

Current Miscellaneous File No. 97
*Transcriptions of letters from John James Giddings,
surveyor of portion of Fishers-Miller Colony, to
Miss Matilda Sloan.*

filed May 26, 1995 d.h.

(John James Giddings [1821-1861] to Matilda Sloan [1825-1864].
Addressed to Miss M. M. Slone, Bethany Wayne County, Pennsylvania. Postage
"Paid 10¢.")

Brenham [Tex] Apr 3rd 1846

Dearest Friend Matilda

I am about to leave this place on a surveying excursion and shall be gone 6 or 7 weeks as this is the best business that offers in my line. I have relinquished the idea of remaining in the office with brethren as though[t] of doing when I left, for I cannot make it as profitable as other business. My prospects are favorable for a successful trip. On my return to this place I should like to find a letter from you. . . .

Since Texas has become one of the states it is not necessary that postage should be paid there. You can therefore leave that undone. I received your letter this morning and have hastily replied to it as I leave to day. You will please excuse poor paper and writing this time and accept this as a proof of my continued affection for you. I sent some specimens of the wild flowers to you a few days ago without regard to language, class or order. I will continue to do so as often as convenient. There are many of them here that are regarded with a peculiar attention as how plants at the north among which the prickly pear is most spontaneous frequently covering an acre of land. When I return I shall know more about them. So I will bid you good morning for this time Matilda.

J. James Giddings

Brenham [Tex] July 19th 1846

Friend Matilda

A long time has elapsed since I have had an opportunity of writing to you and longer since I heard from you except a paper that I found at the office on my return from the frontier. I am still engaged in locating and surveying and most of the time I am absent from the settlement and seldom have access to a post office. . . . You will not attribute my neglect in writing to any intention of mine as I do not have an opportunity oftener of forwarding letters in my surveying excursions. I am frequently 150 or 200 miles from the most distant abode of civilized beings in the wide extended plain where nature sows and reaps her crops, and innumerable herds of wild horses and buffalo feed upon them and gambol upon her flowery carpets which in variety and beauty excell the most labored productions of art. This is a delightful recreation for a botanist to stroll through the wilds of nature and view her variegated scenery and unequalled paintings. How often as I musingly ramble over those plain[s] do I think [of] you knowing that you enjoy yourself in contemplating the works of nature. And oftener while I guard our little camp from the invasions of the stealthy savage at the midnight hour when the glittering host illuminates the vaulted arch, does the fond recollections of former days cluster around each familiar star till I am lost in imaginations ample field in which I live over those scenes again and again as night after night draws her sable curtain around me. Perhaps those beacons occasionally point you to the past when in the siltly hours of night you lonely view them and may be at such a time your thoughts are wandering through the wilds of Texas and then upon the past again. Oh what a difference does the past and present exhibit in our situation and what a variety of scenes intervenes between them dare we send imagination to the future. Oh yes hope whispers we meet again. I perceive I have been almost lost in writing thus far and fancied I were with you as formerly, but recollection assures me there is a wide space between

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us. You probably expect a discreption of the country and how I am suited with it. I have spent most of the time since I arived in the country in traveling and am much pleased with its appearance generally in the fertility of the soil the salubrity of the climate. The beauty of the scenery and in all natural advantages the country cannot be excelled or to highly extolled. But it is a new country still encumbered with a vexatious war and of course subject to a great many inconveniences scarcely thought of in an old settled country. Among which are poor rodes, poor bridges, poor buildings. Of this I may not be a competent judge as my travels have been mostly on the frontier where from the unsettled state of affairs the people have not made any permanent improvements not knowing that they could be benefited by them. But this is an old settled county and contains some very fine towns and dwellings. The town of Brenham was laid out for the county site nearly two years ago and now contains a greater population than Bethany [Pa]. Some fine buildings and is very much of a business town and rapidly improveing. The society I know but little about as I seldom mingle in it. Gambling and drinking is very common and does not indicate a very good state of society. It is a settled maxim that desipation follows war and the society here is some thing similar to what it was in the U.S. soon after the revolution. Among the habits that apear disgusting to me is the allmost universal custom of the ladies chewing snuff and drinking strong coffee. Tea is but little used although it grows in the country to great perfection and will some day be one of the stapl productions. I have stated some of the advantages and disadvantages of the country without deciding between them. The advantages this country has over the north are natural and permanent. The disadvantages of it are only local as are common to all new countries and will be overcome by the assistance of art as soon as the combined interes[t] of the people make it an object to do so. Whether this improvement of art will be rapid or slow is yet uncertain at present. I remain where it appears the most to my interest but if I am ever permanently settled in Texas it will not be on or near the frontier. Although I admire the beuties of wild woods for a time, I also admire and appreciate the advantages of well organized society in which I hope to reside.

