Pour Présenter

A Brief History of the Visiting Card

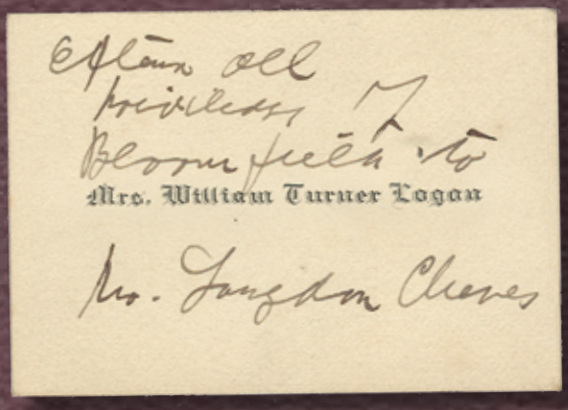
Cards from the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society

By Katherine W. Giles

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle- and upper-class women and men visited friends, relatives, and acquaintances in person. Those were days well before e-mail, Facebook, and cell phones, and thus the custom of paying calls was critical to forming and fostering social relationships. An indispensable tool for any well-bred lady or gentleman during this period was the visiting card, better known today as the calling card.

According to papermakers Crane & Co., the first known use of visiting cards was in sixteenth-century Italy, although others argue they were utilized in China during the fifteenth century. The cards gained popularity in France during the reign of Louis XVI, when they were used by aristocrats to announce their arrival to their hosts. Visiting cards were typically embellished with artwork and other flourishes, but by the early nineteenth century styles had simplified, displaying only the bearer's name on high-quality card stock.

The use of visiting cards spread from France to England and eventually to the United States and South Carolina. During the nineteenth and early

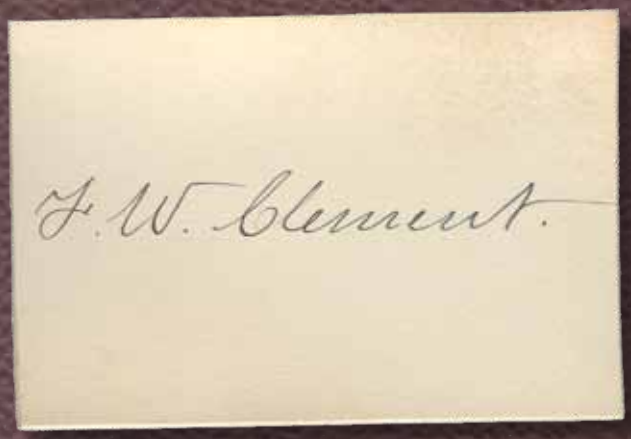


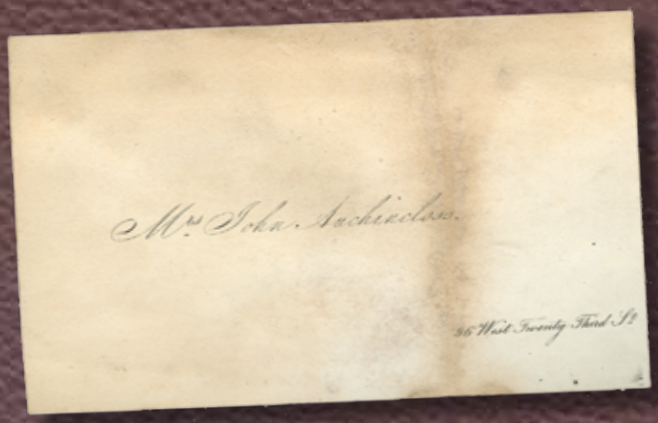
twentieth centuries, the rules of society for middle- and upper-class Americans were strict. What is today a casual social interaction—dropping by a friend's home to say hello and catch up—was in fact a well-choreographed series of rituals. Though such strictures may seem extreme by twenty-first-century standards, they served a useful function. According to Brett and Kate McKay, authors of *The Art of Manliness*, "Calling cards streamlined introductions and helped remind people of new acquaintances and needed visits."

When making a call, the visitor would place his or her card on a silver tray proffered by the servant who answered the door. The card would then be taken to the lady of the house. If she was home, she would choose whether or not to receive the visitor. If she wasn't home, the card was left as a record of the visit. Often a portion of a lady's day was set aside for making calls and for being "at home" to receive visitors. While gentlemen generally adhered to the same rules as ladies, the task of paying calls to form and foster social acquaintances typically fell to women.

The number of cards presented by a caller was very important, as explained in *Martine's Handbook of Etiquette, and Guide to True Politeness*, published in 1866. "In leaving cards you must thus distribute them: one for the lady of the house and her daughters...one for the master of the house, and if there be a grown up son or a near male relation staying in the house, one for him. But though the cards are cheap, you must never leave more than three at a time at the same house. As married men have, or are supposed to have, too much to do to make ceremonial calls, it is the custom for a wife to take her husband's cards with her, and to leave one or two of them with her own."

