

THE STORY OF LOCUST GROVE*

By

HELEN WILKINSON REYNOLDS

Mr. President, Members and Friends of the Dutchess County
Historical Society:

In 1832, between the 6th of October and the 15th of November, during a voyage across the Atlantic, Samuel Finley Breese Morse conceived and worked out the invention of the telegraph.¹ It is therefore one-hundred years, almost to a day, since he made his great contribution to modern civilization and on this centennial anniversary we are gathered here, through the courtesy of Mrs. Young, to call to mind the fact that the man who did so much to forward scientific means of communication throughout the world was for part of his life our fellow-citizen in Dutchess County and that for twenty-five years (1847-1872) he made his home here at Locust Grove.

As we hope to hear in a few moments from Mr. Morse's son, Mr. William Goodrich Morse, and grand-daughter, Miss Leila Livingston Morse, something of the family-life at Locust Grove, I shall not attempt a reference to the same. To my lot it falls, instead, to speak of Locust Grove itself, as an old estate.

Locust Grove lies on the east bank of Henry Hudson's great river and it is worth noting that the first written reference made by white men to this particular vicinity is found in the *Journal*² that was kept by Robert Juet, the mate of the Half Moon, when that vessel came up the river under the command of Henry Hudson. Eight days from today it will be three hundred and twenty-three years since Robert Juet on September 29, 1609, recorded the passage of the Half Moon through what he called "the Long Reach," by which he meant the straight channel for sailing that lies between our New

*An address delivered on the occasion of the Fifteenth Annual Pilgrimage of the Dutchess County Historical Society, September 21, 1932.

Hamburgh and our Hyde Park. Locust Grove looks out on the waters of "the Long Reach" and the name and the place link us in thought with Henry Hudson and his times.

Of course it goes without saying that the land which constitutes Locust Grove once belonged to the Indians. They were the Wapani Indians, or Men-of-the-East-Land,³ and from them Colonel Peter Schuyler of Albany made a purchase for which, on June 2, 1688, he obtained a patent from the Crown.⁴ The land⁵ that Colonel Schuyler bought extended from the present city of Poughkeepsie southward along the river to what is now called Clinton Point (or Stoneco) and was bounded by the river on the west and by Jan Casper's Kil on the east and south.

Buying this tract on speculation, Colonel Schuyler sold it ultimately in three nearly equal divisions. One of the three divisions he conveyed⁶ on October 11, 1699, to Jochem Staats of Albany, the site of Locust Grove being covered by the deed. Jochem Staats thus acquired from Colonel Schuyler a tract which fronted the river from (approximately) Mine Point to Rudco, its boundaries being two streams,—one at the north, called Apokeepsing (which flows now through the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery); and one at the south which we know as the Speckenkill but which originally was "Speck zyn kill."⁷

Five months later (on March 9, 1700) Jochem Staats sold⁸ this land to Dirck Van Der Burgh of New York City, a business man who speculated in real estate both in Dutchess and Orange Counties. Dirck Van Der Burgh did not, himself, come here to live but his only son, Henry Van Der Burgh, removed from New York in early manhood and established himself on this portion of his father's lands. He played a leading part as a pioneer in the development of the local community and brought up a large family of sons and daughters in a house that stood on the east side of the then King's Highway (now the state road), close to the spot where at present there is a house owned by John Van Benschoten.

Henry Van Der Burgh's acres bordered both sides of the King's Highway for some distance north and south of where we stand today at Locust Grove and, after he died, a survey was

made of his homestead in 1752 and the land laid out in lots.⁹ The lots were assigned to the several heirs, who ultimately sold most of them and moved away from this immediate vicinity. As a result, a large part of Henry Van Der Burgh's homestead was acquired by Henry Livingston of Poughkeepsie. Mr. Livingston lived in a house that stood on the bank of the river where the plant of the Phoenix Horseshoe Company was placed in recent times and, between 1751 and 1767 by nine successive purchases from members of the Van Der Burgh family, he protected himself against undesirable neighbors immediately to the south of his own home. Finally, he consolidated a number of his purchases into one large holding and in 1771 made a present¹⁰ of the same to his son, Henry Livingston, Jr., on the occasion of the latter's marriage.

