

NOTE: This material is being put online just now as an appreciation of the many contributions which Dr. Bradley P. Dean has made to Thoreau scholarship. The occasion is that a couple of nights ago Brad suddenly and unexpectedly died.

A THOREAU MYSTERY — SOLVED? BY BRADLEY P. DEAN

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In an article titled "A Thoreau Mystery" in the Spring 1988 issue of the Thoreau Society Bulletin, Elizabeth Hall Witherell published the text of "a curious manuscript" that Raymond Adams had purchased from a Boston rare-book dealer in 1936 for \$1. The manuscript is indeed curious. It reads:

H. D. Thoreau (through Mary Mansfield, Lynnfield) to
Mrs. Jonathan Buffum.

Quality, fineness, durability, is the test of unity. Thus it is like attracts like; thus it is, friends, in my ever-seeking, everyyearning for truth, I have chanced to intrude upon your quiet retreat, and the path is so clear, so crystal in its attraction, I slipped into recognition. It is a pleasure to me as exquisite as when I chanced to meet some friendly moss or lichen, that answered to the vacant spot in my soul on earth. O friends, to such, with pure, noble, truthful spirits, the world is a vast field of action; too large to admit languor or repining, too glorious to be an aimless labor. I love your blessed spirit, and quietly I will withdraw, lest I become overpowered by the delicious calmness and unity, and forget to leave my guest [quest?]. But I shall come again, and hope you will greet me kindly.

Henry David Thoreau

When Witherell read these passages to me in January 1988, I suggested to her that Thoreau may have said them -or something very like them- at a Quaker or "Friends" meeting he may have attended while visiting Lynn MA, in January 1858 or April 1859. I based my suggestion on the content and tone of the passages, which seemed like something Thoreau might have said at such a meeting; on the use of the word "friends" (twice) in the passages; and on my recollection that Jonathan Buffum, with whom Thoreau stayed during his visits to Lynn, Massachusetts, was either a Quaker or (as Thoreau mentioned in his journal entry of January 14, 1858) "a firm believer in Spiritualism." But I have since become confident that the manuscript reports the substance of what Thoreau said at "a sort of Quaker meeting" he attended in Union Hall at the Eagleswood Community near Perth Amboy, New Jersey, on Sunday morning, October 26, 1856.

Thoreau arrived at the Eagleswood Community (also known as the Raritan Bay Union) late the preceding afternoon, Saturday, October 25. In a letter to his sister Sophia a week after his arrival, he wrote:

Sunday forenoon, I attended a sort of Quaker meeting at [the Community's "school room, hall, or what not"] - (The Quaker aspect & spirit prevails here - Mrs Spring says " - does thee not?") where it was expected that the spirit would move me (I having been previously spoken to about it) & it, or something else, did, an inch or so. I said just enough to set them by the ears & make it lively.

Thoreau stayed on at the Eagleswood Community for several more weeks surveying and delivering a total of three lectures. He knew when he arrived there that he'd stay at least three weeks, so on the day after his arrival he could confidently say, "I shall come again," as the manuscript reports he said.

Apparently Mary Buffum Mansfield of Lynnfield (now Lynn), Massachusetts, heard what Thoreau said at the meeting, wrote it on the manuscript in question, and sent or carried the manuscript to her fellow townswoman - and perhaps her aunt- Hannah Breed Buffum, the wife of Jonathan Buffum. If this is so, the manuscript would be all the more fascinating because it would record the spirit's (or something else's) inch-or-so movement of Henry Thoreau on that occasion.

According to the Newark Daily Advertiser of August 10, 1855, the Eagleswood Community consisted of "Some three or four hundred acres of fine, tillable ground" that was "admirably situated on the waters of [Raritan] Bay, with a fine look out toward the ocean - a beautiful tract of country, partly wooded and partly in crops" - all of which would certainly qualify it as the "quiet retreat" mentioned in the manuscript.

The Buffum name was well known both at the Eagleswood Community and in Lynn, Massachusetts. Marcus Spring was the founder and leader of the Community, and his wife Rebecca B. Spring's maiden name was Buffum. Her father, Arnold Buffum, and one of her sisters, Lydia Buffum Read were also members of the Community. Another two of Rebecca's sisters, Elizabeth Buffum Chase and Lucy Buffum Lovell, were regular visitors to the Community.

Arnold Buffum, Rebecca's father, was a distant cousin of the Jonathan Buffum that Thoreau stayed with in Lynn. When Thoreau visited Lynn in January 1858, he lectured in John Alley's parlor, and Alley's wife was Jonathan Buffum's elder sister Mercy. John Alley and Mercy Buffum Alley were both Quakers and had twelve children, one of whom was named Mary.

At about the time of Mary Alley's birth in 1822, Lynn's Quaker community was apparently experiencing a bit of the controversy that led in 1827 to the separation of Quakers into two factions: Orthodox and Hicksite. Among the individuals expelled or disowned from the Salem Monthly Meeting (the local Quaker organization) in 1822-23 were John Alley, Mercy Buffum Alley, Jonathan Buffum, and Jonathan's wife Hannah Breed Buffum. In 1819 Ebenezer Mansfield was expelled from the Salem Monthly Meeting. He or, more likely, one of his sons may have married John and Mercy Alley's daughter Mary; and she in turn may have either lived at the Eagleswood Community in 1856 or been visiting her relatives there, heard Thoreau's impromptu "message," written it down, and sent or taken it to her Aunt Hannah Breed Buffum in Lynn.

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