

IN THEIR WORDS



This occasional section offers readers selections from manuscripts—usually letters and diaries—in public and private collections, with commentary, elucidation, and editing. Information about access and cataloging details appears at the end of the article text.

The Lure of the West and the Voices of Home: Excerpts from the Correspondence of William Spaulding Burt

By RUTH BURT EKSTROM¹

There was considerable migration out of Vermont in the nineteenth century. “Even before Vermont itself was half settled, migration from Vermont began.”² People started leaving the state in large numbers after 1816, sometimes called “The year without a summer.” The outflow increased after the economic panic of 1819 and became even greater after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. “After 1830 emigration rose from a steady stream to a freshet, not to say a flood. The year 1836 broke all records by the size of its exodus. For the

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first time emigration became a public question in Vermont.”³ Historians have asked: Who left? Where did they go? Why?

While many of the emigrants of the early 1800s were probably farmers who hoped to find better land, “it was through the Vermonters’ skill in, and love for, tools that the largest avenue of migration was opened. The highways westward seem to have been dotted with Vermont carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, printers, masons, coopers, and the like.”⁴ “After 1820 there seems to be a fairly clear distinction between two types of migration: the familiar family type going out with considerable equipment and a more or less definite destination; and the young, unmarried men who started off without any real idea of where they were going and with almost no means of getting there. The latter worked their way from town to town, changing their plans at the suggestion of some acquaintance, and at last settling down at some place where prosperity finally dawned upon them.”⁵

Information about where the migrating Vermonters settled most frequently has been determined from United States census returns. In 1850, 52,599 individuals who had been born in Vermont had moved to New York State; 14,320 native Vermonters were living in Ohio, 11,381 in Illinois, 11,113 in Michigan, and 10,157 in Wisconsin.⁶ But we know little about how individuals made the decision to migrate. This would have been based in part on what they heard about “the West” and the source of that information.

BACKGROUND

This article provides insight into how one family of Vermonters viewed the potential advantages and disadvantages of moving to “the West” in the early 1830s. It is based on correspondence between William Spaulding Burt (1812–1896), his family, and his friends from 1832 to 1837. The main theme in these letters is the desire of young adults to become more independent and the concerns of their parents about their activities—something as familiar today as in the 1830s.

Spaulding, as he was known in the family, was the third child and oldest son of William Burt, Jr. and Catharine (Knox) Burt. Spaulding had two younger brothers, Daniel and Job, and five sisters, Catharine, Sarah, Ruth, Almira, and Amanda. His father’s parents, William and Ruth (Robinson) Burt, and their six children settled in Bennington, Vermont, about 1789. Catharine Knox and her family came to South Woodford, Vermont, about 1801, when her father was involved in the development of the Windham Turnpike. By 1820, Catharine’s brothers, James and Lyman Knox, and three of her sisters had left Vermont and moved to New York State.

Communications from these relatives probably influenced Spaulding's decision see what life was like outside of Vermont. He would have heard that better land was available in the west and that these regions held better opportunities than did Vermont. The years when Spaulding was reaching adulthood were a period when migration from Vermont increased greatly.

TRAVELS IN NEW YORK STATE

Letters written in 1833 provide the first evidence of Spaulding's travels away from Vermont. In September of that year Spaulding and his friend, Samuel Safford Pratt, went to Potsdam, New York. After he had been in Potsdam for a month, his father wrote saying "we all think that it is best for you to come home and go to School this winter you need more Schooling and if you do not attend to it now you will be to old." This remark did not produce the desired result. Despite other letters and urgings from his family, such as his sister Sarah's December note that "Mother feels very anxious to see her boy," Spaulding did not return to Bennington until the spring of 1834.

