Western Pennsylvania in 1836 as seen by a Vermont doctor

Among the thousands who went west to seek new homes in the years that followed the opening of the Erie Canal and the Ohio Canal were two doctors from Vermont, Ira and Leonard Barton. No family tradition survives to explain how they came to catch the western fever, but Dr. Leonard Barton, the younger of the brothers, wrote two letters from Pennsylvania to his wife, whom he had left behind in her father's house in Weston, Vermont.¹

As to bare facts, Dr. Barton's account of the great westward migration of the eighteen thirties does not add anything new to the picture of the movement as a whole. It is rather in the more limited field of local history that his letters have something to contribute, especially in the details that they give about places and people in the counties of Crawford and Mercer in western Pennsylvania. In the larger picture, however, his letters have a certain value as an index to the state of mind of an emigrant Vermonter. The doubts and perplexities, the homesickness, the restlessness, the hopes—all these that Dr. Barton experienced must have been characteristic of the feelings of many an emigrant of the period. The letters are written with a quaint alternation of plain speaking and stately formalism, a mixture of humor and melancholy, which reveal a man of taste and education as well as a likable and very human personality.

At the time of the migration to Pennsylvania, Dr. Leonard Barton was thirty years of age, and his brother, Dr. Ira Barton, was ten years older. For three generations or more their Puritan forbears had been moving westward through Massachusetts. At the close of the Revolution their father, a Revolutionary soldier, took his bride to a frontier settlement in Vermont. Later he moved on to the New York frontier, and here on the edge of the great Adirondack forest at Bolton on Lake

¹ The original letters are in the possession of Dr. Leonard's granddaughters, the Misses Clara and Lulu Barton of Erie, who have kindly permitted their publication.
George, Ira and Leonard spent their childhood. Little is known about this part of their history. The only fact that emerges with certainty is that Ira as a lad of sixteen marched with his father and the local militia to Lake Champlain to check the British invasion of 1814. The next landmark in their careers is their graduation from medical school—Ira in 1826 from Castleton Medical College at Castleton, Vermont, and Leonard four years later in the first graduating class at the new Clinical School at Woodstock.\(^2\) An old letter of recommendation written for Leonard about the time he started his medical studies runs as follows: “I am well acquainted with the literary acquirements and moral character of Mr. Leonard Barton, and justly esteem him, a young gentleman of amiable-ness, intelligence and moral worth.” In the interval between receiving their degrees and making the westward journey described in these letters, the brothers practiced in various places, known and unknown, in Vermont and Massachusetts. One of the places with which they were most closely associated was the little Green Mountain village of Weston in central Vermont. Here Ira practiced for several years; here they both married. Their wives were sisters—Mary and Nancy, the daughters of “Squire” Oliver Farrar, the founder of Weston.\(^3\)

What led the brothers to join the westward movement of the thirties is not clear. An inkling is perhaps given in the first letter by a reference to a Dr. Bliss who had left Vermont some time before to settle in Ohio. Apparently the lure of adventure was not a major issue, as it was with some westward emigrants. At least Dr. Barton did not stress this motive in his letters. Such *Wanderlust* as he had seemed to spring from some inner unrest, rather than from a desire for new scenes and excitement. The economic problem, on the contrary, loomed large. It was apparently the hope of making a better living that tempted him to leave Vermont, and on the frontier, in moments of discouragement, it was only this hope that continued to keep him away from his family and the more congenial en-

\(^2\) Castleton Medical College was in 1826 affiliated with Middlebury College, but later it was removed to the University of Vermont. One building of the old medical school is still standing at Castleton. The Clinical School at Woodstock had just been founded as an affiliate of Waterville College in Waterville, Maine, now Colby University. Nothing now remains of the buildings at Woodstock.

\(^3\) All biographical facts are gathered from family traditions and various documents and printed records too numerous to be listed here.
vironment of New England. Some allusion to land speculation can be found in the letters, but only on the part of others. For himself this method of making money seems never to have been considered. Perhaps this was because he had not accumulated any capital for investment in the six years since he had left college; perhaps it was because he did not have the speculator’s type of mind. As it turned out, with the panic of 1837 near, it was probably fortunate that he was not interested in such ventures.

A lucrative practice was what he sought, combined, if possible, with an agreeable environment. It was in this second respect that he found himself especially disappointed. His observations on the life he encountered in western Pennsylvania are anything but flattering. They serve as a reminder of the fact, easily overlooked, that even as late as the eighteen thirties there were parts of this region that were still in a frontier state. Of course, it must be taken into account that the very settlements that offered the best opportunities for a young doctor establishing a practice were likely to be the places where life was the most primitive. This was not true, however, of the first place Dr. Barton chose to settle in. But even there he found little to his liking. It is curious to see how, even when he was trying to present conditions to his wife in the best light possible, his revulsion against the world about him would come to the surface.

