

1850

Life expectancy in Massachusetts was thirty-eight years for the male babies born this year and forty for the female. Nine of the slaveholding states met in convention at Nashville and came out in favor of disunion. A treaty of amity and commerce was signed with Borneo. On the death of President Zachary Taylor, he was succeeded in office by one of the least remembered of American presidents. The decennial census gave the population as 23,191,876—an increase of more than one third over 1840. Only 262 slaves were counted in the North. Flogging was abolished in the Navy and on vessels of commerce, partly through the efforts of Herman Melville, in spite of the fact that several admirals appeared before Congress with the assertion that naval discipline would end the moment the lash was voted away. On March 7 Webster aligned himself with Henry Clay in favor of what is now called the Compromise of 1850; this omnibus bill of concessions to the South kept the Union together for a while longer.

The *Journal* for this year is full, even though eighty-four pages, apparently Thoreau's account of his trip to Canada, are missing. There is little philosophy left, but much naturalizing, with a good deal of lively observation of human nature. Among the best pieces are a sketch of a drunken Dutchman and Thoreau's dry recital of how he had accidentally set fire years earlier to some Concord woods and of the consequences. By now he had become as much of a settled man as he was ever to be. His walking and writing continued, but the writing was seldom superlative. His work as a surveyor took more of his time, and he was not, one would judge, discontent that it did so. Though one or two flibbertigib-

bets were to shout "burnt woods" at him for some years, Thoreau was in general accepted by his townsmen. If they did not praise him, they no longer paused to condemn him as a college graduate too indifferent to his opportunities. The Thoreaus moved to the "Yellow House" on Concord's Main Street. Lecturing and looking for the dead body of Margaret Fuller are two of the various doings the letters for this year are concerned with.

From EMERSON

Saco, Maine, Wednesday 6 Feb

Dear Henry

I was at *South Danvers* on Monday Evening, & promised Mr C. Northend, Secretary of the Lyceum, to invite you for Monday 18th Feb. to read a lecture to his institution. I told him there were two lectures to describe Cape Cod, which interested him & his friends, & they hoped that the two might somehow be rolled into one to give them some sort of complete story of the journey. I hope it will not quite discredit my negotiation if I confess that they heard with joy that Concord people laughed till they cried, when it was read to them. I understand Mr N., that there is a possibility but no probability that his absent colleague of the Lyceum has filled up that evening by an appointment But Mr N. will be glad to hear from you that you will come, & if any cause exist why not, he will immediately reply to you. They will pay your expenses, & \$10.00. You will go from the Salem depot in an omnibus to Mr N.'s house. Do go if you can. Address *Charles Northend, Esq. South Danvers.*

Yours ever
R. W. Emerson.

MS., Berg; *previously unpublished. For dating, see Emerson Letters (IV, 178), where the context of other letters makes 1850 the logical year.*

From EMERSON

Concord, 11 March 1850

Mr Henry D. Thoreau,
My dear Sir,

I leave town tomorrow & must beg you, if any question arises between Mr [Charles] Bartlett & me, in regard to boundary lines, to act as my attorney, & I will be bound by any agreement you shall make. Will you also, if you have opportunity, warn Mr Bartlett, on my part, against burning his woodlot, without having there present a sufficient number of hands to prevent the fire from spreading into my wood,—which, I think, will be greatly endangered, unless much care is used.

Show him too, if you can, where his cutting & his post-holes trench on our line, by *plan* and, so doing, oblige as ever,

Yours faithfully,
R. W. Emerson.

MS., Morgan.

 To H. C. O. BLAKE

Concord, April 3, 1850.

