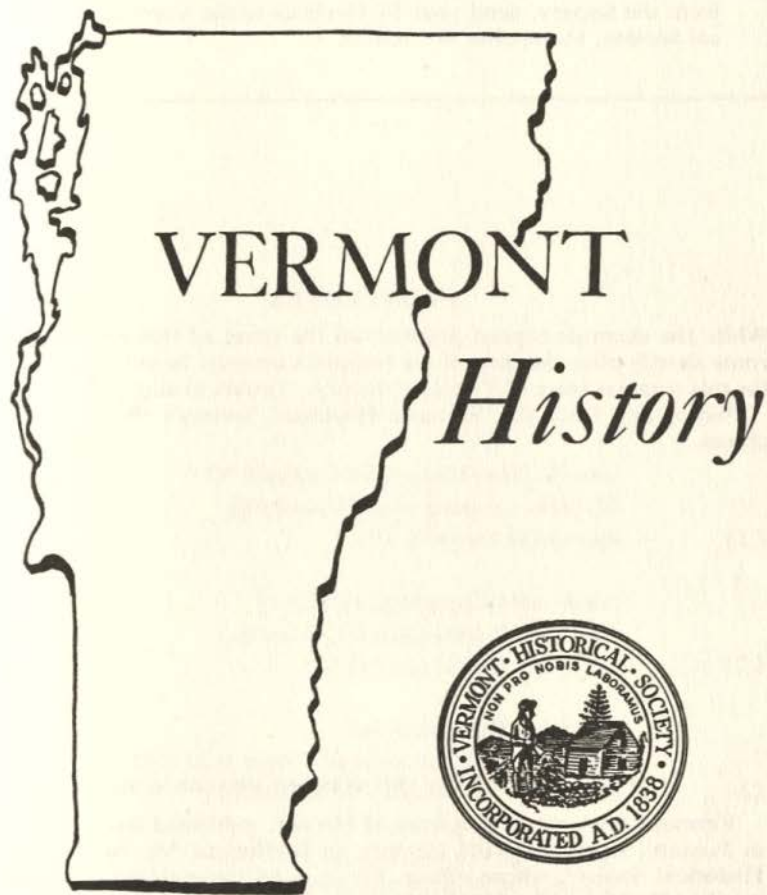


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Of Money Needs and Family News: Brigham Family Letters, 1800-1820

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ABOUT 1796, Uriah Brigham, Jr., left Marlboro, Massachusetts, and by ox-team made the arduous journey into the Northern Vermont wildness. With him went his wife, Elizabeth Fay Brigham, and two children, Mary and Elizabeth. Marlboro was "Brigham country" and within its original boundaries included Northboro, Southboro, Westboro, and Hudson. Brighams had been settled there since 1656. There Uriah had been born, 11 July 1757, had married Elizabeth Fay in 1790, and had served as assessor. Their destination, with all movable possessions, was the town of Bakersfield, Vermont, a trek of over 200 miles. Roads, as such, were virtually nonexistent; hence the enforced use of an ox-sled where no wagon could go. The village of Bakersfield lies about 11 miles from the Quebec border and Brighams were already settled there.¹ Captain Jonas Brigham, who had been a Minute Man at Lexington in 1774,² was the second settler in Bakersfield; approximately in 1791, he moved into the town, and from the first he became prominent in town affairs: he was the first elected town representative to the State General Assembly, and continued in that office for 17 years thereafter. Of his son, Jonas, who had come north with his father, is told the awesome story of his taking an entire week to get a grist to mill and back.³ Jonas had no team of his own. Monday: he walked 12 miles through the woods to Cambridge, to borrow a team from Josua Barnes. Tuesday: he made the trip back home. Wednesday: he returned with his grist as far as Cambridge. The nearest mill was in Fairfax. Thursday: he continued the trip to Fairfax, had the grist ground, and returned to Cambridge. Friday: he brought the grist home. Saturday: he took the team back to Cambridge. Sunday: he walked home to Bakersfield. Captain Jonas Brigham's son, Cheney,

1. Bakersfield is named for Joseph Baker, the first settler, who moved there in 1789 or 1790, and bought the town from Luke Knowlton. At first, the tract of 10,000 acres was known as Knowlton's Gore. The original grant, made by the State to Knowlton is dated 28 February 1787. Joseph Baker bought the entire town from Knowlton in 1791.

