

President Van Buren ordered a ten-hour day for government workers, to the announced regret of a number of prominent politicians. We fought the Seminole Indians in Florida. Harrison and John Tyler conducted a remarkably successful log-cabin-and-hard-cider political campaign and defeated Van Buren. S. F. B. Morse introduced photography into America. The population of the United States exceeded 17,000,000—including 14,189,705 whites, 2,487,355 slaves, and 386,293 free Negroes. The craze for phrenology continued. Women's bonnets underwent a decided change; the large flaring brims popular during the past decade were cut back and the bonnets came down rather far over the ears. In our architecture "American Gothic," inspired by Sir Walter Scott's novels, was the fashion. Bronson Alcott moved to Concord.

Thoreau broke into print with a poem about Ellen Sewall's brother, which the Transcendentalist magazine, the *Dial*, published in its July number. Ellen's and Henry's love affair ripened, but early in November—under orders from her father—Ellen wrote to Henry rejecting him. (This letter has unfortunately disappeared.) "I never felt so badly at sending a letter in my life," she maintained. In his *Journal* Thoreau philosophized and wrote about nature, adding some obscure personal allusions every now and then. Margaret Fuller, who was editing the *Dial*, rejected Thoreau's essay "The Service" in December. "Yet I hope you will give it me again," was the suggestion she added.

TO HELEN THOREAU

Concordiae, Dec. Kal. Feb. AD. MDCCCXL.

Care Soror,

Est magnus acervus nivis ad limina, et frigus intolerabile intus. Coelum ipsum ruit, credo, et terram operit. Sero stratum linquo et maturè repeto; in fenestris multa pruina prospectum absumit, et hinc miser scribo, non currente calamo, nam digiti mentesque torpescunt. Canerem cum Horatio, si vox non faucibus haeserit—

"Vides, ut altâ stet nive candidum  
*Nawshawtu*, nec jam sustineant onus  
 Silvae laborantes, geluque  
 Flumina constiterint acuto  
 Dissolve frigus, ligna super foco  
 Large reponens; etc."

Sed olim, Musâ mutatâ, et laetiore plectro,

—"neque jam stabulis gaudet pecus, aut arator igni,  
 Nec prata canis albicant pruinis,  
 Jam Cytherea chorus ducit Venus, imminente lunâ;"

Quum turdus ferrugineus ver reduxerit, tu, spero, linques curas scholasticas, et negotio religato, desipere in loco audebis, aut mecum inter inter sylvas, aut super scopulos Pulchri-Portus, aut in cymba super lacum Waldensem, mulcens fluctus manu, aut speciem miratus sub undas.

Bulwerius est mihi nomen incognitum, unus ex ignobile vulgo, nec refutandus nec laudandus. Certe alicui nonnullam honorem habeo qui insanabili Cacoëthe scribendi teneatur.

Species flagrantis Lexingtonis non somnia deturbat? At non Vulcanum Neptunumque culpemus cum superstitioso grege. Natura curat animalculis aequè ac hominibus; cum serena, tum procellosa amica est.

Si amas historiam et fortia facta heroûm non deponere Rollin, precor, ne Clio offendas nunc, nec illa det veniam olim.

Quos libros Latinos legis? legis, inquam, non studes. Beatus qui potest suos libellos tractare et saepe perlegere sine metu domini urgentis! ab otio injurioso procul est; suos amicos et vocare et dimittere quandocumque velit potest. Bonus liber opus est nobilissimum hominis! Hinc ratio non modo cur legeres sed cur tu quoque scriberes. Nec lectores carent; ego sum. Si non librum meditaris, libellum certê. Nihil posteris proderit te spirâsse et vitam nunc lenitè nunc asperè egisse, sed cogitâsse praecipue et scripsisse.

Vereor ne tibi pertaesum hujus epistolae sit; Necnon alma lux caret,

“Majoresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae.”

Quamobrem vale, imò valetè, et requiescatis placidè Sorores. [M]emento scribere.

H. D. Thoreaus.

Care Sophia,

Samuel Niger crebris aegrotationibus, quae agilitatem et aequum animum abstulère, obnoxius est; iis temporibus ad cellam descendit et [multas horas (ibi) manet.

Flores, ah crudelis pruina! parvo leti discrimine sunt. Cactus frigore ustus est, gerania vero adhuc vigent.

Conventus sociabiles hac hieme reconstituti fuere. Conveniunt ad meum domum mense quarto vel quinto, ut tu hic esse possis. Matertera Sophia cum nobis remanet; quando urbem revertet non scio. Gravedine etiamnum, sed non tam aegre, laboramus.]

Adolescentula E. White apud pagum paulisper moratur. Memento scribere intra duas hebdomedas.