In December 1832, Spaulding received a letter from Oliver Perry Knox, his cousin who lived in Monroe County, New York, describing job prospects in that area. Oliver, the son of James and Hepzibah (Perry) Knox, was born in Woodford, Vermont, in 1813. He wrote, "I went last spring to learn the masons trade. I worked in Rochester last summer I [made] twelve dollars a month I have been offered \$20 dollars a month for eight months but I think I can do a little better." This letter, as well as his experience in Potsdam, probably led Spaulding to explore the Genesee region in western New York State. "Genesee Fever" had, according to Stuart Holbrook, "threatened for a while to depopulate many towns" in New England. He quotes advertisements that offered ten thousand acres to "the industrious yeomanry of Vermont and New Hampshire who wish for farms not lying edgeways."⁷

Correspondence from the summer of 1834 shows that Spaulding was in Rush, New York, at the home of his mother's sister, Eleanor (Knox) Diver, and her husband Daniel. Spaulding wrote his brother on June 8, 1834: "I got to uncles it is a fine place I have seen 100 acres in one field of wheat it is good and so is corn and grass. I am to work for a man write by the Genessee river the steam boat goes buy every day[.]" He sent a similar positive description to his father:

It is a handsome place here you can see wheat of 100 or 75 acres in a lott. I am to uncles today they have built a large where house since you were out I have seen uncle James [Knox] he is the same as ever he was that he is going to Bennington this fall Jane [Knox] is married

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and gone to Mihegan Perry [Knox] I havent seen yet Sumner and J. Dewey [Knox] are both smart they live write across the crick . . . I no not how long I shall stay here uncle told me that I had better work in Rochester so I work one mile and a half from uncles.

Enclosed with this was a letter from Daniel Diver, Jr. (born in Woodford in 1803) to his relatives in Vermont: "I have bought me A farm in Henrietta of one hundred Acres where we now live About two miles north our Grapes are promising At present We wish you would Sell and Come in to the land of plenty Clothed with milk and honey."

Spaulding's father wrote him on July 8, 1834, saying:

We received your letter the latter part of June we had been in formed by Bliss and French that you had gone a whaling for 3 years . . . we were very glad to find that they ware mistaken . . . We want to hear from you again and we want to hear more particular from Every person how and what they are Doing and when they are Coming to the East.

Spaulding's mother added to this letter writing, "I want you should go and see your aunt Synthia [Cynthia (Knox) Diver, wife of Calvin Diver] and her family before you come home I want you should be more particular when writing I want to know if Eleanor is able to do her work and want to know what James is doing." Spaulding's brother, Daniel Burt, added a note with news of their generation: "Pratt has gone to Michigan."

MICHIGAN FEVER

While western New York State still attracted many emigrants from Vermont, other areas became of greater interest during the 1830s. Stilwell observes, "the part of the West which really beckoned consisted of three almost virgin regions—southern Michigan, northern Illinois, and southeastern Wisconsin."⁸ So it is not surprising that Spaulding told his family that he would like to go to Michigan.

On September 21, 1834, Spaulding's cousin, Russell Judd [son of Isaac and Ruth (Burt) Judd], who was learning the carpenter's trade, wrote to him from Bennington:

Daniel [Burt] tells me that you are going to the Michegan this present fall and spoke of my going with you . . . I have got the western fever so bad that I am not contented here I have got to work about 32 days to make out my 6 months and it is uncertain about my staying any longer . . . I want to know what wages you get where you be and what for a chance you think I should stand for work there a short time and I want to know if Cash is plenty there it is very scarce here I have had 10 dollar this summer hardly enough for spending money

and some tools and I don't think I can stan my hand long at this rate
 I want to know how long you think of staying in the Mishegan . . . I
 want you to write as soon as possible. . . . I cant write much about the
 affairs here but we have good times here we have girls fair fond and
 frisky.

The “fair fond and frisky” girls apparently won out over the “west-
 ern fever.” Russell Judd remained in Bennington and married in Janu-
 ary 1836.

