

PHILO E. THOMPSON'S DIARY OF A JOURNEY ON THE MAIN LINE CANAL

EDITED BY JOEL A. TARR*

PHILO E. THOMPSON, the son of Samuel and Mary Thompson, was born in Ellington, Connecticut, on January 26, 1811.¹ After spending his early years attending school and working on his father's farm in Ellington, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the limited opportunities of New England. Like many another Yankee, he turned his thoughts towards the West. Particularly appealing to him were the fertile prairies of Illinois bordering the Mississippi River where, in 1835, several of his relatives (the Robbinses, Princes, Scarboroughs, and Seymours) had founded the town of Payson, fourteen miles from the flourishing river port of Quincy.² It was in Payson that Philo decided to settle.

With the coming of the transportation revolution, New Englanders traveling to the West had a choice of several excellent routes. Most popular were those that utilized the Erie Canal (completed in 1825) or the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal (completed to Pittsburgh in 1834) to bypass the mountain barriers. It was this latter route, with its combination of canal, portage railroad, and inclined plane that Thompson chose to take. From Connecticut Philo reached the Pennsylvania canal by a combination of steamboat and railroad. Once he had left the canal he completed his trip almost entirely by Ohio and Mississippi River steamboat. Thus he used the most modern transportation facilities available at the time. The entire journey, covering a distance of over 2,200 miles,

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¹For Thompson's genealogy see Mary A. Elliott, comp., *Thompson Genealogy* (New Haven, Conn., 1915), p. 123. Thompson died on April 15, 1893, in Payson, Illinois, after having been thrown from a colt he was trying to break.

²The reasons for the settlement of Illinois in the 1830's and '40's are examined in William V. Pooley, *The Settlement of Illinois From 1830 to 1850*, in *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, No. 220, History Series, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Madison, 1908), pp. 44-65.

was completed in twenty-six days (March 28-April 23, 1836), a remarkable decrease in travel time over the preceding decade.³

Approximately half of Philo's journey was spent on the Pennsylvania Main Line Canal. The building of this complicated canal system had taken fourteen years, from 1820-1834. It was, however, destined to be a financial failure. One of the main reasons was that although the Pennsylvania Canal carried a great many settlers west, the bulk of them still used the cheaper and faster Erie Canal. In addition, navigation on the canal with its many locks and shifting currents was extremely difficult, while the Portage Railroad at Hollidaysburg always served as a bottleneck. The cost of building the canal was so great that in the early 1830's the state of Pennsylvania was driven to resort to a lottery to cover its costs. But even this method, due to corruption, was doomed to failure. By the 1860's all of the canal's works had passed into the hands of the railroads.⁴

The diary was originally written on a sheet and a half of legal size parchment paper, folded into a letter, sealed with wax, and mailed from Quincy, Illinois, to Ellington, Connecticut, at a cost of twenty-five cents. While Philo's descriptions are not as colorful as those of more seasoned travelers and writers like Charles Dickens, the diary is fuller in regard to technical details concerning such matters as planes, locks, and tunnels. Also, the very terseness of Philo's prose gives us a more realistic picture of travel on the canal than is conveyed by Dickens's "Notes." His accounts, for instance, of the tow horses stampeding (April 5) or of the whipping of a thief on a Mississippi River boat (April 17) are vivid in their simplicity. His straightforward record leads one to believe that such incidents were typical of the kind a traveler in 1836 could expect to encounter.

After settling in Payson, Philo sent East for his sweetheart,

³ George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860*, in Henry David et al., eds., *The Economic History of the United States*, Vol. IV (New York: Rinehart, 1951), pp. 34-35, 43-45, 56-57, 141-144.

⁴ For information on the Pennsylvania canal system see Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Towpaths: The Story of the American Canal Era* (New York: D. Appleton, 1926), pp. 92-103; Julius Rubin, *Canal or Railroad? Imitation and Innovation in the Response to the Erie Canal in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston*, in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, Vol. 51, pt. 7 (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 15-62; and Madeline Sadler Waggoner, *The Long Haul West: The Great Canal Era, 1817-1850* (New York: Putnam, 1958), pp. 201-205, 218, 293.

