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Lyman Clapp Diary

1825 Aug. 8-25

55p. (0.1 linear feet)

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When Lyman Clapp and Lucia Cowsls agreed to marry in 1825, they took a celebratory tour of western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut. Over nine days, they traveled from Mt. Pleasant, Mass. (possibly in Worcester County) through Brimfield to Stafford, Tolland, Vernon, Hartford, and Litchfield, Connecticut, before returning home by way of Springfield and Northampton. The Clapp's party consisted of the engaged couple chaperoned by Lucia's parents, and they were joined by a relative, Edward, near Hartford.

Filled with interesting vignettes of travel in western New England during the 1820s, Clapp's diary includes fine descriptions of the various taverns and inns they visited en route and the range of natural and cultural sites, from rolling hills to modern milling technology. Among other sights that caught Clapp's eye were the the Charter Oak, a hermit living in the hills near Avon, the Walcott Factories at Torrington, Northampton, and the extraordinary view from the top of Mount Holyoke.

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Background on Lyman Clapp

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Accompanied by Lucia's parents and joined by a relative, Edward, near Hartford, the Clapps saw the range of natural and cultural sites, from rolling hills to modern milling technology. Their stops included the springs at Stafford, the Charter Oak, a hermit living in the hills near Avon, Miss Pierce's School in Litchfield, and the Walcott Factories at Torrington, where "is manufactured about 100 yards of broad cloth daily, most of it of a superfine quality; 80-90 hands employed in their works, some on high, some on low wages." After spending three days at Northampton, the party took a side trip to take in the view from the top of Mount Holyoke, where Clapp waxed poetic about the view:

On a clear day, thirty one towns can be seen from this summit; the rich meadows on the margin of the river below; the large crops of corn, almost ripe for harvest; the green and regular squares, thirsting upon the river, the scattered houses in the beautiful fields of [???] and the bows and windings of the proud Connecticut, all conspire to fill the soul with rapture, and cause it to break forth in songs of admiration, wonder and praise; and when you view these too, or it was under your feet, you will be transported to the third Heavens, while you are standing upon your Mother earth.

Scope of collection

Lyman Clapp's record of his engagement trip offers both a rich record of a relatively well to do young couple traveling through the countryside, towns, and villages of northern Connecticut and western Massachusetts. Clapp's patrician attitude and occasional callousness toward his social inferiors is fairly rife in the diary, often wrapped in a sense of humor. At Stevens (possibly Mass.), he wrote they "saw nothing noticeable except three ragamuffins standing on the bridge as if brooding over some hellish plot of human destruction," but his contempt was often directed at the waiters and servants of the inns and taverns en route. In Hartford, for instance, he described a waiter having difficulty opening a bottle:

A great black fellow - the fellow prepared himself for a pull by placing the bottle between his knees; he began to tug. Mr. C. standing tiptoe for a glass of good porter. At length the cork, as it was, burst out, and with it the contents of the bottle till Mr. C. after having been spattered from head to toe retreated, leaving the black fellow to stop the torrent, which he did by inserting his great black finger into the neck of the bottle.

Elsewhere, Clapp describes how the party amused themselves debating whether a young black servant was a boy or girl and bantering with an "old bouncing wench" about whether she had served cream of tartar with Clapp's "beef stake" or salt.

The diary has rich and interesting descriptions of the roads, the scenery, and towns they visited, with some attention to the residents, again reflecting Clapp's social attitudes. Passing a roadside missionary donation box for the poor, for example, Clapp decided not to leave anything due to the possibility of "marauding Irishmen," while in East Hartford, he commented:

the farms and buildings indicated a set of indolent inhabitants, living upon what their fathers had acquired, without making the least improvement, or even making good the earnings of their ancestors. This is a beautifully rich, charming? section of the country, capable of being made the garden of New England, but is suffused by its inervated occupants to go to ruins and lie in waste; the natural effect of a rich exuberant soil.

Clapp was more impressed with the ingenuity of modern technology he observed at the Torrington mills and by the remarkable horse-powered ferry they took to cross the Connecticut River on their excursion to Mt. Holyoke:

We crossed the river in a boat propelled by two horses; one on each side continuously stepping, but stationary in relation to the boat. They both tread on a horizontal wheels as broad as the boat is wide; an pitched to a firm post, and as they draw, the wheel under them turns, on the outer edge of which are cogs passing over a shaft with cogs, [washing] across the beast, at each end of which is a wheel with buckets or paddles wading in the water pushing forward the boat.

Although the identity of the diarist is nowhere recorded, there is a note in a later hand on the rear leaf that states: "Grandfather Clapp took grandmother and her father and mother on this trip. Grandfather and grandmother were engaged. They were married the next year." From this slender evidence and internal evidence in the diary itself, it appears likely that the author was the Lyman Clapp who is recorded as having married Lucia Cows, or Cowles (b. July 14, 1795 in Norfolk, Connecticut; died 1852 in Winsor, Connecticut), in Litchfield County, Conn., on January 31, 1826.

Somewhat less certain is where the couple may have begun their journey, noted at Mt. Pleasant in the diary. Although there is no village or town called Mt. Pleasant in Massachusetts that easily matches the description in the diary -- about a four and a half hour ride from Brimfield, the course taken by the party, passing through the Brookfield area at both the beginning and end of the journey, and the times and distances involved, suggest that the Clapps may have begun and ended in Worcester County, possibly near Westminster, where there is a Mt. Pleasant cemetery. The Lyman Clapp (b. 1798) who died in Burlington, Conn., on Aug. 9, 1833 at age 35, may be the same Clapp as the diarist.

Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

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Contributors

Clapp, Lyman [main entry]

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