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James Family Letters in Colby College Library

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The members of the James family were great letter writers. Fortunately a few of their descendants have been concerned to save and catalogue the letters that have come down to us. We owe the bulk of the Colby collection to the interest and care of my aunt, Mrs. Anna Seelye Emerson of Amherst, Mass. Most of these letters were written to her mother, Mrs. Julius H. Seelye, formerly Elizabeth Tillman James, and her mother's sister, Mrs. William H. Prince, formerly Katharine Barber James. Mrs. Prince spent much of her later life in Amherst, part of it in my grandmother's home, and that is how her papers happened to be included in those of our family. The oldest sister of the three was Anna McBride James who became Mrs. Isaac Edwards and lived in Albany. She is the "Cousin Anna" to whom is addressed one of the letters from William James the philosopher quoted below. In addition to this Amherst collection, James letters have come to Colby from many sources.

This issue of the Quarterly contains an article by Professor Harold A. Larrabee on the father of these three sisters mentioned above, Rev. William James, D.D. He and his twin brother Robert were the oldest sons of the progenitor of the James family in America, William James the merchant of Albany, a patriarchal figure who is becoming increasingly well known as the affairs of the James family are brought more and more to public attention. Extremely few of the letters from this William survive, but Colby does have two magnificent breakfront secretary-bookcases of mahogany and curly maple, about eight feet high, that once adorned his Albany home. These came to the college through my cousin, Miss Elizabeth Edwards of Albany. They used to tower over the presidential desk when the office was in Miller Library, and may now be seen on the third floor of the Eustis Building. The original William James married three times and had in all thirteen children. Letters from two of the thirteen are in the Colby collection — the famous Henry the Elder (father of William the philosopher and
Henry the novelist) and his half-brother, the Reverend William described in Professor Larrabee's article. There are also fifty-two letters from William the philosopher, sixteen from William's wife, Alice Gibbens James, a dozen from his brother Henry the novelist, one from his sister Alice, two from his brother Robertson, and a scattering from other members of the family.

The oldest letter in the collection, which is also, I believe, the oldest letter extant from the pen of Henry the Elder, is one of the most interesting because it shows the child to be the father of the man. The boy of sixteen writes with the air of authority for which he was later to be so well known. But the slightly pompous style is relieved by the genuine affection shining through that was equally characteristic of the mature author. Between this letter of 1827 and the one from 1873, quoted in Professor Larrabee's article, Henry James Sr. grew up to be a friend of Emerson, writer of books on religion, and father of five children. The "Augustus" mentioned is his elder brother whose wife was the former Elizabeth Bay. "Sister Marcia," wife of William, was a daughter of Ezra Ames, the notable portrait painter. "Little Hannah," born 1826, was the Anna McBride James mentioned above.

My dear Brother,

It was with very great pleasure that I learned your intention of making us a visit this fall. We have been anxiously expecting you every day this week, and we regret to find that you have not yet arrived. Nothing would contribute, I assure you, more to the satisfaction of our family, than the event of your coming. While it would be a source of high gratification to us collectively, to me individually it might be productive of very eminent advantage, whether contemplated with a view to the ultimate improvement of my mind, or to an immediate assistance to my spirits and resolution. You will therefore pardon me if I press you to come down as soon as may be convenient.

Augustus and his lady have returned, entirely enraptured with Sister Marcia and all your family. They are enthusiastic, nay unbounded in their admiration, and Elizabeth says she despairs of ever attaining to that neatness and beauty, appertaining to every particular of your household. She says she never could imagine any female more amiably pleasing or interesting than Sister Marcia, or any man more warm hearted, prepossessing, or obliging than yourself. Of Miss Manson, she speaks with very sincere regards, and states further that there can be no parent, who would not feel a pride in little Hannah. She has, believe me, inspired me, with all our family, with a very great desire of visiting you.

Albany, Nov. 3, 1827.

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Hoping to see you, in a short time, I have little else to say, than to urge you to realize your contemplated visit, as quickly as possible. You have, indeed, no conception of the gratification it will afford us. Do not let your professional business intervene as an excuse.

Yrs. very sincerely & affectionately
Henry James.

