

A NEW ENGLANDER IN THE WEST

LETTERS OF EBEN WELD, 1845-50

The writer of the following letters, Eben Weld, was one of those hardy pioneers who moved westward with the advancing frontier. He was born at Cornish, New Hampshire, on January 4, 1815, the fourth of the six sons of Daniel and Lydia Fuller Weld. In the early forties Weld emigrated to the Minnesota country, and there he remained until 1850, trading with the Indians, acting as farmer for the Sioux at Kaposia, and becoming "completely wed[d]ed to a frontier life." In 1848 he bought from Charles Mousseau a claim at what is now Dayton's Bluff, St. Paul,¹ but two years later he sold his farm and left Minnesota to go to "Oregon Territory via California." The changes that he witnessed during his residence on the upper Mississippi he describes in a letter from Oak Point, Oregon:

[In] Minnesota from three to five years ago I witnessed the Savages in their fights, and saw scalps torn from each other dripping with blood and midnight dances or (waxepi) and myself the only pale face to write their History. But now 'Tis wonderous Strange. How great the Change. The frontier is no longer here, the ax the plow and the *Hammer* have become mighty Elements of the Pioneers of Minnesota[,] while the original proprietors of the soil are fast giving back and to[o] frequently falling victims to the viscious habits of many of the Whites — it is nearly one year since I sold my farm at Saint Paul Minnisota[,] which is probably ere this covered with buildings, and no doubt has some what increased in value.²

Weld was much pleased with his new location on the

¹ J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of Saint Paul*, 88 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4). Weld is mentioned as a possible representative in the territorial legislature from Pig's Eye, below Dayton's Bluff, in a letter from David Lambert to Henry H. Sibley, June 4, 1849. Sibley Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

² Eben Weld to Martin Weld, February 15, 1851, Weld Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Columbia River. "The Star of Empire shines no farther west," he writes, "but Shines so bril[l]iant here that all nations are comming here to worship." In several letters written in the early fifties he pictures enthusiastically his life in Oregon, and in one he describes himself as a "Pioneer in two Territorys." His career was brought to an abrupt close on June 5, 1857, when a skiff in which he was crossing the Columbia upset and he was drowned.³

Copies of the three letters published herewith were furnished, with information about the writer and the Weld family and some explanatory notes, by Miss Mildred Weld of Indianapolis, a grandniece of Eben Weld. The originals of these letters, of three written from Oregon, and of one relating to Weld's death, which were among the papers of Miss Weld's grandfather, have been received by the Minnesota Historical Society from her cousin, Miss Gladys Irene Weld of Montpelier, Vermont.

EBEN WELD TO TIMOTHY P. FULLER, January 18, 1845

[Weld Papers — A. L. S.]

FORT SNELLING January 18th 1845

DEAR SIR

It is a long time since I have written to you, and much longer since receiving a letter from you, in fact I dont recol[l]ect of receiving a letter from you in all my life! I feéal very anxious to hear from you and Aunt allso my Farther and Mother I fear there is some that have left this World for another since I saw them last. My health is very good at present I have allways boasted of good health untill last Spring when on my way from New Orleans was taken with Chills and feaver but have since out grown them. Chills and feaver are not known much in this part of the North West, it being about the same latitude of your place, but much more temperate in the Winter. we have not snow enough for good s[l]eding it is going on five years since I first came to this Country and never experienced such cold and severe Winters as in Vermont[,] no th-

³ Eben Weld to Martin Weld, August 6, 1851; Alex C. Anderson to Charles S. Weld, May 6, 1858, Weld Papers.