Ellen Campbell Wallace⁵ of Mount Bethel, Pennsylvania, and the two were married on September 13, 1838. The couple had eight children, descendants of whom are still living in Payson. Philo himself prospered; by the 1870's he held 250 acres of land valued at seventy-five dollars per acre.⁶ The editor secured his copy of the diary, which had been privately printed in Payson, and further information on the Thompson family, through the courtesy of Mrs. Rosemary E. Newman of Los Alamitos, California, herself a member of the family.

Ellington, Connecticut [*sic*]—March 28, 1836—Started this day for Illinois. Went to town and attended the wedding of Charlotte Foster and Mr. Waterman at 7 a.m., thence to Hartford (16 miles); arrived at 12 noon. Transacted our business there and left at 2 p.m. on the stage for New Haven (34 miles), through Berlin, Meridan. The road very muddy. Arrived at 9 p.m. put up at Park House and found cousins Luther and Jared (Scarborough) at college that evening. They were much surprised at seeing me and promised to write their mother that evening.

Tuesday, March 29—Cloudy—Cousins this morning accompanied us to the boat—sent their package and much love to their friends. We started at 7 a.m., the sound very still. Had a fine ride and arrived at New York at 2 p.m. Sent our baggage across the city to storehouse. I put up at Franklin House⁷ and attended Park theatre⁸ at evening.

Wednesday, March 30th—(Snow and rain) left New York at 7 a.m. for Philadelphia (95 miles) in the steamboat Swan for Amboy, stopped at 9 a.m.; thence by railroad across New Jersey for Bordentown (35 miles) left at 10, had a glorious ride and

⁵ Born, August 29, 1815, in Mount Bethel, Pennsylvania; died, September 23, 1895, in Payson, Illinois.

⁶ Charles C. Chapman, comp., *The History of Adams County, Illinois* (Chicago, 1879), p. 839.

⁷ The Franklin House on the corner of Broadway and Dey Streets was one of the most popular New York hotels in the 1830's and '40's. See John A. Kouwenhoven, *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 176.

⁸ The Park Theatre in New York, originally constructed in 1798 and enlarged in 1821, was the most fashionable theatre in the city. It was also visited by other more famous travelers such as Fanny Kemble, Charles Dickens, and Frances Trollope. See Bayard Still, ed., *Mirror for Gotham: New York as Seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present* (New York: University Press, 1956), pp. 61, 93-94; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Donald Smalley, ed. (New York: Vintage Edition, Knopf, 1960), pp. 339-340.

arrived at Bordentown at 12, thence down the Delaware to Philadelphia (30 miles []) in the steamboat "Trenton."⁹ We called at Bristol, Pa.; Burlington, N. Y. [*sic*],¹⁰ and arrived at Philadelphia at 5 o'clock where we put up at the North American Hotel kept by Mrs. Yoke. Found this a good house and called on John Hall at evening.

Thursday, March 31st—Pleasant. Stayed in Philadelphia—think it a beautiful city. Visited the Navy yard, went on board the Pennsylvania, the largest ship I ever saw.¹¹ Traveled over a great part of the city; visited the water works at Mount Pleasant—a great work of art, by which water is raised from the Schuylkill by a forcing pump, to a great height into a basin on the top of a hill, thence runs in an aqueduct to Philadelphia, and powerfully waters the whole city.¹²

Friday, April 1—Cloudy. Left Philadelphia at 9 for Columbia (82 miles) on railroad.¹³ Went out three miles with horsepower, crossed the Schuylkill, ascended an incline[d] plane for $\frac{5}{8}$ mile by means of stationary engine, and thence by steam in good style with ten cars in train. Averaged about 20 miles per hour, stopped several times for wood and water. Stopped at Lancaster, a beautiful place, and left two or three cars, thence quickly onward and descended an incline[d] plane 19 hundred feet and arrived at Columbia at 5 p.m., highly delighted with our ride. Like the country very much, put up at the Washington hotel, a good house.

Saturday, April 2, Pleasant. Stayed at Columbia, the canal not passable on account of brakes [*sic*]. This is a pleasant place situated on the Susquehannah [*sic*] at the termination of the railroad and

⁹ This was the route controlled by the so-called "Joint Companies" composed of the Camden and Amboy Railroad and Transportation Company and the Delaware and Raritan Canal Company. For a summary of the background, building, and operation of the "Joint Companies" see George H. Burgess and Miles C. Kennedy, *Centennial History of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Railroad Company, 1949), pp. 241-266.