Mr. Blake,—

I thank you for your letter, and I will endeavor to record some of the thoughts which it suggests, whether pertinent or not. You speak of poverty and dependence. Who are poor and dependent? Who are rich and independent? When was it that men agreed to respect the appearance and not the reality? Why should the appearance *appear*? Are we well acquainted, then, with the reality? There is none who does not lie hourly in the respect he pays to false appearance. How sweet it would be to treat men and things, for an hour, for just what they are! We

wonder that the sinner does not confess his sin. When we are weary with travel, we lay down our load and rest by the wayside. So, when we are weary with the burden of life, why do we not lay down this load of falsehoods which we have volunteered to sustain, and be refreshed as never mortal was? Let the beautiful laws prevail. Let us not weary ourselves by resisting them. When we would rest our bodies we cease to support them; we recline on the lap of earth. So, when we would rest our spirits, we must recline on the Great Spirit. Let things alone; let them weigh what they will; let them soar or fall. To succeed in letting only one thing alone in a winter morning, if it be only one poor frozen-thawed apple that hangs on a tree, what a glorious achievement! Methinks it lightens through the dusky universe. What an infinite wealth we have discovered! God reigns, *i. e.*, when we take a liberal view,—when a liberal view is presented us.

Let God alone if need be. Methinks, if I loved him more, I should keep him,—I should keep myself rather,—at a more respectful distance. It is not when I am going to meet him, but when I am just turning away and leaving him alone, that I discover that God is. I say, God. I am not sure that that is the name. You will know whom I mean.

If for a moment we make way with our petty selves, wish no ill to anything, apprehend no ill, cease to be but as the crystal which reflects a ray,—what shall we not reflect! What a universe will appear crystallized and radiant around us!

I should say, let the Muse lead the Muse,—let the understanding lead the understanding, though in any case it is the farthest forward which leads them both. If the Muse accompany, she is no muse, but an amusement. The Muse should lead like a star which is very far off; but that does not imply that we are to follow foolishly, falling into sloughs and over precipices, for it is not foolishness, but understanding, which is to follow, which the Muse is appointed to lead, as a fit guide of a fit follower.

Will you live? or will you be embalmed? Will you live, though it be astride of a sunbeam; or will you repose safely in the catacombs for a thousand years? In the former case, the worst accident that can happen is that you may break your neck. Will you break your heart, your soul, to save your neck? Necks and pipe-stems are fated to be broken. Men make a great ado about the folly of demanding too much of life (or of eternity?), and of endeavoring to live according to that demand. It is much ado about nothing. No harm ever came from that quarter. I am

not afraid that I shall exaggerate the value and significance of life, but that I shall not be up to the occasion which it is. I shall be sorry to remember that I was there, but noticed nothing remarkable,—not so much as a prince in disguise; lived in the golden age a hired man; visited Olympus even, but fell asleep after dinner, and did not hear the conversation of the gods. I lived in Judæa eighteen hundred years ago, but I never knew that there was such a one as Christ among my contemporaries! If there is anything more glorious than a congress of men a-framing or amending of a constitution going on, which I suspect there is, I desire to see the morning papers. I am greedy of the faintest rumor, though it were got by listening at the key-hole. I will dissipate myself in that direction.

I am glad to know that you find what I have said on Friendship worthy of attention. I wish I could have the benefit of your criticism; it would be a rare help to me. Will you not communicate it?

"What I have said on Friendship" was in all probability the essay on friendship imbedded in the Wednesday chapter of A Week. Text, Familiar Letters of Thoreau, pp. 213-16.

From C. H. DUNBAR

Haverhill May 1st 1850

Cousin H.:-

You probably think ere this I have forgotten to answer your letter but it is not so. I have waited untill now that I might send some definite word about that Job I spoke of. You will recollect I told you one of the owners lived in Cincinnati. He has come on and wishes to have the farm immediately surveyed and laid into house lots. There is some twenty acres of it. So you see it is *quite a Job* and there will be probably some small jobs. Mr. Emerson will wait untill you come which must be as soon as Thursday. I hope it will be so you can come

[1850]

as I have some Jobs to do on the lots as soon as laid out & I think we both can make a good living at it Let me see you if possible if not drop a line that we may not be in suspense. All well as usual. Give my best respects to all and say to them we should be happy to see them at Haverhill

Yours
C H Dunbar

Charles Dunbar was Thoreau's cousin in nearby Haverhill. That Thoreau accepted the offer is indicated by the many Haverhill entries in his Journal for May 1850. MS., Harvard; previously unpublished.

