



Independence Seaport Museum

Guide to the Walsh Family Papers

Creator: Thomas Walsh

Dates: 1847-1855

Quantity: 2 volumes (appx. 800 pp.)

Call Phrase: Walsh Family Papers

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Scope and content: The Walsh Family Papers consist of two volumes of letters received by Mr. and Mrs. Richard Walsh of Stuyvesant Falls, NY, the bulk of which were written by their son Thomas in New York and China, and others from their sons John and Richard James in New York and Brooklyn. The letters in the collection generally concentrate on family matters and ordinary details.

The early letters in the collection are from Thomas Walsh to his father, who was living in Stuyvesant Falls apart from the family in New York, perhaps seeking employment. Thomas' letters initially discuss family news and finances, his work at Cary & Company in New York, some news from Europe and his social activities.

In the spring of 1848 Thomas writes to his father about plans for moving his mother and sisters to from New York to Stuyvesant Falls, and the impact the move will have on their finances and social lives. His letters mention other family members, such as cousin Jane Hyde, and family friends or business associates, such as a Mr. Durand and a Mrs. Nichols.

Thomas often uses his letters to his parents as a forum for complaining about his brothers or discussing how his parents could influence John and Richard to improve their lives.

Thomas' religious life is a frequent topic in the letters, and he comments on the services he attends:

Mr. McLaren preached his famous Sermon on the Divinity last Sunday evg. & succeeded in putting ¼ of his small audience asleep. There was not an original thought in it... the only part in which the least life or eloquence was shown was in a sarcasm on Unitarians. (November 13, 1847)

Thomas also writes of city news:

We had a terrible fire here last night, commencing at 12 oclck & continuing with awful fury until 6 this morning & in that time desolating a very large part of the city.... As the water was speedily exhausted both from Public & private cisterns, the firemen were compelled... to stand and look on. (September 10, 1848)

In early 1849, at the height of the Gold Rush, Thomas' brother, John Walsh, proposes to make his way to California in search of his fortune. John's letter of January 17 imparts to his father his reasons for wanting to go to California, "Here is a chance for my making a fortune for myself which will probably never again occur." On January 28, he elaborates:

I do not intend going there merely for the purpose of digging Gold.... I intend going there more for the purpose of... seeing if I could not establish some business. There is no doubt in the minds of every thinking man that will soon be the emporium for all trade with China.

Thomas writes to their father of his misgivings about this plan, and encourages him to advise John against it.

It would not be extravagant to say that 9/10ths of the adventurers prepare themselves for or consider only the physical evils which may attend their enterprise – leaving entirely out of view the almost certain immoral condition which will result from the absence of the restraining influences of laws, religious customs & worship, female society and the presence of a common disposition to indulge each other in any little & many great vices which may attach themselves to their amusements. (January 19, 1849)

It is not clear from the remainder of the letters if John ever did get to California, but there is mention of him being in Montgomery, Alabama by 1850.

When disease sweeps through New York, Thomas seeks to reassure his parents: "The ac[counts] of cholera in this city... will cause you anxiety for us... the cases have principally been among persons of uncleanly habits...." (June 6, 1849) A letter from Richard from the same time outlines his plans for avoiding the disease:

I... made up my mind to be very prudent to eat no fruit, vegetables nor fish... but... I found that this was rather a dry living and that every body around me seemed to be enjoying themselves... more than I was in the way of eating and

drinking... so I looked around and saw that they ate berries (ripe) and vegetables moderately and did not seem to be any the worse. (July 15, 1849)

In late 1849, Thomas makes the acquaintance of a Mr. Burroughs, a tea merchant of Philadelphia, who is generous with his hospitality and eventually offers his assistance for Thomas to complete his “education in the tea trade” in Canton, China.

Thomas accepts the offer and departs New York. His ship reaches the Harbor of Penang on July 31, 1850 after a “speedy passage of 92 days.” A 21-page letter addressed to his sisters dated August 19 describes the voyage on the ship *Horsburgh*, his early bouts of sea sickness, gaining his “sea legs,” the foul weather around Cape Horn, seeing a pod of “monstrous” whales, the poor quality food aboard the ship, his arrival at Penang, impressions and descriptions of the town, local churches and temples and services at them.

From Penang, Thomas travels first to Singapore, then to Hong Kong, finally arriving at Canton. There he is employed in trading goods, especially teas, and his letters to his father focus on his business ventures.

The market for Green teas not yet opened, the Chinese holding at high prices which the ruinous rate of Exchange deters foreigners from paying. Blacks have gone home in immense quantities, and I question much if they will prove profitable or if the popular taste will continue to run in them while Greens are so low. (November 23, 1850)

Letters to Thomas’ mother tend to focus more on family matters, such as his sisters’ education, and his own health and well-being. He assures his mother that he is attending church, and that his work occupies most of his time. He writes that business precludes him from observing much about the Chinese culture, but some letters include brief descriptions of special events, such as New Year’s festivities.

When the day arrives, all business being suspended, the occupant of each building... sets out a table before his household [idol] filled with fruit, flowers, candies and...lights great numbers of tallow candles.... (February 23, 1851)

In general, Thomas’ preoccupation with personal matters did not lend itself to frequent or lengthy descriptions of contemporary events. He comments briefly on new technologies such as cable transmissions and photographs (“a Daguerreotype on paper”), and on political news, such as the Taiping Rebellion:

[T]he rebels are brave, determined & soldierly men, receiving good pay and fighting for life... Most of the Imp[eria]l officers are corrupt and cowardly – and run as readily as the men... If the rebels succeed they will probably give foreigners considerable privileges among which, it is hoped, will be the free navigation of the Yangtse. (August 6, 1853)

Thomas credits some of his success in business to the general good will toward Americans felt by his associates:

I see many travellers here and their unanimous admission is that... Americans... are better liked and conduct themselves better than any other travellers. Here in China, we stand at the very top both in the estimation of the Chinese & of unprejudiced foreigners. (April 15, 1854)

The final letter from Thomas in the collection confirms his intention to remain in business in China for “a while longer.” He had an offer from A. A. Low & Brother for another three-year contract, but it is not stated in the letters if he definitely accepted it.

Other letters in the collection include several from Richard James Walsh to his parents, discussing family health and business matters, and requesting particular items of clothing to be sent to him. There are also several letters from Mr. and Mrs. Walsh to their son Thomas.