

To Oliver Sparhawk

1834

Mr Sparhawk

Sir

The occupants of Hollis 32¹ would like to have that room painted and whitewashed, also if possible to have a new hearth put in

yours respectfully
Thoreau & Richardson

Correspondent: Oliver Sparhawk (1805-1835), son of Samuel and Elizabeth McKinstry Sparhawk of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, attended Norwich Academy in Norwich, Vermont. He graduated from the school in 1823 and became a businessman in Conway, New Hampshire. Sparhawk later moved to Cambridge, where he kept books for Harvard's treasurer before being appointed steward of the college in 1831, a position he held until his death in June 1835. Sparhawk married Sarah B. Coffin (1809?-1861), daughter of Charles and Dorcas Parker Coffin, in 1834.

¹ T and James Richardson Jr. (1817-1863), one of T's college friends who corresponded with him, were roommates in Harvard's Hollis Hall during the 1834 academic year.

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Editor's Notes

This letter is addressed "Mr O Sparhawk".

PE supplies the year "1834" based on the fact that T and James Richardson Jr. roomed together only during that year.

From Augustus Goddard Peabody

May 30, 1836

Cambridge May 30. 1836.

Dear Thoreau,

After nine days of constant rain, we have some prospect of pleasant weather. I cannot describe my feelings of joy, rapture, and astonishment, but you may have some idea

of the effect produced on me, from the fact that to this circumstance alone, you owe the present letter.¹

I have somewhere seen an essay, to prove that a man's temper depends greatly on the weather; I will not however give the arguments brought forward to prove this important fact for two reasons. Firstly because it appears to me self evident; and secondly because I do'n't intend to write a theme, but a letter.

Strange that any person in his sober senses, should put two such sentences as the above in a letter, but howsoever, "what's done cant be helped"²

Everything goes on here as regular as clock work, and it is as dull as one of Dr Ware's sermons.³ (a very forcible comparison that, you must allow).

The Davy Club⁴ got into a little trouble the week before last, from the following momentous circumstance.

Hen. Williams⁵ gave a lecture on Pyrotechny, and illustrated it with a parcel of fire works he had prepared in the vacation. The report spread through college, that there was to be a "display of fire works," and on the night of their meeting, the Davy room was crowded, and those unfortunate youths who could not get in, stood in the yard round the windows. As you may imagine, there was some slight noise on the occasion. In fact the noise was so slight, that Bowen⁶ heard it at his room in Holworthy.⁷

This worthy, boldly determined to march forth and disperse the "rioters." Accordingly in the midst of a grand display of rockets, et cetera, he step't into the room, and having gazed round him in silent astonishment for the space of two minutes, and hearing various cries of, -Intrusion - Throw him over - Saw his leg off - Pull his wool &c &c he made two or three dignified motions with his hand to gain attention, and then kindly advised us to "retire to our respective rooms." Strange to say he found no one inclined to follow this good advice, and he accordingly thought fit to withdraw.

There is (as perhaps you know) a law against keeping powder in the college buildings.

The effect of "Tutor Bowens" intrusion was evident on the next Monday night, when Williams and Bigelow⁸ were invited to call and see President Quincy,⁹ and owing to the tough reasoning of Bowen, who boldly asserted that "powder was powder", they were each presented with a public admonition.

We had a miniature volcano at Websters¹⁰ lecture the other morning, and the odours therefrom, surpassed all ever produced by Araby the blest.¹¹

Imagine to yourself, all the windows and shutters of the above named lecture room closed, and then if possible stretch your fancy a little farther, and conceive the delightful scent produced by the burning of nearly a bushel of Sulphur, Phospuretted Hydrogen, and other still more pleasant ingredients.

As soon as the burning commenced there was a general rush to the door, and a crowd collected there, running out every half minute to get a breath of fresh air, and then coming in to see the volcano.

"No noise nor nothing."¹²

Bigelow and Dr Bacon¹³ manufactured some "laughing gas," and administered it on the Delta.¹⁴ It was much better than that made by Webster.

Jack Weise¹⁵ took some as usual. King,¹⁶ Freshman, took a bag, and produced surprising effects, merely by running into all the unhappy individuals he met, who seemed by⁸ no means desirous of his company. Wheeler, Joe Allen, and Hildreth,¹⁷ each received a dose. Wheeler proceeded to dance for the amusement of the company, Joe signalized himself by jumping over the Delta fence, and Sam raved about Milton Shakespeare Byron &c. Sam took two doses. It produced great effect on him. He seemed to be as happy as a mortal could desire, talked with Shakespeare, Milton & co, and seemed to be quite at home with them.