The human interest that the letters arouse may justify a few facts about the later careers of the two brothers. Dr. Leonard Barton did not stay in Mercer County very long, but eventually found a more congenial practice in Erie County at Waterford, the site of the old French Fort Le Bœuf. This settlement had been made largely by New Englanders. It had an academy and probably offered more of the sort of intellectual and social life that the Bartons and Farrars had been used to in the villages of Vermont. But Leonard did not live long to enjoy his new home. The melancholy that is so apparent in his letters may have been the forerunner of some serious illness. Only eight years after his migration to Pennsylvania he died, leaving his wife with “little George” and three other children to the care of his brother and other relatives. Dr. Ira Barton did not remain in Cochranton, despite his purchase of the farm. Perhaps he found a ready sale for it at a good profit. At any rate by 1840 he had begun to practice in the town of Erie and had bought a drug store there in which his brother also had an interest. He stayed in Erie until Leonard’s death,
when, upon the request of the people of Waterford, he decided to move there and take over his brother’s practice. As the years went on he grew to be one of the leading men in his community and one of the prominent physicians in the county. Thus at last he found the security and the success that the brothers had hoped for when they left the Green Mountains and turned toward the West.⁴

**Millicent Barton Rex⁵**

**DR. LEONARD BARTON TO HIS WIFE, JULY 9, 1836⁶**

*FAIRFIELD, CRAWFORD COUNTY, P.A.*

**MY DEAR WIFE:**

You may perhaps be Surprised to Receive a Letter from me so soon, therefore before I proceed I will give a short explanation; which is this—that I have stop’d and have it in my power to write you. I have traveled probably 2,000 miles since I left you without making any considerable stop. I have at last anchored in this harbour (which I must confess is none of the best) where I intend to remain for the present unless some poweful [powerful] wind of fortune should part my cable and set me adrift again upon the wide world.

Our first stop after leaving Vt. was in Troy where we stayed one day—visited Albany, &C.—after which we took the railway to Schenectady;⁸ then took a

⁴ Dr. Barton’s spelling has been retained throughout, but for the sake of clearness the letters have been cast into paragraph form and punctuation marks have been supplied.

⁵ Miss Rex, who has contributed the letters and supplied the annotations, is a great-granddaughter of Dr. Ira Barton. She is an instructor in history at the Madeira School, Greenway, Virginia. Ed.

⁶ The month and day are supplied from the postal endorsement. The letter may have been written several days before it was mailed, of course, as was the case with the second letter. Nowhere on the letter is any year given, but it seems safe to assume that the year was 1836, the same as that of the second letter. The close correspondence in fact and in general tone of the two letters indicate that they were written within a few months of each other. Moreover, Dr. Barton would hardly have given such detailed descriptions of life in western Pennsylvania as appear in the second letter if he had been living in the new country for over a year.

⁷ Fairfield, or Sugar Creek Post Office, then a small settlement on French Creek in eastern Crawford County, is now the town of Cochranton. What led Dr. Barton to seek this place is not known.

⁸ This was the Mohawk and Hudson, opened to traffic five years before. The fact that Dr. Barton refers thus casually to the railway at a period when it was still a novelty is rather curious. Possibly the explanation is that this was not his first experience with steam travel.
boat and proceeded west to Buffalo where we stayed a few days. Our next tour was to Cleaveland, Ohio, where we stayed one day, then went up the Ohio Canal. Saw Doc' Bliss and his brothers, stayed one day and proceeded up the Canal. Doc' Bliss was anxious to have me Settle in Boston within 4 miles of him. I think I might have done well there but I did not like the place. Lucian Bliss paid me $24.

After traveling several Days in Ohio we returned to Cleaveland and went on board an other Steam boat bound to Michigan where we arrived in due time. During this voyage we experienced all the beauties of a gale on Lake Erie. There might have been 800 persons on board the boat, three fourths of whom were sea sick. Such vomiting you never saw. Ira was quite seasick and I thought some homesick, which made his case quite bad. I was able between my spells of puking to enjoy many hearty fits of Laughter to see the old Cripples Stagger about the Deck and cast up what they verily believed to be their last accounts. I never before heard such Cursing and groaning. But as it is possible that you may sometime enjoy the Luxurys of a similar scene I will not trouble you with a further description.

