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Letter from William Russell to George Sibley, May 27, 1836

William Russell
Crystal Springs

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Crystal Springs, 27th, May 1836
(Friday)

To Major George C. Sibley,

Dear Sir,

Your letter of 23rd Inst. I recd. from Capt. Geyer on the night of the 24th and although a reply might not appear to be necessary, its character is such, that I must ask leave to trouble you with reading one. Extremely pressed and hurried with more than double what I can accomplish, that I am compelled, even to stint myself in sleep, is the only reason that a reply has been delayed until now. And even now, I must write somewhat in haste, as I am obliged to do all my letters without stopping to deliberate, or to weight the force or weakness of the words I happen to use.

Then, first, as to receiving Lucy Ann Lewis, as a scholar & boarder. You relate what passed between you and Mr. Wherry, that you told Mr. Wherry that she could be recd. And to this inquiry (in my letter of 22nd Inst.) you repeat what you said to Mr. Wherry. That is, I suppose, that you agree to receive her, according to the present rules & principles of your school.

Col. Lewis & I were particular friends for many years; from our first acquaintance to the day of his death, An honest man than he never lived, and in his friendships, he was more than commonly faithful and sincere. When he asked me and I agreed to take charge of his daughter Mary, I solicited his particular instructions, as to her education and the branches he wishes her taught etc. He requested me to have her taught the same branches, and at the same school or schools, and under the same rules & government in all respects, as I thought proper, adapted as to Ann, and declined giving me any other instructions, other than to draw on him for money when money was necessary, I agreed to do so, and thus we parted to meet no more in this world, And I am not her guardian. Mr. H. Stillwell is.

Mr. David Philips (whom I have never seen, nor heard of either, until lately) has been recently appointed guardian of Lucy Ann Lewis, sends her to St. Louis, without my knowledge until she was here, and writes requesting me to take charge of her, and that he wishes her to go to the same school with Mary. (But I will enclose his letter in this and you can see what he has said, and return me the letter when we meet). Mr. Stillwell, Marys guardian, requested me to have her whole time & mind applied to the acquirement of practical useful branches, but not to music, painting or other ornamental branches. Neither of their guardians have said a word, whether they might or might not, apply a part of their time or mind while at school to the study of religion. What my letter of 22nd, inst said on that subject, as relates to them was on my own hook, not instructed either way. That letter 22nd Inst, may have been, and probably was poor composition, or badly worded, written, as it was in more than common haste. But the substance of the opinions I expressed, in relation to girls, children at school, being required to attend night meetings of any sort, or meetings of high excitement at any time day or night, or being catechised or lectured by preachers or others, etc. are founded upon my most conscientious and sincere belief of what is proper right. And most calculated to promote as well the progress in

learning; as the interests and happiness of the scholar I disclaimed any desire for such rules to apply to any others, than those under my charge; I might have limited it to Ann alone, as I had no instructions from the Guardeans of the others, about any such subjects. I was speaking for them, as for Ann, according to my best judgment, conscience & belief Mr. Philips, Guardean of Lucy Ann will be here this summer. I will write Mr. Stillwell for special instructions in the matter, will send him one of your new circulars (when printed) if you will furnish it. And if you will please furnish me an interpretation of what the clause you were so kind as to send me, means in practice, I will send that also. To the clause sent me, from your intended new circular, it is not likely that anyone would take exceptions. It is like that in the U. S. constitution, to provide for the General welfare to which none could object: - The interpretation I would like to send to the guardean of these children, would be, whether the clause referred to in your circular means, practically; that pupils may be required or permitted to attend night meetings at St. Charles, or meetings of high excitement at any time day or night, either theatrical or church? Whether it means that the Pupils will be permitted to be catechised or lectured upon or about matters of religion, by preachers or others? Whether it means that pupils must learn & repeat daily, or at any time, either catechisms, or prayers etc. These interpretations I would like to be able to send with the circular.

As to Mary Lewis & Lucy Ann Lewis, I will only say further, that I will try to ascertain the will of the Guardeans as to the matters referred to. And exercise no will of my own any further in the affair, if I can avoid it. It is too delicate, and too responsible, if I can get out of the scrape. And I would like for them (their Guardeans) to make Mr. Wherry or some one else their agent, to take charge of providing for the children's schooling & interests here. I propose therefore, that Mary Lewis & Lucy Ann Lewis, be and continue at the Lindenwood School, until their proper & lawful Guardeans, either by themselves, or through their agents, direct otherwise. This ends all I have at present to say; as concerns Mary, and Lucy Ann Lewis. My proposal, of course, to accord with whatever may, for the time being, be the rules of your school and family. If this proposal is not accepted I will go for the girls, soon as I can leave home, which last case, I may, until their guardeans are heard from, place Mary & Lucy Ann, at the nunnery near me.

