

1837

Hard times came to the country in 1837. They were not the new president's fault, but Van Buren inherited the blame for them nevertheless. People wanted a scapegoat, perhaps, and in Van Buren they soon found one. State Street, the Boston financial section, was hard hit, though you might not guess it from a contemporary print that shows its three-storied colonnaded buildings bathed in a quiet light. In the print top-hatted gentlemen talk with one another on the sidewalk, never stopping to glance at the bonneted ladies who are passing by. The water sprinkler is being pulled along over the cobblestones while it wets down the dust.

Newly graduated from Harvard, Thoreau looked for a job and started a journal. The first item still preserved is short. "What are you doing now?" he asked. "Do you keep a journal?" So I make my first entry to-day." The second item is significant: "I seek a garret" sums it up. Thoreau was already looking for solitude and the opportunity to live his own life. The panic of 1837 finds no place in his *Journal*. The entries run to quotations from Goethe and Virgil, to paragraphs about hoar frost, rivers, hills, and skies. And, according to tradition at any rate, Thoreau camped by Flint's Pond for some weeks with his Harvard friend Stearns Wheeler, thus anticipating the Walden experiment.

From JAMES RICHARDSON, JR.

Dedham, September 7th, 1837

Friend Thoreau,

After you had finished your part in the Performances of Commencement, (the tone and sentiment of which by the way I liked much, as being of a sound philosophy,) I hardly saw you again at all. Neither at Mr. [Josiah] Quincy's levee, neither at any of our Classmates' evening entertainments, did I find you, though for the purpose of taking a farewell, and leaving you some memento of an old chum, as well as on matters of business, I much wished to see your face once more. Of course you must be present at our October meeting,—notice of the time and place for which will be given in the Newspapers. I hear that you are comfortably located, in your native town, as the guardian of its children, in the immediate vicinity, I suppose, of one of our most distinguished Apostles of the Future—R. W. Emerson, and situated under the ministry of our old friend Rev Barzillai Frost, to whom please make my remembrances. I heard from you, also, that Concord Academy, lately under the care of Mr Phineas Allen of Northfield, is now vacant of a preceptor; should Mr Hoar find it difficult to get a scholar—college-distinguished, perhaps he would take up with one, who, though in many respects a critical thinker, and a careful philosopher of language among other things, has never distinguished himself in his class as a regular attendant on college studies and rules. If so, could you do me the kindness to mention my name to him, as of one intending to make teaching his profession, at least for a part of his life. If recommendations are necessary, President Quincy has offered me one, and I can easily get others. My old instructor Mr Kimball gave, and gives me credit for having quite a genius for Mathematics, though I studied them so little in College, and I think that Dr Beck will approve me as something of a Latinist.—I did intend going to a distance, but my father's and other friends' wishes, beside my own desire of a proximity to Harvard and

her Library, has constrained me. I have had the offer and opportunity of several places, but the distance or smallness of salary were objections. I should like to hear about Concord Academy from you, if it is not engaged. Hoping that your situation affords you every advantage for continuing your mental education and development I am

with esteem & respect  
Yr classmate & friend  
James Richardson Jr

P.S. I hope you will tell me something about your situation, state of mind, course of reading, &c; and any advice you have to offer will be gratefully accepted. Should the place, alluded to above, be filled, any place, that you may hear spoken of, with a reasonable salary, would perhaps answer for your humble serv't

—R—

*James Richardson, another of Thoreau's Harvard classmates, turned to the ministry after doing some teaching and attended Harvard Divinity School. Thoreau had graduated August 16, 1837. Reverend Barzillai Frost was pastor of the Unitarian Church, Concord. Samuel Hoar was chairman of the Concord school committee. Charles Beck was a professor of Latin at Harvard. Reverend Daniel Kimball kept a boarding school in Needham. Although some have questioned the story of Thoreau's teaching in the Concord public schools, this letter authenticates it. MS., Berg.*

To HENRY VOSE

Concord Oct 13th 37

Friend Vose

You don't know how much I envy you your comfortable settlement—almost sine-cure—in the region of Butternuts. How art thou pleased with the lay of the land and the look of the people? Do the rills tinkle and fume, and bubble and purl, and trickle and meander as thou

expectedest, or are the natives less absorbed in the pursuit of gain than the good clever homespun and respectable people of New England?

I presume that by this time you have commenced pedagoguering in good earnest. Methinks I see thee, perched on learning's little stool, thy jet black boots luxuriating upon a well-polished fender, while round thee are ranged some half dozen small specimens of humanity, thirsting for an idea:

Pens to mend, and hands to guide.  
Oh who would a schoolmaster be?

