

The Kensington Letters

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The Woman's Club of Kensington, preparing for its Centennial in 1999, has much to look back on with more than a little pride. Early in this century, members marched for suffrage, lobbied for the child labor bill, and presented the town with its very first trash can.

During World War I, the ladies sent pillows to Europe, knit warm garments for the Navy League and Red Cross to distribute, planted liberty gardens and canned the produce, helped provide books for soldiers and sailors, and bought a Liberty Bond.

But it was during World War II that a club project combined patriotic support for Kensington personnel serving their country with morale-building treasures from home, at Christmas time.

From 1942 to 1945, club members mailed bundles to every Kensingtonian they could find in uniform, at first with packages of candy, and always with newsy accounts of their friends and neighbors. Clubwomen prodded the postmaster and local officials for current addresses of Kensington youth and pored over news accounts in the Washington Star, Post, and Times Herald for names, including the dreaded casualty lists. Serving men and women were traced through Selective Service and the armed forces for their domestic and overseas duty stations. The researched data wound up in letters signed: Woman's Club of Kensington, Mrs. Charles Morey, President.

Postcards of familiar scenes drawn by a local artist, Mr. James E. Lamb, were included with the letters, delighting recipients. Husband of a club past president, Mr. Lamb drew the town landmarks and produced metal cuts affixed to wooden blocks used to print the postcards in red, white, and blue ink. The cards and letters were all neatly printed to appear as originals. The drawings must have been hand-printed and hand-colored.

Many of the scenes are gone today, but in the 40's they evoked life at home: churches, the town hall, the fire house, the drug store, and library. The scenes were familiar to Old Town Kensington residents. Then, as now, the Old Town population numbered about 1,800 in the historic district, which does not include newer subdivisions presently within the Kensington postal area.

That effort amazed the young troops and seamen. Many wrote back to the club on War and Navy Department V-Mail Service, from strange lands, not a little homesick when their Christmas mail arrived from Kensington. Some of the mail from Kensington to the troops came from total strangers who cared about "our boys," and the few girls whose names came up. In the words of the club history of that period, "to a weary boy or girl, or man or woman in a foreign land, a picture of the Presbyterian church, the railroad station or the drug store brought poignant memories of home, sweet home."

This was a formidable project for the 30-member club. (Dues were then \$1 per year.) A total of 292 cards was noted in the carefully maintained notebook, along with costs for materials and postage. Stamps cost 3 cents per letter, and 40 cents was listed as a cost for "white string" for

the bundles. Some of the mail returned “undeliverable,” but many responses arrived with hearty thanks; one lad regarded the scenes as “shrines” in his memory.

Under the wartime pressure of censorship and postal delays, some packages never reached the addressees. A few grateful letters arrived after their writers had died, along with appreciative notes from their Gold Star Mothers.

Kensington residents served in all of the military services, including the Army Air Force preceding the U.S. Air Force and the Merchant Marine. Women served in the WAAC and the WAVES and as military nurses.

And the Kensington mail, imaginatively conceived and produced, touched an emotional and welcome chord, bringing a bit of Christmas to the hearts of its recipients.

Excerpts from One of the Kensington Letters

This year our Christmas card does homage to the Fire Department which has enriched our town by placing an Honor Roll (gift of Mr. Eugene Raney, through the American Legion) inscribed with all your names, in the little triangle at Baltimore Street between Connecticut and Lincoln Avenues and which was dedicated on October first....

What youngster ever lived whose heart did not leap up when siren blew or fire truck went clanging by! We feel so much about you all as all have felt about the firemen who go to right the wrongs, to put the fires out, and save the people. We are proud of each and every one of you, wherever round the globe you are, or here in the U.S.A. working ceaselessly upon supplies or teaching instrument flying, etc., etc. — all contributing. We know you all could tell us many a story of high courage, of devotion and good sportsmanship, and of cute dear funny things, too, in the midst of all the agonies of weariness and waiting, let alone the rest, for where can be found in all the world such good fun boys as our Americans? And what wondrous sights you’ve seen with all the agony and sweat, and tears; and the eternal friendships you have made. So many of you in the South Pacific, in Alaska, on the high seas continually, and more than ever now in Europe.

We think of you all, sailing the seas, ... in the air and on the ground.

Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and God bless you.