TWO LETTERS ON EARLY TRANSPORTATION IN PENNSYLVANIA.


Near Shippensburg, March 4th, 1825.

Rev. and Dear Uncle,

Nothing has transpired here for some time of a domestic nature, that seemed sufficiently interesting to be told in Congleton.

Our Crops of Grain have been abundant for two years past, yet the Farmer does not flourish. Produce was never known to bear so poor a price. Wheat 75 cents a Bushel—Rye dull at .25—Corn at .20—If we convert our Corn and Rye into whiskey and send it to Baltimore, it only brings .20 a Gallon. Clover seed which used to sell for 10 sometimes 15 dollars is now selling at two dollars a bushel. Such being the state of our Markets the Farmer who is a few dollars in debt cannot pay, and many Farms are sold by the Sheriff at 30 Dlls. an acre which had been purchased at 100 dollars and even more an Acre. Those who are not in debt can get along pretty smoothly. Notwithstanding the low price of food, yet such is the difficulty of finding employment, that our paupers increase to an alarming degree.

The Mania of the day with us, is cutting canals. The experiment made by the State of New York has been so successful and so far exceeded all expectations that our State has it seriously in contemplation to attempt a water communication from Philadelphia to Pittsburg. Commissioners have been appointed to explore the rout, and have reported favourably. They say it is practicable by tunneling the Allegheny Mountains. The Tunnell would be about 4½ miles in length and from 100 to 750 feet below the surface. Some think this rather too great a bore, whilst others think it ought not for a moment to terrify us. But this is a subject that scarcely any of us know anything at all about. From what I have read of Railroads in extracts from English
papers, it appears to me that they have many advantages over canals. A principal one is that, for three or four months in the season when farmers usually send their produce to Market, the Canals are frozen. You have Railroads in England and probably you are well acquainted with their construction. You would do me a great kindness if you would write me a particular description of the manner in which these roads are made. The length and probably weight of the pieces of metal used—an estimate of the expense, on a plane, or where there was no digging, and any other information which you will give respecting them. I am appointed one of the Commissioners for Cumberland County to devise and recommend most suitable routs and plans for operation, and, it was long ago said, that a man can speak or write, better, if he understands something of the nature of the subject he is treating. If it should be that there are none of those roads in your part of the Country and that they have not been enquired into by you, perhaps Dr. King or some one of your friends would be so good as to describe them.

The Legislature of the State of Ohio, have just passed an act for making a Canal from Lake Erie to Portsmouth on the Ohio River a distance of about 400 miles. There will then be a water communication from New York to New Orleans! I was in that State last Spring. . .

This day John Quincy Adams will be inaugurated President of the U. S. for four years. Rumour says, and perhaps correctly, that he has selected the following Gentlemen to compose his Cabinet:—Henry Clay of Kentucky, Secretary of the State—Richard Rush of Pennsylvania, Secretary of the Treasury—James Barbour of Virginia, Secretary of War—S. L. Southard, New Jersey, Secretary of the Navy—William Wirt, Virginia, Attorney General and DeWitt Clinton, at present Governor of New York is offered the appointment of Minister to the Court of St. James.

Please to present me affectionately to my Aunt and to my Cousins when you next see them (wish they would write to me) and be as sure of the love and friendship of

Your Nephew

John Nevin.
Letter of John Nevin, Shippensburg, Cumberland County, Pa., to his uncle, General Samuel Finley, Chillicothe, Ohio.

Near Shippensburg, 5th, March, 1825.

Dear Sir:

I was much gratified in receiving your favour by Mr. Stewart and congratulate you on the chearing and auspicious prospects of bustle, business and activity which will soon pervade the State of Ohio. The bonfires, illuminations and other devices to which the good people resort to express their Joy, and render it visible, on the passage of the Canal bill, I received thro another channel.

We poor Pennsylvanians seem to have been left far behind in the march of internal improvement. We are doomed, yet a while, to crack our whips and tug the ponderous wagon, whilst our Friends of New York and Ohio will be floating with all their lumber from New York City to New Orleans. 'Tis true, we have been exploring a little and inquiring whether our waters could not be placed in some position to bear us along from Philad. to Pittsburg. But unluckily we find that we would have to worm our way under the Foundations of the Hills and tunnel the base of the Allegheny Mountain for about 4½ miles in length and from 100 to 750 feet from the surface. . . But let not our dashing Sisters ridicule our want of energy and enterprise. Pennsylvania is cautious, calculating and ever watchful to make the blunders of others profitable to herself. Even now her large sides are shaking with ill contained laughter to think how she will outstrip the whole of you by and by. I'll tell you the secret—when Ohio and New York have become completely engulphed in mud, mire and water and doomed by their debts ever to remain so. Then Pennsylvania will rise in her might, shake herself—call forth into lively exercise the keen penetrating glance of her Quakers and the plodding perseverance of her Germans, and surprise and astonish the Union by connecting the extremities of the State—not by the inert Canal, but by a Rail Road! A mode of conveyance, which for safety, celerity and uninterrupted pro-
progress, surpasses the Canal as far as the latter does the old Turnpike. Yes, My dear Sir, whilst you and our tall Sister of York will be waddling along in trenches in your sluggish element, with your goods liable to injury from dampness and your heads liable to be sheared off in passing under bridges, ever and anon begrimed and besloughed by Freshets and inundations, and in fact bung'd up totally by Ice in that very season of the year when Farmers would wish to send their produce to market,—Thus irrevocably fixed, you will be constrained to behold Pennsylvania bearing her brow aloft, spuming alike both Mud and Frost, with her thousand twirling vehicles, urged on by Steam, in rapid and undeviating progression, and bearing away the whole of your Western produce to her Great Emporium. Even DeWitt Clinton will scratch his head & exclaim in the language of Sterne "Really they manage these things better in Pennsylvania."

The data on which we proceed are not speculative and visionary. The inquiry in England now is not, Are Railroads preferable to Canals? But Parliament are pestered with petitions from Canal Stockholders to prevent the incorporation of Railroad Companies. They have put on Sackloth and ashes, as the Button makers did long ago, and prayed for the suppression of what they consider ruinous to their funds. But the Government says No. You must not stand in the way of the march of mind. The progress of useful invention must not be interrupted by you. As Turnpikes had to give way to your mode of conveyance, so now in turn you must not grumble that your gullies must succumb to the more advanced progress of the Arts as displayed in the Railroad System...

Your affectionate nephew

John Nevin

John Nevin 1776-1829.
Farmer, Cumberland Co.
Dickinson College, Class of 1796
Trustee Dickinson College 1825-29.