The prospect of Spaulding going to Michigan did not produce a posi-
 tive response from his parents. In September 1834 his father wrote:
 “We received your letter dated the 7th in which you told of going to
 Meshigan. I think you had better not go to that place your health would
 be in danger . . . I had rather you would come home. We should be very
 glad to see you. We think you had better not go to Meshigan until you
 have been home.” His mother wrote a more emotional appeal:

I would write a few words to you to inform you of my feelings re-
 specting your going to the Meshugain. I have heard it is a very un-
 healthy place. Harry Hinsley went their and staid five or six months
 and spend 2 or 3 100 d[ollars]. they were sick all the time they were
 their they were glad to get back alive – I feel very bad about you go-
 ing any further from us we are a going old I feel that I cant live but a
 little while at longest and I want my Children where I can see them
 often. Spaulding you are very near and dear to me it seems hard to
 me to be separated from you I think you can suit your self as well
 where you are or this way as you can their [.]

Negative attitudes about the West were not unusual. Stilwell points out
 that while many writers described the West as an almost utopian prom-
 ised land, others said the claims made were false and misleading. These
 reported that “the West was an unhealthy place, where the drinking wa-
 ter was uniformly bad, and men sickened and died of fever and ague.”⁹

His parents’ concerns apparently had the desired effect on Spaulding.
 Correspondence from early May 1835 shows that he and his brother,
 Daniel, were working by the month at jobs in Auburn, New York. Their
 mother wrote asking if they were near Homer, where her sister, Lydia
 (Knox) Dailey, lived. But by June of 1835 Daniel had returned to Ben-
 nington. The reason for Daniel’s short stay in Auburn is evident in an
 August 2, 1835, letter in which William Burt asks Spaulding if Daniel
 had been very homesick. But Spaulding had no such problem. Letters
 from his Knox relatives and their friends in the Rochester area raised
 the possibility of his joining them and going to Michigan or Illinois. On
 July 24, 1835, Lyman Sumner Knox [the son of Lyman Knox] wrote
 from Rush:

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I want you to be shure and come and go to the west Stephen Crow is a going George Berry says he is a going and J Willson William I believe you and I and Joseph can make great wages a hunting and trapping I see a man that has ben to the Illanois this several year he says that a man can make \$30 a month all the fall and winter as well as not fur is plenty if you Don't come and the rest of the boys Don't go I shall go with Crow I want to go the fore part of September I want you to write to me as soon as you get this letter and write whether you can go or not [.]

Traveling to a new location without a specific contact or job opportunity was not uncommon during this period. Stilwell writes, "It was by no means rare for young men to leave Vermont without a definite destination or intention of any sort. Their way was to drift along from town to town until they got wind of a good job or until some friend suggested a lucrative objective. If their money gave out, they would stop a while at that point to earn a little at odd jobs. Then on again."¹⁰

Spaulding remained in New York State through the fall of 1835. An August letter from his brother Daniel had supplied news of their generation in Bennington, including developing romances, travels to the west, and the return of a friend.

As I expected R[ussell] Judd has been gone 4 days with Cromacks sister—I[saac] Judd is going to see Julia Philups and the Story is they are going to be Married but I don't know whether they will or not . . . S[amuel] S Pratt was in Chicago the last they heard of him two months ago . . . B Vandeeet has got back he has been here about two month I have not seen him They say he has not Made anything at all.

OHIO

Instead of going to Michigan or Illinois, Spaulding and a friend decided to investigate the Ohio region and even contemplated going south to New Orleans. The reaction from home was not positive. In March 1836, Spaulding's parents wrote to him in Cincinnati. His father said: "I learnt that it is an unhealthy place Whare you are and that you talk of going to New Orleans I would not go there the prospect for work here is better than it was we should be glad to have you Come home we Cannot bare the thought of your going any further write immeditly and let us know when you will be home." His mother wrote in a similar tone:

I write a few lines thinking I might have some little influence on your mind I would advise you as a friend to flee from that place We have heard that place is called the most unhealthy place in the world I do feel very bad about your living in that place the Colery raged there you know to a great degree my earnest desire is that you would Come from Sinsenetta if you have any regard for yours Come and see us once more I think you might lay up as much property here as

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you will there but if you Could go to a healthy place I Would not feel as bad about you as I now do. we hear some times in the state of Ohio is healthy and the Land very good if you could get a little land in a healthy place I should feel better than I now do [.]

