

1838

The House of Representatives, resolutely closing its eyes to the future, resolved to receive no more antislavery petitions. The *Great Western*, first steamship built for transatlantic service, left Bristol on its maiden voyage April 8 and docked at New York April 23. Under the will of John Smithson half a million dollars was paid into the United States Treasury for the founding of the Smithsonian Institution. (Congress was to be surprisingly tardy in using the money.) Chief Black Hawk died in Iowa. A treaty of commerce and navigation was signed with Sardinia. Every railroad in our country was constituted a post route. The banks, after some bitter disagreements, decided to resume specie payments. Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, of the Navy, in command of a fleet of six vessels, was commissioned to explore the Pacific Ocean and the southern seas.

In need of work and looking for it, Thoreau joined with his brother John to open a private school for small boys. It was housed for a short time on the site of the present Concord Public Library. Henry taught the children classics, mathematics, and nature study. He made his first trip to Maine. He found time to lecture before the Concord Lyceum; his first lecture was called "Society." To judge by the scraps preserved, it was characteristically critical. In his *Journal* he wrote some original verse, quoted from the classics, reflected on life, and mourned the loss of a tooth.

To JOHN THOREAU

Concord, February 10, 1838.

Dear John,—

Dost expect to elicit a spark from so dull a steel as myself, by that flinty subject of thine? Truly, one of your copper percussion caps would have fitted this nail-head better.

Unfortunately, the "Americana" has hardly two words on the subject. The process is very simple. The stone is struck with a mallet so as to produce pieces sharp at one end, and blunt at the other. These are laid upon a steel line (probably a chisel's edge), and again struck with the mallet, and flints of the required size are broken off. A skillful workman may make a thousand in a day.

So much for the "Americana." Dr. Jacob Bigelow in his "Technology" says, "Gunflints are formed by a skillful workman, who breaks them out with a hammer, a roller, and steel chisel, with small, repeated strokes."

Your ornithological commission shall be executed. When are you coming home?

Your affectionate brother,  
Henry D. Thoreau.

Text, *Familiar Letters of Thoreau*, pp. 20–21.

To JOHN THOREAU

Concord, March 17th 1838

Dear John,

Your box of relics came safe to hand, but was speedily deposited on the carpet I assure you. What could it be? Some declared it must be Taunton herrings just nose it sir. So down we went onto our knees and commenced smelling in good earnest, now horizontally from this corner to that, now perpendicularly from the carpet up, now diagonally, and finally with a sweeping movement describing the entire circumference. But it availed not. Taunton herring would not be smelled. So we e'en proceed[ed] to open it *vi et chisel*. What an array of nails! Four nails make a quarter four quarters a yard,—i faith this isn't cloth measure. Blaze away old boy, clap in another wedge, then!—There! softly she begins to gape—just give that old stickler with a black hat on a hoist. Aye! Well [sic] pare his nails for him. Well done old fellow there's a breathing hole for you. "Drive it in," cries one, "rip it off," cries another. Be easy I say. What's done, may be undone Your richest veins don't lie nearest the surface. Suppose we sit down and enjoy the prospect, for who knows but we may be disappointed? When they opened Pandora's box, all the contents escaped except hope, but in this case hope is uppermost and will be the first to escape when the box is opened. However the general voice was for kicking the coverlid off.

The relics have been arranged numerically on a table. When shall we set up housekeeping? Miss Ward thanks you for her share of the spoils, also accept many thanks from your humble servant "for yourself."

I have a proposal to make. Suppose by the time you are released, we should start in company for the West and there either establish a school jointly, or procure ourselves separate situations. Suppose moreover you should get ready to start previous to leaving Taunton, to save time. Go I must at all events. Dr Jarvis enumerated nearly a dozen schools which I could have—all such as would suit you equally well. I wish you would write soon about this. It is high season to start. The canals are now open, and travelling comparatively cheap. I think I can borrow the cash in this town. There's nothing like trying

Brigham wrote you a few words on the cig[ar] which father took the liberty to read, with the advice and consent of the family. He wishes you

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to send him those [numbers] of the library of health received since—38, if you are in Concord, othe[rw]ise, he says, you need not trouble you[rse]lf about it at present. [H]e is in C and enjoying better health than usual. But one number, and that you have, has been received.

The bluebirds made their appearance the 14th day of March—robins and pigeons have also been seen. Mr. E[mer]son has put up the bluebird box in due form.

