What do we really know about Grace Bedell’s family?

In 1999, the Village of Westfield unveiled artist Don So-tille’s bronze sculpture. It depicts the moment when President-elect Abraham Lincoln met young Grace Bedell at the local train station. The idiosyncratic story about their correspondence—and his beard—is a local favorite.

Ironically, the Chautauqua County Historical Society’s vast local history collection contained no original source material referring to the Norman Bedell family. Although a successful manufacturer of cast iron cook stoves and the father of eleven children, Norman Bedell was only in Chautauqua County briefly and left few records.

Then, in September 2011, an archive of letters, legal documents, newspaper clippings and photographs that once belonged to Grace Bedell's brother, Frank S. Bedell, was donated to the historical society.

This exhibit explores the content and value of the Frank S. Bedell/Watkins/Wilcox Collection.

"Frank was Grace's favorite among four older brothers.”

Lincoln's Little Girl
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FRED TRUMP

Norman Bedell was a successful cast iron stove manufacturer whose factory in Albion, NY made products similar to this one at the Amherst Museum in Amherst, NY.

Two ads from The Westfield Republican in the late 1850s demonstrate a strong family work ethic. (Enlarged)
Frances Bedell Wilcox preserved her family’s unique history.

Frances Bedell Watkins, affectionately known as “Fa-Fa” as a child, was the daughter of William and Maggie Watkins. On Christmas Eve in 1912, she married Frederick Wilcox in Los Angeles, where her uncle Frank S. Bedell was living. Frank Bedell would die within the year.

On July 1, 1913, Frances signed a contract with the Rosedale Cemetery Association for the purchase of “a single grave, Number One (1) in the South West quarter of Lot Number 181 in Section 3”. She paid $86. The contract notes in Frances Wilcox’s own hand: “It is in this single grave that Frank S. Bedell is buried, July 3rd 1913.”

Frances Bedell Watkins Wilcox saved that document all her life, along with life insurance papers, newspaper clippings, family photographs, personal letters and even small bundles of human hair. When she died at the age of 71 in June, 1953, she had been living in Atlantic City, New Jersey where she worked as a nurse.

The archive she preserved still has meaning for us today. Yet its survival was by no means guaranteed. In fact, it was through “the kindness of strangers” that it has come to us at all.