If a lady called upon someone for the purpose of forming a new acquaintance, she would typically leave her card without expecting an audience. If the recipient wished to meet the caller, she would

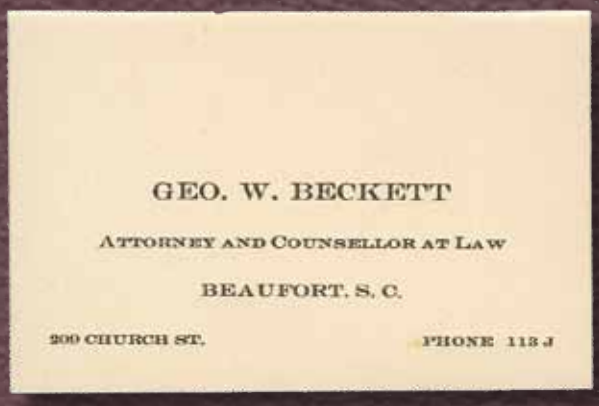


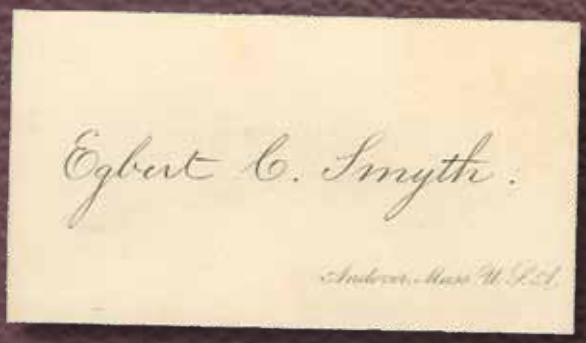


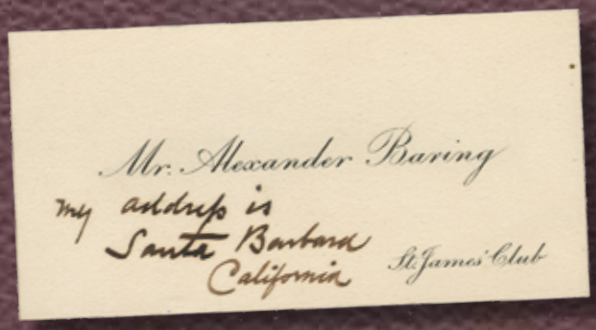
send her own card in response. If she chose against the acquaintance, she would either return the original card in an envelope or not respond at all (a formally prescribed "brush-off" if there ever was one). After paying condolence calls, visitors who left their cards could expect to receive a return card from the bereaved when he or she was prepared to receive visitors again.

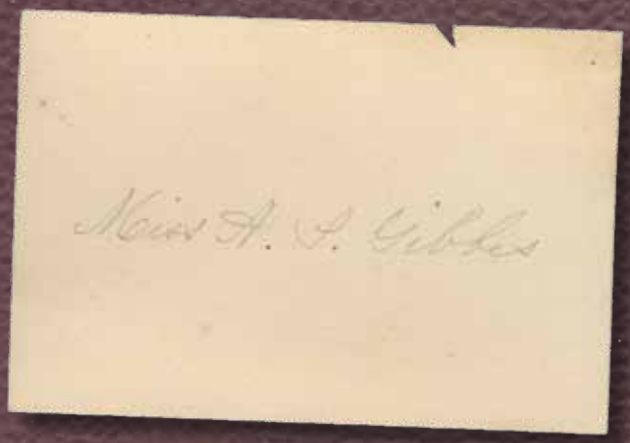
Despite their diminutive size, visiting cards could convey a considerable amount of information. For example, a card on which the upper left-hand corner was turned down signified congratulations; turning down the lower left-hand corner communicated condolences. Small inscriptions could also be used. According to *Martine's Hand-book*, "When the caller is about to leave the city for a protracted absence, it is usual to put the letters P.P.C. in the left hand corner of the card; they are the initials of the French phrase, "*pour prendre congé*"—to take leave, and may with equal propriety stand for *presents parting compliments.*" Other standard inscriptions were "p.r." for *pour remercier* (an expression of thanks), "p.f.N.A." for *pour feliciter Nouvel An* (Happy New Year), and "p.f." for *pour féliciter* (congratulations). Sometimes cards were engraved with the card-holder's address or, in a man's case, the name of his gentleman's club. Women occasionally printed their visiting hours on their cards, though these additions could be made by hand as well.

Business cards were also in use during this period, but the two were kept strictly separate. Visiting cards were reserved exclusively for the purpose of meeting social obligations. Business cards, on the other hand, were used much as they are today, to promote a business. In fact, business cards can be traced back at least as far as the seventeenth century, before newspaper advertising became a well-oiled machine. These early "trade cards" were used for advertising and as maps to the business in question, since many towns lacked a formal street numbering system.









Despite their popularity, business cards were never left as evidence of a social call. Doing so would give the distasteful impression that the call was made in order to collect a bill.

With the rise of the telephone, the loosening of Victorian social strictures, and the decline of household staffs, formal calls and the need for visiting cards eventually fell out of practice. The only community that continues to officially uphold the tradition is the U.S. Armed Forces, whose officers customarily use calling cards to pay formal social calls. Business cards, on the other hand, only became *more* popular as the twentieth century wore on. Today they are considered commonplace.

And yet recently stationers have reported a resurgent interest in calling cards, for those occasions when a business card just doesn't suit. From parents swapping info over carpools, retirees actively networking, and singles trading phone numbers with potential dinner dates, traditional calling cards are being put to a variety of new uses.

It is doubtful that our modern culture will return to the rigid social formulas of the Victorian era. Nonetheless, the resurrection of calling cards is proof that, much like fashion trends, some social traditions previously resigned to history can reemerge and adapt to a new era. ◆