An enclosed letter from Spaulding's brother, Daniel, told of the marriage of Russell Judd and of several other young people in Bennington, as well as who was "keeping company" with whom. Daniel reported escorting a young lady home and added, "we had perty fair times." He noted that Spaulding's friend, Samuel Pratt, was living in Plainfield, Cook County, Illinois.

In June 1836, while Spaulding was still in Ohio, Pratt wrote to him from Illinois, saying he had bought "a pese of land and Sold it for 5 hundred dollars and have Set up business for me Self and partner in Plainfield . . . as for the cuntrie it is won of the finest cuntrie I ever Saw and carpenters Get most any wages they ask and now Burt I think that you would do well to come here you can get bord for to dollars a weak we have got stuff for 1 thousand Chairs and find Sale for them as fast as we can get them done and if you will come here I think you never will be Sorry" [.]

Spaulding apparently did not find the description of Illinois attractive enough to travel there. But he did not leave Ohio. This did not make his parents happy. They wrote him again in Cincinnati in June 1836, his father taking a stronger tone than earlier:

I now under take to advise you to Come home imediately you will Say that you Can get the most wages thare but I do not think so you can get a dollar and 25 cents per day and I hope you will Come home imediatly we want to see you very much we are ferfull that you will get sick and dy thare Come Spaulding and be one amongst us we want you . . . If you should live thare in growing abundance and lose your health you would not be the better—you can do as well here as any where quit the unhealthy place and Come home and if you cannot Start for home next week write to us when you will be at home [.]

Catharine Burt wrote just as forcefully:

Since we heard from you I began to think we never Should hear nor see you again your last letter dated march informed us that it was very sickly where you lived and we wrote to have you leave that place as soon as possible I now would instruct you as a Mother to come from that place wages is very high here there is a great Call for Mens work if you don't want to Come home I wish you to go to some healthy place I expect there is healthy towns in the state of Ohio I do beg of you not to stay in that unhealthy place it has been noted for being sickly for a number of years it is through the mercy of God your life is spared until now [.]



LEFT: Catherine (Knox) Burt (1787–1878), Spaulding’s mother. No date (early 1870s?). Courtesy of James Hayden. RIGHT: Daniel Robinson Burt (1815–1880), Spaulding’s brother, and Daniel’s wife, Elizabeth (Ford) Burt (1820–1888). Daguerreotype, no date (early 1840s?). Case label: “Holmes Daguerreotype,” possibly the work of Henry Holmes of Troy, New York. Courtesy of the Bennington Museum.

An enclosed note from Spaulding’s sister, Almira, updated her brother on other family news: “Daniel is paying attention to Betsey Ford pretty steady for he didn’t get home last Sunday night to about day light.” Daniel Burt and Elizabeth “Betsey” Ford were married in October 1836.

RETURNING EAST

Parental pressure apparently was sufficient to make Spaulding leave Cincinnati and return to Auburn, New York, by September 1836. William Burt, Jr. wrote his son:

We are glad that you are so far back towards home and that there is so good a prospect of you coming . . . you inquire the price of labor a good Workman Can get from 1.25 to 1.50 and Some 2.00 per day and be found labor it is very much wanted a man can get more if he boards him self and board is from 1.25 to 2.00 per week there is factorys and houses building in the East village of Bennington and we should all be glad to have you Come home we have been fearful

that you would not Come very soon . . . Isaac Hathaway Esra Tuttle and others say that joiner and carpenter work is better here than for years past . . . I do not know your situation Nor how Long you can do with out your money and So I Cannot tell you what is best but work is high and we Should be glad to see you.