To H. C. O. BLAKE

Concord May 28 1850

Mr Blake,

I "never found any contentment in the life which the newspapers record"—any thing of more value than the cent which they cost. Contentment in being covered with dust an inch deep! We who walk the streets and hold time together, are but the refuse of ourselves, and that life is for the shells of us—of our body & our mind—for our scurf—a thoroughly *scurvy* life. It is coffee made of coffee-grounds the twentieth time, which was only coffee the first time—while the living water leaps and sparkles by our doors. I know some who in their charity give their coffee grounds to the poor! We demanding news, and putting up with *such* news! Is it a new convenience or a new accident or rather a new perception of the truth that we want?

You say that ["the serene hours in which Friendship, Books, Nature, Thought, seem above primary considerations, visit you but faintly"—Is not the attitude of expectation somewhat divine?—a sort of home-made divineness? Does it not compel a kind of sphere music to attend

on it? And do not its satisfactions merge at length by insensible degrees in the enjoyment of the thing expected?

What if I should forget to write about my not writing. It is not worth the while to make that a theme. It is as if I had written every day— It is as if I had never written before— I wonder that you think so much about it, for not writing is the most like writing in my case of anything I know.

Why will you not relate to me your dream? That would be to realize it somewhat. You tell me that you dream, but not what you dream.— I can *guess* what comes to pass. So do the frogs dream. Would that I knew what. I have never found out whether they are awake or asleep—whether it is day or night with them.

I am preaching, mind you, to bare walls, that is to myself; and if you have chanced to come in and occupy a pew—do not think that my remarks are directed at you particularly, and so slam the seat in disgust. This discourse was written long before these exciting times.

Some absorbing employment on your higher ground—your upland farm, whither no cartpath leads—but where you mount alone with your hoe—Where the life-ever-lasting grows—you raise a crop which needs not to be brought down into the valley to a market, which you barter for heavenly products.

Do you separate distinctly enough the support of your body from that of your essence? By how distinct a course commonly are these two ends attained! Not that they should not be attained by one & the same means—that indeed is the rarest success—but there is no half and half about it.

I shall be glad to read my lecture to a small audience in Worcester, such as you describe, and will only require that my expenses be paid. If only the parlor be large enough for an echo, and the audience will embarrass themselves with hearing as much as the lecturer would otherwise embarrass himself with reading. But I warn you that this is no better calculated for a promiscuous audience than the last two which I read to you. It requires in every sense a concordant audience

I will come on Saturday next and spend Sunday with you, if you wish it. Say so if you do.

Drink deep or taste not of the Pierian spring. Be not deterred by melancholy on the path which leads to immortal health & joy. When they tasted of the water of the river over which they were to go, they

[1850]

thought that tasted a little bitterish to the palate, but it proved sweeter when it was down.

H D T

MS., C. Waller Barrett.

 To HORACE GREELEY

Wedns. Morn.

Dear Sir—

If Wm E Channing calls—will you say that I am gone to Fire-Island by cars at 9 this morn. via Thompson. with Wm. H. Channing

Yrs
Henry D. Thoreau

It is clear that when the shocking news of Margaret Fuller Ossoli's death reached Concord Emerson asked Thoreau to hurry to Fire Island, where the ship bringing Margaret and her husband and child to America had been wrecked. Emerson said in a letter of July 23 to Greeley that he had charged Thoreau to gather all the news of the wreck that could be got at the beach and to recover any of Margaret's manuscripts or other property that could be salvaged. Her ship, however, had been wrecked on the 19th; so that by the time the report reached Concord and Thoreau arrived on his sad errand it was the 24th and there was little to salvage. MS., Berg; the manuscript, undated, is attached to the letter from Emerson to Greeley; but Thoreau set out for Fire Island on the 24th, a Wednesday.