ing like it taking every thing into consideration this is the most advantageious Country I ever lived in the soil cant be beat for Wheat and potatoes and of all kinds of vegetables. Wild fruit is plenty of all kinds[,] Plumbs and Apples in abundance, Strawberry[r]ies and blu[e]ber[r]ies are allso plenty in their time. When I first visited this wild Count[r]y I had a small capital of four hundred dollars worth of Indian Goods of which I sold out at Indian payments allso collected furs &c. afterwards got Government contracts at the Forts allso Indian farming and am now about finishing a Contract of three hundred and fifty Cords of Wood at three dollars per Cord, a hundred Cord per Month, which has kept me pretty busy some times employing from twelve to fifteen halfbreeds and Frenchmen[,] as Yankees are scarce in this part of the World there is a set of people that are emigrating here from the Selkirk Settlement on Red River who are english or Scotch half breeds who are very good to work[,] but the French are no better than Indians lazy and a treacherous people who live on un[w]hol[e]som[e] food[,] now and then make a Dog feast and *talk large*.⁴ This Fort is to be built over a new another season and I shall stand a good chance to get more Contracts I have a valuable Claim at the falls of St Anthony the finest Water privilege in all the west.⁵ was I not afraid of loosing it I should of made you a visit long ago but am in hopes to make improvements enough upon it this Spring to secure it for one year or more so that I can see old Granite and the Greene Mountains once more. a short time since was talking with an old Englishman who was engaged in the last war with the Indians — against the Americans — concerning Polk. the old man took the trouble to enquire where I hail[e]d from I told him from the old Granite State the old man openly declaired there was more knowledge and virtue in the five New England States than all the rest of the World put together and that he seldom saw an individual but could read and wright who came from there to make the matter short,

⁴ In the early forties of the last century many French settlers — retired traders and voyageurs — were living in the vicinity of Fort Snelling and the present site of St. Paul. There, also, were to be found groups of emigrants from the Red River settlements near the Canadian border. William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1: 213–220 (St. Paul, 1921).

⁵ The city of Minneapolis, with its important lumber and flour mills, developed around these falls.

the old Man lost his bet on the election and I won a fine suit of Buckskin and a fine pair of Boots and a Poney if it had not fell through the ice and drown[ed] I wish I had some of those Canadian Horses there is none in these parts they would bring a great price here. our horses come mostly from Missisourii on St[eam] Boats and are of a delicate nature not fit for this Climate I am expecting to visit you next Spring perhaps in the month of June without fail Please remember me to Aunt and those who have not forgotten me Please direct to St Peters — Fort Snelling I[owa] Ty.⁶

Believe me Truly

EBEN WELD

TIMOTHY P. FULLER

[Addressed:] HON. TIMOTHY P. FULLER, CABOT, VERMONT

[Postmark] FORT SNELLING, Jan 21

EBEN WELD TO MARTIN WELD, February 10, 1846

[Weld Papers — A. L. S.]

FORT SNELLING IOWA TERRITORY Feb 10th 1846

BROTHER MARTIN

I cannot well delay a longer silence it is certain that I am in your debt or that you are in mine for a letter. I am living so remote from a Post office that it is difficult to send or to receive letter[s] the latest information from the Green Hills was better than a year ago. it was from Uncle Francis and wife who informed me of *forty* things, and one thing was that you had taken a wife, no doubt for the better ⁷ I wish I could say the same But pale faces are scarce in this part of the Country I am living in an Indian Village of Siouxs fifteen miles from the Fort Snelling ⁸ have been living four years among the natives generally as a Trader and an *Indian* talking and writeing the Darkota or Sioux Language. So in writing to you, you will please excuse my awkwardness in writing This is a very large band of

⁶ The district around the mouth of the Minnesota or St. Peter's River was known as St. Peter's. The portion of Minnesota west of the Mississippi that includes Fort Snelling was part of Iowa Territory from 1838 to 1846, when Iowa was admitted as a state. Folwell, *Minnesota*, 1: 486-489; Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 32 (Iowa City, Iowa, 1918).

⁷ Francis Fuller was Weld's maternal uncle. This letter is addressed to Martin Weld, who married Immogene L. George in 1844.

⁸ The village was Kaposia, on the present site of South St. Paul. Little Crow was chief of the Kaposia band.