All send their love. From

Y'r aff. brother  
H. D. Thoreau

*John, still in Taunton, had shipped to Concord a box of Indian relics (Thoreau's Journal, I, 454). Miss Prudence Ward was a boarder in the Thoreau household. Dr. Edward Jarvis, according to Sanborn (Familiar Letters of Thoreau, p. 23), was born in Concord in 1803 and went to Louisville in April 1837. He knew the Thoreau boys well and gave them good hopes of success in Ohio or Kentucky as teachers. But their plan was never carried through. Since Brigham was a common name in Concord, no specific identification can well be made. The Library of Health was probably the Boston periodical published from 1837 to 1843. Emerson in his Journals (IX, 360) says of the bluebird house: "John Thoreau, Jr., one day put up a bluebird box on my barn,—fifteen years ago, it must be,—and there it is still with every summer a melodious family in it, adorning the place and singing his praises." MS., Huntington. Words and letters torn from the manuscript in the third from the last paragraph have been replaced within brackets.*

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From JOSIAH QUINCY

Sir,—

The school is at Alexandria; the students are said to be young men well advanced in ye knowledge of ye Latin and Greek classics; the requisitions are, qualification and a person who has had experience in

*school keeping.* Salary \$600 a year, besides washing and Board; duties to be entered on ye 5th or 6th of May. If you choose to apply, I will write as soon as I am informed of it. State to me your experience in school keeping.

Yours,  
Josiah Quincy.

*Josiah Quincy, the president of Harvard, came to Thoreau's aid in his quest for a school. He first wrote a letter of recommendation (Sanborn's Henry D. Thoreau, p. 61):*

Harvard University, Cambridge, March 26, 1838.

To Whom It May Concern,—

I certify that Henry D. Thoreau, of Concord, in this State of Massachusetts, graduated at this seminary in August, 1837; that his rank was high as a scholar in all the branches, and his morals and general conduct unexceptionable and exemplary. He is recommended as well qualified as an instructor, for employment in any public or private school or private family.

Josiah Quincy, President of Harvard University.

*A few weeks later he followed it with the letter to Thoreau recommending a school in Alexandria, Virginia, which, Sanborn suggests, might have been the Episcopal Theological Seminary there. Miss Prudence Ward, in a letter to her sister on April 13, 1838, comments on the offer: "He is willing to take it . . . if accepted" (Sanborn, The Life of Henry David Thoreau, p. 201); Sanborn dates the letter April 12, 1838. Quite evidently Thoreau's offer was not accepted. Text, Sanborn's Henry D. Thoreau, pp. 61-62.*

To JOHN THOREAU

Concord July 8th 38—

Dear John,

We heard from Helen today and she informs us that you are coming home by the first of August, now I wish you to write, and let me know exactly when your vacation takes place, that I may take one at the same time. I am in school from 8 to 12 in the morning, and from 2 to 4 in the afternoon; after that I read a little Greek or English, or for variety, take a stroll in the fields. We have not had such a year for berries this long time—the earth is actually blue with them. High blu[e]berries, three kinds of low—thimble and rasp-berries, constitute my diet at present. (Take notice—I only diet between meals.) Among my deeds of charity I may reckon the picking of a cherry tree for two helpless single ladies who live under the hill—but i' faith it was robbing Peter to pay Paul—for while I was *exalted* in charity towards them, I had no mercy on my own stomach. Be advised, my love for currants continues. The only addition that I have made of late to my stock of ornithological information—is in the shape, not of a Fring. Melod. but surely a melodious Fringilla—the F. Iuncorum, or rush sparrow. I had long known him by his note but never by name. Report says that Elijah Stearns is going to take the town school.

I have four scholars, and one more engaged. Mr. Fenner left town yesterday. Among occurrences of ill omen, may be mentioned the falling out and cracking of the inscription stone of Concord monument. Mrs. Lowell and children are at Aunt's. Peabody walked up last Wednesday—spent the night, and took a stroll in the woods. Sophia says I mu[st] leave off and pen a few lines for her to Helen. S[o] Good bye. Love from all and among them yr

aff' brother  
H D T

*Here Thoreau is writing about the private school he opened in Concord the month before. His brother John soon joined him in the enterprise. The Sophia referred to is Henry's younger sister; Helen is the older*

one. Augustus Goddard Peabody was the former Harvard classmate who wrote the earliest letter to Thoreau that we have. MS., Iownes. Words mutilated in the last paragraph of the manuscript have been replaced within brackets.

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TO HELEN THOREAU

Concord Oct. 6th—38.