¹⁰ Obviously Burlington, New Jersey.

¹¹ The *Pennsylvania*, one of the most powerful ships of her time, was launched in 1837, having taken fifteen years to build. She was designed by Samuel Humphreys and carried 120 thirty-two pounder long guns. Howard I. Chappelle, *The History of American Sailing Ships* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1935), p. 117.

¹² These famous water works are described more fully by Frances Trollope and Charles Dickens. See Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, pp. 261-262, and Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (New York: Fawcett Edition, 1961), p. 119.

¹³ The Main Line Canal began at Columbia.

canal. See many fine sights, particularly great six horse teams, with the driver riding near the hind horse guiding them with one rein. The bridge across the Susquehanna 1¼ miles long cost \$130,000.00.¹⁴

Sunday, April 3, Pleasant. Still at Columbia. Little regard is here paid to the Sabbath. There is no cessation of business on railroad or canal, people spend their time in riding or loitering about the streets.

Monday, April 4, Pleasant. Yet at Columbia. Left at 5 for Holidaysburg [*sic*] by canal (172 miles) on the boat Chesapeake [*sic*] Libbart the captain. Passed Harrisburg that night.

Tuesday, April 5, Pleasant. (On the canal) crossed the Susquehanna 43 miles from Columbia, with horse on bridge and the boat pressed heavily down by the current.¹⁵ Thence up the Juniatta [*sic*] two miles and crossed the river by aqueduct, stopped at Newport and here crossed the river by rope ferry. Stopped, also, at Millerstown. Met a boat aground, and could not get by. Every man off and backed the boat several rods and started at full speed; raised a swell and went by. Passed Mexico, a considerable place. Horses were frightened and jumped into the canal and swam across; ran half a mile; flung one horse (we had three) but they stopped unhurt.

Wednesday, April 6, Pleasant on canal. Left the boat and walked one mile across the mountains (the distance around by boat 5 miles), bought some sweet cider and apples. Walked some distance. We crossed the Juniatta by aqueduct, passed Jack's Narrows, a lofty mountain, with a stage road running across the side. Crossed the Juniatta several times by aqueduct and towbridges and passed through 111 locks and ascended 1,000 feet.

Thursday, April 7, Pleasant. Arrived safely at Holidaysburg at six, thence by Portage railroad 36 miles over the Alleghany mountains to Johnstown, drawn by horses on the levels, and ascended

¹⁴The original plan of the Pennsylvania Canal had been to go south of Columbia on the east bank of the Susquehanna. Objections by Columbia property owners, however, necessitated a change in the route, and a long, low, double-decked roadway was constructed across the river to be used as a towpath so tow-teams could cross the river. See Carl Carmer, *The Susquehanna*, in Hervey Allen and Carl Carmer, eds., *Rivers of America* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), p. 444.

¹⁵At the junction of the Susquehanna and the Juniata rivers a nine-foot high dam created a pool that was crossed by a bridge 2,231 feet in length. The bridge carried a two-story towpath to accommodate tow-teams going in opposite directions. Harlow, *Old Towpaths*, p. 102.

5 inclined planes by stationary engines. The longest 3,200 feet. We passed a mile and a half upon the summit, 2,475 feet above [sic] tidewater.¹⁶ Here we breakfasted and found a cool climate with much snow. We descended 4 inclined planes, saw several coal mines, much heavy timber. Thence 14 miles by engine and passed through a tunnel 900 feet long and 260 feet beneath the surface.¹⁷ We descended another incline[d] plane and thence by horsepower to Johnstown, where we arrived at 2, then on by canal to Pittsburg (103 miles) on board the canal boat Cincinatti [sic] with Captain Hoffman. We passed the tunnel during the night and did not see it.

Friday, April 8. Pleasant. On the canal, passed down the Kiskeminitas by slack water. Dams were across the river setting backwater for several miles. We passed many salt works on the river bank where salt is manufactured by boiling salt water which is obtained by boring six or eight hundred feet through the rocks. It is raised by steam pumps. Their fuel is coal which is dug from the mountain above them. We crossed the Alleghany river by aqueduct thence down by this river and passed Freeport, a considerable place. Went through 65 locks and crossed the Alleghany again by aqueduct at Pittsburg, where we arrived at 6 p.m., and put up at the Exchange.¹⁸

Saturday, April 9. Stormy. Stayed this day at Pittsburg. This is a great manufacturing place, particularly of iron work. Coal is their only fuel and it is the blackest, nastiest place I ever saw. Buildings inferior, people generally of the lowest grade. Engaged passage on board the boat Mountaineer with Captain Wells for St. Louis—put baggage on board and took lodging there.