Sioux and I am the only white person at the Village so I have to talk with the Indians or to myself, a *man* of better sense. for two years I have been instructing the natives in Agriculture I was appointed by the Indian department as Farmer agreeable to the Treaty of 1837 providing Farmers and Blacksmiths to the several different Bands with Salerys of Six Hundred Dollars each an[n]ually to be paid Quarterly for the Term of Twenty Years Houses and implements are furnished by Government⁹ I have a large two Story House and am the only occupant while it is sor[r]ounded with *Icewxteas-tipis* or Sioux Houses.¹⁰ I am any thing but being lonesome But I think if I had one of those pale faces down east for a partner I could live in a better stile and wear a white shirt occas[s]ionally now and then cut a pie of the Pumpkin kind: But Plague on those Pies and nick nacks they are enough to kill an Ostrich or a Dog after ones been living on Buffaloe meat and Venison without salt or spice Fort Snelling is about the same Latitude of your place But a vast deal of difference in the climate and Health of the two places the months of May June and the fore part of July we have a considerable of rain. the remaining part of the year is uniform and pleasant we have no north *easters* there has been no snow here yet this winter hardly to whiten the ground moderate freezing by night[,] thawy sunshiny days now and then a fire starts in the tall grass in the

⁹ As a farmer for the St. Peter's agency receiving a salary of six hundred dollars a year Weld appears in the lists of *Persons Employed in the Indian Department* for 1846-47 and 1847-48. See 29 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 36, p. 3 (serial 499); and 30 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 26, p. 5 (serial 516). Although Weld states that he had served for two years, his contract as farmer was not approved until July 21, 1845, according to a letter of that date from T. H. Crawford to John Chambers, in the Indian Office Letterbooks, 36: 495. Weld seems to have retained this position until sometime in 1848 or early in 1849, when, according to his own statement, he "was discharged as farmer." See Weld to Sibley, January 31, 1849, in the Sibley Papers. For the article in the treaty of 1837 relating to farmers for the Sioux, see Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs, Laws, and Treaties*, 2: 494 (Washington, 1904).

¹⁰ On the night of July 27, 1848, Henry Lewis, an artist who was visiting the Minnesota country and sketching in the Mississippi Valley, stopped at Little Crow's village. In his diary he records: "we accepted the hospitality of Mr Weld for which we paid dearly afterwards and got a pretty good nights rest in his house." The Minnesota Historical Society has a typed copy of the Lewis Diary. The tent of skins used by the Sioux as a lodging was commonly known as a tipi.

Bottoms and little Prairies while some spring creek stops its further progress untill some native stops to light his pipe and sets fire in a new place to gaze on the raging flames and half suffocated vermints it is very dry and pleasant Oct weather no sudden changes no cases of consumption the peopple die with old age and in Batt[1]e with the Chippeways¹¹ I have witnessed a number [of] scalp dances and dog feastes and medicin[e] dances there has been some talk here on the Frontier about the Red Coats going into the *scalp trade* as formerly, about Orregon But I doubt the Speculation¹² I have not time to do you justice nor myself on this small sheet of Papper How is all the folks. Please inform me where Charles is[,] Moses and Daniel[,] and [whe]ther Farther and Mother yet live. Be sure [*manuscript torn*] write me the particulars. How does Uncle Tim get a long. when you see him give him my best respects tell him I shall make him a visit next fall if the Chief [*Little Crow*] will let me the Indians have become so attached to me they refuse to let me leave them and are very anxious that I should take the Chiefs daughter for a wife. I received a letter from Brother Fuller last July stateing that he had lately been married in Nauvoo¹³ But did not inform me whether she was one of the Spiritual ones or of another kind She was very impertinent to enquire through him how many papposes I had and wives. give my best Respects to your wife and to all who have not forgot me

EBEN WELD

[P. S.] Please write soon and direct to Fort Snelling Iowa now, and then a news paper would rellish well

EBEN WELD

MARTIN WELD ESQ^r

[*Addressed*] MR MARTIN WELD, GROTON, VERMONT

[*Postmark*] FORT SNELLING, Februry 11.

¹¹ The Sioux of southern Minnesota and the Chippewa of the north were hereditary enemies, and battles between the members of these tribes were common. In 1842 a battle took place near Kaposia, and, as late as 1853, after Minnesota Territory was organized, a skirmish occurred on the streets of its capital city, St. Paul. Willoughby M. Babcock, "Sioux versus Chippewa," *ante*, 6: 41-45.