To EMERSON

Fire Island Beach Monday morn. July 25 '50

Dear Friend,

I am writing this at the house of Smith Oakes, within one mile of the wreck. He is the one who rendered the most assistance. Wm H Channing came down with me, but I have not seen Arthur Fuller—nor Greeley, nor Spring. Spring & Sumner were here yesterday, but left soon. Mr Oakes & wife tell me (all the survivors came or were brought dir[ec]tly to their house) that the ship struck at 10 minutes after 4 A M. and all hands, being mostly in their night clothes made haste to the fore-castle—the water coming in [at o]nce. There they remained the, passengers *in* the fore-castle, the crew *above* it doing what they could. Every wave lifted the fore-castle roof & washed over those within. The first man got ashore at 9. many from 9 to noon—. At flood-tide about 3½ o'clock when the ship broke up entirely—they came out of the fore-castle & Margaret sat with her back to the fore-mast with her hands over her knees—her husband & child already drowned—a great wave came & washed her off. The Steward? had just before taken her child & started for shore; both were drowned.

The broken desk in a bag—containing no very valuable papers—a large black leather trunk—with an upper and under apartment—the upper holding books & papers—A carpet bag probably Ossolis and one of his? shoes—are all the Ossolis' effects known to have been found.

Four bodies remain to be found—the two Ossolis—Horace Sumner—& a sailor.

I have visited the child's grave—Nobody will probably be taken away today.

The wreck is to be sold at auction—excepting the hull—today The mortar would not go off. Mrs Hartz the Captain's wife, told Mrs Oakes that she & Margaret divided their money—& tied up the halves in handkerchiefs around their persons that Margaret took 60 or 70 dol[lars.] Mrs Hartz who can tell all about Margaret up to 11 o'clock on Friday is said to be going to Portland Me. today—She & Mrs Fuller must & probably will come together. The cook, the last to leave, & the Steward? will know the rest. I shall try to see them. In the meanwhile I shall do what I can to recover property & obtain particulars hereabouts. Wm

[1850]

H. Channing—did I write it? has come with me. Arthur Fuller has this moment reached this house. He reached the beach last night—we got here yesterday noon. A good part of the wreck still holds together where she struck, & something may come ashore with her fragments. The last body was found on Tuesday 3 miles west. Mrs Oakes dried the papers which were in the trunk—and she says they appeared to be of various kinds. "Would they cover that table"? a small round one— "They would spread out"—Some were tied up. There were 20 or 30 books in the same half of the trunk. Another, smaller trunk empty, came ashore, but there is no mark on it—She speaks of [Celesta] Pardenas as if she might have been a sort of nurse to the child—I expect to go to Patchogue whence the pilferers must have chiefly come—& advertise &c &c.

MS., Harvard.

To CHARLES SUMNER

Springfield Depot noon July 29th 1850.

Dear Sir,

I left Fire Island Beach on Saturday between nine & ten o'clock A. M. The same morning I saw on the beach, four or five miles west of the wreck, a portion of a human skeleton, which was found the day before, probably from the Elisabeth, but I have not knowledge enough of anatomy to decide *confidently*, as many might, whether it was that of a male or a female. I therefore hired Selah Strong, Keeper of the Light, to bury it simply for the present, and mark the spot, leaving it to future events, or a trustworthy examination, to decide the question.

Yrs in haste
Henry D. Thoreau

P. S. No more bodies had then been found.

In searching Thoreau came across a body that he thought might be that of Horace Sumner, brother of Charles Sumner the famed abolitionist, later senator from Massachusetts. MS., Harvard; previously unpublished.

From CHARLES SUMNER

Boston July 31st 50

My dear Sir,

I desire to thank you for your kindness in writing me with regard to the remains of a human body found on the beach last Saturday.

From what you write & from what I hear from others, it seems impossible to identify them.

If the body of my brother could be found, it would be a great satisfaction to us to bury him with those of his family who have gone before him.

Believe me, dear Sir, faithfully & gratefully Yours,
Charles Sumner

MS., Abernethy (*typescript*); *previously unpublished.*

To H. C. O. BLAKE

Concord, August 9, 1850.

Mr. Blake,—

I received your letter just as I was rushing to Fire Island beach to recover what remained of Margaret Fuller, and read it on the way. That

event and its train, as much as anything, have prevented my answering it before. It is wisest to speak when you are spoken to. I will now endeavor to reply, at the risk of having nothing to say.