Having said all I intended to say in this letter as regards Col, Lewis's daughters. It is a more painful nature to me, than any I have had to perform for a long time; that I feel it absolutely necessary, to add a few remarks and explanations as to myself.

My letter of 22nd Inst. might have been much shorter, and still contained its whole material substances, which is that I objected to the children under my charge attending night meetings at all, or highly excited meetings (anxious or other) at any time day or night, considering, as I do, high excitements, destructively injurious to their proper studies. I objected to their being catechised or lectured (I meant, separately & individually) upon religious subjects, other than moral, assenting as I did, to their going to church on Sundays, when the weather was good, and of course, to hear lectures from the pulpit, to the whole congregation. I objected to their studies at school, being directed to matters of religion, other than moral, believing as I do, and stated, that while it is of paramount importance, it is the most difficult of demonstration, of any study on earth, and requires more strength

and maturity of mind, than any other; therefore, unfit as I think, for children at school. These were the principal matters to which I objected, and I enquired, if any of these views, so materially differed from yours, as to conflict with any of your established rules? Your answer does not say that anyone, or which one of them does so conflict. The paragraph from your intended circular does not say that they conflict, though, it would be, at the same time, no violation of that paragraph, to occupy half (or more) of the time of the school, in the matters to which I object. That paragraph is exceedingly convenient to cover different sorts of cases, or to be construed to suit every body.

My letter of 22nd Inst. also (as I intended it) by way of furnishing the reasons on which my above named objections were founded; stated facts, such as I have seen myself and know to be, according to my senses, true, in relation to exciting the sympathies and under such excitements (most wickedly, as I think) obtaining pledges from individuals, sometimes mere children, such as they never would or could perform. But I did not hint, or know, of any such occurrence at St. Charles, nor in your family, nor that you, or any of your family, had ever encouraged any such thing. I was merely stating in advance (as I supposed) of anything that had occurred there, what I had seen and known elsewhere; and considered as extremely wicked, expecting, as I did, that so stating what I had seen, and my opinions of that matter, would be an inducement with you, to protect any of the children entrusted to me, from being subjected, to any such excitements or abuses, if such should ever reach your neighborhood. This was my view & motive, in saying what I did on that part of the subject. And it was with the same view, and same motive, that I named the misfortunes, which I had been made to feel so severely, in my former attempts to promote the education of some of my young relations. But, from your answer (which really alarms me) you seem to take all this as applicable to yourself, (which I never meant, or intended) to mean) and shew from your answer, an inclination to defend the whole. I hope in God, my dear sir, that if you have been promoting measures, of the character of which, I have had so much bitter cause to complain, and of which you have so often heard me complain; that it has been applicable only, to others, than either of those under my charge. For me to be made again, the victim of such wickedness, would very nearly take my life, and more particularly if permitted to be done, through the instrumentality or with the knowledge, of those whom, I have always regarded as faithful friends.

In the letter you speak of having written me, upon these same subjects "Som two years ago," you have possibly in part forgotten the final conclusion. The first 7 or 8 pages of the letter, argues the subject in favour of most of the principles you now maintain, and concludes, by admitting, that the matters, from which I had asked Ann & Mary to be excused, were not required by any rules of the school, or institution. And that if I still wished them excused, and wrote again to that effect it would be done. Mrs. Sibley, writes briefly, again to that effect it would be done. Mrs. Sibley, writes briefly, in the same letter, approving its entire contents, and urging, as to Sunday schools, (which was not expected to be continued long), the inconvenience of separating the girls, by taking part of them to Sunday school, and leaving part at home, etc. Considering all the circumstances, I then replied as I felt, that I was unwilling, to add to the troubles or inconveniences of the institution (or to that effect.) & would therefore submit, to their going to Sunday school as before, But what is now most astonishing to me, is your saying that my views are "now for the first time understood by us."

