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## Robert Fowler Diary

1831-1854 (*Bulk:* 1841-1845)

1 vol. (0.1 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 174

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A native of Salisbury, Massachusetts, Robert Fowler (b.1805) was a prosperous shipbuilder and merchant with a trade extending from Nova Scotia to the Gulf South. He and his wife Susan Edwards, whom he married in 1830, had at least four children.

Kept by Robert Fowler between 1831 and 1854, the volume includes both diary entries (primarily 1841-1846) and accounts. With occasional commentary on local political matters, commerce, weather, and family matters, the diary is largely a record of Fowler's spiritual concerns and his wrestling with doctrinal matters and the relationship of religion and daily life. An ardent temperance man, he commented on religious topics ranging from the Millerite movement to the resurrection, salvation, and the duty of prayer.

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## Background on Robert Fowler

Born in Salisbury, Massachusetts, on August 27, 1805, Robert Fowler was a prosperous shipbuilder and merchant with a trade extending from Nova Scotia to the Gulf South. The son of Betsy and Robert Fowler (1760-1842), a shipwright and Revolutionary veteran, Robert married Susan Edwards on Oct. 10, 1830, with whom he had at least four children: a daughter, Mary Frances (b.1831), and sons Everett(?), Robert Henry (b. 1845) and Frank Edwards (d. October 2, 1847, aged 2 years, 6 months).

An important figure in the community, Fowler displayed a strong sense of civic commitment and was involved in a minor way in local issues such as the controversial construction of a bridge over the Powow River. During the 1840s, however, religious matters dominated his concern. Deeply influenced by the moderate evangelical awakening, Fowler sometimes attended two or more services on Sundays at the local "Christian Chapel" and the Baptist Meeting House in Mills Village, among other churches. Probably a Universalist, based on his attendance at the quarterly conference in Danvers in 1842, he was of a moderate evangelical bent, rejecting the enthusiasm of Millerites, for example, and criticizing their postmillennialism as "calculated to stop revivals of religion, & contrary to Scripture."

Growing out of his religious beliefs, Fowler became an ardent temperance man, and was dismayed by the sometime lack of zeal of some of his fellow townspeople for the cause. After attending a meeting of a temperance association at which only nine of 250 members appeared, including not a single clergyman, Fowler complained that "i all this speakes anything, it tells a bad tale, viz That the subject of temperance is of but little consequence to them..." The poor attendance, however, did little to dampen his spirits. At the next meeting, the members of the association agreed to give preference in trade to temperance taverns and stores and to pay higher wages to temperate workers "as a strong inducement for all to become such." Some members of his group felt this did not go far enough: the intemperate should not be hired at all. At a later county-level meeting, temperance delegates proposed nominating County Commissioners "without regard to party affiliation," arguing that since their role of Commissioners was "rather of a moral or religious nature such as having charge of our jails, houses of correction, &c," only temperance men should be considered. Objections followed from some who felt that such a course would make the cause of temperance "was too holy a cause to be brot down to be us'd and contaminated by answering the purposes of political demagogs," and the whole was shelved.

In September 1843, thirteen years after leaving home to get married, Fowler reflected on his life:

Our family has been increased with an addition of a Daughter and Son, and health has verry generally been our lot. We have ben called to part with our earthly Parents and consign them to the tomb being one of the most trying scenes, that we are ever called to pass through; Yet we thank God that we were sustained under these afflictions, and were not called upon to sorrow as those without hope.

Thursday evening [Sept. 28, 1843] we are now again quietly situated in our new habitation the scenes of the day have ben somewhat trying to the family and has been a scource [sic] of some rather unpleasant feelings. What a powerfull agent is the mind, and how sensibly it operates on the body: Oh! memory. Oh! recollections; how thou art able to fill the soul with ineffable joy; or bury it in the deepest anguish and grief. Well do I remember the feelings and sensations of childhood and youth; well do I remember the day I left my Fathers house and took upon myself the cares of a family but those feelings cannot be described they only be immagined by those that have passed throug the same changes.

## Scope of collection

Kept by Robert Fowler between 1831 and 1854, the volume includes both diary entries (primarily 1841-1846) and accounts. With occasional commentary on local political matters, commerce, weather, and family matters, the diary is largely a record of Fowler's spiritual concerns and his wrestling with doctrinal matters and the relationship of religion and daily life. An ardent temperance man, he commented on religious topics ranging from the Millerite movement to the resurrection, salvation, and the duty of prayer.

Reporting on the sermons he attended on Sundays at various churches, most frequently Warren Lincoln's Christian Chapel, Fowler writes at length about issues of doctrine and faith, including judgment day; the role of love, joy and peace (written while attending a Universalist Convention in Danvers); the resurrection; the duty of prayer; and salvation. Of special interest are several references to the Millerite movement in the years leading up to the predicted Second Coming in 1843. The "doctrine of the millennium," he wrote, was "wholly unfounded. . . and detrimental to the cause of religion, being calculated to allay the fears & lead people to put far away the evil day." In February 1842, he records attending a series of meetings held by the famous Millerite Charles Fitch and the otherwise unidentified Mr. French on "Mr. Millers theory or the end of the world coming in the year 1843." Fowler wrote: "This both of them Gentlemen stated in public [sic] they undoubtedly believed would take place and Mr. Fitch state it was clear to his mind as a *sunbeam*. and that Christ would make his 2nd appearance in 43, when he would

change the dead and living saints and burn up all the wicked together with this terrestrial earth." Interestingly, Fowler refrained from further comment.

The diary also contains some references to Fowler's varied mercantile interests. The earliest records in the volume are accounts from 1831 and 1837, respectively, for hides and lumber (clapboard, hemlock timber, cedar shingles, laths and joists), commodities in which he must have traded extensively. In the text of his diary, Fowler mentions sending fish "packt in ice," apples, flour, lumber, and other goods to ports from New Orleans and South Carolina to Nova Scotia. He refers to a number of individual ships that he appears either to have owned or contracted, including the schooners Freedom, Signal, Van Buren, Florence, and Gem, and the brig Calcutta. One entry from 1846 records having a 65 ton schooner built for him and another from August 1835 makes reference to the sale of the Van Buren. Several references to Newburyport suggest that he may have had ships there.

After September 1843, the diary entries become briefer, more sporadic, and less descriptive, focused primarily on weather, with references to mercantile activities. There are only two or three brief entries at all after 1846.

## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for resesarch.

### Provenance

Acquired from Charles Apfelbaum, 1987.

### Processing Information

Finding aid originally written by Martha Grier-Deen, August 1987, and revised April 2007.

### Bibliography

*The Standard History of Essex County, Massachusetts* (Boston: C.F. Jewett & Co., 1878)

*Vital Records of Salisbury, Massachusetts* (Topsfield: Topsfield Historical Society, 1915)

### Language:

English

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## Search terms

### Subjects

Fatherhood.

Fitch, Charles, 1805-1844

Merchants--Massachusetts--Salisbury.

Millerite movement.

Religious life--Massachusetts--Salisbury.

Salisbury (Mass.).

Second Advent.

Temperance.

### Contributors

Fowler, Robert [main entry]

### Genres and formats

Account books--Massachusetts.

Diaries--Massachusetts.

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