

LETTER BY EDWARD HARRIS, 1797

By R. C. Ballard Thruston

Read before The Filson Club, April 2, 1928.

[This letter is in the archives of the New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, where it was found by Mr. Thruston, who made a photographic copy. It was written by Edward Harris of Washington, Mason County, Kentucky, to Thomas Cristie, Londonderry, New Hampshire. It is in a clear, distinct hand, and consists of five pages and the address. In the upper right-hand corner of the address page is written, "E. Harris P. M." (Post Master), and under that is "Free," showing by whom the letter was sent and how. In the following copy no changes have been made other than in dividing the longer paragraphs into shorter ones and in adding a few punctuation marks.]

Washington, Mason County, Kentucky.

11th April 1797.

Dear Sr

I was much gratified about a fortnight since when Moses M Fabling called to see me as he was on his way to New Orleans; I should not have known him, but he introduced himself by telling me he had seen me at his Uncle Cristie's: nothing could have been spoke to have engaged my attention more; til this time I treated him as a stranger; I immediately view'd him as a friend or at least one that could inform me of the welfare of an old friend in whose welfare I can heartily rejoice: altho' 1300 miles separates our bodies yet my friendship has not abated. I was glad of an oppertunity to treat a friend of yours with as much kindness as the time & circumstances would admit of. He came from the river Ohio to this Town, which was four miles, to see me & the Country. He had a companion with him a young man from New Jersey.

After dinner I walked half a mile with them on a road they were not acquainted with to conduct them to a neighbor's who was an acquaintance of the Jersey lad's. Moses told me he head property on board the boat & was on a trading voyage, and

expected to go round to Philadelphia. He was much pleased with what he saw of this Country, & preferred to any he had seen. It was the last of march & I shew'd him appletrees in full bloom; my appricot tree was in bloom by the middle of march. I know these things seem strange to you. I suppose we are in Latitude 38 north & perhaps 20 degrees west of where you are. The fruit in this Country is far more delicious than yours: I suppose the best Country for Corn, wheat, Rye, Oats, Barley, flax, hemp, & grass: in the United States: I know that it has been the reciev'd opinion of the Eastern States, that the Southern States, are not good for grass; be it so: But it is not the case of the Western States—Last season a neighbor, nearby cut 9 tons of herds grass on 3 acres at one mowing, which is enough; to tell you of the fertility of the soil of this Country would be treated as romance in Londonderry, therefore shall not furnish you with materials to redicule facts. I don't mean you in particular, but your Countrymen in general.

As I know you will be gratify'd to hear something of the Country I will give you a summay information of the situation, soil, climate & spontanious product of the Country. And first I would observe that the Country in general lies very high from the bead of the Ohio: I can but gues at it, but if I should say 300 feet, perhaps it is higher; the bank of the [river] I judge is 70 feet high, then from a level on the margin of the river [now Maysville] we assend a high hill, difficult for a team to climb, & the ground is still assending 'till we arrive to the Town of Washington which is 4 miles from the river.

The Rivers in this part of the world lay in a very deep bead; & on each side are very high hills & from the river for a consideral distance, the ground is broken, but in the interior part of the State there are large bodies of exceeding well laying land level enough for profit or pleasure; in the rivers are fish of various kind & very good. The Soil is free from sand or gravel; when you take it between your fingers you cannot percieve any more grit than in butter; in what is called the rich land it looks as black as the bottom of your dung heaps; the under strata is Clay of different complexions but generally inclined to a redish or yellow; under this Clay is a limestone thro' the whole state, in places it is nearer & some deeper from the surfice it is shelly & flatt layers & between them a tough blew clay; in the water courses

there is plenty of flatt limestone which is used for lime & building Houses. The Climate is temperate not so sever cold in winter, nor so entense hot in the summer as with you, tho' the last winter has been the coldest known here—our spring begins the last of February; we plant corn from the last week in april 'till the middle of June & some have had a good crop of corn from the ground on which flax grew the same season, we have none of the severe north east & S: E storms that you have: yet we are subject to frost in April—we have often Thunder gusts & frequent in the winter: with heavy rains which makes it very miry; frost in winter does not penetrate the earth more than 6 or 8 Inches, we have but little Snow which will lay sometime two or three weeks; wch eve [with even(?)] some flights [of snow] in the spring.