Rev'd William James

The next letter, from Alice James, younger sister of the philosopher and the novelist, is written to Katharine Barber James Prince about whom a word should be said. Interest in this “Cousin Kitty” began to appear among students of William James when one of his letters to her was published in 1920 in Letters of William James, edited by his son Henry. In my Religion in the Philosophy of William James (1926) nine letters addressed to her are included. All nine are now in the Colby collection. Several are reprinted in the recent biography of William James by Professor Gay Wilson Allen. Last year while going through old family papers I came upon over a hundred letters to this remarkable person from relatives, friends, or acquaintances. Some were from missionaries or converts in India, others from freedmen in the south, others from American Indians on reservations in the west. Many were from the poor and downtrodden near home. One man wrote to say that his life would have ended ignominiously on the gallows if it had not been for her friendship and interest. Practically every letter, whether from an acquaintance abroad or a close relative nearer home refers to a gift she had sent or a special act of kindness she had performed. Not long ago I was told by Mrs. Alexander James, widow of the philosopher’s youngest son, that the entire clan were devoted to this remarkable cousin.

Her story is the more noteworthy because she was a person who suffered at times from mental illness. She grew up in Albany, and was at intervals a patient in mental hospitals at Clifton Springs, N. Y., and Northampton, Mass. One of the doctors in attendance was the “alienist” or psychiatrist, Dr. William H. Prince, who fell in love with her after his wife died and married her. The letters that have survived give evidence of a very happy marriage. A touching story is told of the kindness of the philosopher William James who was visiting Mrs. Prince in a mental institution at the time when Dr. Prince was
mortally ill in a hospital near by. At her request James obtained permission to escort her on what proved to be her last visit to her husband.

This first letter to “Cousin Kitty” comes, as said, from Alice James, younger sister of the philosopher and the novelist. She was born in New York City in 1848 and died in London in 1892. A good account of her life is given in Anna Robeson Burr’s Alice James, Her Brothers, Her Journal. In his book The James Family, F. O. Matthiessen quotes from an 1889 entry in her diary: “I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn’t happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me.” Alas, the melancholy was not so easily to be exorcised. Recent studies describe in detail her periods of depression and her urgent attempts to get help from her brothers. She was particularly dependent on Henry and fled to him in England in 1884. Soon after reaching him she wrote the following letter. The “Bessy” mentioned is Elizabeth Seelye, my mother. “Kitty Edwards” is the daughter of Mrs. Anna James Edwards, sister of Elizabeth Edwards. “Cousin Anna” is the Mrs. Emerson through whose interest the letters were kept.

7 Bolton St., London 10
Dec. 11th.

Dear Kitty,

Thank you very much for your note. I was so glad to hear good news of you and that everything in your circumstances was so happy. I had heard of your removal to Amherst and thought of how happy you must be in being so near your dear Bessy. You must give her my love, and tell her how sorry I am that we have never met, but perhaps we shall some day, now that the ocean rolls between us, for the more improbable things seem, the more likely are they to come about in this world of contraries. I am settled for awhile here in London in the next street to Harry. His house was too small to hold me, but he is the best of brothers and I see him twice every day.

I have quite broken down again in my health although I had thought that I had gained at Sharon. But I have so much to be thankful for and it is only a little harder waiting and the change will be all the more marvelous when it comes. I have had such a blessed feeling ever since I can remember that it was so close at hand that every thing that came seemed so easy to bear.

Please give my love to Kitty Edwards when you write. I have such sweet memories of her and of Cousin Anna. Believe me always, dear Kitty, far or near your loving cousin

Alice James
Alice James had four older brothers: William, Henry, Garth Wilkinson, and Robertson. The younger two fought in the Civil War and later tried to improve the lot of former slaves by employing them at good wages on a Florida plantation. An industrial depression and the prejudice of neighbors proved too much for them, however, and the two James brothers finally abandoned the project and moved west. After a period in Iowa, Robertson settled down in Wisconsin. But both his physical and mental health left much to be desired. He had enlisted at the age of seventeen as lieutenant in a Negro regiment, had served with bravery and been promoted to captain. But he had also suffered a severe sunstroke while taking part in Seymour’s raid on Florida and seems to have been a semi-invalid from that time on, so that periods of sparkling wit alternated with moods of great depression. He married Mary Holton and had two children: Edward Holton, the “Neddy” of the following letter, and Mary Walsh. In his recent biography of William James Professor Allen says that during the later years Robertson’s nervous instability and fondness for alcohol made him “an erratic and undependable husband.” Certainly it is true that for long periods he was away from his wife and children. The letters in the present collection, showing him established with his family in Concord, Mass., come from a happier time. Like so many other letters to Mrs. Prince this one expresses thanks for a gift.