Spaulding did not reply quickly. William wrote him on October 20, 1836: “We have Sent two letters but have heard nothing from you . . . we are fearfull that there is Something the matter but we hope that you are well and we wish to see you . . . and if you are not Coming home imediately I want you to write to me.”

Apparently Spaulding returned home for a visit during the winter of 1836–37, but by June he was back in Auburn. His father wrote: “We are enjoying a tolerable good Degree of health it is a tolerable healthy time but provision continues to be scarce . . . Charles [Cromack] has tried a place on our land and thinks it will do . . . thought of placing the building in between here and Jobs . . . the whole family send their love to you and if you Do not Come back this Sumer Write imediately.”

Daniel Burt wrote: “We are all well and hope to remain So they say that S Ovidt Cried 2 days after you left but she has got over it now . . . For my part I have not much to do business is very dull and is like to be J[oseph] Cromack has Bot the Hicks farm and taken Possession now R[ussell] J[udd] is at work about ½ the time and Hardly that.”

If business was slow in Bennington, it was much worse in many other places. The Panic of 1837 had begun. “Farmers went on growing crops for lower prices, but outside of the agricultural sector, economic activity declined.”¹¹ Vermont was less affected by the Panic than were many western states and emigration began to decline. “When the crash came, therefore, the prospective emigrant found he was about to leave a community in which there was nothing much to crash, and about to go to a community where everything was toppling.”¹²

By 1839, Spaulding had returned to Vermont and he remained there for the rest of his life. The next item in the correspondence, a January 1, 1839, letter to him from Eleanor Bowker of Sandgate, enclosed a poem beginning, “O give me back my Heart again.” Eleanor and Spaulding were married on November 11, 1839. For nearly thirty years they lived in Bennington where Spaulding worked as a carpenter.¹³ They had four sons and one daughter. In 1864, Spaulding purchased a farm in Sunderland, Vermont; by 1868, both Spaulding and his son, Henry, a Civil War veteran, had moved to Sunderland.¹⁴ William Spaulding Burt died there on March 27, 1896.

It might have been expected that Spaulding, as a young carpenter,

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William Spaulding Burt (1812–1896) and his wife, Eleanor (Bowker) Burt (1815–1871). No date (late 1860s?). Reverse labeled: “Copied by H. P. Moore, Concord, NH—The only manufacturer of silvertypes.” Courtesy of James Hayden.

would have remained in the West, perhaps joining his Knox and Diver cousins in Michigan or his friend, Samuel Pratt, in Illinois. But several other factors influenced his decision to return to Vermont. They included the economy, his parents' wishes, and his interest in an attractive young woman. He had sampled life in several western states and despite the urgings of his friends and relatives to join them there, he found the possibilities of those places could not compete with what he knew of Vermont.

MANUSCRIPT LOCATION INFORMATION

Photocopies and transcriptions of the letters of the correspondence of William Spaulding Burt are included in the file of Burt-Hayden Family Papers at the Bennington Museum Library.

NOTES

¹The author wishes to thank Jim Hayden, the great, great grandson of William Spaulding Burt, for sharing this correspondence with her.

²Lewis D. Stilwell, *Migration from Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948), 64; Harold A. Meeks, *Time and Change in Vermont: A Human Geography* (Chester, Ct.: The Globe Pequot Press, 1986), 80.

³Stilwell, *Migration from Vermont*, 171.

⁴*Ibid.*, 150.

⁵*Ibid.*, 167–168.

⁶*Ibid.*, 214.

⁷Stuart A. Holbrook, *The Yankee Exodus: An Account of Migration from New England* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 17.

⁸Stilwell, *Migration from Vermont*, 188.

⁹*Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 191.

¹¹Daniel W. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 505.

¹²Stilwell, *Migration from Vermont*, 179.

¹³US Census, 1850, Population, Vermont, Bennington County, Bennington, 211.

¹⁴US Census, 1880, Population, Vermont, Bennington County, Sunderland, 526.