We found traveling so verry difficult in Michigan on account of the immense numbers of people emigrating that way that we thought best to take some other route; therefore we returned to Buffalo, from thence through the southwest part of N. Y. to P.a. At Warren, P.a. we took a passage down the Alleghany River to Pittsburg about 200 miles. There we found a City containing about

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9 The trip to Buffalo was made on the Erie Canal, then eleven years old.
10 The Ohio Canal extended from Cleveland to Portsmouth on the Ohio River and was 310 miles long. It was completed in 1832.
11 Boston is in Northfield Township, Summit County, Ohio, along the route of the Ohio Canal. Dr. Hosea Bliss and his brothers, Lucian and Ambrose, had migrated from Jericho, Chittenden County, Vermont, about 1833. William H. Perrin, ed., History of Summit County with an Outline Sketch of Ohio, 572, 6936 (Chicago, 1881).
12 Some idea of the incredible number of emigrants going west in this direction can be gained from the following estimates: according to Robert E. Riegel, America Moves West, 278 (New York, 1930), in 1833 sixty thousand people and in 1834 eighty thousand passed through Buffalo to go up the lakes. Edward Channing and M. F. Lansing, Story of the Great Lakes, 267 (New York, 1909), has a still more amazing figure—five thousand people leaving Buffalo in a single day in 1838. Michigan was a most popular destination at this period; that other Vermonters besides the two doctors Barton had it in mind is indicated by the old ditty quoted in Riegel, p. 279:

Then there's old Varmount, well, what d'ye think of that!
To be sure, the gals are handsome, and the cattle very fat:
But who among the mountains 'mid cloud and snow would stay
When he can buy a prairie in Michigania?
Yea, yea, yea, to Michigania.
40,000 inhabitants. It is the greatest business place I ever saw and the most Dirty place that I have seen. There I had a view of the pleasant Ohio. From 20 to 30 fine Steam boats are to be seen there constantly. We left Pittsburg last Sunday for Erie, traveled together untiill Monday afternoon when we sepropered. When I saw Ira last he said he should go directly to Buffalo. Probably you will hear from him soon and I should not be surprised if you should see him in less than a month.

I have stoped in a fine Country which is fast improveying. There is not a Doc' in less than 10 miles of me one way and 14 the other. I have no doubt but that I can make money here but I fear that I shall not enjoy myself as well as I have done in Vermont. To tell you the plain truth Nancy I have most sincerely repented of my folly in leaving Underhill. But I have this to console me—I left for the purpose of benefiting my family, which object I think I shall accomplish if you can be reconciled to leave your native mountains and live among people entirely different from any you have ever seen. The people in this place are perfectly sivil, generally religeous and temperate. There is no ardent spirits sold here, which is a strange thing in this western world. I have no doubt but that you may soon become accustomed to the manners and customs of the Pennsylvanians so as to like them as well as you do the people of Vt. I can get along with every thing that I have met except their manner of living, some part of which is intolerable. I want you should let me know your feelings on the subject as soon as possible, and if you really think it best I will return to Vt. and spend the remainder of my days where I can the best promote your happiness and the happiness of our children.

I almost dread to hear from you for fear of hearing unpleasant news. Still if you have the least regard for me write as soon as you receive this and tell me the whole. I have always been fearful that our babe was not long for this world.

This trip was probably made on the turnpike via Mercer and Meadville. There is a description of this road as it was in the year following Dr. Barton's journey in David Stevenson, Sketch of the Civil Engineering of North America, 217 (London, 1838). Even the mail coach on which Stevenson traveled made a speed of only two and three-quarters miles an hour, because of the great marshes that had to be crossed. The road was built of corduroy for miles and occasionally was flooded with water.

The decade 1830–40 was a period of great expansion for Crawford County. The new Beaver and Erie Canal, with its branch, the French Creek feeder, was being built, and navigation down French Creek to the Allegheny River was still continued. The population of the county nearly doubled in these years, rising from 16,030 to 31,724. History of Crawford County, Pennsylvania, 199 (Chicago, 1885).

Underhill is in Chittenden County, Vermont, at the foot of Mount Mansfield. It was probably while practicing here that young Dr. Barton made the acquaintance of the Bliss brothers of Jericho.
but may I ask where is our Little George? is he alive? is he well? if you can
tell me he is you will give me more happiness than all I have enjoyed since I
saw you. I flattered myself before I left Vt. that by traveling I might rid my
mind of trouble, but alack, I find that the very idea is folly. The image of our
Darling child (whose soul I believe is now in the realms of eternal felicity,
there to enjoy happiness for ever) is almost constantly before me. His looks
and actions which were lost to me for many months have returned to me more
fresh than ever. The looks of our little George I have most entirely forgotten.
You must b[e]stow a double share of Love and affection on our children in my
absence. Love them for me for the time may never come when I shall enjoy
the inest[im]able privilege of folding to my bosom those Children who are
bound to my heart by the strongest cords of Parental affection.