2. Jonas Brigham (1748-1826) hailed from North Brookfield, Mass. In 1777, he was a lieutenant from Brookfield and fought in the Battle of Saratoga.

3. Related in Hemenway's *Vermont Gazetteer*; W.I.T. Brigham's *The History of the Brigham Family* also mentions it.

was the first born male in Bakersfield. In 1821, he was to marry Elizabeth, Uriah Brigham's daughter, and to remain a farmer all of his life in Bakersfield.

What impelled Uriah and Elizabeth Brigham to strike out for Bakersfield? Uriah was one of eleven children. Vermont served inhabitants of Massachusetts and Connecticut of the past Revolution era much as did California and the West in the succeeding century. Vermont was virgin wilderness, a frontier to challenge and to offer the varied opportunities. Uriah's father, Lieutenant Uriah Brigham,⁴ had lived like a grandee, in lavish style. He and his wife, Sarah Breck Gott Brigham, received the visiting elite from far and near. The estate bore this strain throughout Lieutenant Uriah's lifetime. At his death, his affairs were so involved as to keep the administrators employed for thirty years. His son, Uriah, had the strongest incentive of stark necessity for seeking a new home, where homestead and farm would give subsistence to his family.

Bakersfield has followed a graph common to numerous Vermont towns: during the first part of the nineteenth century, a sharp rise occurred in the clearing of land, and the establishment of the small industries which made normal Vermont towns to a large degree self-sufficient. Bakersfield little by little acquired its gristmill, four sawmills, potash factory, tannery, a wool carding mill, a starch factory, brick kiln, and whisky distillery. Yet the early hardships were tremendous, with each homestead producing most of the food and clothing, the tools and apparatus for the family — in the broadest sense both human and animal. There was to follow a decline in these enterprises, as local ventures passed to larger industrial centres. Bakersfield never possessed sufficient water power to compete with more favorable industrial sites. Dairying and lumbering held on the longest, and continue to-day. To complete the cycle, Bakersfield is now largely a residential village, with a pronounced educational tone: Brigham Academy.

In the Brigham Family Collection of thirty letters in the archives of the Vermont Historical Society, Uriah Brigham's first letter is dated, 16 March 1800. The over-riding motive which drove him to write letters was money. A great scarcity of ready cash prevailed in the wilderness. Therefore, he pens a succession of requests to Peter Fay, his well-to-do farmer-brother-in-law, in Southboro, Massachusetts.⁵

4. Uriah was a lieutenant, 1762, in 3rd Marlboro Co.

5. His mother Mary Fay, in Letter 1 July 1820 calls Peter "fleshy."

"This note I send you against Walter Morse I wish you would call on him for the Money immediatly after you git the note & if he cant pay you request a bondsman to your satisfaction. . . ." And Uriah tells previous particulars of his family: "I got into my own House the 16th Day of February 1799 and my Wife liked the House so well that she brought me a Son the 23^d day of Nov. last and we call his name Breck⁶—I raised about 40 bushels of wheat about 65 bushels of corn about 200 bushels of Potatoes and about 50 lb of Flax last year. Enough to support My Family and Some to Sell—I improved about 7 acres of Land last year and I expect this year to improve about 14 acres—My Stock is a good yoak of oxen two Cows and a yearling Heifer a likely Breeding Sow 10 hens and 2 Hunting Cats. I have sold my mare and pung; I live very much retir'd I sildom goe further from home than to Mill about half a Mile—I have killed one Hog that weighed 243 lb I have two more to Kill in April that I expect to weigh 200 lb each. . . ." He directs Peter Fay to send his communications "into the post office at Worcester to be Sent to the post office at Burlington State of Vermont."