Sunday, April 10. Severely cold, some snow. Started at 11 for St. Louis on board Mountaineer (1,200 miles). Good company and enjoy ourselves well. Called at Wellsville and Steubenville, Ohio; Wheeling, Va., at 7. Here we stayed overnight. These are manufacturing towns using coal and much resembling Pittsburg.

Monday, April 11. Pleasant. Our boat tarries at Wheeling,

¹⁶ The highest point on the Main Line Canal was actually 2,200 feet. Taylor, *Transportation Revolution*, p. 44.

¹⁷ This was the longest tunnel in America at the time. Harlow, *Old Towpaths*, p. 103.

¹⁸ The Exchange, the leading Pittsburgh hotel in the 1830's and '40's, was located at Pennsylvania Avenue and 6th Street. Charles Dickens stayed there in 1842. Leland D. Baldwin, *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1937), p. 273.

taking on freight and emigrants—whole families with their effects, farming tools, household furniture, horses and wagons, slaves, hogs and all. Started at 11 on our way again, made several stops taking on more families with their furniture. Our boat is now heavily laden, have about 80 cabin passengers. Deck also, too numerous to mention—river very high. We see many log huts, good farms and coal mines along the river. People here seem of good birth and live well. We enjoy our passage here very much.

Tuesday, April 12. Pleasant. Making rapid progress down the river. Stopped at Burlington and Portsmouth, Ohio—flourishing [*sic*] places. Stopped at Maysville, Ky., a very neat, handsome place, and arrived at Cincinnati during the night, here stayed till morning.

Wednesday, April 13. Pleasant. At Cincinnati had the opportunity to view the city. Think it the pleasantest situation I ever saw, best pavements, buildings good, business lively. Started at 10 on our way, stopped at Lawrenceburg, an excellent tract of land here. Halted at Risingsun, and stayed at Louisville during the night. A flourishing [*sic*] business place.

Thursday, April 14. Pleasant. Left Louisville and passed the rapids. River is high and the canal useless.¹⁹ Stopped at New Albany, a newly built, flourishing [*sic*] place. See here much excellent land—one tract in particular in Indiana extending in width about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the river to a perpendicular ledge of rock about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile in length, forming an impassable fence. Trees here have put forth their green leaves, and peaches are in full bloom.

Friday, April 15. Pleasant. See some good land, though much is overflown. Stopped at Evansville, a high growing place. Stopped at Mount Vern. a pleasant place and halted at Shawneetown. Here I first set foot on the soil of Illinois—a handsome place though rather too low.

Saturday, April 16. Stormy. Left the Ohio at break of day and now making our way up the mighty Mississippi. See some excellent bottom land, especially in Missouri. The Illinois side is wild and covered with timber, banks not firm, but breaking off in some places, and forming in others. See large flocks of Pelicans,

¹⁹ The Louisville and Portland Canal was opened in 1820. It was designed to bypass the rough stretch of water in the Ohio River at Louisville known as the Falls. See R. E. Banta, *The Ohio*, in Hervey Allen and Carl Carmer, eds., *Rivers of America* (New York: Rinehart, 1949), pp. 14, 511.

a bird as large as a goose, white showing some black upon the wing as they fly off, and having a large bill.

Sunday, April 17. Cloudy, some rain. Stopped from midnight until day on account of fog. This morning a circumstance happened worthy of note. One of our cabin passengers has lost his boots. Search being made he finds them upon the feet of a deck passenger, a good looking, well dressed young man. The mate gets a rawhide, orders him to the forward deck, makes him take off his coat, ties his hands, and putting the hook of the windlass rope between his wrists, hauls him up with his toes just touching the floor, and gave him twenty two lashes and afterward set him on shore at a wooding place on an island. We saw some excellent land on the Missouri side, the teams plowing with no regard for the Sabbath. We stopped at 10 until morning.