The gift made by Henry Livingston to Henry Livingston, Jr., included the land on which we are now standing and, on the north side of the entrance-drive between this house and the gate, is a spot which is pointed out as the one on which Henry Livingston, Jr., is believed to have built his house about 1771. Henry Livingston, the second, is less well known in Dutchess County than he deserves to be and I am happy to say that we have with us today one of his descendants, Dr. William S. Thomas of New York City, who will tell us something about him. He was a man who not only served the public in civil and military capacities but who stands out conspicuously in other ways. Beside conducting a mill, a store and a landing for sloops on the shore of the river west of this house (near a promontory known, for him, as: Harry's Point), he was by profession a surveyor and he was gifted with artistic talent. He had a facile pencil, which he used to decorate the borders of his maps and in making sketches. We have him to thank for a sketch¹¹ made in 1799 of a river-landing and storehouse,—the only picture I have ever found of one of those wharves for sloops with which the water-front of Dutchess was dotted in the eighteenth century. Another delightful drawing is of his own saw-mill¹² here at Locust Grove. Still another, that ornaments a map dated 1798,¹³ is of a surveyor's chain, through which is entwined a long spray of a climbing rose. And his

fancy was as facile as his pencil for he wrote often and at length genial, merry verses that described family-scenes and current events.

In connection with the ability of Henry Livingston, the second, to write lighthearted, entertaining verse, Dr. Thomas will probably tell you the fascinating story of the literary mystery that centers around him. You are all familiar with the beloved nursery-rhyme entitled: *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, which begins: "T'was the Night before Christmas," and you may have heard that it was written by Clement C. Moore of New York. However, the descendants of Henry Livingston, the second, all believe that he was the author and that he wrote the verses here at Locust Grove in his stone house which stood just down the avenue. I will not enter into the complicated details of the two sides of the story. You can find some of them, if you wish, in a volume entitled: *Famous Single Poems*, published in 1923 by Burton E. Stevenson; as also in the *Year Book* of the Dutchess County Historical Society for 1919; in the *Christian Science Monitor* for August 4, 1920; and elsewhere. But I do wish to say that there is so much offered on both sides of the question that if you lean to one side you are completely unable to account for the other. The whole matter is an intriguing puzzle. How delighted we of Dutchess all would be if incontrovertible evidence were found some day that the dear, familiar lines were really written here at Locust Grove!

Henry Livingston, the second, gave the name Locust Grove to this place and he lived here from 1771 until his death in 1828,—fifty-seven years. In 1830 his executors sold Locust Grove¹⁴ to John B. Montgomery of New York, who left the city and made his home at Locust Grove from 1830 to 1857. Very little is known of Mr. Montgomery. He and his wife, Isabella Williamson, joined the Dutch Church in New York in 1816,¹⁵ which is the earliest mention of him that has been found. From 1847 (when he sold Locust Grove) until 1857 he lived in Poughkeepsie at the northwest corner of Church and South Hamilton streets¹⁶ and the last years of his life were spent at number 56 Noxon street, where he died on November

9th, 1861.¹⁷ He and several of his family were buried in the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery and the inscription on the stone at his grave states that he was born June 5th, 1785. The place of his birth has not been learned. An old gardener who worked at Locust Grove referred to Mr. Montgomery in after years as "an Irishman" and pre-fixed the colorful description: "hot-headed" and, as Mr. Montgomery is on record in New York City between 1817 and 1829 as a member, incorporator and officer of the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, it is probable he was not only Irish by descent but that he was a native of Ireland.

It was to Samuel Finley Breese Morse that John B. Montgomery sold¹⁸ Locust Grove in 1847 and the property remained in the Morse family until in 1895 it passed into the possession of William Hopkins Young. The thanks of the community are due to our hostess and her family for the fostering care they have given this old estate and its traditions. They have looked upon it as a trust from the past, which feeling has led to the preservation of its early natural features so far as possible. I suppose the woods between the house and the river are now much as they were in the time of Henry Livingston for their growth of trees, ferns and wild flowers has been protected and undisturbed.

If one is interested to know how Locust Grove appeared in the eyes of Samuel F. B. Morse it is only necessary to turn to his own words to find out. From letters he wrote, which have been preserved, his love for the place is evident, as the following excerpts reveal:¹⁹

"Poughkeepsie, North River,

July 30, 1847.

* * * I was informed of a place for sale, south of this village 2 miles, on the bank of the river * * * I have this day concluded a bargain for it. I am almost afraid to tell you of its beauties and advantages. It is just such a place as in England could not be purchased for double the number of pounds sterling. Its 'capabilities', as the landscape gardeners would say, are unequalled. There is every variety of surface, plain, hill, dale, glens, running streams and fine forest, and every variety of different prospect: the Fishkill Mountains towards the south

and the Catskills towards the north; the Hudson, with its varieties of river-craft, steamboats of all kinds, sloops, etc., constantly showing a varied scene.

I will not enlarge. I am congratulated by all in having made an excellent purchase and I find a most delightful neighborhood. Within a few miles around, approached by excellent roads are Mr. Lenox, General Talmadge, Philip Van Rensselaer, etc., on one side; on the other, Harry Livingston, Mrs. Smith Thompson, Mr. Crosby, Mr. Boorman, etc., etc. The new railroad will run at the foot of the grounds (probably) on the river and bring New York within two hours of us. There is every facility for residence,—good markets, churches, schools, * * * Singularly enough this was the very spot where Uncle Arthur²⁰ found his wife. The old trees are pointed out where he and she used to ramble during their courtship.”