Uriah often, as it were, spent the money against his expectations and before he actually had it in hand. Money he needed to clear land.⁷ He expresses keen disappointment in an unfulfilled loan of \$200, which resulted in his losing \$50. He requests Peter Fay to "git one Side of good Upper Leather on my note; you can send to S^t Albans⁸ by M. Jewel. . . ." "I am not in extreme Poverty nor great Affluence but have Victuels Enough to keep you three Week if you see fit to visit me."⁹ ". . . we have vituuls enough to Eat and some to sell, we are Comfortable for Cloaths ant none to spair, we have six Children¹⁰ two Sons born sence we have been hear the first we named Breck the second we named Josiah Fay to do Honor to his Grandfather. . . . We begin [to] have some help from our Children the Girls can spin knit and sowe very well we have had considerable advantage of Schooling for our Children sence we have been hear the two Girls and Uriah can read a newspaper very well we have got a very good House and Barn and about 20 acres of land under improvement which yealds Us a plentifull supply of provisions and fodder for our Cattle, pastureing we have

6. Breck was the 5th child, born about 1798. Two brothers, Uriah and Robert, had been born previously in Bakersfield.

7. Letters 7 September 1802 to Peter Fay, Southboro and 24 January 1803 to Mrs. Mary Fay, Southboro.

8. St. Albans is 15 miles from Bakersfield.

9. Letter 7 September 1802.

10. Mary, Elizabeth, Uriah, Robert, Breck, Josiah Fay; Peter Bent was to be the seventh child, not born until 1807.

non except the woods . . . we raise a Great deal of Poultry and take the good of eating of it . . . Flax . . . and the wool from our sheep will do something toward Clothing us.—Idleness we are strangers to,—we persevere in industry and the strictest economy by that means we live well and clear of debt . . . Tell Herman Fay¹¹ that we have got as good a Farm as aunt Saras' and a much more agreeable situation . . . you may have a Letter from me any week on paying 17 cent for the Postage for their is an established Post rode by my House a post to carry Mail once every week without fail—. . ."

The majority of the letters in this collection are between Uriah's wife, Elizabeth and her mother, Mary Fay, in Southboro, Massachusetts. In every letter, there is evidence that both women keenly felt the disadvantage of the distance between. But it is thanks to geographic separation that we have letters preserving the personal details. Elizabeth tells her mother on January 27, 1812, that a winter visit to Southboro came to naught, because of a sickness in the Uriah Brigham family: ". . . my eldest daughter [Mary] commenced teaching a school the first of June last and returned home the twenty first of Sept with a severe illness which continued about three months."

Health is a paramount topic in all this correspondence between mother and daughter, and continually they yearn for visits and for news of family members: ". . . thirteen years have rolled away since I have conversed with you or any . . . of my relations. . . ." "N.B. please write by the bearer and I wish you to write in particular concerning my Brothers and sisters. . . ." This plea is repeated as variations-on-a-theme in nearly every letter.¹²

Elizabeth Brigham was the daughter of Colonel Josiah Fay and Mary Bent Fay. Josiah died in the Revolution while serving on Long Island. His grave is in Trinity Church cemetery, New York City. Mary Fay's character, which her daughter Elizabeth (one of nine children) reflected, was remarkably strong. It is remembered of her, that she was once fined \$300 by the Southboro authorities for breaking the Sabbath by riding a mile on horseback to visit a sick daughter.¹³ All but one of Elizabeth's letters to her are addressed to "The Widow Mary Fay". She lived to a good old age; her gravestone reads: "In Memory of Mrs.

11. Herman Fay married Martha, the sister of Uriah's wife Elizabeth.

12. Aunt Sarah's death is recorded in Elizabeth Brigham's Letter 12 April 1815: ". . . The letter that I received from you informed me of the death of aunt Sarah. I was hoping one more to have seen the aged woman but she is now no more. . . ."