You have undoubtedly expected to hear that I was in the war. I suppose I should have been if I had not been absent when the call was mad[e]. But ere it was in my power to have thus rendered my country any service, the conflict was over for the time and probably for all, and I pursued my forever occupation although a brothers blood was yet unavenged. If the war is not brought to a speedy and amicable termination soon, I shall be induced to take the field if any active movements are made. But at present, I do not wish to encounter a more southern clime when I can do no good. I shall start in a few days for the frontier again. I have district to survey on the head waters of the Brassos and employ about 20 men. If the land office is not closed I shall probably continue in it some time. I think it is a profitable business. I shall be absent from this place about 2 months. Think I shall find a letter from you when I return? Do write soon and often, you dont know how much I should like to hear from you. It is so seldom I get a letter from any of my old associates that I get very lonely for I have not formed any acquaintances beyond my business transactions. Excuse me for troubling you with business matters. I find my mind is very much upon them. Give my respects to your parents and sisters and brothers if you think proper. What are all of the Bethany folks about? I have not herd from them since your last. I suppose there has been several weddings by this time. They are very common here among children 10 and 12 years old. I am at brothers now, his family are well. I am also. George has gone to Navarro county about 150 miles N.E. of this to see some land we have located there. I dont know when he will return.

There has been much rain and high water this season. The crops are fine, the health is good generally. I see I must draw to a close while I remain with the utmost sincerity your friend.

J. James Giddings

New Braunfels [Tex] Jan 17, 1847

Friend Matilda

On my arrival at this place last evening, I had the pleasure of receiving your most excellent letter of Dec. 9 and will for a few moments endeavour to exclude the thoughts of business affairs entirely from my mind while I acknowledge the receipt of yours by attempting to reply. After visiting Pennsylvania, it is my intention to return again to Texas the following summer and indeed my visit will necessarily be very short among my friends there as my presence in this part will be very important to my interest. . . . I love the fruits of my pilgrimage here but now is the spring time of life with me and the field of fortune are open before me and I have already reaped an abundant harvest from the fruits of my own industry and enterprise and it appears very much to my interest to continue a little longer in the business in which I have engaged, while it warrants an ample compensation for continued exertion. Yet on all occasions I wish to regard your happiness and enjoyment. . . . With the expectations of seeing you soon, I bid you adieu. Remaining as ever your

Friend J. J. Giddings

Brenham [Tex] Jan 30, 1847

Dear Friend

A long time it has been since I received any thing from you although I have written often and haunted the post office constantly hoping to find something from you but I have long watched in vain.

. . . I have just contracted with the German colony to do twenty thousand dollars worth of surveying this year which will render it impossible for me to return this spring as I anticipated doing. Yet I shall be pleased to do so as soon as practicable if you are disposed to accede to my proposals. If not I don't know as I have any desire to return. I am very much crowded with business and shall be the balance of the year. I expect to have 50 or 60 men in my company this summer and 5 or 6 compasses. Write to me often and I shall be happy to reply as often as possible. My address will be New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas. All letters sent to this place will be forwarded to me. I am well. George will be with me this summer. Give my respects to your family and friends.

Yours with due respect
J. James Giddings

San Antonio [Tex] Mar 1 1847

Friend Matilda

Notwithstanding I have written you so often since I received anything from you I will at this time address you again. My company are at Fredericksburgh and I leave this place this evening to join them. I shall then go to my surveying district on the Rio San Saba where I expect to remain some time. Your letters if you do yet write to me will be forwarded to me from the office at Brenham or New

Braunfels. I will write you as often as I have an opportunity but I shall be very busy as I expect to have some 40 or 50 men in employ and run 5 or 6 compasses. Yet I shall think of you often and should you favor me with another epistle it will afford me great pleasure to receive and reply to it. You will excuse this hasty scrawl and remember you absent friend.

J. J. Giddings

San Saba Fort [Tex] Apr 19 1847

Friend Matilda

I received yours of 5 Feb yesterday by an additional company that arrived in camp then. I assure you it was a welcome visitor and quite unexpected in this wilderness for I little expected a letter would reach me if it even arrived at the office. And now the unwelcome apprehensions frequently entertained on account of your long silence are removed and assurance of your friendship is rendered certain and lasting. How much I should delight to return immediately to you but my business at present is such that I cannot leave for some time, probably not until winter. I am now engaged in a very heavy contract of surveying which will engross my attention until that time. I have now 40 men in employ and run 6 compasses. My expenses are great but profit much greater. I think I shall do well at the contract and intend to give it my best attentions. I perceive some changes have taken place in the society of B[ethany] since I left, I hope to the mutual interest and satisfaction of all parties. I was much gratified with the remembrance of the Dr. and Isabelle. Remember me to them and tell them I should be very happy to receive a letter from them and think I shall see them eventually in a social circle and narrate the scenes of my adventures in the wilds of the west.