Locust Grove, October 12, 1847.

“You see by the date where I am. Locust Grove, it seems, was the original name given to this place by Judge Livingston and, without knowing this fact, I had given the same name to it, so that there is a natural appropriateness in the designation of my home.”

Letter, dated June 21, 1868

Upon return from a trip abroad.

“Once more I am seated at my table in the half-octagon study under the south veranda. Never did the Grove look more charming. Its general features the same but the growth of the trees and shrubbery greatly increased. Faithful Thomas Devoy has proved himself to be a truly honest and efficient overseer. The whole farm is in fine condition.”

Before I close may I add a word or two about the house at Locust Grove?

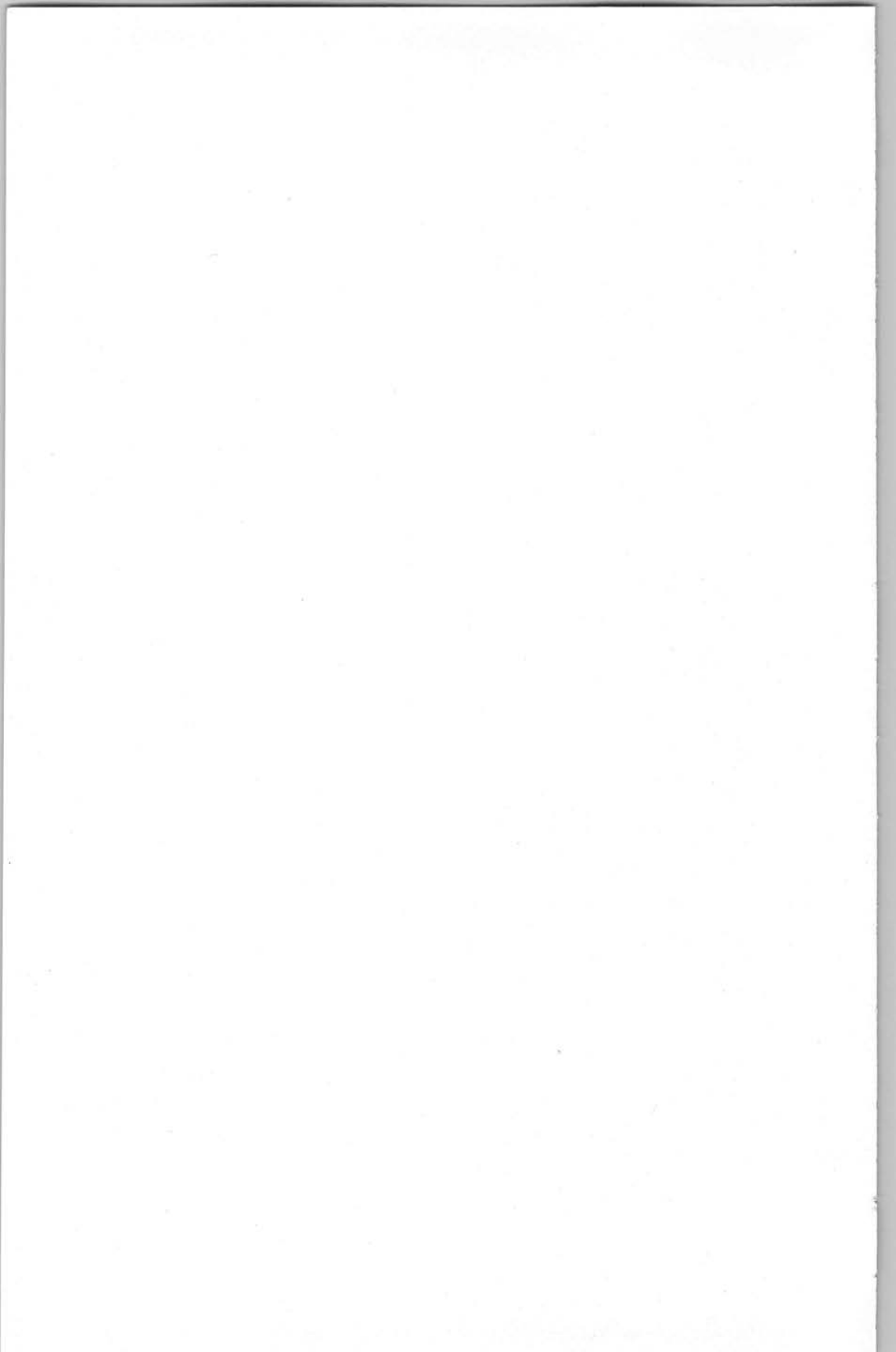
When John B. Montgomery bought the place in 1830 he abandoned the stone house on the north side of the avenue, which had been the home of Henry Livingston, the second, and built farther west a rectangular frame house which forms the nucleus of the present dwelling.²¹ It had a hall through the center of the first floor, with two rooms at the left and at the right one room and a staircase ell. In passing through the house a few moments ago you may have noticed that corners of the doorframes in this part of the house are finished with



Photograph by Margaret DeM. Brown.

