

## MEMORANDA AND DOCUMENTS

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### A NEW HAMPSHIRE SCHOOLMASTER VIEWS KENTUCKY

THREE LETTERS, 1847-1848

FRANK O. SPINNEY

**W**HEN Joseph C. P. Dow left his father's farm in Epping, New Hampshire, at the time of the Mexican War, he was no doubt impelled by a variety of motives. New England schoolmasters were much in demand in the West and South, and the lure of cash may have had much to do with his decision. Restlessness and discontentment with farm life, together with the venturesome spirit of the times, probably helped in persuading him to make the break.

Shortly after his arrival in Walton, a small town in northern Kentucky not far from Cincinnati, Dow received a letter from the reverend Bartholomew Van Dame, a friend and former teacher. Van Dame, a Dutchman by birth, had come to New Hampshire in 1819 as a boy. Befriended by the Dows, who took it upon themselves to be almost a foster family to him during his early struggles alone in a strange land, Van Dame was steadfast thereafter in his devotion to anyone bearing that name. Constant references to and anxiety for the welfare of the younger Dows appear in the journal which this itinerant schoolmaster, preacher, and reformer kept for nearly thirty years. From Joseph Dow's correspondence it is clear that he had received much advice from the family friend. Particularly was Van Dame concerned lest his former student become indifferent to the infamy of slavery.

Mr. Van Dame, just turned forty, was himself somewhat restive at this time. His health, always poor, was now worse than ever. Maybe a different and milder climate would prove beneficial. Contributing most to his frame of mind, however, was the feeling that in New Hampshire he was not putting forth his best efforts in the fight against slavery. He therefore began seriously to con-

sider the possibility of moving where he could combat the "Peculiar Institution" on its home ground, and his letters to Dow were evidently filled with questions about the practicability of such a plan.

Dow's correspondence in reply to his friend's inquiries furnishes much information about the new environment in which the young Yankee found himself. Brief comments on the prevailing price of provisions, the condition of the roads, the climate, and the financial aspects of school teaching, are mingled with observations upon the effects of slavery. Most interesting, perhaps, is Dow's description of how he and a group of fellow teachers, presumably New Englanders also, introduced into the section the debating society, with its public discussion of topics of the day. Whether this was done designedly, or whether the schoolmasters just happened upon the scheme, the debaters' platform was quickly turned into an ingenious device for antislavery propaganda. Inflammatory issues banned in ordinary conversation could be argued publicly before audiences and a group of judges. It did not matter that the decisions were prejudiced, so long as the debaters had an opportunity to express their ideas.

Dow gives no hint as to whether this technique for the spread of antislavery opinion was a widespread practice or simply a local invention. The topics for debates which he mentions were so consistently concerned with various aspects of the slavery problem as to suggest some settled policy, perhaps directed from outside and conceived on a large scale. Dow gives no intimation that this was so, but he may have been an unconscious tool in such a design. One of the several "pedagogues" in that section might well have been, unbeknown to the others, an *agent provocateur* of a Northern antislavery organization.

Not many months after the last of these letters was written, the young schoolmaster was on his way to California. Whether his predilection for maintaining the wrong position in debates about slavery had anything to do with his departure from Kentucky is not indicated. If it was adventure he wanted, the stories coming from California promised plenty of that, whereas school-teaching in New Hampshire or in Kentucky was still just school-teaching. Dow remained ten years on the west coast but never struck it really rich in the gold fields. He wrote once that he was getting

from six to fifteen dollars a day from his digging. Finally, his desire for adventure apparently satisfied, he returned to Epping and settled down to as quiet an existence as any neighbor who had never been more than twenty miles or two days from home.

