



TOM GRALISH / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Paper conservationist Joan Irving holds a finely scripted missive written by smitten teacher Hugh Pugh in 1801. He didn't marry his beloved Mary Fisher, but his penned proposal stayed in her family.

A love tale old and delicate

By Art Carey
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The year was 1801.

The place was St. Clair, a tiny village in Bedford County, south of Altoona.

Hugh Pugh was a schoolmaster, hopelessly smitten.

Mary Fisher, the object of his affection, was 20, possibly a former pupil. Evidently, she was a fox.

Or, a "lovely fair maid," as Hugh called her, pledging always to admire her "beauteous form."

In swooning verse rendered in Spencerian script so fine it seems penned with a needle, he declared his undying devotion:

*There is but one
And only one
And I am only he
That loves but one
And only one
And thou art the only she.*

Clearly, Cupid's arrow had deeply pierced Hugh's aching heart. But this was no mere valen-

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The delicate script of a love long ago

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tine, suitable though the sentiments may be for Tuesday's high holy day of romantic love. Hugh was asking Mary to marry him.

My ravished Soul doth ever long to see,

The Marriage Knot so firmly ty'd between thee and me.

Hugh's handwritten proposal is akin to fraktur, elaborate folk-art drawings created by the Pennsylvania Germans between about 1750 and 1850. Fraktur — the word refers to the typeface used in these illuminated manuscripts — were done in ink and watercolor and functioned mainly as family documents, marking births, baptisms, marriages and deaths. Precursors to contemporary collages, they sometimes incorporated student writing samples, awards of merit, hymns and bookplates.

Although not rare — fraktur regularly turn up at auctions and in antiques shops — some command prices in the thousands. Two years ago, an ornate fraktur created in 1801 was auctioned at Freeman's for a record \$366,750.

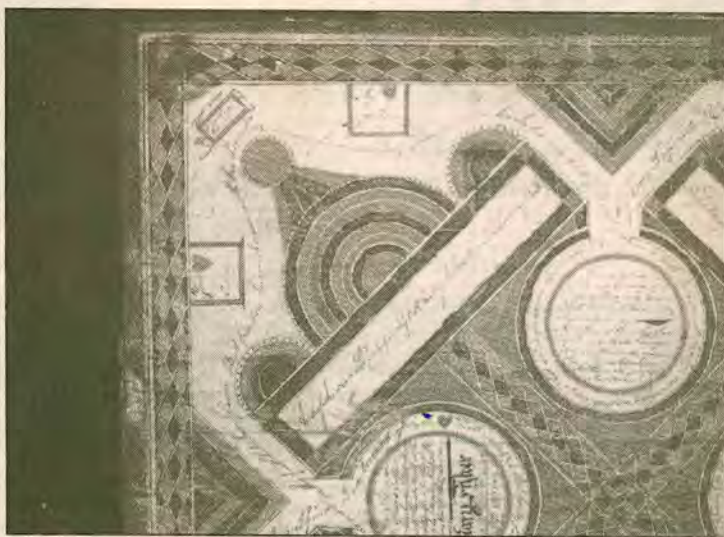
Hugh Pugh's document is now at the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, the nonprofit conservation laboratory in Center City, where it's being cleaned, repaired and restored.

"It's quite unique," says Ingrid Bogel, the center's executive director. "It's different from anything I've seen."

While Hugh's amorous confession may have been influenced by Pennsylvania German traditions, he was almost certainly of Welsh descent. His billet-doux is written in English and more accurately belongs to a subset of folk art and primitive valentines called True Lover's Knots, another popular medium of the day whose hallmarks include minute handwriting, fancy scrollwork, and messages of love arrayed around a labyrinth. A reader can begin anywhere and, turning the piece, experience a continuous flow of tender thoughts.

After completing his love note — about 12 inches by 12 inches — Hugh folded it up, sealed it with a dab of wax, and most likely delivered it personally to Mary Fisher's home.

Today, it is slightly torn, stained, and fraying around the edges. But to behold the letter



"It's different from anything I've seen," artifact conservationist Ingrid Bogel says of this 1801 example of the True Lover's Knot art form.

is to marvel. It inspires admiration as much for its sentiments and poetic flights of fancy as its craftsmanship and jewelry-like intricacy.

In one passage, Hugh uses symbols and abbreviations that foreshadow today's text messaging (the X stands for "cross"):

As soon grief shall

Sink into my ♥

2CUX my Love without desert

You have a ♥, a double ♥, I fear.

2 great a X of ♥ oh ♥ forbear

AX, AX, ICUB

A double XU are to me.

Here Hugh hints that he was jilted, two-timed or double-crossed. Could Mary have been a flirt with a roving eye, too easily distracted by a rakish swain in a souped-up buckboard?

The person most qualified to speculate is Meg Schultz, the proud owner of the piece. Mary Fisher was her great-great-great-grandmother, and the letter was passed down through the maternal side of Schultz's family. At one point, it was almost discarded and burned.

"It was hanging in a bedroom hallway in the house where I grew up in Newtown Square," says Schultz, 47, an art director for a direct-mail company, who now lives in Mount Laurel. "I used to stare at it for hours. I was fascinated by it. I took it down off the wall and copied all the words and tried to write like that."

The proposal so intrigued her that she became a genealogical sleuth and family historian.

No likenesses exist of either

Hugh or Mary, Schultz says. Information about Hugh is especially scarce, but Schultz is sure of one thing: The love letter had to have taken him hours to make. "It shows just how devoted he was," she says.

Devoted, but not necessarily a writer. As a schoolteacher, Hugh was undoubtedly familiar with literature, but his vaulting sentiments may have been cribbed.

"It's probably not entirely original," Schultz says. "In those days it was common to copy poems from other sources, just like a little boy today might copy a Hallmark card. But the artwork itself is so exquisite that even if he didn't write the verse, he put so much of himself into the object that he must have been an artist, not just a regular guy."

More is known about Mary Fisher. Her forebears came to America more than 300 years ago from Lancashire, England. They settled first in Chester County, then moved farther west. Mary was the oldest of seven children. Her mother died in childbirth when Mary was only 12, so she probably spent her youth helping her father raise her siblings. No doubt her dutiful nature figured in Hugh's high regard.

Sadly, that regard was not returned: Mary spurned Hugh's proposal. Four years later, on Feb. 13, 1805, the day before Valentine's Day, she married Benjamin Bowen, a farmer. In the space of 17 years, she bore him 10 children, the seventh of whom, also named Mary, was

the great-great-grandmother of Meg Schultz.

So why did Hugh Pugh strike out? Was it his unfortunate rhyming name?

"We used to joke about that in the family," Schultz says, "but it's a very common Welsh name. I found hundreds of Hugh Pughs on genealogy Web sites."

Schultz has another theory: "Maybe her father wouldn't let Mary marry Hugh because he didn't own property. Maybe the reason I can't find Hugh in the census roles is that he didn't have a home. Maybe he didn't have a way to take care of her. Back then, it was all about land and cows."

But despair not, ye romantics. Protocol in those days dictated that when a woman rejected a written marriage proposal, especially one as elaborate as this, she was expected to return it to her suitor.

"I always assumed Mary rejected Hugh because she didn't dig him," Schultz says. "But why would she save Hugh's proposal and give it to her granddaughter? You don't save love letters from someone you don't care about. The fact that Mary saved it tells me that Hugh must have meant something to her."

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