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Reviews...

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Reviews...

CEASE NOT TO THINK OF ME The Steele Family Letters, edited by Patricia H. Ryan. *Huntsville Planning Department (P. O. Box 308, Huntsville, Alabama, 35804), 1979. 184 pages, illustrated, index, paper, \$6.00.*

Cease Not to Think of Me is an especially rich collection of letters that were exchanged among members of two prominent mid-nineteenth century Huntsville families, the Steeles and the Fearn. The editor Patricia Ryan compiled the letters from various public and private collections and organized them into a clear and interesting narrative. She and the Huntsville Planning Department which published the letters are to be congratulated.

Certainly for those readers interested in the social history of antebellum Alabama, this collection is most valuable. There are a number of extensive collections of letters by nineteenth-century Alabama families, but few of these have been published. Fletcher Green's *The Lides Go South and West* is one of these exceptions. James Lide and his family were early settlers in Dallas County. While Lide and his sons were absorbed in building up their plantations, his daughters missed the wide circle of kin and friends left behind in South Carolina. Not only was she lonely, but Sarah Lide Fountain worried deeply about her children's education in a place where schools were not yet organized.

Similar difficulties are absent from the pages of the Steele family letters. When the letters were written, Hunts-

ville was a well-developed town with strong educational and religious institutions. While the Lides suffered the social isolation of pioneers, the Fearn and the Steeles enjoyed a rich social connection of both family and friends. Because of these differences, *Cease Not to Think of Me* is an excellent accompanying collection to *The Lides Go South and West* for those readers interested in the diversity of social experiences that characterized Alabama's development in the years before the Civil War.

by Ann Boucher

The most well-known members of the Steele and Fearn families--the architect George Steele and the physician and businessman Dr. Thomas Fearn--were rarely the authors of the letters in this collection. Rather, the majority of the letters were exchanged by Steele's son Matt and his wife Kate, the daughter of Dr. Fearn. Matt and Kate Steele were separated frequently during the years 1849 to 1855 because of his business travels. To the good fortune of present-day readers, if not to themselves, the Steeles exchanged letters that are unusual in some of the topics discussed and in the richness of detail recorded.

The letters were written by

Matt and Kate Steele during the first six years of their marriage. This timing was important to the content of the correspondence. Husband and wife were not discussing the marriages of their children or the care an aged parent should receive. Rather, they were planning for their own marriage, discussing the births and rearing of their own children, and measuring ideas of what husbands and wives were like against their own recently acquired experience.

The Steeles were also working out the relationship they as a new family should have with their parents. For Matt Steele, as for the sons of many wealthy and prominent Alabamians, this relationship involved his economic livelihood. Formally trained in the law and probably informally educated by his father in architecture and construction, Matt Steele practiced neither during the early years of his marriage. Instead he worked within his father-in-law's firm of commission merchants and cotton factors. He accepted this as a potentially lucrative and enjoyable way to provide for his family, but nevertheless dreamed of going to Texas where "we would then be alone, to ourselves, and I would be more independent, in any business that I might engage in than I am now in or could engage in." (p. 82) In their discussion of this and other topics, the Steele's candor is exceptional when compared with that of husbands and wives in other collections of nineteenth-century Alabama letters.

The collection's final sections are composed primarily of the letters of Matt Steele's sister Ellen and her husband Edward Tracy, written both be-

fore and during Tracy's service in the Confederate Army. While not of the same quality as that between her brother and sister-in-law, Ellen Steele Tracy's correspondence recounted many truly touching episodes. Her description of her daughter's illness certainly captured much of the love and attention children in these families received from parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The girl's eventual death from scarlet fever as well as her mother's untimely death gave basis in fact to the extreme concern expressed throughout the letters for health.

Those who turn to *Cease Not to Think of Me* for a chronicle of architectural developments in antebellum Huntsville from the leading architect's family will be disappointed. Those who read it for local conditions and personalities, for family history, and a sense of the social environment of Huntsville's well-to-do at mid-century will be rewarded. Ms. Ryan's introduction and conclusion are well done, although the early introductions to specific chapters are less satisfying. The "Who's Who" at the end is useful. A map identifying the residences of the more prominent characters is not given, but might have been useful to all readers, especially those unfamiliar with Huntsville. Such criticisms in no way detract from Ms. Ryan's accomplishment. She has brought together a collection of enjoyable letters that are vital as local records and as part of this state's social history. *

CEASE NOT TO THINK OF ME may be purchased from the Huntsville Planning Department on the fifth floor of the Municipal Building