Concord, Mass.
Jan’y 16, ‘86.

Dear Kitty:

Neddy rec’d a book by mail shortly after Christmas from a New York publisher. We had been in the dark as to who the donor might be until a day or two since when my wife was in Cambridge. There she learned that you had sent it. I write now to explain the delay in acknowledging it. Neddy will also write to thank you for it. He would have written yesterday but the little fellow has not been very well. His old enemy asthma keeps him at low ebb a good share of the time. I suppose you know that my wife is here. We are happily settled and with a pleasant future before us. Concord is a quiet place, but there are plenty of nice people and sufficient to make life move smoothly. I keep up my painting as best I may and spend very pleasant hours in my studio. During a month past I have written a lecture upon the siege of Charleston and the failure of Butler to capture Richmond in 1864 with the army of the James. It embodies my 2½ years of martial experience. It is finished now and is to be delivered in the Town Hall here in a few
weeks, for the benefit of disabled soldiers. Don't you want me to go up to Amherst and electrify the dwellers there with my effort? I often think of you dear Kitty and wonder if we shall ever meet. The winter months must be hard on you confined to the house as you are. My wife wants me to send you her affectionate remembrances and to thank you as I do for your kind recollection of little Ned. He is out today tobogganing on some neighboring hillside. When you are up to it drop me a line.

Ever affectionately
Robertson James.

Another letter adds: “I am becoming a literary person myself, dear Kitty. I have a paper now in the hands of the Editor of the Atlantic which is awaiting his decision. If he rejects, I am pretty sure of its sale elsewhere as Howells tells me he has no doubt of its being accepted . . . . Yesterday I lectured in Boston before the Saturday morning Club, an organization of the ‘femmes savantes’ of the city.”

The next letter is from Mrs. Alice James, the philosopher’s remarkable wife. “What saved (William) James from absolute shipwreck, in his own estimation,” says Professor Allen, “was his marrying Alice Howe Gibbens.” The first paragraph of the present letter suggests that at times she had trouble keeping up with her restless husband. The baby with whooping cough, was little Herman who was born January 31, 1884, and died July 9, 1885. The date of the letter appears to be 1885 just before the whooping cough turned into fatal pneumonia. After the baby’s death the father wrote a remarkably beautiful letter to Mrs. Prince in which he says: “It brings one closer to all mankind, this world old experience.” The letter is in the Colby collection and is printed in my Religion in the Philosophy of William James, 160.

The “summer quarters” so eagerly sought were finally found in Chocorua, N. H. Here William James developed what he came to refer to as his “sylvan home” — a place for which he had great affection and to which he returned to die in August 1910 after his final sojourn in Europe. “Bob” is presumably Robertson of the letter above. The “little boys” are the two oldest children, Harry and Billy. “Sam” is the dog frequently mentioned in Mrs. Prince’s journal.
Dear Kitty —

Though I remailed your letter at once it will perhaps be some days before you hear from William as he is changing from place to place in search of summer quarters, and not yet overtaken by his letters. I think I can answer the question you asked about the bromide. Dr. Folsom prescribed it for you as he did for Bob, irrespective of sleep. William, I feel sure, would say, "Continue to take it for the present, whether you sleep or not."

Forgive me, dear Kitty, if this seems intrusive. You know I do not mean it so, and write lest you should be doing without it while vainly expecting word from William. If you are in doubt why not write yourself to Dr. Folsom, Marlborough St. about No. 9.

Our baby is having a severe struggle with whooping-cough.

I thank you for your kind thought about the dresses for the little boys, but don’t do anything of the kind this season, as they have their play suits, and are in fact quite well supplied.

I hope you are living much out of doors. Won’t they let you keep Sam?

Affectionately yours,

Alice H. James.