Monday, April 18. Pleasant. See many lofty cliffs on the Missouri side, more picturesque and varying than I can describe—shot towers, particularly at Selma, upon the edge of the cliff 375 feet high. Illinois side is rich though rather too low. Passed Jefferson Barracks, a beautiful place. On landing to wood a boy leaped upon the bank, fell back upon a log and was considerably hurt. Arrived at St. Louis at 5, put our luggage on board the boat O'Connell and put up at the National Hotel.

Tuesday, April 19. Pleasant. Now in St. Louis, a lively business place, literally thronged with people. City irregularly built, streets narrow, badly paved, people savage and immoral. Left at one on O'Connell for Quincy (200 miles) cabin crowded with passengers.²⁰ Land on both sides rich, though rather [sic] low. Waters of the Mississippi and Missouri do not mingle for many miles. Arrived at Alton about 9 at evening, the scattered lights covering a sloping hill, presented a brilliant appearance though it appears rather rocky and uneven.

Wednesday, April 20. Pleasant. On our way up the Mississippi. The Illinois shore is high and rocky, covered with timber; the Missouri low. We passed two extensive prairies, one most beautiful—high and rolling; the other level and wet. About sunset we had a heavy thundershower with hail, rain, and wind, com-

²⁰ St. Louis was the key point for travelers to Illinois coming on the Mississippi. From it boats left almost daily for Illinois towns on the Mississippi or Illinois rivers. Pooley, *Settlement of Illinois*, p. 71.

pulling our boat to run ashore and remain until the storm abated. Here the Illinois shore had a low bluff a distance back.

Thursday, April 21. Pleasant. Stopped at Louisiana, Missouri, a considerable place. Here are two flour mills in operation. Passed an island 60 miles in length and five to eight broad, and stopped at Saverton, Missouri—a handsome site for a town. Many wild ducks and turkeys. Called at Hannibal at evening. Here rather low.

Friday, April 22. Pleasant. Halted at Marion City, a newly begun place, situated on a low, level prairie, newly overflowed with water. A large quantity of building material and farming tools are deposited here. There are three log cabins, two framed houses and a store house already erected. We arrived at Quincy at 9 and put up at a log tavern. Spent the forenoon in looking about the place which is quite new, being covered with stumps. The front of the bluff near the river is lofty and rough, difficult to ascend, the town back upon the summit is a pleasant place having a handsome public square, a few good framed buildings, among many small houses and log cabins. The foundation for a court house is laid and is to be erected this season.²¹

This afternoon went with Major Holton to see his farm and was highly pleased with the country and with his farm in particular, it being an elevated situation upon a prairie with a rich black soil three feet deep. Called at Mr. Flints and found them well. He has a good house and barn and a pleasant situation. We returned to Quincy at evening well pleased with our excursion. In company with Mr. Hubbard, I engaged a team for the conveyance of his goods and my trunk to Payson.

Saturday, April 23. Pleasant. Left Quincy for Payson (14 miles) at 9 o'clock, went past some excellent farms, and through a large tract of timber—found a bad muddy road—traveled over a high extensive prairie, and arrived at Cousin Daniel's (Daniel Robbins) at one o'clock. Found them well, living in a neatly built framed house, situated upon a rich rolling prairie which seems almost a paradise. Went at evening to uncle Princes, (Dea. David Prince) found them all well and happy, living in a good framed house in a beautiful situation. Found Deacon Scarboroughs family

²¹ Quincy was one of the fastest growing towns in Illinois. In 1834 it had a population of 600, in 1838 over 1,500. In 1837 over three hundred steamboats stopped at its wharves. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

well.²² This, the village of Payson as laid out, seems formed by the God of nature for a town as they design it, and should building progress a few years, as during the past year, it will soon be one of the pleasantest villages which this country produces.²³

²² The Robbins, Princes, and Scarborougs, along with the Seymours, were the founders of Payson. Deacon Prince and Deacon Scarborough were Deacons in the Congregational church. They constructed a church in Payson that duplicated the Congregational church in Ellington, Connecticut.

²³ Payson gave promise for a time of becoming an important community, but within a few years after its founding its growth nearly stopped. This was probably due to the competition from the more advantageously located town of Quincy. *Ibid.*, p. 119.