Why I to be sure. The fact is, here I have been vegetating for the last three months. "The clock sends to bed at ten, and calls me again at eight." Indeed I deem "conformity one of the best arts of life." Now should you hear of any situation in your neighborhood, or indeed any other, which you think would suit me, such as your own, for instance, you will much oblige me by dropping a line on the subject, or, I should rather say, by making mention of it in your answer to this.

I received a catalogue from Harvard, the other day, and therein found Classmate Hildreth set down as assistant instructor in Elocution, Chas Dall divinity student—Clarke and Dana law do, and C. S. W[heeler] resident graduate. How we apples Swim! Can you realize that we too can now moralize about College pranks, and reflect upon the pleasures of a college life, as among the things that are past? Mays't thou ever remember as a fellow soldier [in] the campaign of 37

Yr friend and classmate  
Thoreau

PS I have no time for apologies.

*Thoreau's former Harvard classmate Vose was now teaching school in upstate New York in the little village of Butternuts. Hildreth, Dall, Clarke, Dana, and Wheeler were other members of that same class of 1837. In the last line of this letter the bracketed word is torn out of the manuscript. MS., Berg.*

From HENRY VOSE

Butternuts Oct. 22nd, 1837.

Friend Thoreau

I received by yesterday's mail your favor of the 13th. with great pleasure, and proceed at once to indite you a line of condolence on your having nothing to do. I suspect you wrote that letter during a fit of ennui or the blues. You begin at once by expressing your envy of my happy situation, and mourn over your fate, which condemns you to loiter about Concord, and grub among clamshells. If this were your only source of enjoyment while in C. you would truly be a pitiable object. But I know that it is not. I well remember that "antique and fish-like" office of *Major Nelson*, [to whom and Mr Dennis and Bemis, and J Thoreau I wish to be remembered]; and still more vividly do I remember the fairer portion of the community in C. If from these two grand fountainheads of amusement in that ancient town, united with its delightful walks and your internal resources, you cannot find an ample fund of enjoyment, while waiting for a situation, you deserve to be haunted by blue devils for the rest of your days.

I am surprised that, in writing a letter of two pages and a half to a friend and "fellow soldier of the —37th" at a distance of 300 miles, you should have forgotten to say a single word of the news of C. In lamenting your own fate you have omitted to even hint at any of the events that have occurred since I left. However this must be fully rectified in your next. Say something of the *Yeoman's Gazette* and of the politics of the town and county, of the events, that are daily transpiring there, &c.

I am sorry I know of no situation whatever at present for you. I, in this little, secluded town of B. am the last person in the world to hear of one. But If I do, you may be assured that I will inform you of it at once, and do all in my power to obtain it for you.

With my own situation I am highly pleased. My duties afford me quite as much labor as I wish for, and are interesting and useful to me. Out of school hours I find a great plenty to do, and time passes rapidly and pleasantly.

Please request friend W. Allen to drop me a line and to inform of his success with his school. You will please excuse the brevity of this:

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but as it is getting late, and everybody has been long in bed but myself, and I am deuced sleepy I must close. Write soon and long, and I shall try to do better in my next.

Yours truly,  
Henry Vose.

*It is difficult to identify the various persons mentioned by Vose in this letter. They probably include Albert H. Nelson and Bowman W. Dennis, two Concord youths of Thoreau's age, and William Allen of Thoreau's Harvard class. "Grub among clamshells" may refer to Thoreau's favorite pastime of searching for Indian arrowheads. MS., Morgan.*

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To HELEN THOREAU

Concord Oct 27 1837

Dear H.

Please you, let the defendant say a few words in defense of his long silence. You know we have hardly done our own deeds, thought our own thoughts, or lived our own lives, hitherto. For a man to act himself, he must be perfectly free; otherwise, he is in danger of losing all sense of responsibility or of self-respect. Now when such a state of things exists, that the sacred opinions one advances in argument are apologized for by his friends, before his face, lest his hearers receive a wrong impression of the man,—when such gross injustice is of frequent occurrence, where shall we look, & not look in vain, for men, deeds, thoughts? As well apologize for the grape that it is sour,—or the thunder that it is noisy, or the lightning that it tarries not. Farther, letterwriting too often degenerates into a communing of facts, & not of truths; of other men's deeds, & not our thoughts. What are the convulsions of a planet compared with the emotions of the soul? or the rising of a thousand suns, if that is not enlightened by a ray?

