



ArchivesSpace

## Fanny Fern collection, 1853-1872

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Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Maine Women Writers Collection

Abplanalp Library  
University of New England  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, Maine 04103  
[cmiller10@une.edu](mailto:cmiller10@une.edu)  
URL: <http://www.une.edu/mwwc>

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository:</b>	Maine Women Writers Collection
<b>Creator:</b>	Fern, Fanny, 1811-1872
<b>Title:</b>	Fanny Fern collection
<b>ID:</b>	0130
<b>Date [inclusive]:</b>	1853-1872
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 folders
<b>Language of the Material:</b>	English

### Preferred Citation

Fanny Fern collection, Maine Women Writers Collection, University of New England, Portland, Maine

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## Biographical/Historical Note

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Sarah Payson Willis Parton (1811-1872) was born to Nathaniel and Hannah Parker Willis on July 9, 1811, in Portland, Maine. By 1812 the family returned to Boston, where Nathaniel Willis became a Deacon at the Park Street [Congregational] Church, called Brimstone Corner because of the explosive Calvinist sermons preached there. A journalistic innovator in the United States, Nathaniel Willis began the first religious newspaper in 1816, *The Recorder*, and in 1827, the first children's magazine, *The Youth's Companion*. Young Sarah enjoyed the training of growing up in a journalists' family, yet reacted with resistance to a strict religious home environment. She was sent to several boarding schools, including Catharine Beecher's Hartford Female Seminary from 1828-31, where Beecher's younger sister Harriet Beecher [Stowe] also instructed. Sarah's parents hoped that she would thereby become serious regarding studies and religion. In 1837, she married Charles Harrington Eldredge (1810-1846), a cashier at the Merchant's Bank of Boston, and gave birth to three daughters: Mary Stace (1838-1845), Grace Harrington (1841-1862), and Ellen Willis (1845-1922). When Eldredge died in Boston of typhoid in 1846, he left Sarah with two young daughters and no income. Her brother, N.P. Willis, by 1846 a successful poet as well as publisher of the *New York Home Journal*, refused financial help to his destitute sister. In 1849 Fern married a widower with two children, Samuel P. Farrington, but the marriage proved so unbearable that she left in 1851, and in 1852 he obtained a divorce on grounds of desertion. The writer

"Fanny Fern" came into existence to earn support for herself and her children. Her first publication, *The Model Husband* signed by Clara (she also used Tabitha, Olivia, Olivia Branch, and Jack Fern), appeared on June 28, 1851, in Boston's *Olive Branch*, edited by the Rev. Thomas F. Norris. By September Sarah had settled upon the "Fanny Fern" byline, the name by which she was known thereafter. She chose this for two reasons: her mother had loved sweet fern—a sturdy plant surviving in hostile conditions, and the alliterative name spoofed the pennames of genteel lady writers since Fern wrote boldly and forthrightly, often on unpopular topics. Thereafter, weekly columns by "Fanny Fern" appeared in the *Boston Olive Branch* (28 June 1851 - 25 June 1853), the *Boston True Flag* edited by William Moulton (29 November 1851 - 23 April 1853), the *New York Musical World and Times* published by Oliver Dyer (9 October 1852 - 19 November 1853), and the *Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post* (7 January 1854 - 1 April 1854). An 1855 serialized novella, *Fanny Ford: A Story of Everyday Life*, had so increased the circulation of the *Ledger* that its editor Robert Bonner made Fern the highest paid newspaper columnist at the time. After the publication of her 1855 bestseller, *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Times*, and *Rose Clark* in 1856, she wrote exclusively for the *New York Ledger*. From her journalistic pieces first published in the foregoing serials, Fern compiled between 1853 and 1872 six collections, several reaching bestseller status. In 1856, after having a prenuptial agreement drawn up, which gave Fern rights to her earnings before and after their marriage, she married James Parton (1822-1891). Parton was an editor at her brother's *New York Home Journal*, but quit due to conflicts with N.P. Willis. Parton would later become a noted publisher and editor. Fanny Fern died in New York City of breast cancer on October 10, 1872. She was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, alongside her first two daughters and first husband. A large fern-embossed stone cross marks her grave.

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## Collection Scope and Content

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This collection includes twentieth century articles, a family history, photographs, and published work in periodicals including *Portland Transcript* and the *People's Organ*. The collection holds at least one copy of each of her book titles and three titles appearing as articles in *Portland* newspapers. In some cases multiple printings of a given title are in the collection. Unless otherwise indicated, the titles are first editions. Additionally, the collection holds several biographical and critical titles.

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## Arrangement

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This collection is organized as a single series. Arranged by subject.

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## Administrative Information

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### Publication Statement

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URL: <http://www.une.edu/mwwc>

### Access

Collection is open for research.

### Publication Rights

For permission to reproduce or publish, please contact the Curator of the Maine Women Writers Collection.

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## Related Materials

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### Related Materials

Fanny Fern and Ethel Parton papers, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

James Parton papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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## Controlled Access Headings

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- Portland (Me.)

- Reproductions
- Photographs
- Ephemera
- Clippings
- Fern, Fanny, 1811-1872
- Fern, Fanny, 1811-1872

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## Collection Inventory

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Title/Description	Instances	
20th century articles	Box 9	Folder 001
Two photograph cards and a copy	Box 9	Folder 002
Family history information from Carol Kessler	Box 9	Folder 003
A Little Girl and Two Authors by Ethel Parton, photocopy from The Horn Book, 1941	Box 9	Folder 004
Publisher's announcement of "The Life and Beauties of Fanny Fern" and accompanying letter, 1855	Box 9	Folder 005
"Fanny Fern at the Hartford Female Seminary" by Ethel Parton, 1901	Box 9	Folder 006