Tell me Nancy what course to pursue to best promote your happiness and if
consistent I will be governed by it. I find that absence and distance from my
family serve to increase my affections for you. Write me in less than five minutes
after you get this if you———me [sic]. Direct your Letter to Sugar Creek
Post office, Crawford County, Pensylvania.16

Yours affectionat[el]y

L. Barton

Nancy Barton

[In margin:] Recollect Sugar Creek Post office, Crawford County, Pensyl-
vania.

[Addressed:] M" Nancy Barton, Weston, Vermont
[Postal endorsement:] Sugar Creek, Pa., July 9th 25

DR. LEONARD BARTON TO HIS WIFE, September 1, 1836

GEORGETOWN,17 MERCER COUNTY, P.A.

DEAR WIFE:

I fear that you may think yourself neglected by my not writing you sooner,
but the reason is that I changed my location soon after receiving yours and
wished to ascertain my prospects before writing you again.

16 This was, of course, before the days of the telegraph. According to the stage schedules
given in Eli Bowen, The United States Post-Office Guide (New York, 1851), the time neces-
sary for a letter to go between Weston and Sugar Creek can be roughly estimated at
about ten days. At this rate, if the schedules of 1851 can be taken in any way as a guide
for the mail service of 1836, Dr. Barton could not expect to receive even the quickest reply
in less than three weeks from the time of mailing his letter.

17 Georgetown, or Culbertson's Post Office, was on the main turnpike between Pittsburgh
and Erie, some ten miles southwest of Cochranton. Later it was called Exchangeville, and
There is a population of three or four thousand inhabitants within a few miles of this and but one physician whom they all call a very clever fellow, but none pretend that he is a man of more than ordinary skill. He is an Elder in the presbyterian church and I believe that many people here would rather die with his prayers than live by the prescriptions of another.\(^{18}\) Notwithstanding these obstacles I am confident that by Steady perseverance with a tolerable share of good fortune I shall be able to do a good business before long.

You have probably seen Ira's Letters, which I presume describe this country as being far superior to the valley of the Connecticut and equal at least to the garden of Eden. He and I have the misfortune to think differently as regards this country. I am not prepared to say that I think it better than the Counties of Rutland, Addison, & Chittenden, Vt. They raise more wheat here than there but in some respects it is really inferior to that country. Still I am ready to admit that by proper improvement it will make a very fine country.

I think that Ira is far better situated than he ever has been before. The farm which he has purchased is really a good one, and I think he may make perhaps a thousand Dollars in the bargain. It is situated in the valley of French creek and contains some land which is not inferior to the flats in Clarendon.\(^{19}\) There is a Canal passing through it but at present it is of but little use.\(^{20}\) He has every thing in his favour and with a reasonable share of good fortune he can as easily be rich in ten years from this time as to be otherwise. I was with him when he made the purchase, and was very much delighted to see him so much animated. While walking over his farm he would break out all at once—"The fact is there is no such land as this in Weston—the fact is Esq. Farrar's\(^{21}\) flat would not begin to compare with the poorest part of it—and finally the fact is I would—

then Sheakleyville, the name it bears today. What led Dr. Barton to make this change is a matter of conjecture. Apparently he did not benefit himself by the move.

\(^{18}\) This was apparently a Dr. Samuel Axtell, mentioned in *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania*, 473, 1094 (Chicago, 1888), and in John G. White, ed., *A Twentieth Century History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania*, 280 (Chicago, 1909).

\(^{19}\) Clarendon is in central Vermont. The farm must have been near Cochranton, Dr. Leonard Barton's former location.

\(^{20}\) Apparently this canal was a part of the slackwater navigation system established in 1834 to enable boats to return up French Creek from the Allegheny River. Great hopes had been entertained for this project, but it was abandoned after the first trip of the "French Creek Pioneer," because the boatmen found the dams and locks too inconvenient. After it was damaged in 1837 it was never repaired. *History of Crawford County*, 279, 533; *Map of the Railroads and Canals in the United States and Canada*, 55 (New York, 1834); Henry S. Tanner, *Description of the Canals and Rail Roads of the United States*, 101 (New York, 1840).

\(^{21}\) Esquire Farrar was Dr. Barton's father-in-law.
not swap it for any four farms in Weston." Show the above to Franklin. I think I can already see him begin to laugh.\(^2\)

You may tell Mary\(^2\) that the buildings on their farm consist of a large two story log house, a large log barn and 6 or 7 other log buildings (without names), all of which are situated on the ruins of an antient fortification, and I should think from their appearance that they were built for the use of Noah and his family at the time they left the ark.\(^4\) But on the whole it is really a pleasant & romantick place and I think she will like it much.