Your affectionate brother,  
Henry

*Helen, the eldest of the Thoreau children, is the least known member of the family. Born October 22, 1812, she died June 14, 1849. For a few years she taught in various schools, but most of her life was spent in the family home. This earliest extant letter to a member of the Thoreau family was written while Helen was in Taunton, where her maternal relatives the Dunbars lived. Sanborn identifies the recipient (Familiar Letters of Thoreau, p. 12). Emerson first intended to include the letter in his collection, but at the last minute dropped it out. MS., Berg, copy in Emerson's hand.*

To JOHN THOREAU

Musketaquid two hundred and two summers—two moons—eleven suns since the coming of the Pale Faces. Tahatawan—Sachimausan—to his brother sachem—Hopeful—of Hopewell—hoping that he is well.

Brother, it is many suns that I have not seen the print of thy moccasins by our council fire, the Great Spirit has blown more leaves from the trees and many clouds from the land of snows have visited our lodge—the earth has become hard like a frozen buffalo skin, so that the trampling of many herds is like the Great Spirit's thunder—the grass on the great fields is like the old man of eight winters—and the small song-sparrow prepares for his flight to the land whence the summer comes.

Brother—I write thee these things because I know that thou lovest the Great Spirit's creatures, and wast wont to sit at thy lodge door—when the maize was green—to hear the bluebird's song. So shalt thou in the land of spirits, not only find good hunting grounds and sharp arrowheads—but much music of birds.

Brother. I have been thinking how the Pale Faces have taken away our lands—and was a woman. You are fortunate to have pitched your wigwam nearer to the great salt lake, where the pale-Face can never plant corn.

Brother—I need not tell thee how we hunted on the lands of the Dundees—a great war-chief never forgets the bitter taunts of his ene-

mies. Our young men called for strong water—they painted their faces and dug up the hatchet. But their enemies the Dundees were women—they hastened to cover their hatchets with wampum. Our braves are not many—our enemies took a few strings from the heap their fathers left them, and our hatchets were buried.—But not Tahatawan's—his heart is of rock when the Dundees sing—his hatchet cuts deep into the Dundee braves.

Brother—there is dust on my moccasins—I have journeyed to the White lake in the country of the Ninares. The Long-knife has been there—like a woman I paddled his war-canoe. But the spirits of my fathers were angered.—the waters were ruffled and the Bad Spirit troubled the air.

The hearts of the *Lee-vites* are gladdened—the young Peacock has returned to his lodge by Nawshawtuck. He is the medicine of his tribe, but his heart is like the dry leaves when the whirlwind breathes. He has come to help choose new chiefs for the tribe in the great council house when two suns are past.—There is no seat for Tahatawan in the council-house. He lets the squaws talk—his voice is heard above the warwhoop of his tribe, piercing the hearts of his foes—his legs are stiff, he cannot sit.

Brother, art thou waiting for spring that the *geese* may fly low over thy wigwam? Thy arrows are sharp, thy bow is strong. Has Anawan killed all the eagles? The crows fear not the winter. Tahatawan's eyes are sharp—he can track a snake in the grass, he knows a friend from a foe—he welcomes a friend to his lodge though the ravens croak.

Brother hast thou studied much in the medicine books of the Pale-Faces? Dost thou understand the long talk of the great medicine whose words are like the music of the mocking bird? But our chiefs have not ears to hear him—they listen like squaws to council of old men—they understand not his words. But Brother, he never danced the war-dance, nor heard the warwhoop of his enemies. He was a squaw—he staid by the wigwam when the braves were out, and tended the tame buffaloes.

Fear not, the Dundees have faint hearts, and much wampum. When the grass is green on the great fields, and the small titmouse returns again we will hunt the buffalo together.

Our old men say they will send the young chief of the Karlisles who lives in the green wigwam and is a great medicine, that his words may

be heard in the long talk which the wise men are going to hold at Shawmut by the salt-lake. He is a great talk—and will not forget the enemies of his tribe.

14th sun.

The fire has gone out in the council house. The words of our old men have been like the vaunts of the Dundees. The Eaglebeak was moved to talk like a silly Pale-Face, and not as becomes a great war-chief in a council of braves. The young Peacock is a woman among braves—he heard not the words of the old men—like a squaw, he looked at his medicine paper. The young chief of the green wigwam has hung up his moccasins, he will not leave his tribe till after the buffalo have come down on to the plains.

Brother this is a long talk—but there is much meaning to my words. they are not like the thunder of canes when the lightning smites them. Brother I have just heard *thy talk* and am well pleased thou are getting to be a great medicine.

The Great Spirit confound the enemies of thy tribe.