It being the clear right of every individual, at mature years to act upon such religious principles as he may think most proper, or choose to adopt, and to change his religious principles, as often as he may deem it proper to do so, and for them (while he is within the limit of human laws) not bound to answer or account to human beings, are rights (as I hold them to be) which might deter from comparisons, of present, with former times. My own religious principles, which though very far from perfection (as that of all human beings) have never materially varied or changed, nor have I yet been convinced, that with the heart and disposition God has given me, that I have power to better them, or desirous as I am to do right in all things, according to my best Judgment, power and ability, I too might have changed to do better if I could. Then, that a religious bias, as you state, has ever (always) been inculcated in your family, I could myself, be a witness to prove, according to my sense of the term, from 1827, when I had the pleasure, of spending a week or more at your house, (at Fountain Cottage) up to (as far as I have knowledge) the present time. And until the last past year or two, I had supposed, that your religious principles & my own, were very nearly, or entirely alike, that I apprehend you would admit, that yours has undergone a material change, within the last few years, that you would now uphold and maintain principles that you did not formerly deem essential, that what you would now deem paramount duties, were not formerly so considered by you. Then, if evident and material changes as stated have taken place -- if it be true, that it is by some sects, held & maintained, that children at 10 or 12 or 15 years old, are competent, and have sufficient discretion & maturity, to make their minds & final decision, in the important matter of religion (although they might not have been found capable of understanding thoroughly the rules of arithmetic, or other simple branches, some that hold these principles, might deem it their conscientious duty, either to God or to the church, or to the child, to promote, or to hurry the consummation of that end, by uniting the child to their own church, But many church members have I believe, entered into solemn covenant and contract (see the enclosed printed "covenant") "To lay plans" and "to make revivals of religion the aim of their lives" Now, although, no one so pledged or sworn, may reside in your neighbourhood, yet there may be of your welcomed visitors, these that are thus pledged by solemn covenant to lay plans to get up revivals To excite the sympathies and distract and unfit the mind for school studies, and to maintain, that children at school are proper & fit subjects for these revivals, and for anxious & other excited meetings.

Now, my dear sir, to you, that has been (if not now) for a long time, my sincere and by me, much valued friend, I most soberly, and deliberately repeat, that no child of mine, or of which I was the lawful Guardian should be permitted by me, to go to any boarding school & live in a family, where such child could not be protected from being "either catechised or lectured by any one, no matter how eminent, worthy or virtuous, upon religious subjects of any sort, nor in any way advise or encourage in that matter, other than as regards their moral conduct". And further, protected from being exposed at night meetings, or at highly excited meetings, at any time, day or night, or permitted at school, to spend their time and thoughts about religion, other than moral, believing as I most sincerely and conscientiously do, that no other subject so much requires the fullest strength and maturity of mind. And that to be lectured (individually) or catechised by "revival" makers, or permitted to attend excited meetings "planned" for that purpose, is more fatally destructive of regular school studies, than any other that

human invention could contrive. And if you will only give me credit for sincerity, in this my firm belief, then every other point I have urged, are justified, or explained.

Your letter concludes that you close the subject by “desiring me to take Ann & Mary away, as soon as I conveniently can. It is convenient for me to take Ann away now. Mrs. Easton has kindly agreed to take charge of and protect her, until I can come up for her. And I have written to Ann, to go immediately to Mrs. Eastons, and there to stay, until I come for her.

As I am not the lawful guardian of Mary, or Lucy Ann Lewis, and as their lawful guardians (one of whom is expected here this summer) might think entirely different from me, upon the subjects agitated, I proposed in the beginning of this letter, that they should continue at Linden Wood and if withdrawn from there at all, to be done by their lawful guardians, and not by me. If this proposal is not agreed to, it will be, when I know that fact, time enough then, to provide for them elsewhere.

Since the commencement of the Linden Wood School, I have considered Ann upon the same footing with all the other pupils there, and myself under the same obligations as that of every other parent who had a child or children, at that institution. But in withdrawing Ann from your family, I am constrained to repeat, the high sense of gratification I felt for the evidently disinterested spirit of kindness shewn by both Mrs. Sibley and yourself in first receiving Ann into your family, when you had no school or expectation of any, and through Mrs. Easton, (as well as one or two others) had said she would if I wished it, take Ann to raise, as I then preferred your family (Mrs. Easton’s family, being then so large) did not lessen the obligation and kindness I felt. Then that act of your disinterested kindness I must not forget, though your supposed duties to a church or a sect with my very different opinions as to a part of those matters, may sever us widely, very widely, in these respects, however similar our former opinions, in such matters were.

I remain, Yours as ever,

Wm. Russell

2 Letters from Wm. Russell to G.C.Sibley
of 22nd & 27th May 1836.

About Religious matters chiefly.

Ans. fully on the 23rd May & 2 June,
answers copied in my Patent Copy Book,
on the last page of No. 1.

[In the folder that I have, this letter exists in two forms. The first is a typescript. I copied the typescript in its entirety before finding the photocopy of the handwritten document. In comparing the two documents, I added a few underlinings that were apparent in the handwriting but not present in the typescript, but I did not carefully check the photocopy against the typescript word-for-word, since I assume that the typescript was made from either the photocopy or from the original that the photocopy

was made from. Generally, the two documents appear identical in content, except that all the lines below Russell's signature (beginning with "2 Letters from Wn. Russell to G.C.Sibley) do not appear in the photocopy. Also, a separate document – the last page of an undated letter to Mary Sibley – is folded between the third and last pages. The undated page was typed up separately and saved among these letters as "Undated, Final page of a letter to M. Sibley from W. Russell".]