It was amusing to trace the connexion of his ideas, and on the whole he afforded greater entertainment than any other person there, it affected him however very strongly, and he did not get over it till he was led off the Delta and carried into Wheelers room; he was well enough however next day.

This letter containeth a strange mixture.

All possible allowance must be made for want of time, not being accustomed to letter writing &c &c.

Hope you are all well, at home.

Yours truly
A. G. Peabody.

Correspondent: Augustus Goddard Peabody (1818-1877), son of Augustus and Miranda Goddard Peabody, graduated from the Harvard Medical School in 1844 and became a doctor in Machias, Maine. In 1856 he married Elizabeth S. Holway (1820-1895), daughter of John and Leonice Crocker Holway.

¹ Illness forced T to withdraw from Harvard on May 21, 1836; thus he missed the rest of the school year.

² A proverbial expression that occurs in many forms dating to classical antiquity.

³ Peabody refers either to Henry Ware Sr. (1764-1845), Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, or to his son Henry Ware Jr. (1794-1843), Professor of Pulpit Eloquence and the Pastoral Care at the Harvard Divinity School. The appointment of the elder Ware provoked a split between liberals and conservatives at Harvard that led to the establishment of the Divinity School. The younger Ware had been minister at Boston's Second Church, where his assistant was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). Peabody's invocation of dullness suggests the elder Ware, whose style was not engaging.

⁴ The Harvard chemistry club, which first met on December 28, 1815, was named for Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829), who first discovered the exhilarating effects of inhaled nitrous oxide.

⁵ Henry Williams Jr. (1816-1901) was the class of 1837 secretary.

⁶ Francis Bowen (1811-1890), an 1833 Harvard graduate, taught philosophy at his alma mater from 1835 to 1839. He later edited the *North American Review*. In 1853 he was appointed the Alford Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. With the publication of his highly negative essay-review of Emerson's *Nature* in the January 1837

issue of the *Christian Examiner and General Review* (pp. 371-385), Bowen became a prominent leader of the conservative wing of the American Unitarians.

⁷ A Harvard dormitory.

⁸ T's classmate Henry Jacob Bigelow (1818-1890) was the son of Dr. Jacob Bigelow and Mary Scollay Bigelow. In addition to the "public admonition" Peabody describes in the letter, Bigelow was dismissed from Harvard from April 24, 1837, to "the Saturday before commencement" that year because "three guns and a quantity of powder, shot, and bullets were found" in his room, and "one of the posts in the room was found perforated with musket bullets" (MH-Ar Faculty Records UAIII 5.5.2.IX, 311). Bigelow later became a doctor, and in 1846 he joined the Massachusetts General Hospital, where he taught and practiced. In October of that year he arranged a demonstration of an operation performed on a patient who had inhaled ether to put him into a deep sleep. The event's success contributed to the acceptance of the administration of ether as an effective and safe method of anesthesia. Bigelow published a number of papers on the subject. In 1848 he married Susan Sturgis (1825-1853), daughter of William and Elizabeth Davis Sturgis of Boston.

⁹ Josiah Quincy (1772-1864) served as Harvard's president from 1829 to 1845. Quincy instituted the unpopular numerical grading system and treated student rebellions harshly, but he succeeded in attracting distinguished men to the faculty and established the Harvard Law School.

¹⁰ John White Webster (1793-1850), son of Redford and Hannah White Webster, graduated from Harvard in 1811 and became a doctor and a professor of chemistry. In 1827 he was named Erving Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy at Harvard. He was hanged in August 1850 for the murder of Dr. George Parkman, a wealthy Boston physician and speculator. Webster had borrowed money from Parkman and killed him in a dispute over a loan.

¹¹ "Araby the blest" is Milton's translation of *Arabia felix*, the Latin name used to describe the southern, fertile part of the Arabian Peninsula. Milton compares the fragrant breezes of Eden to those met by sailors who have rounded the Cape of Good Hope and traveled north of Mozambique, where "off at sea north-east winds blow / Sabean odours from the spicy shore / Of Araby the blest" (vol. 2, *Paradise Lost*, 4.161-163).

¹² An allusion to Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Elder Brother*, 2.4.58-59: "Let me have no Noise, nor nothing to disturb me, I am to find a Secret" (*The Works of Mr. Francis Beaumont, and Mr. John Fletcher*, 2:125).