¹² The treaty with Great Britain by which the boundary between Oregon and Canada was fixed at the forty-ninth parallel was ratified in June, 1846. A few months earlier, when Weld was writing, the cry of "Fifty-four-forty or fight" was ringing through the land.

¹³ The reference is to Dr. John Fuller Weld, who was living in the Mormon settlement of Nauvoo.

EBEN WELD TO MARTIN WELD, April 21, 1850

[Weld Papers — A. L. S.]

April 21^s 1850

DEAR BROTHER

I am now on board of a steamer (Western World) and shall arrive at New Orleans this evening and leave — tomorrow the 22nd inst in the Steam Ship Allabama for Chargres on my way to Oregon Territory *via* California I left Minnesota on the 8th and have so far made a very quick passage Martin in attempting to write you I find I am so many years behind the times I hardly know where to commence. Well in the first place my health is good never better. But you had better believe it is very hot here just now and that I have met with a serious change in the climate 13 days ago I crossed Lake pippin [*Pepin*] 40 miles on the ice and here it is hot enough to roast Niggers I call^d at Nauvoo while the Boat was exchanging passengers to enquire of B^r Fuller and no wone could inform me of his whereabouts the place appears to have change^d its inhabitants and the Temple and most of the City is in ruins¹⁴ I stoped only two hours in Sa[i]nt Louis and expect to stop just about as long in Orleans. we have a verietiy of passengers on to day a duel took place to day on the Hury Cane Deck of the Boat one badly wounded travelers to and from California loaded down with Gold and *heav[i]er* with revolvers & Bowe Knives the River is so rough and windy that it is very difcult to write I will write you a gain from Panama or the isthmus. and allso at Francisco

May 23^d Steam Ship Columbus being about to stop for water & Coal at Acapulco [Mexico] I take this moment to finish what has been begun on the Mississippi River I left Orleans on the first of May arrived at Panama on the 15th inst and bought me a premium Ticket for \$350.00 some sold as high as \$500.00 But a great many could not buy any at all two thousand are still a waiting for other vesels and many are sick with the Panama fever Some have been obliged to remain for eight weeks who purchased their Tickets

¹⁴The Latter Day Saints under Joseph Smith established a settlement at Nauvoo on the Mississippi in 1839. In 1846, as a result of the "Mormon War," they left Illinois and migrated westward to Salt Lake. The elaborate Mormon Temple erected at Nauvoo was burned in 1848. Theodore C. Pease, *The Story of Illinois*, 186-189 (Chicago, 1925); Theodore Gregg, *History of Hancock County, Illinois*, 956 (Chicago, 1880).

in New York, through to Francisco But it is better to buy a ticket in Panama than to be detained on account of the irregular meeting of the line of Vessels But I am considered one of the lucky passengers not to be detained at this miserable filthy place of *Hell*. But I am in no wise discouraged I see a plenty of it every day I mean the *Dust* Boxed up & bound for the States

if nothing happens this ship will arrive at Francisco in eight days from this which will make me a passage of a bout 8 thousand miles in a bout forty sailing days this ship left New York 15th of March — by arrond the Horn and arrived at Panama in 85 days and on the same day I arrived from Minnesota So I shall be able to enter the mines of Gold with the dry season

I shall mail this at Acapulco Mexico half way from Panama to Francisco and hope I shall be on Land when I write a gain.

Please direct me to Sacramento City California ¹⁵

Yours Affecty

E. WELD

M. WELD

Martin I would be more explicit in writing this time but circumstances will not permit I left Minnesota for the purpose of makeing you a visit, and to get me a *Wife* But the current of the Mississippi was to[o] strong towards the Gulf Stream and here I am on the Mexican Pacific Coast bound for *Dust*. Martin will you write on the receipt of this and give me a History of friends and relatives. I will in return give you a correct statement of the El dorado of California — without exageration.

E. WELD

M. WELD

¹⁵ Weld could not have remained long in California, for in February, 1851, he wrote from Oregon: "I was very fortunate in making my location claim here the fore part of the summer." He evidently expected to return to California after staking his claim, but he did not go because he "anticipated cholera" and heard "unfavorable reports from the mines." Weld to Martin Weld, February 15, 1851, Weld Papers.



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