13. W.I.T. Brigham, *The History of the Brigham Family* (Grafton, N.H., 1907), p. 180.

Mary Fay, who died Jan. 5, 1833, aged 95 years and 8 months."¹⁴

Today we can feel true relief that Uriah and Elizabeth *were* able to visit Southboro. In the letter of 7 November 1817, Elizabeth reports to her mother, Mary Fay: "I arrived home in just two weeks from the day I left Southborough I had a good journey and no bad luck and found my family well . . . they was verry glad to see us again for we had been gone longer than they expected though had not been concerned about us They had but done harvesting. Before we got home they had dug nine hundred bushels of potatoes though it has been the wettest fall that ever was known here." In a letter of later date Uriah also mentions this visit: "We took great satisfaction in the visit we maid you two years agoe, and through the generosity of our Mother and connections we got well Paid." After Uriah's death, Widow Elizabeth Brigham, in company of her son Josiah, visited Southboro; the Letter of 26 February 1822¹⁵ assures Elizabeth that her twin brother, Alpheus, "is at present in about the same state of health that he was when you left here." And, in a single letter from Alpheus himself¹⁶ to Josiah Fay Brigham, we read: "It is a pleasure to be call to mind the visits of your Mother & you, & rejoice that the seeming misfortune to your horse while here has proved no injury to your interests."¹⁷

Mary Fay made her home with her unmarried son, Alpheus, whose precarious health (he was often confined to bed with rheumatism) was one of the venerable lady's chief anxieties: ". . . fashion often seduces him to expose his health to the damp dew of Heaven as well as the vicissitudes of the evening air, which I presume have been very destructive to his health. . . ."¹⁸ By letter, Elizabeth had urged her mother to move for the winter into a more comfortable room. This she refused to do; also she "has not thought it convenient to alter . . . those habits she has acquired of doing all her work herself in preference to yielding to the infirmities attending old age. . . ."¹⁹ In a letter of 1 July 1820, Mary Fay had lamented that she could no longer maintain her dairy. "I have made no butter nor cheese this season, nor shall I. . . ." She was then age 83. The last letter in this collection from Mary Fay was posted 25 February 1826 and written in firm hand. Among other fami-

14. Olin P. Fay, *Fay Genealogy*, (Cleveland, 1898).

15. Written by Elizabeth's nephew, Fitch Winchester, who was writing on behalf of Mary Fay.

16. 20 September 1822.

17. In Letter 12 April 1825, Elizabeth notes that another winter has passed without a visit to her mother. "We had everything in readiness to perform the journey and on account of bad sleighing were obliged to give up the pursuit." Because of decrease in farm work, winter was the favored time for visits away from home.

18. Letter 26 February 1822, to Fitch Winchester.

19. *Ibid.*

ly calamities, she adds to Elizabeth Brigham: "I must express my regret that you are under the necessity of having your finger taken off. . . . I feel confident if you do have Fortitude enough to undergo the operation, you will never [sic] be in a situation to visit me again, if you do finally have it taken off. . . ." We can take some comfort in learning from this same letter, that Mary Fay occasionally in old age had a maid: ". . . I have got so bad a cold now I am unable to wait on myself, and [unable to wait] much more so on others."

Another series of Uriah Brigham's money letters provides remarkable dramatic suspense. What inaugurated it was a letter from his brother Henry Brigham, announcing the death, at 86, of their mother, Sarah Breck Brigham, in Marlboro, Massachusetts.²⁰ At once, the question of her property assumes urgent significance. Henry recommends that the farm land be put on sale as a whole, and that they appoint an agent to act for them. To divide the land (" . . . the water strips are all grown up and it has not had any manure since you left . . .") would incur large expense and might make it unsalable.²¹

Henry writes again, two years later,²² to apprise Uriah of the death of their brother Breck (Robert Breck died ca. 1815 in Worcester). He was said to be worth \$4 or 5000, and by will left certain fifths of this to one brother and 2 sisters, and to the rest \$1 each. Henry has not yet recovered from attending Breck's funeral, because a winter ago he had a fall, with the consequence that it pains him to ride. Advice has been for them to bargain his own, their sister Anne's, and Uriah's right in their mother's property. It would be better for Uriah, he continues, to come in person and attend to this business. And, Henry adds an account of the death of their brother John: ". . . I never heard but he was well he was plowing the old onion bed with his mear and fell on his face on the ground at the plows tail and never was known to breathe after—as to mothers personal property I should suppose their is some but I presume it is where you nor I never will find it." It is the most distressing time that Henry has seen. "I have acres in my pastures that is as dead as it was last winter and what the cattle will do I know not. I had hay for my cows until Election. . . . I have had a tedious Cough . . . called an influency. . . ."