I find that actual events, notwithstanding the singular prominence which we all allow them, are far less real than the creations of my imagination. They are truly visionary and insignificant,—all that we commonly call life and death,—and affect me less than my dreams. This petty stream which from time to time swells and carries away the mills and bridges of our habitual life, and that mightier stream or ocean on which we securely float,—what makes the difference between them? I have in my pocket a button which I ripped off the coat of the Marquis of Ossoli, on the seashore, the other day. Held up, it intercepts the light,—an actual button,—and yet all the life it is connected with is less substantial to me, and interests me less, than my faintest dream. Our thoughts are the epochs in our lives: all else is but as a journal of the winds that blew while we were here.

I say to myself, Do a little more of that work which you have confessed to be good. You are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with yourself, without reason. Have you not a thinking faculty of inestimable value? If there is an experiment which you would like to try, try it. Do not entertain doubts if they are not agreeable to you. Remember that you need not eat unless you are hungry. Do not read the newspapers. Improve every opportunity to be melancholy. As for health, consider yourself well. Do not engage to find things as you think they are. Do what nobody else can do for you. Omit to do anything else. It is not easy to make our lives respectable by any course of activity. We must repeatedly withdraw into our shells of thought, like the tortoise, somewhat helplessly; yet there is more than philosophy in that.

Do not waste any reverence on my attitude. I merely manage to sit up where I have dropped. I am sure that my acquaintances mistake me. They ask my advice on high matters, but they do not know even how poorly on 't I am for hats and shoes. I have hardly a shift. Just as shabby as I am in my outward apparel, ay, and more lamentably shabby, am I in my inward substance. If I should turn myself inside out, my rags and meanness would indeed appear. I am something to him that made me, undoubtedly, but not much to any other that he has made.

Would it not be worth while to discover nature in Milton? be native to the universe? I, too, love Concord best, but I am glad when I discover,

in oceans and wildernesses far away, the material of a million Concords: indeed, I am lost, unless I discover them. I see less difference between a city and a swamp than formerly. It is a swamp, however, too dismal and dreary even for me, and I should be glad if there were fewer owls, and frogs, and mosquitoes in it. I prefer ever a more cultivated place, free from miasma and crocodiles. I am so sophisticated, and I will take my choice.

As for missing friends,—what if we do miss one another? have we not agreed on a rendezvous? While each wanders his own way through the wood, without anxiety, ay, with serene joy, though it be on his hands and knees, over rocks and fallen trees, he cannot but be in the right way. There is no wrong way to him. How can he be said to miss his friend, whom the fruits still nourish and the elements sustain? A man who missed his friend at a turn, went on buoyantly, dividing the friendly air, and humming a tune to himself, ever and anon kneeling with delight to study each little lichen in his path, and scarcely made three miles a day for friendship. As for conforming outwardly, and living your own life inwardly, I do not think much of that. Let not your right hand know what your left hand does in that line of business. It will prove a failure. Just as successfully can you walk against a sharp steel edge which divides you cleanly right and left. Do you wish to try your ability to resist distension? It is a greater strain than any soul can long endure. When you get God to pulling one way, and the devil the other, each having his feet well braced,—to say nothing of the conscience sawing transversely,—almost any timber will give way.

I do not dare invite you earnestly to come to Concord, because I know too well that the berries are not thick in my fields, and we should have to take it out in viewing the landscape. But come, on every account, and we will see—one another.

Text, Familiar Letters of Thoreau, pp. 223–26.

[1850]

From JOSIAH PIERCE, JR.

Portland, Oct. 18, 1850.

Dear Sir,

In behalf of its Managing Committee, I have the honor of inviting you to lecture before the "Portland Lyceum" on some Wednesday evening during the next winter. Your former animated and interesting discourse is fresh in the memory of its members, and they are very anxious to have their minds again invigorated, enlivened and instructed by you. If you consent to our request, will you be pleased to designate the time of the winter when you would prefer to come here?

