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AN EMILY DICKINSON ADDRESSEE CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED

In the standard three-volume edition of The Letters of Emily Dickinson (1958) edited by Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, there is only one recorded letter to Alfred Norcross (1815-88), younger brother of the poet's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson.¹ Her death on 14 November 1882 is the occasion of the message (which is dated "early 1883?" by her editors), but Alfred is nowhere mentioned by name – instead, the letter is addressed to "Mother's Brother", and reads in part:²

Thank you for coming here and please to tell my Cousins how beautiful she was – We hope you are having a lovely Winter and think of [you] with new peace in the warmth (Home) of your Daughter – Accept our love for them and a kiss for the little Grand Boy –

¹ Emily Dickinson, The Letters of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, MA: 1958), 759. All references to letters are from this edition, and are given by number prefixed by L in parenthesis. Quoted material in this article is reprinted by permission of the publishers from The Letters of Emily Dickinson, Thomas H. Johnson (ed.), Theodora Ward (ass. ed.), Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1958 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1986 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1924, 1932, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952 by Alfred Leete Hampson. Copyright © 1960 by Mary L. Hampson. Jay Leyda also identifies this as a draft letter to her Uncle Alfred and dates it to an unspecified part of 1882 in The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press), II, 390.

² The phrase "how beautiful she was" echoes a similar expression in L785 to Dickinson's cousins, Louisa and Frances, daughters of her aunt Lavinia Norcross (1812-60), when she reported her mother's death to them in late November: "Mother was very beautiful when she had died."

The subject of the letter, a rough draft written in pencil on paper containing portions of a separate fair draft to another correspondent (which is why there are word alternatives and editorial emendations), is not in doubt. But Johnson and Ward make mistakes in the transcription (“coming here” is actually “loving her”), and there is reason to believe that they might also have misidentified the identity of the addressee.³ Their notes to the letter say of “Mrs Dickinson’s younger brother Alfred” that his “first grandchild, *a girl*, was born in December 1882” (italics mine). They allow that the youngest brother, Joel Warren Norcross (1821-1900), had a male grandchild, but dismiss Joel as the addressee on the grounds that the child was “born in December 1883” and that “the tone of the letter suggests that it was written while the memory of Mrs Dickinson’s death and her funeral were still fresh” (L800).

The coordinates of the letter are as such: Dickinson is writing to an unnamed uncle on the Norcross side of the family, not long after her mother’s death, and this uncle has a “Daughter” and a “little Grand Boy.” Almost immediately, this should rule Alfred out, because his two surviving children with Olivia Chapin (1816-98) were sons – Arthur Dickinson Norcross (1848-1916) and Herbert Chapin Norcross (1856-1942). Even if we allow for the possibility that “Daughter” means “daughter-in-law”, the first child of Arthur Dickinson Norcross and Augusta Valentina (Kinney) Norcross (1860-1950) was not a boy but a girl, Grace, born on 17 December 1882, who died on 12 January 1883 of spinal meningitis: their other children were born after the date of this letter.

³ The correction was first made by Marta Werner in her *Emily Dickinson’s Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), n.p.

Joel Warren Norcross was married twice: first, in 1854, to Lamira Jones (1833-62), and they had two children, one of whom, Anna Jones Norcross (1855-1939), in turn married Lewis Girdler Swett (1856-1913) at Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1877. Anna and Lewis had one child, Louis (sometimes Lewis) William Swett – but, crucially, he was born on 2 October 1880, and not “in December 1883” as Johnson and Ward claimed.⁴ Moreover, his birth took place in Riverside, California: though the family home was still registered that year as Lynn, Massachusetts (at “Ocean, corner of Bassett”), by 1882 the City Directory entered Swett as having “removed to Riverside, California.”⁵ And in its issue of 18 February 1883, the San Diego Union records “J. W. Norcross” and “L. G. Swett” as shareholders and board members of “The Gorgenia Vineyard Association”, located at Riverside, San Bernardino.⁶ This might explain Dickinson’s hope that her uncle is enjoying a “lovely Winter” in the warmth of the home of his daughter – Joel must be visiting his daughter Anna and grandson Louis in a place with a much warmer climate than that of New England.⁷

⁴ Joel’s second child, William Jones Norcross (1858-1928) married Nellie Marie Trask (1859-1933) 9 March 1881, **but their son William Charles was not born until December 1883**. Joel Warren Norcross married again, Margaret P. Gunnison 24 April 1866, and their daughter Edith Carlton was born in November 1873.

⁵ Lynn, Massachusetts, City Directory, 1880 & 1882. In Ancestry.com. U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

⁶ San Diego Union, 18 February 1883, p. 3. Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers, infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A136E6A0F0DF56B38%40EANX-13ED5E315928A6DA%402408860-13ED5A2A996CD48C%402-13ED5A2A996CD48C%40. Accessed 1 February 2021.

⁷ **For more on Anna Norcross, see Martha Ackmann, “I’m Glad I finally surfaced’: A Norcross Descendent Remembers Emily Dickinson.” The Emily Dickinson Journal 5, no. 2 (1996), 120-26.**

In her note, Dickinson mentions that her sister “Vinnie received the paper – and (was much interested) thanks you very much...” and that both sisters had separately exclaimed “How it would interest Mother” (L800). Joel had written a two-volume manuscript on the The History and Genealogy of the Norcross Family that was privately printed in 1882, and the “paper” may be a reference to, or excerpt, from it. There is a subtle distancing in the expression here, however, which tallies with the fact that Dickinson referred to Joel in separate, earlier, letters as “Ego, mihi, me” (L127) and “the pestilence” (L128): it is “Mother” who would have been most interested in the genealogy; Joel is not an uncle, but “Mother’s brother.”⁸

The editors of the 1958 edition were correct in assuming that L800 must have been drafted not long after the death of Dickinson’s mother (she “was” beautiful, not is), but it is the genealogical records of both Alfred and Joel Warren Norcross which identify the latter, father to Anna Jones Norcross Swett and grandfather to her three-year old son, Louis, as the true recipient of L800, pictured “in the warmth (Home) of [his] daughter” and instructed to give “love for them and a kiss for the little Grand Boy.”

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⁸ L127 is corrected against the manuscript, AC#607 in the Emily Dickinson Collection at Special Collections, the Frost Library, Amherst College. In the 1958 Letters the sequence is misread as “Ego, mitie, me”.