So it came about that Uriah found money owed him, from the

20. 6 February 1815, Barre, Mass.

21. Henry adds interesting observations about the War of 1812 in progress. He is ashamed of Massachusetts, because the old Tories have gotten into power and use it. The British could have had Boston for winter quarters, with a fleet and army before the town, anytime they appointed to take possession. Northampton unanimously voted to take measures for the defence of that town.

22. Letter 1 June 1817, Barre, Mass.

sale of the Marlboro land. And it is to his well-to-do brother-in-law, Peter Fay, that Uriah applies for the money. “. . . I have maid calculations for it—I shall be very much disappointed if I dont have it—I have received nine Dollars being the interest for one year . . .”²³ By December, the money has not been forthcoming, and Uriah again addresses Peter Fay, Southboro, Massachusetts and asks him to send the money. “I make no doubt but the money will have a safe conveyance in the mail—you need not fear on your part for this letter will clear you from all harm—we have a post office in Town where all letters to me are lodged—you may send it in large Bills if it is convenient because the less the number of Bills the less the postage. . . .”²⁴ Yet by February, Uriah had received no money, but Peter Fay had written to enquire directions for conveying the money to Bakersfield. This elicits from Uriah a rather trenchant epistle, emphasizing that he had *already* forwarded instructions in the foregoing letter, and goes on interestingly: “. . . I view the Male to be as safe a Conveyance as I can have except a private conveyance and I dout no of any opportunity in that way. . . . I wish you would send it on immediately by male.—Seale it up in a letter in the presence of the post Master—to be left in the post office in Bakersfield—Benjamin Ball formerly from Westborough is post Master he lives about two miles from me if a letter gits into his office for me he commonly sends word in a Short time he can have an opportunity almost any Hour in a day—Fear nothing on your part for this letter will clear you from all harm—I take the whole on myself as to any reske. . . .” And a postscript adds: “N.B. you wrote to me that you had 128 dollars and expected the remainder in twenty or thirty days if you have not got the whole of the money send what you have.”²⁵ A brief note allays our suspense: “I Rec^d your Letter of the 29th of Jan^y. last with one Hundred and fifty nine Dollars sealed in the same. . . .”²⁶

Stark tragedy stalks any such exchange of family letters. Elizabeth Brigham’s brother, Josiah Fay, had a deranged son, Peter Bent Fay, who died age 33, in 1831.²⁷ In a letter of Mary Fay, the boy’s grandmother, a grim note of the times interjects itself: “. . . Bent, who remains in a stupendous [sic], stupidity, or delirium, and the proverbiality is, he ever will. He is chained a part of the time in a chamber,

23. Letter 10 September 1819, Bakersfield.

24. Letter 2 December 1819, Bakersfield.

25. Letter 8 February 1820, Bakersfield.

26. 24 February 1820, Bakersfield.

27. Letters, 10 September 1819, 8 February 1820, 1 July 1820.

through the fear of his parents that he will some time, if loos & when an oportunity presents, distroy himself, or some other person. . . ."²⁸