Bartholomew Van Dame, still uncertain whether to accept his young friend's advice about undertaking a school in the South or West, determined to see for himself. A leisurely journey of nearly four months' duration in the spring of 1848 carried him far enough into the slave-holding section to convince him that what Dow had reported was true. He thereupon returned to New Hampshire fortified with eye-witness material and a pair of slave manacles which he had purchased in Virginia. The high point of his frequent subsequent talks about slavery was a melodramatic shaking of the chains before the eyes of his listeners in the villages and towns of the eastern part of the State.

The three letters transcribed below, used with the permission of the owner, Martha Hale Shackford, were found in a collection of diaries, correspondence, and other papers preserved by Mr. Van Dame.

WALTON, BOONE CO., KY.  
MAY 10TH, 1847

REV. B. VAN DAME  
EPPING, N. H.

Dear Friend,

I received your very acceptable letter and for various reasons have neglected to answer it until the present time. I will try to answer your questions to the best of my knowledge. As for the morals of the people, in general they are far behind the people of the New England States. Drinking is the most prevailing curse of this part of the country. Gambling also engages a great part of the time, of those whom we, in our part of the country would call the "upper ten" and a great many of those, who, like the poor of our parts, wish to follow the fashion, gamble to the extent of their resources and then stake their labor as the last ultimatum. But 'tis thought but little of here, because 'tis the "custom" and also the "fashion," and you know very well that what fashion and custom dictate, must be done, and like a spoiled child 'tis hard breaking old habits. Slavery also exerts a vast influence over the morals of the community, over those who own such property, by making them indolent, and they to pass off the time resort to the Drinking and Gambling "Hells" of the land. And it has a bad ten-

dency on the poor as it takes the labor that would otherwise fall to them, from them, and they, to drown the cries of their poor families, resort to the drinking "dens" of which there are plenty in this region. I have not seen slaves sold, but have seen quite a number of advertisements, in which among other things "Negroes" brought up the rear or last item. Negroes belong to the different churches but seldom attend at the same place with the whites, but have a preacher of their own color to whom they resort to hear the word of "Life." I have seen quite a number of slaves, who were nearly white, far whiter than their master's sons, when they came home from the Mexican war, which by the by is looked upon here as an Administration affair, although there are plenty who are willing to volunteer. Some slaves are treated very well, while others are most shamefully abused. It would not do to talk of the "Peculiar Institution" in school. I heard the Congregational minister preach one evening at my school house. In his prayer he invoked God to have our country under his especial protection, and to bring the Mexican war to a termination but did not mention the slaves, of whom *he* has a number.

The lines of Campbell forcably came into my memory.

"Yet, yet degraded men th' appointed day,  
 "Which breaks your bitter cup is far away;  
 "Trade, wealth, and fashion ask you still to bleed  
 "While *holy* men give Scripture for the deed." <sup>1</sup>

I will not call those men *holy*, who give Scripture for such deeds. But they may have "Stolen the livery of Heaven to serve the devil in" for aught I know to the contrary.

You would find this climate not very well suited for your constitution, the weather is so changable, 'tis not very cold but there is a great deal of rain in the winter season and the nature of the soil is such that you would not be able to travel much, the roads are very muddy all the winter season. I would advise you not to come out west, a southern climate might suit you better. The weather here this past winter has been very wet and quite cold. School teaching here is not much better than 'tis in the east.

I think you might do better South than West if you would not mention their "peculiar institution" to any one, if you did it would go hard with you.

I should like very well to hold a correspondence with you for I think it would be of great value to myself, and might serve to let you know, as far as my observation goes, how they treat their

<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from Part I of "Pleasures of Hope" by Thomas Campbell (1777-1844), first published in 1799.

slaves. As for my becoming a slaveholder never fear for that. Schools here are in the back ground compared with schools in the East. I will send you some papers soon, and I now send you one that contains the acts of the last Kentucky legislature. You will perceive that it is against the law for any person to bring a slave into this state for the purpose of selling the same, the penalty is for each offence \$600. fine, but you will see that they can ask the legislature for liberty to do it and it will in all cases be granted. Please write soon.

I am well, and wish you the same.

