Farmington Abolitionist Letters Come (Back) to Connecticut
Connecticut Historical Society is winning bidder for Amistad-related letters

Hartford, CT (April 8, 2013) – On Thursday, March 21, 2013, the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS), along with the help of many contributors, successfully bid on 94 historically-significant letters linked to the Amistad, the abolitionist movement, and society in Farmington, CT. The letters, auctioned by Swann Auction Galleries in New York City, were initially estimated to be worth $30,000 to $40,000, but by the time the hammer came down went for $55,000.

The letters were written by Charlotte Cowles to her brother Samuel between 1833 and 1846 and will be referred to as the Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence going forward. The bulk of the content revolves around life in Farmington, CT for the young Charlotte (age 13-25 during this time) including local politics, her studies (she was studying chemistry at the age of 13), local schools, and news of their neighbors and friends. Included within four of the letters are details pertaining to the story of the Amistad, including descriptions of interactions between the local people and the Amistad Africans, who lived in Farmington, CT after their release by the United States Supreme Court in 1841.

Other letters describe activities of anti-slavery and abolition groups in Farmington and the assistance the town provided to Thomas, an escaped slave. Charlotte also writes about attending a political meeting with several other women and enjoying breaking out of the “woman’s sphere” with her attendance. Within the time span of the letters her brother, Samuel, moved to Hartford to publish the anti-slavery newspaper, Charter Oak, which subsequently was the target of repeated vandalism described in letters to Charlotte.

In 2012, two sisters from upstate New York discovered the letters among material they inherited from their grandmother, who had been given the letters around 1900 by a “Mrs. Flint”. As they realized the letters related to Farmington, CT and antislavery activities, they contacted the Farmington Historical Society (FHS) to inquire about the letters and FHS’s interest in acquiring them. A closer examination of the letters revealed the wonderful content and CHS was subsequently contacted as a potential buyer as well. Swann Auction Galleries was contacted soon thereafter to assist in appraising their value, which quickly set the auction process into motion. Their historical value was based on the rarity of the details of the Africans’ lives in Farmington after their release from prison by decision of the United States Supreme Court in 1841 and that they were written by a young woman.

Acquisition of the letters and the passionate effort to keep them in Connecticut, where they belong, was a collaborative effort. With designated funds to acquire historical material, state-of-the art storage facilities, a full-time archivist, and the ability to give the public access to the letters once acquired, the CHS was chosen to lead the charge. Joanne Lawson, Director of the FHS, offered to help raise funds to purchase the letters and Kate Steinway, Director of CHS, immediately pledged a 1-to-1 match for funds raised. Along with the cooperation of the Director of the Stanley Whitman House, Lisa Johnson, a grassroots mobilization raised $22,200 in pledges within one week. Shortly thereafter, John J. Patrick, Jr., Chairman, President & CEO of the Farmington Bank, pledged $10,000 after hearing about the efforts from John Carson, Vice President of University Relations at the University of Hartford. In addition, David and Mary Dangremond (David is a CHS Honorary Trustee with 24 years of service and a former CHS Vice-President) pledged a substantial gift that allowed CHS to go beyond the maximum appraised value.
“In my six years as executive director, this is the first collaborative fundraising effort I’ve experienced that has so many dramatic and moving elements – the intense time pressure, the grassroots effort, the incredible generosity of local organizations and community leaders, and a collegial appreciation of what CHS can bring to these terrific letters,” remarks CHS’ Steinway.

“Farmington Bank was honored to assist the Connecticut Historical Society with its purchase of the Cowles letters, especially in light of the shared history between the family and the Bank,” said Patrick. “It was at Samuel Cowles’ house on 27 Main Street in Farmington where our original 21 corporators met in 1851 to create Farmington Bank. And, two years later, the Cowles home served as Farmington Bank’s second office. Everyone associated with Farmington Bank welcomes the Cowles family letters back home,” Patrick continued.

The historic letters arrived at CHS on Friday, March 29 and will be on display for a short period of time prior to being scanned and transcribed to be made publicly available online around May 1.

The Connecticut Historical Society is located at 1 Elizabeth Street in Hartford. For more, visit www.chs.org or call (860) 236-5621.

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**About the Connecticut Historical Society (@ConnHistSoc):**

Founded in 1825, the Connecticut Historical Society is a non-profit museum, library, research and education center. CHS strives to inspire and foster a life-long interest in history and ignite a passion for learning about history through research assistance, exhibitions, tours and programs for all ages. Visit www.chs.org or call 860-236-5621.

**About Farmington Bank:**

Farmington Bank is a full-service community bank with 20 branch locations throughout central Connecticut. Established in 1851, Farmington Bank is a diversified consumer and commercial bank with an ongoing commitment to contribute to the betterment of the communities in our region. Farmington Bank, with assets of $1.8 billion, is a wholly-owned subsidiary of First Connecticut Bancorp, Inc. (NASDAQ Global Select Market: FBNK). For more information about Farmington Bank, visit farmingtonbankct.com.

**About Farmington Historical Society:**

The Farmington Historical Society is an all-volunteer non-profit organization founded in 1954 to preserve the history of Farmington and to educate the public about it. For more information, visit www.FarmingtonHistoricalSociety-ct.org, or call 860-678-1645.