We now turn to the letters written by William James the philosopher. Before quoting some of these in the Colby collection, however, I want to mention ten important communications which are not in this collection or any other because they were burned with the rest of the Louvain library in the second World War. But there is an association with Colby, as they were published in the Colby Library Quarterly for March 1945. They deserve more critical attention than they have so far received since they are addressed to Théodule A. Ribot, first editor of the Revue Philosophique, and seem to furnish our only evidence that Ribot is one of the scores of philosophers with whom James corresponded. There is no mention of Ribot in the published Letters edited by Henry James, Jr. In Ralph Barton Perry’s two volume Thought and Character of William James he receives only a passing reference in a letter from Francis J. Delboeuf. Professor Allen’s biography says merely that Le Temps classified James, after his death, as a member of the school of Ribot and Wundt. But these letters show that James was in active correspondence with Ribot for twenty years from 1884 to 1904. An interesting fact that appears is that in 1884 James offered his article on “The Perception of Space” to the Revue Philoso-
phique and it was accepted. Surprisingly, we find it published, not in the *Revue* but in four installments in the British journal *Mind* for 1887. Later with some changes it becomes Chapter XX of the *Principles of Psychology*. Professor Perry (*op. cit.* I, 604) quotes an amusing comment on the article made by the author to G. Croom Robinson, editor of *Mind*. “It certainly is,” James writes, “as dull as the dullest thing you can possibly have printed of late.”

Since the original letters are destroyed it is perhaps not inappropriate to explain how they happened to come to light in the first place. Early in the 1920s I learned that James’s letters to Ribot had been sold to the Louvain library soon after the first war. I visited Louvain in 1929 but the authorities assured me I was on the wrong track and that no James material was there. In 1933 I tried again, armed with a letter from Mr. Dave Hennen Morris, former ambassador to Belgium. This time all doors were opened, the letters copied, and published in 1945, as noted. Two brief paragraphs are worth reprinting, so relevant is their comment to the present-day discussion of James’s philosophical “dualism” and also his attitude toward metaphysics. Both are from a letter headed: “Cambridge, May 13, 1888.”

The complete set of letters appears in *Colby Library Quarterly*, I, 155-161.

“My mind is in more of a chaos than ever,” wrote James, “what with automatic writing, multiple personality, ‘sommeil à distance,’ and ‘veridical phantasms’! I disbelieve in the existence of ‘ideas’ in the Lockian sense; I have for many a long year harbored an animosity to the ‘ego’; the ‘soul of the world’ I can ‘take no stock in’; yet experience is cognitive — but who, what, or where the vehicle of cognition is, transcends my powers!

“One thing! Empirical facts without ‘metaphysics’ will always make a confusion and a muddle. I’m sorry to hear you still disparage metaphysics so much, since rightly understood, the word means only the search for clearness where common people do not even suspect that there is any lack of it. The ordinary positivist has simply a bad and muddled metaphysics which he refuses to criticize or discuss.”

This brings us to the fifty-four letters from William James now housed at Colby. Forty were in the original collection,
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thirty-nine to Mrs. Kitty Prince, one to her sister, Mrs. Anna Edwards. To these have been added eight to Miss Mary E. Raymond who was one of James's graduate students at Radcliffe, two to Violet Paget, the English novelist and essayist "Vernon Lee," who got into an altercation with Henry James over her use of him as a character in one of her novels, and one each to William T. Clarke, Miss Hillard, the music critic James Gibbons Huneker, and Thomas Sergeant Perry, editor of the North American Review. Miss Raymond donated her letters to Colby, those to Miss Paget are part of the large amount of Paget material that came from her executrix, Miss Irene Cooper Willis, the Huneker letter was purchased by the college and published in the Colby Library Quarterly for August 1952, that to Perry was a gift of Miss Margaret Perry, his daughter.

Perry was a close friend of William and Henry James from the time when they were all boys together at Newport, R. I. In 1867 William James saw much of him when both were students in Berlin. Apparently the Colby letter is the earliest that remains from their extensive correspondence. The communications in the published Letters of William James and also in the biography by Ralph Barton Perry come from a much later period, after the turn of the century. James wrote the present letter when he was twenty years old and studying chemistry at Lawrence Scientific School under Professor (later President) Charles W. Eliot. Perry was about to enroll as an undergraduate.

