

The Special Collections Research Center was recently able to purchase with the generous assistance of the Library Associates a marvelous cache of twelve letters addressed to Ebenezer Meriam (1794–1864), a meteorologist, pamphleteer, and philanthropist, who was supplying support for schools on the Onondaga and Oneida Indian reservations. This lot was of particular interest to us because eight of the letters were written by the Reverend Samuel J. May (1797–1871), the New England Unitarian minister and reformer who relocated to Syracuse in 1845. The urgency of the problem that May is confronting is revealed in a letter of 26 November 1855 to Meriam: “I shall be most happy to make the best use, in my power, of the money you may be pleased to send me for the benefit of the Indian children. Some of them are so destitute of clothing that they cannot attend school.” The letter from May to Meriam was efficacious, as another one from May to Meriam dated 29 December confirms: “I returned to day from the East, whither I went a fortnight ago, to deliver lectures in Salem, Providence and Boston—and found your favor of 26th enclosing a check for one hundred dollars to be expended in purchasing clothes for those children who attend the Indian School. I have already taken some steps towards the accomplishment of your benevolent purpose—and in due time will send you a full and exact account of my doings.” A letter from May to Meriam dated 19 January 1856 confirms that they have further plans in common: “I am glad you are thinking of a Farm School on the Reservation, and I am happy to inform you that a commencement has already been made. The present teacher, W^m Tibbitts has hired a number of acres of the Indians and is cultivating them. He employs Indian laborers—and if he can receive some further aid from the Legislature, he will enlarge his operations—and engage to employ only Indians.—I shall in a few days make a communication to the Superintendent of Public Instruction on the subject.” May feels compelled to conclude this letter with the acknowledgment that he has been somewhat overextended in his efforts with the Indians: “You will see that I have had enough to do the past year—so much indeed that I have been obliged to neglect my ministerial duties—and must hereafter decline to hold the offices I have held in the Indian Department. I shall still retain my connection with the Mission—and my interest in the Tribe—but some other person or persons must be found to take the care and official responsibility.” In another letter to Meriam on 31 January 1856, however, May provides a more detailed account of the school and farm on the Onondaga Reservation: “I am much inclined to favor your plan of instituting on our Reservation, a Farm school. It can be done—at least the experiment can be commenced at small expense. There is already there a good dwelling house, barn, well and cistern. Indeed Mr Tibbitts—the present teacher—has already gone somewhat into farming operations. And if the Legislature would appropriate \$450 or \$500 instead of the last sum, Mr Tibbitts would be enabled, he thinks, to carry on his day school in Summer by a good female assistant—while he was giving his principal attention to the Farm—and in winter would devote himself to the School—together with his assistant.—I really think well of his project, and believe the Legislature could not make proper provisions for the young of this Tribe at so cheap a rate.” Samuel J. May was, of course, best known for his abolitionist work, and his home was a stop on the Underground Railroad. As this gathering of correspondence amply demonstrates, however, he was involved in many of the reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century. An examination of May’s communications with Gerrit Smith located in the Gerrit Smith Papers in our holdings confirms the broad scope of his reform activities.