Some weeks since I ordered a paper to be sent to you for one year, has it arrived? Write me often, I will write as often as possible but I shall be most of the time in camp about 100 miles from the settlements and consequently cannot write as often as I would. Please excuse this hasty scroll. I having written it sitting while on the ground in my tent. With the utmost sincerity.

I remain your friend
J. J. Giddings

Matilda

San Antonio [Tex]
August 1st 1847

Friend Matilda

Being now at the office I will address a few lines to you. I was much in hope of finding a letter from you when I arrived at Braunfels but it had not yet reached there. I have carried on my surveying very advantageously thus far though it has kept [me] constantly employed having at some times 70 or 80 men in my employment. I shall not continue with more than 30. My company are now in the settlement and will return in a few days to the woods with me. There is much rumour in the settlements relative to Indian hostilities among us but is all groundless. If any of it reaches you, give yourself no uneasiness on account of it. True the Indians have been among us in large bodies but were friendly and did not offer any show of hostility. Yet I think they will after 3 or 4 months if there is not a reconciliation offered them by the German company who have been quieting them with presents till they claim them as a right and are getting

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somewhat dissatisfied that they do not still receive them. But before any thing of the kind takes place, I shall be done with the woods. For a time I have completed about \$25,000 worth of surveying. There is much yet to be done. I have the confidence of the company having done more for them than all the rest (or 20 others). They are anxious for me to continue work for them. I am also offered a \$75,000 job of surveying for next summer but shall not take it until I see you. I want to come home very much and think I will do so in the spring without fail or before if I can close my business so as to leave. I have built a store in Fredericksburgh. George is there with a small stock of goods though we are not doing much in that line, more than for the use of my own company but think I shall do good business when well established there. George will attend to that however. I have written very freely about my business efforts. Perhaps more so than a correspondence like ours will admit of. If so, excuse me for I have not written in boasting. No I am not so vain as to believe it would avail anything or that it is necessary at all, but my mind is so absorbed with business affairs that I have scarcely a thought for any thing else except you, and they are often mingled together. On the one I depend for future prosperity, on the other I rely with the utmost confidence for future happiness and enjoyment. Am I not right in doing so? Give my respects to you sisters and their families. Also to you parents whom I hope soon to meet. I am well and have been during the season. Excuse my hastiness while

I remain most sincerely
Your friend J. J. Giddings

San Antonio [Tex]
Sept 13, 1847

Friend Matilda

On my return from the frontier I found your letter of July 4 and am much gratified to find that my protracted absence has not shaken your confidence in me and I believe we now so fully understand each other that we will never again be subjected to the unpleasant reflection of having been forgotten or neglected by our most intimate friend and I look forward with pleasing anticipations to the time of our meeting when we can converse verbally and relate the scenes that have intervened our meeting. For you no doubt have much of my native land to rehearse that would be very interesting to one who has been so long away, and of course there is a world of items in my sojourn in this flower garden of nature that would amuse if not interest you for a time. For my life since I left home has in reality been more novel, more romantic than fiction could picture one. The climate is so mild that no inconvenience is realized by being absent from a dwelling, but like natures own children we stroll over the flowery plains and view with admiration the vareagated landscape, its undulating surface, its Ilana groves, the lone hill in the distance and the grassy carpets as they wave in the gentle breeze till twilight draps her curtain and shuts out the distant view. Then the glittering train of luna majestically ride in the spacious firmament inviting our admiration with a more brilliant display than more northern climes are favored with. How then can a contemplative mind thus surrounded by the beautie of nature ever be without an interesting theme that caries its imaginations up to the great author of nature which it cannot fail to admire and reverence? Can such a mind get weary of such scenery or wish to leave them? If distance friends were near to enjoy them with me I would answer never but I perceive I am getting lost in the labyrinths of thought and perhaps wandering upon themes that do not coincide with your thinking and will leave the subject. I am much pleased with