Cambridge, July 8th '62

Dear Boy:

Yr. inelegant and confused note just rec'd. Furnished rooms you can get just as well when you come, I will look up addresses. The college rooms wh. are unfurnished and preferred by most on that account, are drawn by lot after your examinations. Their rent, wh. I do not exactly know is trifling. Rent of furnished rooms greater. I could let you have a good room without bed or board for 50cts a week, the draught through the open rafters being very gratifying and sanitary this weather. I can let you have a good article of room furnished with bed and other luxuries from $2.00 to $4.00 a week. Demoniacally dear. I humbly offer you my spare bed and plate during your stay, and shall feel your acceptance muchly. I told Harry Ito ask you. Tell Car Conductor to drop you at Trowbridge St.—tis the only house in the street,—is mine—but not! I will (far as human eye can see) meet you at the deepo. Farewell for the nonce! Study hard and do not get nervous about the
examinations. Bigger fools than you have passed them "like a breeze". 
Walk justly — be virtuous & you will be happy.

Once more adieu!

Wm. James,

P. S. If you see my venerable father — bring him along with you, or send him beforehand.
P. P. S. I begin to murmur shouts of delirious joy already at the prospect of seeing you.
P. P. P. S. May the shadow of your nose never be less!
P. P. P. P. S. Ditto of your beard!
P. P. P. P. P. S. Inversely of your extremities!

[Appended is a sketch of two shoes — a very long one labelled "T. S. P.", a much shorter "W. J."]

Miss Mary E. Raymond, to whom eight of the letters are addressed, was a Smith College alumna who took graduate work with James at Radcliffe, and became the able and respected headmistress of Hathaway Brown School in Cleveland. For a time she was a summer neighbor of ours in Royalston, Mass., not far from Jaffrey. We often talked about our common interest in James and she spoke at Colby on the art of teaching with special reference to his methods. She was much impressed by the willingness of Henry James Jr., to come to Colby for a lecture on his famous uncle and namesake at the time of the hundredth anniversary of the latter's birth, April 15, 1943. "In honor of this visit," as she put it, she gave to Colby her treasured collection of letters from the lecturer's father. The following is typical of the personal interest William James showed in so many of his former students:

Chocorua, Sept. 15, 1904

Dear Miss Raymond:

Oddly enough, I should probably have written to you this very day, even if your delightful and impressionistic letter from Yorkshire had not arrived the day before yesterday. Your poetic epistle of last summer had been far too long unanswered, but an invincible lethargy has settled on me in the matter of letters of friendship — business letters have to be so numerous that the(y) spoil the whole letter-writing industry for one's soul, and the telegraphic habit replaces that of sweetly gossiping along. You seem to have kept the latter, along with your admirable optimism of temperament and ability to press enjoyment out of every vicissitude that life provides. I congratulate you on having so many alternatives of occupation. Slum, school, farm, and globe-trotting — what could one have more, and each seems to make you fitter for the other. I have the farm here, but do no farming, and the school, but do little teaching (only one ½ course now!) and my real interest lies
in desiring to write, but not writing, an epoch making philosophical book. Perhaps it will come yet!

I haven’t seen Miss Shipman, or heard from her, for several years, and am glad to get your good account. The Emmets are settled with their mother, Mrs. Hunter, on a farm at Salisbury, Connecticut. Rosine (sic) has developed very well, I think, and is at last getting into some successful literary work.

With best wishes and envious feelings, I am ever faithfully yours,

Wm. James

Letters to Rosina Emmet are printed in the published *Letters of William James* and a note about her is found in volume II, 61.

In another letter to Miss Raymond, dated 1896, James sends some advice: “But why think of a Ph.D? Such things are vanities, and surely the tag to your name would not have any real effect in securing you occupation hereafter. I advise travel and free study. You can hardly go astray in Europe, for everywhere there is entertainment and instruction for an American like yourself.”

The Colby collection has a playful letter from William James to his cousin Mrs. Anna Edwards. “Kitty” is of course Mrs. Prince. “Florence” is not surely identified, though it may be a cousin, Mrs. Florence James Rosse. The others are not known.

Cambridge, May 16, 1897.

