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**Rare 19th-Century African American Women's Friendship Albums Online
Cassey and Dickerson Albums Document Prominent Abolitionist Circles, Contain Earliest Signed
Paintings by African American Women**

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – June 7, 2012 – The Library Company of Philadelphia has digitized three rare albums that bring to life the world of African American women activists in antebellum Philadelphia. Purchased in part with funds provided by the William Penn Foundation, these albums make the Library Company the repository of three of only four such documents known to have survived intact. The 19th-century friendship albums of Amy Matilda Cassey and the sisters Mary Anne and Martina Dickerson inaugurate the Library Company's newly created [African Americana Digital Collection](#).

Created by three young women active in the antislavery movement, these volumes provide unique insights into the culture, politics, and gender relationships of African American women of the antebellum era. Friendship albums bound in embossed and gilt morocco were popular gift items for young women in general, who filled them with tokens of sentiment and regard from friends, family, and admired figures. The Cassey and Dickerson albums contain essays, poetry, sketches, and floral watercolors contributed by figures prominent in the movement, including Sarah Mapps Douglass, Margaretta Forten, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips.

Amy Matilda Cassey was born into New York's black elite in 1809 and joined that of Philadelphia in 1828 with her marriage to Joseph Cassey, a businessman who was a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a sales agent for William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator*. Her album contains poems, prose, drawings, watercolors, and gouaches of flowers contributed by women of the African American communities in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Baltimore. The album also contains entries by noted abolitionists Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. Mary Anne Dickerson's album was created as a pedagogical instrument to promote cultivated expression, with contributions dating from 1833 to 1882. Contributors to this album include many members of the antislavery intelligentsia.

Antebellum African American Elite Activists

The floral artistry practiced by upper class African American women of the day allows viewers entry into a private circle wherein members would display their accomplishments for each other's pleasure and

amusement. The artworks contained in these volumes are likely the earliest known signed paintings by African American women.

But the albums were also cultural and literary efforts, with contributions by cultural leaders of both genders that organize artistic voices in support of a unifying vision and cause. Amy Cassey and Mary Anne and Martina Dickerson, and the women in their circles, studied drawing manuals, instruction books, decorative floral works, women's periodicals, and the "language of flowers" literature, while they challenged slavery in public meetings, defied public opinion with their racially integrated organizations, published antislavery pamphlets, held antislavery fundraising fairs, and petitioned Congress for abolition.

Cassey and the Dickersons were active in the local black literary and debating societies, and the albums document the intimate connections of Philadelphia's black leaders with a larger network of activists and reformers. These albums are of extreme value as they demonstrate both the cultural and artistic vibrancy of the antebellum African American community and the interests of particular women within that society.

African Americana Online at the Library Company of Philadelphia

Adding substantially to digital resources in African American history, an online edition of *Afro-Americana, 1535-1922: From the Library Company of Philadelphia* has been introduced by Readex, a division of NewsBank. Created from the Library Company's acclaimed collection, which began with Benjamin Franklin and has steadily increased, this new online resource will provide researchers with more than 12,000 wide-ranging printed works about African American history. Critically important subjects covered include the West's discovery and exploitation of Africa; the rise of slavery in the New World along with the growth and success of abolitionist movements; the development of racial thought and racism; descriptions of African American life—slave and free—throughout the Americas; and slavery and race in fiction and drama. Also featured are printed works of African American individuals and organizations.

"The Library Company's Afro-Americana Collection is one of the most comprehensive and valuable archives of printed material by and about people of African descent anywhere in the world," says Professor Richard Newman of the Rochester Institute of Technology. "From early descriptions of African

society and culture to the black struggle for justice in the Americas during the 19th century, it remains a touchstone for scholars and students alike. To have it available online and at your fingertips in a searchable format will be a dream come true.”

The Library Company of Philadelphia

The Library Company of Philadelphia is an independent research library specializing in American history and culture from the 17th through the 19th centuries. Founded in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin, the Library Company is America's oldest cultural institution and served as the Library of Congress from the Revolutionary War to 1800. The Library Company was the largest public library in America until the Civil War and includes the extensive personal libraries of prominent early American bibliophiles such as James Logan. [Open to the public](#) free of charge, the Library Company houses an extensive [collection](#) of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera, prints, photographs, and works of art, and the second largest holding of early American imprints. Particular strengths of the collection include economic history, women’s history, African American history, history of medicine, history of philanthropy, and visual culture. To find out more, please visit www.librarycompany.org.

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Sarah Mapps Douglass, "A token of love from me, to thee," ca. 1833. Watercolor and gouache.