

A Bronxville Love Story—
Frank Ross Chambers + Kate Waller Chambers
+ Crow's Nest

By Raymond Geselbracht

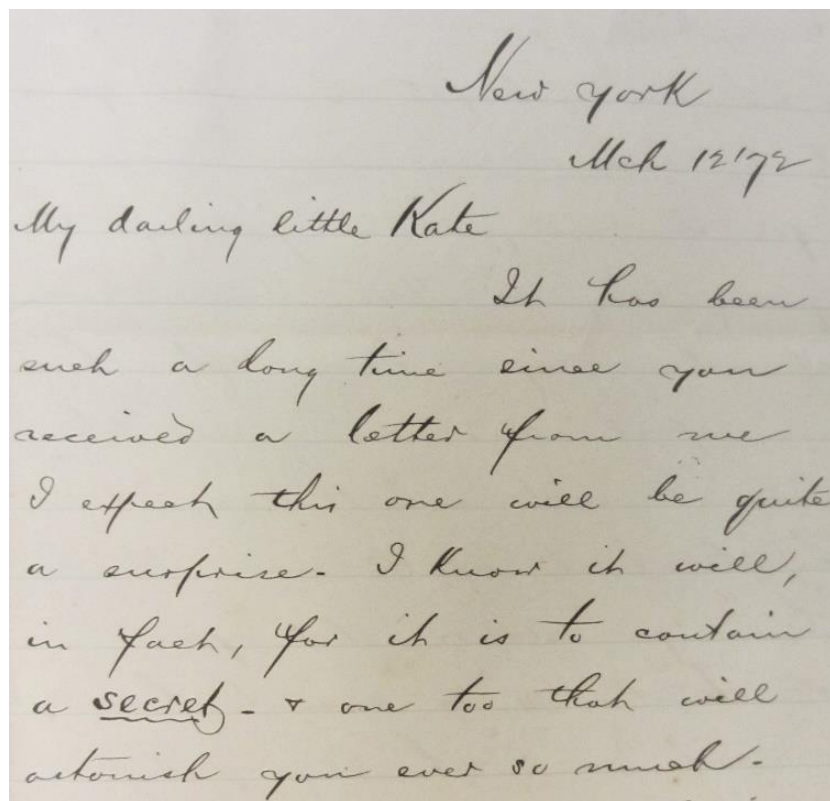


Frank and Kate Chambers are remembered today primarily as civic leaders and philanthropists whose service to the village and gifts of land and money greatly influenced Bronxville's development as a suburban village. Less well known is the story of their discovery of their love for one another, and how their home in Bronxville, called Crow's Nest, became part of this love story. The special beauty and charm of the story is preserved in their letters and written reminiscences.

A few years before the Civil War began, Frank Ross Chambers' mother died and he was sent to live with his father's sister, Aunt Peggy, who lived about forty miles north of Montgomery, Alabama. Frank was seven years old. During the time he lived with Aunt Peggy, he became close to his cousins in Montgomery, Margaret Waller and her little daughter, Kate. Not long after the Civil War began, Frank took a job in Montgomery, and he was often at his cousin Margaret's home. His father died during the war years, leaving Frank an orphan, and three of his four brothers were killed in the war.

In 1867, when Frank was seventeen, he went to New York City to take a job with a dry goods firm. He often thought of his cousins in Montgomery, and he sometimes wrote to Kate. "Doesn't it seem a long time since we were last together?" he wrote her

when she was about fifteen. "It does to me, and I fear you may have thought that as soon as Frank left home...he forgot all about his little pet." "I don't know why it is," he wrote in another letter, "but I always felt more like confiding in you, than anyone else."



New York
Mch 12/72
My darling little Kate
It has been
such a long time since you
received a letter from me
I expect this one will be quite
a surprise. I know it will,
in fact, for it is to contain
a secret - & one too that will
astonish you ever so much.

About two years later, Frank wrote Kate a letter he believed would surprise her. "I know it will, in fact," he wrote, "for it is to contain a secret— and one too that will astonish you ever so much.... But you mustn't make any noise, faint, scream...and besides you must promise not to tell. Will you promise? Well, hold your ear right close and let me whisper—I'm going to be married very soon."