The Managers have been used to offer gentlemen who come here to lecture from a distance equivalent to your own, only the sum of twenty-five dollars, not under the name of pecuniary compensation for the lectures but for traveling expenses—

An early and favorable reply will much oblige us.

With great respect, Your obedient Servant,

Josiah. Pierce, Jr.

Henry D. Thoreau, Esq.

Thoreau had read a portion of Walden as a lecture in Portland in March of 1849. MS., Berg; previously unpublished.

From FRANKLIN FORBES

Clinton Nov 14, 1850

Henry D. Thoreau Esq

Dear Sir

As one of the Committee on Lectures of the Bigelow Mechanic Institute of this town, I wish to ascertain if you will deliver your lecture

on "Cap[e] Cod" before the Institute on either Wednesday Evening of the month of January—

An early answer will much oblige

Yrs respectfully,
Franklin Forbes.

P. S. If you prefer any other lecture of yours to the above mentioned, please name a day on which you can deliver it.

MS., Berg; *previously unpublished.*

TO FRANKLIN FORBES

Concord Nov. 15 1850

Dear Sir,

I shall be happy to lecture before your Institution this winter, but it will be most convenient for me to do so on the 11th of December. If, however, I am confined to the month of January I will choose the first day of it. Will you please inform me as soon as convenient whether I can come any earlier.

Yrs respectfully
Henry D. Thoreau.

Thoreau delivered a lecture on Cape Cod at the Bigelow Mechanic Institute in Clinton on January 1, 1851. MS., Estelle Doheny Collection, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, California (typescript); previously unpublished.

[1850]

From JOSIAH PIERCE, JR.

Portland, Nov. 20th 1850.

Dear Sir,

You may perhaps believe that I am writing to you from Ireland and not from Portland, making a blunder even in the date of the letter, when you read that this is for the purpose of apologizing for and correcting another error—I intended and ought to have designated the evening of January 15th and not of January 8th or 10th, as that on which we hoped to hear a lecture from you.

With the wish that this newly appointed time, the fifteenth of January next, may be equally acceptable to you,

I am With great respect, Yours truly
J. Pierce, Jr

MS., Berg; *previously unpublished.*

From T. W. HIGGINSON

Newburyport, Dec. 3, 1850.

My Dear Sir

I hear with pleasure that you are to lecture in Newburyport this week. Myself & wife are now living in town again, & we shall be very glad to see you at our house, if you like it better than a poor hotel. And you shall go as early as you please on Saturday—which is the great point, I find, with guests, however unflattering to the hosts.

If I do not hear to the contrary I shall expect you, & will meet you at the cars.

Very sincerely yours
T. W. Higginson.

1851

This was the peak year for the immigration of the Irish, whom Thoreau always regarded with interest. Population reports state that more than 221,000 were admitted to the United States during the year. The Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth reached America and began his triumphal tour. He was received with great enthusiasm but soon found that Congressional support and American money were not forthcoming for the cause of Hungarian independence. Henry Clay resigned from Congress. John Audubon and James Fenimore Cooper died. The first electric railroad was established between Washington and nearby Bladensburg, Maryland. The Committee of Vigilance organized itself in San Francisco. Its record of sentences ran: four men hanged, one whipped, fourteen deported, one ordered to leave California, fifteen handed over to the authorities, and forty-one discharged. A Negro named Shadrach was arrested in Boston as a fugitive slave, rescued from jail at night by a mob of colored men, and sent off in safety to Canada.

Thoreau became thirty-four during this year. He had to have some dentistry done and acquired false teeth—to him a strong sign of man's mortality. No Yankee ascetic, though plainly no sensualist either, he thought and wrote about love and marriage. He disliked feminists, however, and complained about having to squire one of them, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, to a lecture. While respectable Boston obeyed the Fugitive Slave Law, his sympathies swung over to the abolitionists, although he was still ready to point out that there were many more forms of slavery than Negro slavery. There were strongly marked trends in his writing for 1851. The year saw no publications but a good deal of composition. The *Journal* is full—full and rich. There are several different kinds of writings in it, and they are all good. Oddly enough, only one letter has been found.