Tahatawan

his mark



*It is clear that Thoreau always admired and loved his elder brother John, whose tragic death from lockjaw in 1842 left a deep impression on him. This letter, written in what is supposedly conventionalized Indian dialect, gives a sidelight on the brothers' interest in Indian lore. Thoreau writes as Tahatawan, the mythical(?) sachen (according to Sanborn, Familiar Letters of Thoreau, p. 19) of the Musketaquid or Concord River.*

*Sanborn has furnished the following annotations: "The White lake in the country of the Ninares" is White Pond in the district called Nine-Acre Corner; the "Lee-vites" were a family living on Lee's Hill or Nashawtuck, where the old Tahatawan lived at times before the English settled in Concord in September 1635; the "real date" of this letter is November 11-14, 1837, and between those two days the Massa-*

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*chusetts state election was held; the council house was the Boston State House, to which the Concord voters were electing deputies; "Eagle-Beak" was doubtless Samuel Hoar, Concord's leading citizen; the "great medicine whose words are like the music of the mocking bird" may have been the mellifluous but rather shallow orator Edward Everett; and the "young chief of the Karlisles" was Albert Nelson, son of a Carlisle physician, who began to practice law in Concord in 1836. MS., Berg.*

TO ORESTES BROWNSON

Concord Dec 30th 1837.

Dear Sir—

I have never ceased to look back with interest, not to say satisfaction, upon the short six weeks which I passed with you. They were an era in my life—the morning of a new *Lebenstag*. They are to me as a dream that is dreamt, but which returns from time to time in all its original freshness. Such a one as I would dream a second and a third time, and then tell before breakfast.

I passed a few hours in the city, about a month ago, with the intention of calling on you, but not being able to ascertain, from the directory or other sources, where you had settled, was fain to give up the search and return home.

My apology for this letter is to ask your assistance in obtaining employment. For, say what you will, this frostbitten 'forked carrot' of a body must be fed and clothed after all. It is ungrateful, to say the least, to suffer this much abused case to fall into so dilapidated a condition that every northwester may luxuriate through its chinks and crevices, blasting the kindly affections it should shelter, when a few clouts would save it. Thank heaven, the toothache occurs often enough to remind me that I must be out patching the roof occasionally, and not be always keeping up a blaze upon the hearth within, with my German and metaphysical cat-sticks.

But my subject is not postponed *sine die*. I seek a situation as

teacher of a small school, or assistant in a large one, or, what is more desirable, as private tutor in a gentleman's family.

Perhaps I should give some account of myself. I would make education a pleasant thing both to the teacher and the scholar. This discipline, which we allow to be the end of life, should not be one thing in the schoolroom, and another in the street. We should seek to be fellow students with the pupil, and we should learn of, as well as with him, if we would be most helpful to him. But I am not blind to the difficulties of the case; it supposes a degree of freedom which rarely exists. It hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive the full import of that word—Freedom—not a paltry Republican freedom, with a *posse comitatus* at his heels to administer it in doses as to a sick child—but a freedom proportionate to the dignity of his nature—a freedom that shall make him feel that he is a man among men, and responsible only to that Reason of which he is a particle, for his thoughts and his actions.

I have even been disposed to regard the cowhide as a nonconductor. Methinks that, unlike the electric wire, not a single spark of truth is ever transmitted through its agency to the slumbering intellect it would address. I mistake, it may teach a truth in physics, but never a truth in morals.

I shall be exceedingly grateful if you will take the trouble to inform me of any situation of the kind described that you may hear of. As referees I could mention Mr Emerson—Mr [Samuel] Hoar—and Dr [Ezra] Ripley.

I have perused with pleasure the first number of the 'Boston Review.' I like the spirit of independence which distinguishes it. It is high time that we knew where to look for the expression of *American* thought. It is vexatious not to know beforehand whether we shall find our account in the perusal of an article. But the doubt speedily vanishes, when we can depend upon having the genuine conclusions of a single reflecting man.

Excuse this cold business letter. Please remember me to Mrs Brownson, and don't forget to make mention to the children of the stern pedagogue that was—

[Sincerely and truly yours,  
Henry D. Thoreau.]

P. S. I add this postscript merely to ask if I wrote this formal epistle. It absolutely freezes my fingers.

*Brownson was a vigorous and aggressive minister who believed that moral reform should be accompanied by political reform. Without, he affirmed, changing his basic position, he went through several religious conversions before ending as a Roman Catholic. He was a social radical in his early thirties when Thoreau came to stay at his house late in 1835. Thoreau had been allowed a brief leave of absence from his studies at Harvard that he might teach school for a term and make a little money. Brownson was living in Canton, Massachusetts, and Thoreau was sent there to see about an opening. He was interviewed and recommended by Brownson, whose children were attending the Canton school, and Brownson liked him so well that he took him into his home. Brownson edited the Boston Quarterly Review. MS., University of Notre Dame Library; closing salutation missing from manuscript and copied from printed text in Henry F. Brownson's Orestes A. Brownson's Early Life, pp. 204-6.*