mother dated 28 December 1843 suggests that he lived in the Derby-Stanstead area, but there is no other reference to him in the correspondence; nor is his deathplace recorded in the genealogy.

Child, Lydia B. – Marcus' sister (b. 1807), who became a Millerite and remained in West Boylston, Massachusetts. Note that there were three other Lydia Childs – Marcus' wife, his mother, and his sister-in-law (David's wife). Unless otherwise indicated, references to Lydia are to Marcus' wife.

Child, Thomas – cousin and former suitor of Elizabeth.

Child, Walter – Marcus' brother. The genealogy claims that he was born in 1803 and died in Watertown, Massachusetts, but the correspondence suggests that he was older and lived in Stanstead County. See the introduction.

Howe, Mrs – presumably Annis Child's mother-in-law, since he married a Howe. Apparently from West Boylston, she was referred to by Lydia's mother as "sister" Howe, though Lydia does not refer to her as aunt.

#### FAMILY ACQUAINTANCES

Baxter, Portus – Stanstead merchant who built a store in the village during the later 1830s and sat as one of Stanstead's MLAs from 1830 to 1834. (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 35; Kesteman, "Une bourgeoisie," 693).

Burke, Ann – friend and former school mate whom Elizabeth visits at her parental home in Newport, New Hampshire. Recently married to a U.S. Congressman.

Brock, Mr and Mrs – the Reverend James Brock succeeded Dr Cooney as the Methodist minister for Stanstead in 1843. He served there until 1846. (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 87).

Chamberlain, John – the correspondence suggests that Marcus felt he had some political influence locally, but there is no reference to him in Hubbard's *Forests and Clearings*. On 26 November 1843 Lydia writes that he is about to move to Montreal to keep a hotel with his son, Nelson.

Colby, Dr Moses French – prominent Stanstead physician and Tory MLA in 1837–38. For details see the introduction.

Cooney, Rev. Dr Robert and Mrs – close friends of the Childs. He was Methodist minister at Stanstead from 1839 to 1843, then moved to Montreal. See the introduction.

Cutting, Horace – Marcus' partner in Coaticook who became that town's first post-master in 1844. (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 57).

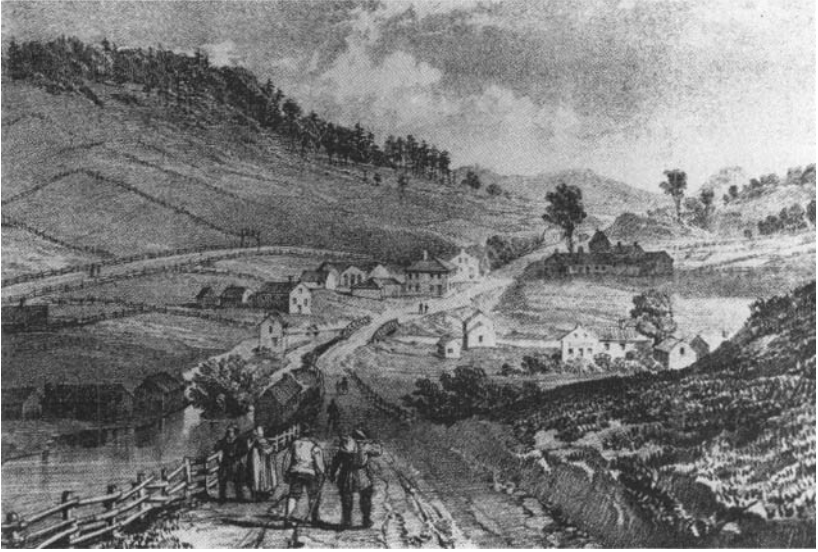
De Coto, Thomas – the Childs' discontented farm hand.

Dickerson, Silas H. – born in 1799 in New Jersey, and moved from Upper Canada to Stanstead in 1823 to establish the *British Colonist*. A political exile during and after the Rebellion of 1837–38, he became collector of customs for Stanstead in 1854, and mayor of Stanstead Plain in 1857. (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 8, 221). See the introduction.

Everet – no last name given. Employee of the Childs.

Fox, Amos K. – born in Stanstead in 1824, he managed Child's store in Coaticook during the early 1840s. (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 57, 175; *Coaticook 1864–1964*, 14.

- Grannis, Mrs – neighbour and friend of Lydia; apparent widow of William Grannis. See the introduction for details.
- Kilborn, Charles – store clerk and member of the founding family of Rock Island. See the introduction.
- Knight, Albert – born in Waterford, Vt in 1817, he opened a store in Stanstead Plain in 1837, and would become MPP for the county in 1861. (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 132–3).
- McLellan, Miss – identity unknown. There was no MPP in Kingston of that last name in 1843. Frequent references to her by Marcus suggest that she was a friend of Elizabeth, though she may have been somewhat older and was certainly considered to be a model of sophistication.
- Meigs, Mr – presumably Dr John Meigs, who was born in Wheelock, Vermont, in 1810, and commenced practicing medicine in Stanstead in 1836. He married the daughter of Mrs William Grannis in 1843. (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 147).
- Patton, Andrew – born in Paisley, Scotland in 1780, and settled in Stanstead in 1804 (Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, 120), Patton was later employed by Robert Hoyle as an assistant customs officer. On the customs patronage issue, see the introduction.
- Pomroy, Benjamin – son of Selah, born in Stanstead in 1800, and apprenticed as clerk for Ichabod Smith before beginning a mercantile business in Sherbrooke in 1823. Eventually moved to Compton village where he became a highly successful entrepreneur, involved with the establishment of Sherbrooke's Eastern Townships Bank and Paton Woolen Mills, as well as the St Lawrence and Atlantic Railway (future Grand Trunk). (Channell, *A History of Compton*, 172–3).
- Pomroy, Selah – born in Massachusetts in 1795, and a pioneer of Stanstead Plain in 1798. Politically conservative and no apparent relation to Lydia, though she called him Uncle Selah in one of her letters.
- Sleeper, Lewis – Elizabeth's future husband. See the introduction for details.
- Smith, Mr – probably refers to Ichabod Smith, who was born in Surry, N.H. in 1788, and opened a store in Stanstead with William Baxter and Wilder Pierce in 1813. They subsequently established separate businesses. Smith retired in 1836, selling his large brick store at the north end of the village, but he remained active in public life. Like Child, he was a founder of the Stanstead Bible Society and the Stanstead Seminary.
- Sophie – no last name given. Family servant whose indigent family became a problem for the Childs after she was dismissed for stealing.



Kilborn's Mills, Stanstead, Lower Canada and the United States Settlements, 1836. Drawn by Joseph Bouchette, the surveyor-general, and published in *British American Land Company Views in Lower Canada*, 1836, this print illustrates the border between what became known as Rock Island and Derby Line, Vermont. It gives little indication, however, that there were a paper mill, a tannery, a saw mill, a grist mill, and a clock and chair factory located here on the Tomifobia River. Charles P. de Volpi and P.H. Scowen, *The Eastern Townships. A Pictorial Record* (Montreal: Dev-Sco Publication, 1962), plate 4



The Legislature met in this building, originally intended as a charity hospital for the poor. The abandoned blockhouse which had served this purpose burned down in 1834, but there was no money for equipment, maintenance, or staff after the new building was completed in 1835. Its availability in 1841 influenced Lord Sydenham's decision to choose Kingston as the capital of the new province. The wings shown here were apparently added at a later date.  
National Archives of Canada, C5494