Dear Helen,

I dropped Sophia's letter into the box immediately on taking yours out, else the tone of the former had been changed.

I have no acquaintance with "Cleavelands First Lessons," though I have peeped into his abridged grammar, which I should think very well calculated for beginners, at least, for such as would be likely to wear out one book, before they would be prepared for the abstruser parts of Grammar. Ahem! As no one can tell what was the Roman pronunciation, each nation makes the Latin conform, for the most part, to the rules of its own language; so that with us, of the vowels, only a has a peculiar sound.

In the end of a word of more than one syllable, it is sounded like ah—as pennah, Lydiah Hannah, &c. without regard to case.—but da is never sounded dah because it is a monosyllable.

All terminations in es and plural cases in os, as you know, are pronounced long—as homines (hominēse) dominos (dominōse) or in English Johnny Vose. For information see Adam's Latin Grammar—before the Rudiments This is all law and gospel in the eyes of the world—but remember I am speaking as it were, in the third person, and should sing quite a different tune, if it were I that made the quire. However one must occasionally hang his harp on the willows, and play on the Jew's harp, in such a strange country as this.

One of your young ladies wishes to study Mental Philosophy—hey? well tell her that she has the very best text book that I know of already in her possession. If she do not believe it, then she should have bespoken a better in another world, and not have expected to find one at "Little

and Wilkins'." But if she wishes to know how poor an apology for a Mental Philosophy men have tacked together, synthetically or analytically, in these latter days—how they have squeezed the infinite mind into a compass that would not nonpluss a surveyor of Eastern Lands—making Imagination and Memory to lie still in their respective apartments, like ink stand and wafers in a la[dy's] escritoire—why let her read Locke or Stewart, or Brown. The fact is, Mental Philosophy is very like poverty—which, you know, begins at home; and, indeed, when it goes abroad, it is poverty itself.

Chorus. I should think an abridgment of one of the above authors, or of Abercrombie, would answer her purpose. It may set her a-thinking.

Probably there are many systems in the market of which I am ignorant.

As for themes—say first "Miscellaneous Thoughts"—set one up to a window to note what passes in the street, and make her comments thereon; or let her gaze in the fire, or into a corner where there is a spider's web, and philosophize—moralize—theorize, or what not.

What their hands find to putter about, or their minds to think about,—that let them write about. To say nothing of Advantages or disadvantages—of this, that, or the other. Let them set down their ideas at any given Season—preserving the chain of thought as complete as may be.

This is the style pedagogical.

I am much obliged to you for your piece of information. Knowing your dislike to a sentimental letter I remain

Yr affectionate brother,

H D T

*A sidelight on Thoreau's Transcendental—or pre-Transcendental—ideas is cast by the slighting reference to John Locke, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Brown in this pedagogical letter. Locke became an object of scorn for the Transcendentalists because he stressed the superiority of knowledge acquired through the senses over knowledge acquired from within. The Scottish philosophers Stewart and Brown, however, taught that all of us have a "common sense" that lets us know the truth of some things our five regular senses could never tell us. The Transcendentalists were well agreed that the knowledge from within was superior to, and*

*transcended, any knowledge gained from without.* MS., Berg. Part of a word torn from the fifth paragraph of the manuscript has been replaced within brackets.

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*Note. A belatedly discovered letter of 1838 is printed on page 656.*

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*From* EMERSON

My dear Sir,

Will you not come up to the Cliff this P.M. at any hour convenient to you where our ladies will be greatly gratified to see you & the more they say if you will bring your flute for the echo's sake; though now the wind blows.

R. W. E.

Monday 1 o'clock P.M.

*By February of 1838 Emerson and Thoreau had become friendly; by April they were walking together to the Cliff, that is to say the southern side of Concord's Fair Haven Hill. Their friendship, however, was probably still maturing, as Emerson's formal salutation shows. Indeed, in February of 1839 Emerson will still head a letter to Thoreau "My dear Sir"; and it will take Thoreau almost ten years before he can bring himself to start a letter with Emerson's given name. On February 23, 1848 he will finally write: "Dear Waldo,—For I think I have heard that that is your name." This note of Emerson's was probably written on Monday, November 12, 1838, when H. G. O. Blake, who was to become one of Thoreau's most devoted correspondents, came to visit Emerson. A walk to the Cliff and "social music" were among their activities. Another possible but less likely date, also advanced by Rusk (Emerson Letters, II, 174), is June 29, 1840. MS., Berg.*