Te valere desiderium est  
Tui Matris C. Thoreaus.

Amanuense, H. D. T.

[P. S. Epistolam die solus proxima expectamus.]

MS., Morgan; *bracketed portions are from Familiar Letters of Thoreau, pp. 32-33. The manuscript is torn and a portion of the original letter missing. The postscript should appear on the manuscript, but does not:*

*whether Sanborn found an extra scrap of paper originally appended to the manuscript is not known. Sanborn translated this letter in his edition of Familiar Letters of Thoreau. His translation, with a few corrections, follows:*

Concord, January 21, 1840.

Dear Sister,

There is a huge snowdrift at the door, and the cold inside is intolerable. The very sky is coming down, I guess, and covering up the ground. I turn out late in the morning, and go to bed early; there is thick frost on the windows, shutting out the view; and here I write in pain, for fingers and brains are numb. I would chant with Horace, if my voice did not stick in my throat,—

See how Nashawtuck, deep in snow,  
Stands glittering, while the bending woods  
Scarce bear their burden, and the floods  
Feel arctic winter stay their flow

Pile on the firewood, melt the cold,  
Spare nothing, etc.

But soon, changing my tune, and with a cheerfuller note, I'll say,—

No longer the flock huddles up in the stall, the plowman  
bends over the fire,  
No longer frost whitens the meadow;  
But the goddess of love, while the moon shines above,  
Sets us dancing in light and in shadow.

When Robin Redbreast brings back the springtime, I trust that you will lay your school-duties aside, cast off care, and venture to be gay now and then, roaming with me in the woods, or climbing the Fairhaven cliffs,—or else, in my boat on Walden, let the water kiss your hand, or gaze at your image in the wave.

Bulwer is to me a name unknown,—one of the unnoticed crowd, attracting neither blame nor praise. To be sure, I hold any one in some esteem who is helpless in the grasp of the writing demon.

Does not the image of the Lexington afire trouble your dreams? But

we may not, like the superstitious mob, blame Vulcan or Neptune. Nature takes as much care for little animals as for mankind; first she is a serene friend, then a stormy friend.

If you like history, and the exploits of the brave, don't give up Rollin, I beg; thus would you displease Clio, who might not forgive you hereafter. What Latin are you reading? I mean *reading*, not studying. Blessed is the man who can have his library at hand, and oft peruse the books, without the fear of a taskmaster! he is far enough from harmful idleness, who can call in and dismiss these friends when he pleases. An honest book's the noblest work of Man. There's a reason, now, not only for your reading, but for writing something, too. You will not lack readers,—here am I, for one. If you cannot compose a volume, then try a tract. It will do the world no good, hereafter, if you merely exist, and pass life smoothly or roughly; but to have thoughts, and write them down, that helps greatly.

I fear you will tire of this epistle; the light of day is dwindling, too,—

“And longer fall the shadows of the hills.”

Therefore, good-by; fare ye well, and sleep in quiet, both my sisters! Don't forget to write.

H. D. Thoreau.

Dear Sophia,

Sam Black (the cat) is liable to frequent attacks that impair his agility and good-nature; at such times he goes down cellar, and stays many hours. Your flowers—O, the cruel frost! are all but dead; the cactus is withered by cold, but the geraniums yet flourish. The Sewing Circles have been revived this winter; they meet at our house in April or May, so that you may then be here. Your Aunt Sophia remains with us,—when she will return to the city I don't know. We still suffer from heavy colds, but not so much. Young Miss E. White is staying in the village a little while. Don't forget to write within two weeks.

That you may enjoy good health is the prayer of

Your mother,  
C. Thoreau.

H.D.T. was the scribe.

P.S. We expect a letter next Sunday.

[1840]

*Helen was teaching in Roxbury. Nashawtuck is the largest hill near the center of Concord. The steamer Lexington was destroyed by fire in Long Island Sound January 13, 1840, with a loss of many lives. Aunt Sophia Dunbar was Thoreau's mother's sister and a resident of Boston. The book referred to is Ancient History by Charles Rollin.*

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To HELEN THOREAU

Concord, June 13, 1840.