I have said more in favour of the country than I can in favour of the people. There is but a small part of them that I like at all. A large share of them are an ignorant disagreeable set of wretches fit for no decent society. Allmost every man keeps at least 2 guns, 4 or 5 Dogs, and from 5 to 20 hogs, which they never feed. The streets are overrun with them and they are generally so poor that it takes two or more to make a shadow. The howling and squealing which is constantly to be heard in this place is enough to make even a pious man break out in bitter cursses.

From these few facts you can form a correct idea of the general character of the people. Women in this country work on the farms and go barefooted. Their feet are from 12 to 18 inches long and from 4 to 6 broad, as near as I can judge without measuring. I think they might be made much smaller by washing. I think from the size of their ankles that their legs are put on wrong end upwards, but I may be mistaken in this as I have not examined cases enough to ascertain the fact for a certainty. I could tell you many other things about the Penamites but it is not best. The society about Cochranon & Sugar Creek is mostly an exception to this description. I could have stayed there and been contented.\(^5\)

My Dear, from what I have written you will be verry likely to mistake my feelings at this present time. At this time last year I am certain that our thoughts and feelings were reciprocal and I have no doubt but our thoughts

\(^2\) Franklin Farrar, Dr. Barton's brother-in-law.

\(^3\) Mary was Ira's wife and Nancy's sister.

\(^4\) The fortification was probably a relic of the mound builders. Almost all the travelers of this period comment on similar prehistoric remains that were to be found up and down the Ohio Valley and its tributaries. Accounts of relics of the mound builders in Crawford County are contained in History of Crawford County, 137–142; Sherman Day, Historical Collections of the State of Pennsylvania, 639 (Philadelphia, 1843); and Alfred Huiden-kooper, "Incidents in the Early History of Crawford County, Pennsylvania," in Pennsylvania Historical Society, Memoirs, vol. 4, part 2, p. 144 (Philadelphia, 1850).

\(^5\) That the first settlers of Cochranon were superior in culture to most of their neighbors is remarked upon by the county historians. See History of Crawford County, 550; Samuel P. Bates, Our County and Its People, 519 (1899); Daily Tribune Republican (Meadville), centennial edition, May 12, 1888, p. 4.
have often during this day both been occupied by the same subject. To tell you
the truth, Nancy, I enjoy life but poorly. I am often rather melancholy. My
health is none of the best and I am fully convinced that I cannot be happy
without the society of my family. There is but little time that you and our
children are absent from my mind. The most that I have to console me is that
you are surrounded by your Dearest friends and my children are in the care of
a mother whose feelings are far more tender than my own. Nothing but the
hopes of benefiting my family keeps me from you a mom[e]nt. The task is the
most unpleasant one th[at I] ever experienced and it gives me pain to be
obliged to tell you that probably near nine months more must pass away before I
shall be able to see you. I shall direct M' Wells to send you money and want
you to spare nothing that will have a tendency to make you and the children
comfortable and happy. You must get flannel for the children by all means. I
want George kept away from the water and every other place where there is
danger, for I am constantly borrowing trouble about him.

We must write each other often. Write me as soon as you get this and tell me
all about yourself and children the same as if I was present. Tell me if George
improves in talking, whether he grows any and whether he remembers me.
Tell me all about the babe. I want to know how large he is and whether he
appears bright. I am aware that this would appear verry simple to many but I
think that any person who is absent from a family that he Loves will excuse me.

Give yourself no trouble about me, believe me well and happy, for I assure
you that nothing but anxiety makes me otherwise and that will all be relieved
when I hear from you. All you can doe for me is to write me which I hope you
will doe often.

Direct your Letters to Georgetown, Mercer County, P.A.

Yours affectionately,

Leonard Barton

Nancy Barton, Sep', i*' 1836

P.S. I have Rec'd a verry polite invitation from the people of Underhill to re-
turn—had I not left it might have been better. Write soon. Give my respects to
all. Tell M' Stewart that if he wants to buy land he can doe better in P.A. than
Vt. 27

L. B.

[Addressed:] M'' Nancy Barton, Weston Post, Vermont
[Postal endorsement:] Culbertson's Po., Mercer Co., Pa., Sep* 4 th  25

26 Mr. Wells has not been identified.
27 Nancy Barton's brother-in-law. He eventually followed Dr. Barton's advice and re-
moved to western Pennsylvania.