Yours, J. C. P. Dow

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Two weeks since 18 slaves made their escape to Ohio and have not been heard from since they took four Horses and a wagon with them. Good luck attend them I say.

WALTON BOONE CO. KENTUCKY

DEC. 30. '47

REV. B. V DAME

EPPING, N.H.

Dear Friend,

I received a paper from you yesterday, & agreeably to your wish, I will now endeavor to write a few imperfect lines, informing you of some of the "doings" of *we* Kentuckians, for I like Paul when "In Rome do as Romans." But do not think that I have changed my mind on the subject of slavery, but on the contrary the more I see the effects of this debasing institution, the more I am opposed to its continuance or its extension. *We Pedagogues* (for there are three or four in this vicinity) have got up a debating school & a circulating Library. Among the questions which have been discussed in our society, are the following, "Is the present war with Mexico just or unjust?" I took the negative but it was decided in the affirmative from the prejudice of the judges, not from our inability to sustain our side. Some of those on the affirmative admitted that they were *used up* although they gained the decision. "Do the signs of the times indicate the downfall of this Republic" was another question which was discussed, & decided in the affirmative, on which side I spoke. Which have been the worse treated by the people of the U.S., the Negroes or Indians? was another. I took the affirmative alone & gave them "a row up salt River" <sup>2</sup> in style. I had a first rate opportunity of letting off some of our Anti-slavery principles, which I did to good advantage.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase, connoting political defeat, derived from an incident of the presidential campaign of 1832, and was probably first used by Representative Alexander Duncan in a speech in 1839.

The question, Ought slavery to be abolished in the U.S. was brought before the society but for want of any one to take the negative it was not discussed, had it been I should have taken the affirmative, so you can judge in what light the "peculiar institution" is viewed by the young men of this portion of Ky.

I would be much obliged if you would propose some questions, to discuss, in your answer to this letter, for you must not fail of writing in return. I have about two months to teach—am now enjoying the Christmas holy-days, which last from Christmas until New-Years' day. The Negroes are allowed the same time & they improve it, you may be assured. Provisions are quite cheap here. Pork is only \$2.50 per H. Beef from 2.50 to \$3.00. Flour about \$5.00 per bbl. Wheat \$1.10 per bushel. Potatoes are not much cultivated here in the west & bear a very good price in market 50 cts being paid in Cincinnati. I received a letter from home yesterday, & learn from that, that you are teaching on North River,<sup>3</sup> but not whether it was a private, or public school. I see by the letter that I received that Harrison is not attending your school.

I am sorry to hear it, for he certainly ought to improve every advantage of which he has an opportunity. Tell our folks (if you see them) that I will answer their letter soon. I am much obliged to you for sending me the paper, & would thank you to send as many as you think proper, & I will send you some soon. Give my respects to all, & Tell Josiah to write soon.

I can think of nothing more at present to write about & so shall close.

Yours sincerely,  
Jos. C. P. Dow

P.S. write soon without fail.

I am going to a dancing school, this afternoon to see them dance. Do not dance myself, or play cards—*have Reformed.*

J. C. P. Dow

Wish you all a happy New Year

WALTON BOONE CO. KY. JAN. 25TH. 1848.

REV. B. V. DAME  
EPPING, N. H.

Dear Friend:—I received your very acceptable letter of the first, & take this opportunity to write a few lines in answer to it. You wish to know if you could get a school to justify your coming out West. I will state to you briefly the facts, and leave you to con-

<sup>3</sup> The North River school was the district school of Epping in that part of the township in which the Dows lived. Van Dame taught there for many years off and on, sometimes hired by the town, but frequently renting the building for private classes.