Dear Helen,—

That letter to John, for which you had an opportunity doubtless to substitute a more perfect communication, fell, as was natural, into the hands of his “transcendental brother,” who is his proxy in such cases, having been commissioned to acknowledge and receipt all bills that may be presented. But what's in a name? Perhaps it does not matter whether it be John or Henry. Nor will those same six months have to be altered, I fear, to suit his case as well. But methinks they have not passed entirely without intercourse, provided we have been sincere though humble worshipers of the same virtue in the mean time. Certainly it is better that we should make ourselves quite sure of such a communion as this by the only course which is completely free from suspicion,—the coincidence of two earnest and aspiring lives,—than run the risk of a disappointment by relying wholly or chiefly on so meagre and uncertain a means as speech, whether written or spoken, affords. How often, when we have been nearest each other bodily, have we really been farthest off! Our tongues were the witty foils with which we fenced each other off. Not that we have not met heartily and with profit as members of one family, but it was a small one surely, and not that other human family. We have met frankly and without concealment ever, as befits those who have an instinctive trust in one another, and the scenery of whose outward lives has been the same, but never as prompted by an earnest and affectionate desire to probe deeper our mutual natures. Such intercourse, at least, if it has ever been, has not condescended to the vulgarities of oral communication, for the ears are

provided with no lid as the eye is, and would not have been deaf to it in sleep. And now glad am I, if I am not mistaken in imagining that some such transcendental inquisitiveness has traveled post *thither*,—for, as I observed before, where the bolt hits, thither was it aimed,—any arbitrary direction notwithstanding.

Thus much, at least, our *kindred* temperament of mind and body—and long *family-arity*—have done for us, that we already find ourselves standing on a solid and natural footing with respect to one another, and shall not have to waste time in the so often unavailing endeavor to arrive fairly at this simple ground.

Let us leave trifles, then, to accident; and politics, and finance, and such gossip, to the moments when diet and exercise are cared for, and speak to each other deliberately as out of one infinity into another,—you there in time and space, and I here. For beside this relation, all books and doctrines are no better than gossip or the turning of a spit.

Equally to you and Sophia, from

Your affectionate brother,  
H. D. Thoreau.

*Helen was still teaching school in nearby Roxbury and, according to Sanborn, was apparently being assisted by Sophia Thoreau. Text, Familiar Letters of Thoreau, pp. 37–39.*

To?

Concord June 20th 1840.

Dear Sir,

I have made inquiry of sundry songlovers and songwrights in the neighborhood, with a view to your proposals, with what result, favorable or unfavorable, will appear. Mr. Wood pronounces in his cool experienced way that the scholars will not be forthcoming—for why? The town or parish contemplate a school the next winter which should be public, and open equally to old and young—learned and unlearned. The people, he says, have been accustomed to look to the parish for

these things, and to them a dollar even has lost some of its weight when it has passed once through the assessors' hands.

Mr Whiting, the Superintendent of the Sabbath School, affirms that there are whole platoons of children, whom the parish would be glad to have in a condition to do singing, but have never yet accomplished the thing by voting it, or once correctly pitching the tune. So he stands ready to render smooth official assistance by public notice to the school—and the like.

But of what avail all this ballancing of reasons—depend upon it nothing good was ever done in accordance with, but rather in direct opposition to—advice. Have you not the sympathy of parish votes—that it will have singing? Or rather have you not the assurance of your own resolution that you will give it them at any rate?

Mr. Wood then, who more than any man has gaged all throats—Juvenile and senile—in the vicinity—raises the cold water bucket.

Mr. Whiting—and Nelson and others rely mainly on the incalculable force there is in a man—who has sternly resolved to do what is in him to do,—the phial of laudanum—and nodding poppy—and Concord river running nine times round—to the contrary notwithstanding.

At present I read in the faces of the children neither encouragement nor discouragement they having had no hint of the future.

Yrs to command  
Henry D. Thoreau.

MS., Massachusetts Historical Society; *previously unpublished.*

From MARGARET FULLER

1st Dec.

I am to blame for so long detaining your manuscript. But my thoughts have been so engaged that I have not found a suitable hour to reread it as I wished till last night. This second reading only confirms my impression from the first. The essay is rich in thoughts, and I should

be *pained* not to meet it again. But then the thoughts seem to me so out of their natural order, that I cannot read it through without *pain*. I never once feel myself in a stream of thought, but seem to hear the grating of tools on the mosaic. It is true, as Mr. E[merison] says, that essays not to be compared with this have found their way into the Dial. But then these are more unassuming in their tone, and have an air of quiet good-breeding which induces us to permit their presence. Yours is so rugged that it ought to be commanding. Yet I hope you will give it me again, and if you see no force in my objections disregard them.

S. M. Fuller

*Direct and to the point, this letter from Margaret Fuller, probably from Jamaica Plain, accompanied the returned manuscript of Thoreau's essay on "The Service," which he had submitted for publication in the Dial. The essay was finally published in 1902 by Charles E. Goodspeed of Boston. Sanborn's Life of Henry David Thoreau dates the letter 1840. Since the manuscript of "The Service" is itself dated July 1840, Sanborn is probably correct. MS., Morgan.*