JOHN QUINCY ADAMS, diplomat, senator, professor, president, and congressman, was also a poet. His diary is cluttered with examples of his art. He wrote many poems about his travels—to young ladies, to his sons, and to total strangers. The muse never seemed to fail him.

Our interest in John Quincy Adams the poet is the result of his western swing to Cincinnati in the autumn of 1843. He had gone there, at the age of seventy-six, to deliver an address at the laying of the cornerstone for a new astronomical observatory. After accomplishing this mission, on November 10, 1843, he embarked on the steamer Benjamin Franklin on the first leg of his journey back to the capital. His itinerary called for a four-day stop in Pittsburgh.

Among the passengers on the Benjamin Franklin that November was a young lady named Mary Emma Rhey who, accompanied by her brother, was traveling to her home in Pittsburgh. She and the elderly congressman struck up a friendship; she sent him flowers and invited him to her parents' home in Pittsburgh. He accepted and noted in his diary: "We saw her father, mother, brothers, and sisters, a respectable family in private life. She was not at home when we called, but came in as we were taking leave." A detailed account of Adams's visit to Pittsburgh has been described by Donald M. Goodfellow in an article in the Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, September-December 1945.

A few years ago, the late Alexander P. Reed, Pittsburgh attorney and banker, gave to me, in connection with another historical research project on which I was working, the original copy of a poem written by John Quincy Adams to "Miss Mary E. ____________ of Pittsburgh." The identity of the young lady was a mystery, for the last name was almost impossible to decipher. Adams's handwriting...
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was shaky — no doubt a combination of age, rheumatism, arthritis, and perhaps the movement of the boat. Another possibility had also to be considered. At least one of Adams's biographers has noted the fact that he did, on occasion, make a deliberate attempt at illegibility.¹ In any case, the identity of the young lady presented a challenge to the history sleuth. Various combinations of letters were investigated and tested on the Pittsburgh records of the period — census lists, business directories, and newspapers. Finally, the Adams diary itself provided the information that Miss Mary Emma Rhey of Pittsburgh was a passenger on the Benjamin Franklin when Mr. Adams was journeying to that city. A careful examination of the name in the poem suggests that it could indeed be "Rhey," and probably is. Furthermore, it would have been in character for the gallant old gentleman to write these verses to the young lady who befriended him during his travels.

The poem has now been presented to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Literary critics will probably agree with Adams's own recorded observation that "I have kept copies of all my contributions to albums, and I sicken at the sight of them."⁴ Nevertheless, this poem should have a certain appeal to Pittburghers. It may be that it has never before been printed, not even in one of the numerous and short-lived nineteenth-century newspapers which so often printed literary contributions from poets with less talent than Adams. Here it is:

TO MISS MARY E. RHEY OF PITTSBURGH

And wilt thou, gentle Lady, prize
The writing of this trembling hand?
And wilt thou look with placid eyes
On lines inspir'd by thy command?
Then through the range of after days—
Of happy days, for thee in store
One thought within thy bosom raise
Of him who then shall be no more.

One pleasing thought, let Memory bring
That in thy early youth's career

³ Marie B. Hecht, John Quincy Adams: A Personal History of an Independent Man (New York, 1972), 442.
One flap of Time's untiring wing
   Brought us in social converse near
And though too soon these moments close
   And we may meet hereafter never—
A spark of kindling friendship rose
   To burn between our Souls forever.

Steamer Benjamin Franklin
   Ohio river
   16. Novr 1843
   John Quincy Adams
To Miss Mary E. Slagg of Pittsburgh

And wilt thou, gentle Lady, prize
The writing of this trembling hand?
And wilt thou look with jaded eyes
Our lines inspired by thy command?
I turn through the range of after days
Of happy days for thee in store
One thought within my bosom raise
Of him who there shall be no more.

One pleasing thought, let memory bring
That in the early year this career
One phase ofJones in winter lying
Brought us in social converse, how
And though too soon these moments close
And we may meet hereafter no more
A spark of kindling friends' remembrance
To burn betwixt our souls forever.
Steamer Benjamin Franklin
Ohio river
12th Nov. 1843

John Quincy Adams