To innumerate all the natural herbage & flowers in the woods would be too tedious & I should want names for them; Buffaloe Clover, Rye grass—pea vine & a broad leaf grass & what is call'd rich weed is what the Cattle most delight in, but there is in the month of march a great variety of food all over the woods; the under brush is what you call fever bush [spice bush] which grows large with a red berry, some haws or thorn; the natural fruit is the Custard apple [pawpaw], Cherrys, Mulberrys, & a variety of plum like damsons, Blackberries, rawsberries, May apples, resembling an orange, goosberries, & Crab apples, (Nuts) hie-cory, black walnut, Chesnut, beachnut, Coffee nut & Buck eye, this last resembles the Chesnut, but is as large as a hickory nut of the largest Size. The trees you have seen innumrated in the pamphlet that was published about the Muskingum [river country, in the state of Ohio] when it was in vogue; Sheep are the best in this Country I ever saw, Cattle are not so good as in N. England owing to want of Care, horses are much better than with you, Salt & sugar are made in considerable quantities. Iron & lead is made in the Country—Grindstones & Sea Coal is plenty, [Sea coal is an old English name for coal; so named because it was brought to English cities by sea.] In Short I believe it to be the richest & best poor mans Country in the World.

Industry will produce a great plenty; half the labor you bestow on 5 Acres will yield between 3 & 4 hundred bushels of Corn, There is one farmer in this neighborhood who had last

fall ten Thousand bushls of Corn & 3000 bushls of wheat for his crop. I suppose he had 20,000 bushls of Corn growing on his farm; this to you will seem incredible. He has a few negroes & perhaps 40 Tennants who pay 12 bushels of corn to the acre—you will ask why be tennants in such a Country—I will tell you it is a great advantage, many people come from Virginia & other States very poor & are strangers, know nothing of the Country, they often take a piece of land to clear & have the income for 4 or 5 year, after that, they pay a rent, if they keep it: but ordinarily if prudent they go off on land of their own full of stock & provisions. The greatest difficulty in the Country is the uncertainty of title; to give you a history of that would exceed the design of my letter.

I live in the County town: which is about a square mile laid out in three main streets north & South, between the two streets are house lots of half an acre each, measuring each way from the center street: the rest of the land is laid out in five acre lots on each side of the back streets: there are three streets running east & west at such a distance with a number of allys as to make it convenient to come at the lots, we have a court house built with stone, a Gaolors [jailer's] house of brick & the Jail of billets of wood about 12 inches square & 2 & ½ feet long placed so as the ends to make the inside & out side of the room, a thick stone wall 15 feet high surrounds the Gaol, There is a considerable number of large Stone & Brick houses in the main street, there is but one meeting house & that is a Baptist, the Presbyterians are but few in number & meet in the court house: there has of late been a great stur among the baptists & a great many persons diped; I esteem their doctrines very corrupt. We are a mixture of many sorts of people & religions which makes Church & State difficult to manage [Washington was laid out in 1786 and was county seat from 1788 to 1847, when it was superseded by Maysville.]

Perhaps you will ask me why I left Muskingum [to which he had gone with other New England settlers about 1790]; it was because of the Indians [who destroyed the fort and killed twelve settlers]; & disagreeable whites.

I have but a house, lot & 40 Acres of land in this Town, which has cost me about £200 pounds; my house is not of the most elegant kind tho tolerably comfortable, tradesmen are

scarce & exorbitant in their prices, nails & Boards hard to come at, my lands yields me a competency & that is all we need.

I am grown old & unfit for much labor & it is my business to be preparing for a State that is more durable than the present; the business of religion yields more satisfaction than can the bustle of this life. I often feel tired of the Business of time and almost wish my self free of the shackels of the body,, but desire to feel submissive to the divine will, & to learn patience under suffering: my greatest concern is that I might enjoy the light of God's countenance, & to live so as to promote his declaraitive glory in the world. God has been good to us in every respect—Carried us tho' many difficulties especially the Small pox—& does at this time give us a comfortable measure of health & is daily supplying our wants with not only the necessaries but delicacies of life, blessed be his name! He is more ready to give than I am to be thankful. . . .

My childn are all about me except John who has settled in Philadelphia. My oldest daughter Abigail is married & lives opposite to me in the same street, Edward follows his trade. I could not make a farmer of him, he has as much work as he can do at the tin & Copper smith business. . . .

I hope you will let me hear from you: direct your letters, to me as post master & they will come free, you will describe my place of abode, as at the head of this letter; put your Letter in the post Office in Haverhill or Chester & no doubt it will come safe. I must bid you farewell; we shall not be long here, our journey is almost ended, I hope we shall meet where Sin & Sorrow will be at an end: & where Singing Worthy is the Lamb will never have an end. My respect to all your family & to Capt James Wallace and Deacon Alexander, if they are in your neighborhood, & all inquiring friends

Your friend & Well wisher

Edward Harris

Mr. Cristie—I wrote in so much haste I find I have made many blunders, you must find it out if you can.