He was married to Mollie Pease in April 1872. They had three children, one of whom died in infancy. In 1878, they moved from New York City to Mount Vernon.

In 1882, Mollie died, and Frank was left to care for their children. He worried what to do, and decided to invite Margaret and Kate Waller to come live with him in New York. Two years later, they agreed to spend the summer with him in Mount Vernon, and then to take the children with them in the fall to Montgomery for the winter.

Late in the summer, when the time for the trip back to Alabama was growing near, Frank realized that his feelings for Kate had changed. "As the parting time approached," he later wrote, "I realized that possibly a prize was too near to be lost and one night...I seized the opportunity to ask her to become more than a sister-cousin." Kate wasn't sure what answer to give him. She wanted to say yes, because she too realized she had grown to love him. But she was worried that since they were cousins, perhaps they couldn't marry.

Her mother felt they shouldn't stay any longer in the house with Frank, but Kate persuaded her to stay, until the time—not far away—when they were to go to South

Carolina to attend a wedding. There they talked with Kate's uncle, Reverend John Stout, who said that from what he could see, Kate and Frank loved each other too much to be barred from marrying just because they were cousins. Shortly after this, Frank received from Kate, in his words, "a precious letter of acceptance." Frank and Kate were married before the end of the year.

In the spring of 1888, they moved to a big house in Bronxville called Crow's Nest, which sat on top of a prominent hill overlooking the tiny village and the surrounding countryside, including the thirty acres or so that was part of their property.

Crow's Nest was the third partner in the Chambers love story in Bronxville. "Crow's Nest," Kate remembered late in life, "became more and more a personality rather than a mere house and grounds." It became over the years the center of Frank and Kate's life, particularly Kate's. She was a person who felt the need to idealize the world as a place which was sweet and good, and in which people were dear and kind, and Crow's Nest became for her the place where she could do her best to make this imagined world a reality. She knew her dream required unrelenting labor, or rather, as she referred to it, "the strain of keeping the spirit and temper right."



The garden which she created at Crow's nest, spreading over thirty acres, was the essential setting for her ideal world. She devoted as much time to her garden as her busy life allowed—from one to four hours every day during the planting season and also in the fall. During this, to her, beloved labor, she once wrote, "[her] eyes beheld visions of green and loveliness which came true." Her writings about her garden, such as *Spring Comes to Crow's Nest* and the poem, "Dear Little White Roses," are radiant

with the emotions she experienced in companionship with the living things, the sun's warm light, the breezes that passed by her in the garden. She also remembered, as she walked through her garden, all the happy voices of her family and friends and her many guests who came to enjoy the garden with her. Her guests included many children in summertime who especially loved the big swimming pool which sat on a small plateau in the center of the garden.

Everything about Crow's Nest became for Kate a part of this ideal garden. One year when she and Frank returned home after a winter vacation in the Caribbean, she was overcome with emotion as they came up the entry drive and entered the house. "Crow's Nest," she later recalled, "with all its charm never seemed more lovely —



the grounds with early spring buds and blooms, the house with its woodwork and rich soft colorings, the loved pictures, books, inviting chairs, the comforts and charm of bedrooms, with their personal belongings, and all the gradual collections of years, the garden full of promise, and the absolute delight of the recreation of life and beauty...."

At the center of all of this were Frank and Kate Chambers and the ever-young love they had for one another. Frank wrote Kate a note on her 69th birthday. They had been married forty years. "I offer you the gift of a devotion that increases with the years & that I know you reciprocate," Frank wrote. "So we shall journey on together as long as life here lasts and keep our troth into eternity. You are the greatest blessing the good Lord has bestowed on me."

Frank died in 1940, Kate seven years later. Their love story became part of Bronxville's history, brought back to memory by their personal writings and photographs as a Valentine's Day gift to the people of Bronxville.

Image Credits: The portraits of Frank Ross Chambers and Kate Waller Chambers, and the image of the letter from Frank Ross Chambers to Kate Waller Chambers, March 12,

1872 are courtesy of the New-York Historical Society. The images of the Crow's Nest house and garden are from the Bronxville History Center.