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San Antonio and think of making it my home while in Texas. Though it is delapidated and in appearance a heap of ruins, there is much life and animation in business and in reality the thoroughfare of western Texas. It is also improving and filling up with substantial citizens and affords a very good society. It will allways be a place of importance. I will not attempt a minute discription of the place as it has so often been done that you must be quite familiar with it and will be quite at home when you reach the place for I think your travels will extend this far. I shall be at this place for some months attending to my field notes and preparing them for the land office. I have 14 men out surveying and shall send out 7 more in a few days. I may have to go out to them before they return. If so I will write on my leaving the settements as I have generally done. I shall soon be able to tell when I can visit Pa and will then inform you. It is not probable that I can come before spring but will come as soon as posible. I am still crowded with business that must be attended to. I have more than a years labor of writing to do if I were to do it alone but I think I shall have it done this winter. I have not yet contracted to do any more surveying but have on hand about 2 months work that has accumulated while I have been surveying for the German colony. I will write again in a few days when I shall be able to know with more certainty the state of my affairs. With the utmost cencerity I remain your friend.

J. J. Giddings

San Antonio [Tex]
Oct 30 1847

Friend Matilda

. . . The 4 surveyors you speak of belonged to a party of Robert Hays, a brother of Col J. C. Hays of the Texas rangers and have not yet been heard from and are undoubtedly murdered. They were then at work some 30 miles from me and 3 of my men who were on their way to the settlements were robbed of nearly evry thing they had and got off with their lives only by giving the Indians orders on me for large amounts of provision and amunition. It being near the same place and time that the depredation was committed on Hays company, it was undoubtedly the same party but their orders were not accepted and our whole company were threatened with violence and had we have been no stronger than the other might have shared the same fate. But our force at that time was 80 men were armed, while the victims of their violence were alone and without arms.

I have now closed my business in the woods for the present and probably for the winter. My time will be prety much employed at this place in closing up my summer surveying. George and 2 other yong men are writing for me and will probably continue some time as I have as yet but 1400 pages writen of 5000 I have to write. The contract I spoke of with the G[erman] E[migration] company was at \$2000 per section for all I could do by the first of Sept. At that rate I have surveyed to the amt of \$30,000 or upwards. I have received but \$10,000 and my men and some other expenses are yet unpaid. I am anxious to bring it to a close as soon as posible and know what is due me. I think I shall clear something by the operation during the summer. I have mad my head quarters at Fredricksburg the uper German settlement and have employed my men at leisure times in improving a lot. I have some very convenient buildings there for training and expect George will occupy them as such. I am boarding with a Mr. McLam a very pleasant family. I enjoy myself very well and find in this place some associates whose habits and ideas of society seem more orrginial to my own than I have hithered found yet among the mass. The standard of morality is very low. It is an ancient looking town. Aparantly a heap of ruins at a distance, but it is of late fast

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improving and the thoroughfare of western Texas. I think of making it my home while in Texas. I perceive I have made my letter more a history of my own business than of exclusive friendship but as I have told you before my mind is ultimately occupied by the thoughts of business and yourself and sometimes both at once. I hope you will excuse me on that account if my partake of the same spirit.

Write soon and often. I will write as soon as I can write more definitely about coming home. Give my respect to all whom you think worthy, reserving a share for yourself and allow me to remain your friend.

J. J. Giddings

Gonzalas [Tex] Dec 20 1847

Friend Matilda

. . . I believe I shall be able to leave my business affairs in a few weeks but cannot tell positively at present. I have not yet been able to settle my contract with the German Emigration company or they have not been able to pay me according to contract. I think they will do it soon and as soon as that is accomplished I am ready to start for Pa though I shall not be able to stay long with my old friends there having a great deal of unfinished business here as land agent that will require my attention next summer and I am getting a business of that kind sufficient to justify me in attending to it and will soon be ready to make a permanent location. I shall want you to return with me if you think you can enjoy yourself in Texas. What think you of it? I know it is asking a great deal of an affectionate and dutiful child to leave her parents and friends such a distance behind but I know you have ever been true to me and believe you will yet confide in me entirely believing that in each others society we may be happy although in Texas. Besides your friends may also come to Texas. I am confident it would be to their interest to do so. What say they about it? What does your Father think or say of my propositions? I have never spoken or written to him about it yet. On my arrival in New York, I will write him and you and await a reply. . . . I bid you adieu remaining as ever your friend.

J. J. Giddings

ANNETTE GIDDINGS HOLLIS

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24 May 1995

C. B. Thomson
Director Surveying Division
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Dear Mr. Thomson,

Thank you for the opportunity to visit with you recently and learn something of the surveying business that my great great grandfather, John James Giddings, was engaged in. My husband and I found a lot of valuable information both in the land office and at the State Archives that you directed us to.

Enclosed are parts of letters which might be of interest to a former surveyor, in particular to someone, like yourself, who is so knowledgeable about the writer.

Sincerely,