clude as you think best. It would cost about \$30 to come to Cincinnati. Board would be about \$1.50. Tuition for English branches \$25 for two sessions of five months each. Languages extra charges. Schools are not generally so far advanced as in the East. But you would have to be silent on the subject of slavery, for if it was known that you were an Abolitionist, you might as well think of getting to the Moon, as getting a school in Kentucky. You would have to hire a house in which to teach, & you would not get a first rate school in less than a year or so. But I know you would never give up the right of expressing your own opinions on any subject, for all the schools in Ky. I have got heartily tired of staying where one cannot express openly his opinions—on any or all subjects. By the way in our debate I can let off some of our Anti slavery doctrine & no one can or dare throw out that I am an abolitionist, for all things are allowed to be said in debates, that will advance your own side. But the man with whom I board (a slave holder) says that all questions that involve the subject of slavery ought not to be discussed in Ky. And I have heard him say that slavery was an evil, yet he says it ought not to be debated in Ky. for it makes the Negroes uneasy & has a tendency to make them try to escape (which by the way) a great many do. The rising generation promise better hopes in regard to this detestable practice of dealing in the souls of men. I have heard a number of preachers preach but never heard one of them say one word either for or against slavery, but one judging from their actions, (& the Bible says by their works ye shall know them) would conclude that they were in favor of the "Peculiar Institution" for they are slave holders. A minister to go into the pulpit and preach Anti slavery doctrine, as some do in the East, would be in danger of his life, it would not be allowed—Aye, in our boasted land of *Liberty* one has not the privilege of expressing his opinions—Shame on such actions! Call not this the land where Liberty's broad shield shines over all, while one sixth of her sons & daughters toil & bleed beneath the lash, 'tis a disgrace to the Union—Our Eagle is no longer an emblem of protection, but of Despotism, Tyranny, & Oppression. It lives by plunder, it feasts on innocence—& drinks the life blood of its victims. Does not the present war with Mexico show it. It tears her *limbs* from her body & then because she writhes & offers some resistance, she strikes her beak to its very vitals. I have said more than I intended but not half what I feel. And by the way next thursday evening we shall debate the question, "Would the acquisition of more Territory be beneficial to this Union." I shall take the negative or that it would not. And rest my argument on the violation of the Constitution, by so doing.

We have very interesting times at our debates. We have also a small circulating Library in this vicinity of which I am a member, so most of my leisure time is occupied in reading. You must be sure and elect Berry<sup>4</sup> for governor next March. The people of Ky. give up that the next president must be a Northern man, & some have fixed on Cass, while others on Buchanan—the latter is committed against the Abolitionists & the former says the "Wilmot proviso" ought not to be brought into Congress. By the way I see Hale<sup>5</sup> has made a speech in Congress denouncing the war. Please send it to me as soon as you can get it, for the Ky. papers will not copy it. I should like very much to read it. Send me some papers & tell all the "B'hoys" on the road to send me papers for I should like to see how politics runs in N.H. at present. Give my respects to all who may enquire. I wish you could write & read *Phonography* then I could write a letter four times as long on the same paper, that letter which you sent me that covered four pages, I copied in *Phonography* on one page, so you see it is only a quarter as much work, & takes only a quarter of the paper, as our old way does. I have got so as to read & write it as fast or faster than I can the common way of writing. I am very well. Tell Josiah to write me soon, also tell our folks to write—my school has only four weeks longer to keep. I don't know where I shall go after my school is out, but you will know, for I shall write some of the folks when I get stationed again.

But this is taking up my time in school for I have written this before school hours. I commence at 8 o'clock in the morning.

Yours truly,

J. C. P. Dow

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<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Springer Berry (1796–1894) was an unsuccessful candidate for the governorship of New Hampshire on the Free Soil ticket for the years 1847–1850. In 1861, as a Republican, he was elected and served well as "war governor."

<sup>5</sup> John Parker Hale (1806–1873), of Dover, achieved in his election to the Senate in 1846 the most outstanding success of the antislavery forces up to that time. He ran for the presidency on the Free Soil ticket in 1852. In 1865 he was appointed Minister to Spain by Lincoln.