Dear Cousin Anna,

I am sorry that Kitty cannot come. I am sure that a change of occupation for a time would do her good. Perhaps later on she may be able to pay us a visit.

I am writing to ask you to return my check! An inimitable letter from the fair Florence makes it clear that this is a case where an omnipotent force meets an invincible resistance. Blake won’t send and she won’t pay, and what’s more she won’t order him to send to anyone but herself — so I must await developments. She is a haughty aristocrat and I am proud to be connected with her by blood!

I shall trust to your family to watch how the cat is jumping, and give the mirror a gentle turn in my way. Meanwhile the one chair from Marie has arrived, and gives me great satisfaction.

Affectionately yours, and with great regrets for Kitty,

Wm. James

P. S. Is it possible that Blake (since he advanced money on the mirrors?) can ere long claim them as his own and put up the price?

The following letter to Kitty asks whether President Seelye of Amherst, husband of Kitty’s sister Elizabeth, will join the
ghost-investigating society. Apparently an invitation — if extended — was not taken advantage of. Howard James Jr., a professional actor, was a first cousin once removed. Some of his amusing letters to Kitty, describing his adventures in the theatrical world, are in the collection.

Cambr. Jan'y 2 [1885?]

Dearest Kitty

Here is a somewhat belated happy New Year. I return your house-plan which doesn't suit my lot, or my ideas! tho' as you say, it is compact enough and saves stairs. Our plan has come out $3000. higher than we hoped, so we must try again! I'm just back from Phila. where I had another fever attack. All right now, but wish vacation lasted a week longer. Went there on "Psychical Research Society" business. Will President Seelye join this ghost investigating society? Little Howard writes from N. Y. that he is through one engagement and contracted another. He seems to have found his element. I must be very short. All your letters and cards have been received. Have just had to write eleven (11) letters. The older one grows the worse it gets. God bless you, dear Kitty!

Yours,

Wm. J.

Alice is upstairs (8:30 p.m.) getting the baby to sleep, or she would send love.

The next letter is marked Dictated and the handwriting is that of Mrs. James. "Kitty Temple," (Mrs. Richard Emmet) was a first cousin, older sister of the "Minny Temple" so much discussed in biographies of Henry James, from whom the latter drew for "Minny Theale" in Wings of the Dove and Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady. "The Gibbenses" are Mrs. James's mother and youngest sister, Margaret, who had sailed for Italy in December.

My dear Kitty,

This is, as you see, from both of us, the soul being mine and the body Alice's. I received your letter of Dec. 22nd in New York whither I had gone for the holiday. I spent Christmas eve and morning at Kitty Temple's at Pelham. I never in my life saw a finer family of children than her six, the youngest two, especially. I told her it seemed as if she had practiced so as at last to know how to turn them out absolutely perfect; and she seemed to enjoy the compliment.

I finished up many letters whilst gone, and add chores that I had saved for this vacant time, and after a couple of days spent at Newport...
came back and am swimming in the college tide again, devoting myself among other things to mesmerizing students a couple of hours on several afternoons in the week.

The Gibbenses got safely of(f) and we know by telegraph of their steamer's arrival. Our house is empty, and larger and more peaceful than it ever has been before, and we wish very much that you might come and spend a week or more with us whenever you feel inclined. We lose one of our servants early in March who could help you when here so you must come before then. I know you have some plans for February but have forgotten their date. Choose your own time between now and the 5th of March, say; let us know, and I will escort you in triumph to this house from the Albany depot.

You say you are open to advice. I would dose you with it could I think of any worthy of being tendered. I wish I could advise more interesting and helpful occupations! But alas, neither I nor Alice have practical inventiveness. I congratulate you on your surplus. It is a pleasure to know anyone having a surplus. Please give my best regards to the Seelyes. Love from both to yourself,

Aff'y
W. and A. James.

These are examples of the glimpses into the more informal moods of this remarkable family offered by this collection of letters. Many more are quotable and there is in particular a large assortment from an earlier period which throws revealing light on the social life, including the manners and foibles, of early nineteenth-century New England and New York. Perhaps some inquirer of the future will be moved to look them up and make them available. And at the rate at which James material keeps turning up it is reasonable to hope that the collection will be added to for some time to come.