

October 30, 1837

TO HARRIET HENRY

Mary Henry Copy,<sup>1</sup> Family Correspondence,  
Henry Papers, Smithsonian Archives

On board Steam-boat W. L. Stephens<sup>2</sup>  
Monday Oct. [30],<sup>3</sup> 1837

My dear Harriet. I arrived off the dock on Saturday night last at about eleven o'clock in the packet ship *Toronto*, Capt. Griswold,<sup>4</sup> after a pleasant passage of twenty-six days.<sup>5</sup> Now that the voyage is over it seems but a day or two since I left England. Time passes on the ocean with few incidents to mark its lapse and the month at sea seems less than one of the crowded days on shore. I was wretchedly ill with sea-sickness during the first seven or eight days. From the crowded state of the cabin I could procure but little attendance but this contributed to my recovery, since I was obliged to make some exertions in the way of assisting myself. Those who have felt the ills of the malady know that it produces the greatest disinclination to action and that any effort tends to diminish the disease.

Few events of importance occurred. A child of Mr. Clay<sup>6</sup> chargé d'affaires of this country to the Court of Russia died a few days after we sailed; the body was put in a cask of spirits for preservation but it would have been much better to consign it to the deep. . . . One night we experienced a violent thunder-storm a very unusual occurrence on the ocean in north latitudes in the month of October. The thunder was loud and the air highly electrified. The ends of spars and tops of the masts were tipped with brushes of electrical light. Several vessels have been struck during the past summer belonging to America but none I believe seriously injured; all risk of this

<sup>1</sup> There are two Mary Henry Copies of this letter. Our version is based on the more complete handwritten copy.

<sup>2</sup> Unidentified. The closest we could come was the *R. L. Stevens*, a night steamboat from New York to Albany (New York City Directory, 1837).

<sup>3</sup> The copyist incorrectly gave the date as October 21. From Henry's account of his trip (see his letter to Stephen Alexander of November 2, 1837, below), on Monday, October 30, he took a steam boat from Sandy Hook to New York City.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Griswold (ca. 1808–1882) was a captain on the London to New York run from 1833 until 1854. During that twenty-one year stretch he commanded five different ships. He

was the *Toronto's* first captain and remained with that ship until 1845. Robert G. Albion, *Square-Riggers on Schedule: The New York Sailing Packets to England, France, and the Cotton Ports* (Princeton, 1938), p. 336.

<sup>5</sup> Although by no means the record for the *Toronto*, this was a rapid voyage. The average passage from London to New York for this ship was thirty-six days; the shortest was twenty-three. Henry was fortunate not to have been on board during her longest trip: fifty days. Albion, *Square-Riggers on Schedule*, p. 283.

<sup>6</sup> John Randolph Clay (b. 1808) pursued a diplomatic career from 1830 until 1860, holding posts in Austria and Peru, in addition to Russia. *Herringshaw*, p. 224.



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kind could be avoided by the use of the lightning rod proposed by Snow Harris<sup>7</sup> and adopted in the government vessels of Great Britain. There is however a strange antipathy to its use among sailors. [They] imagine the vessel is in more danger when it is employed, forgetting that the tall masts serve as attractors without giving protection. Considerable discussion took place among the passengers as to the nature of the light at the mast heads during the storm. One man, who had been more than twenty years a sailor stated that often during a violent storm of wind without lightning a faint light could be observed at the end of masts and spars, and that this on examination was found to proceed from a gelatinous substance of the phosphorescent kind. The phenomena observed by us was undoubtedly an electrical one<sup>8</sup> but that phosphorescent matter should not accumulate at the points of spars<sup>9</sup> I am not prepared to say. The opinion that a substance of the kind does thus accumulate is too common not to have some foundation in truth and is probably connected with some atmospheric phenomena not yet fully investigated. Whoever, says M. Biot, will carefully study for twenty years the facts of popular superstition, will find in them enough true philosophy to repay the labor.<sup>10</sup>

Another circumstance which for a short time relieved the monotony of sea life was a large whale passing close to the ship and crossing obliquely her path. It was one of the largest size. It did not continue on the surface but disappeared at intervals rising again to blow and<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For Snow Harris and his lightning rod, see above, Henry's European Diary, March 14-16, 1837.

<sup>8</sup> Henry and his shipmates were observing a display of the brushlike electrical discharge usually called St. Elmo's Fire (a corruption of St. Erasmus, the patron saint of Mediterranean sailors). Recorded since Graeco-Roman times, it was a frequent occurrence during stormy weather. Its electrical nature was well known by Henry's day. Peter Kemp, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* (London, 1976), p. 744; William Burney, ed., *Falconer's Marine Dictionary* (London, 1830), p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary naturalists had noted a form of phosphorescence due to the decomposition of organic matter in the ocean. Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle* (New York, 1969), pp. 167-169. Whether there is any connection

between this decomposing matter and the gelatinous substance seen by the sailor is uncertain.

<sup>10</sup> We have been unable to identify the source of this quotation. Moreover, the sentiments expressed differ considerably from the elitist views most often expounded by Biot. There is a strong possibility that Henry misattributed the quotation, which Henry will repeat in his "Meteorology in its Connection with Agriculture" (*Scientific Writings of Joseph Henry*, 2 vols. [Washington, D.C., 1886], 2:253). (We wish to thank Dr. Eugene Frankel of the Department of Energy for his assistance in attempting to locate this quotation in Biot's writings.)

<sup>11</sup> The Mary Henry Copy breaks off in mid-sentence.