In a letter to one of his sons, probably to Robert, in Lennox, New York, Uriah relates the death by drowning of his 18-year-old son, Breck. The cover of the letter is missing and the paper is fragmented.²⁹ ". . . I must wright to you the heavy tidings of the Death of your Brother, Breck, he was drowned in Mitchels Millpond on the 28th of June last³⁰ he went to wash him and got into the Chanel unexpectly and their drowned.—their was help enough but none could help him—all stood amazed at the awful sight till it was too late to save his Life. . . . Sence you left me I have had 4 of as good Boys as any man they were willing to hear my advice and promote my interest at any time, I have now three³¹ left I hope they will be spair'd me—nothing can excell their industry. . . ." In a letter to her mother, Elizabeth Brigham had mentioned that her son, Breck, talks of going to live with Josiah's son and learn a trade.³² Josiah Fay was a manufacturer of handmade veils. "A very skillful mechanic. He was called 'Brad'."³³ He had five sons and resided in Marlboro. In a letter of Uriah's, we learn ". . . Robert is some where in State of New York he has learned the Blacksmith's Traid and follows journey worck at \$20 per month. . . ."³⁴ The life of a Vermont farmer required aptitude for many diverse skills. The natural trend to specialise is shown in more than one of the Brigham boys. Evidently, there was a family tradition for metal crafts. A trade was to be a prime resource, especially after the death of their father at the age 63. He left nine children. Elizabeth Brigham narrates to her mother the circumstances of Uriah's death. The letter is reproduced complete. In its fulness it reveals the strength required of a family daily facing the uncertainties of a life of little leisure, much hard work, small material reward, and unexpected death.

28. 30 October 1820, Southboro.

29. 10 August 1818, Bakersfield.

30. 1816 is, however, the date usually given. See W.I.T. Brigham; *The History of the Brigham Family*, p. 181.

31. Besides the absent Robert, the three remaining sons were Josiah Fay, Peter Bent, and Benjamin Gott.

32. Letter 7 November 1817, Bakersfield.

33. O. P. Fay, *Fay Genealogy*, p. 40.

34. Letter 10 September 1819, Bakersfield.

Bakersfield Sep^l 27th 1820

Dear Mother,

Once more I am permitted to address you and may I adress with such language as will afford consolation to your declining mind though I have solemn news to write. Yet I hope you will be prepared for the event and do not suffer immoderate grief to prevail on your mind. When we wrote to you last we then were enjoying every earthly felicity which mortals could enjoy health and fortune smiled around us our remaining children were to us the best of children. But God saw fit in the midst of prosperity to change the scene. I am separated by death from a kind and indulging husband while he lived I had every protection which the arm of mortality could afford every thing which he could do for my happiness and the happiness of his family he was always ready to do. For almost twenty-nine years we lived together in conjugal love but those conjugal ties are forever separated and I am left to walk the remaining part of life separated by the hand of Providence from the smiles of a kind husband and may I be enabled by Omnipotence to bear this separation with calmness and to consider that God hath a right to give and to take away and that it becomes mortals to bow with submission to His divine will. Undoubtedly dear Mother before I close writing you would wish me to inform you the particulars relative to my husband's death. On the morning Sept. 3^d he arose early as usual left his house thinking to drive his cows home to be milked and while attempting to get over a pair of bars (which wear near the house) he thought he would turn his head and see if he could discern where the owls had devoured some of his hens as he heard a noise among them the night before and in doing this he fell of the bars struck first his shoulders and his feet bent almost over his head which caused a severe hurt but with much difficulty he got to the house himself one of his sons met him at the door helped him into the house and a physician was immediately sent for and relief was soon obtained by the letting of blood and then he remained in a comfortable state untill the ninth day of the month excepting at times sever pain during this time we employed an eminent physician which he prefered to any other at this time he was seized with more violent pain and his case supposed to be dangerous and another physician was immediately employed and little encouragement was given of a recovery but soon a dark veil was cast he remained a live untill saturday 16th. nine o clock in the evening then the scene of life closed about eighteen hours previous to his death he

was informed that he must soon expire he then with calmness wished his family to appear around him he gave them good advice he wished them always to conduct agreeable to the moral precepts of the Gospel and to avoid religious controversys for no good could be obtained by them he wished me and the children to proceed in business as though he was with us and not let melancholy prevail upon us he observed to me how much I shall make calculations to visit you next fall with one of my sons and I hope I am well an likewise my children are well I hope you in nothing will prevent you health I wish you to write me soon write concerning my brothers and sisters.