The tower added by Samuel F. B. Morse to the house built by John B. Montgomery on the estate at Poughkeepsie called *Locust Grove*.

The plate was made from a photograph taken in 1932 and reproduced by the kind permission of the owner of Locust Grove, Mrs. William Hopkins Young.



a decoration in the form of conventionalized leaves, carved in wood, a design which was new in this vicinity about 1830.

When Mr. Morse came to Locust Grove he enlarged the house by additions at the north and south, which turned the original rectangle into an octagon. The southern end of the octagon, the room which opens on this south veranda, became his study. He also built the *porte cochère*. Later, Mr. Morse extended the house toward the west by adding a large drawing-room and carrying the addition up in a tower of four stories. The tower was a copy of one in Italy of which Mr. Morse was fond.

When Mr. Young bought Locust Grove he made alterations at the north end of the house that provided a large dining room and better service facilities. And so, the house, as it stands, bears the imprint of the successive ownerships of Mr. Montgomery, Mr. Morse and Mr. Young.

In the hope that I have succeeded in giving you an idea of the general trend of the story of Locust Grove, we are now to have the pleasure of hearing from Dr. Thomas and Miss Morse some of its details in connection with the lives of the people who have lived here.

1.—Edward Lind Morse, editor; *Samuel F. B. Morse, His Letters and Journals*, 1914, vol. 2, pp. 5-21.

2.—Robert Juet; *Journal of Hudson's Voyage, 1609*; pub. 1625 in *Hakluytus Posthumous or Purchas his Pilgrims*; reprinted 1811 in *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, vol. I, p. 143.

3.—Helen W. Reynolds; *Poughkeepsie, The Origin and Meaning of the Word*, 1924, p. 4.

4.—Patent to Pieter Schuyler, recorded in the office of the Secretary of State, Albany, N. Y., Book 6 of Patents, p. 325.

5.—Helen W. Reynolds; *Poughkeepsie, The Origin and Meaning of the Word*, 1924; pp. 25, 26, 27.

6.—*Ibid.*, pp. 30, 31 and p. 52 (note 79).

7.—*Ibid.*, p. 31.

8.—*Ibid.*, pp. 30, 31 and p. 52 (note 79).

9.—Dutchess County deeds, liber 4, p. 451.

10.—*Ibid.*, liber 7, p. 127.

11.—Helen W. Reynolds; *Poughkeepsie, The Origin and Meaning of the Word*, 1924, map opp. p. 30.

- 12.—*New York Magazine and Literary Repository* for August, 1792.
- 13.—Helen W. Reynolds; *Poughkeepsie, The Origin and Meaning of the Word*, 1924, map opp. p. 18.
- 14.—Dutchess County deeds, liber 44, p. 35.
- 15.—*New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, vol. 62, p. 198.
- 16.—Directories for village and city of Poughkeepsie.
- 17.—*Daily Eagle*, Poughkeepsie, N. Y., November 12, 1861.
- 18.—Dutchess County deeds, liber 85, p. 269.
- 19.—Edward Lind Morse, editor; *Samuel F. B. Morse, His Letters and Journals*, 1914, vol. 2, pp. 280, 281, 464.
- 20.—"Uncle Arthur", a brother of Mr. Morse's mother, was Arthur Breese of Utica, N. Y. He married Catharine Livingston, a daughter of Henry Livingston of Locust Grove. His grand-daughter, Sarah E. Griswold of Utica, on August 10, 1848, became the second wife of Samuel F. B. Morse of Locust Grove. Mr. and Mrs. Morse were thus cousins through their Breese ancestors.
- 21.—Edward Lind Morse, editor; *Samuel F. B. Morse, His Letters and Journals*, 1914, vol. 2, ill'n opp. p. 280.

HENRY LIVINGSTON, JR.

By

WILLIAM S. THOMAS, M. D.

The editor regrets to state the address made by Dr. Thomas at Locust Grove, Poughkeepsie, on the occasion of the Fifteenth Annual Pilgrimage, September, 21, 1932, was extemporaneous and that no notes of it are available. The facts forming the substance of the address may however be found in an article written by Dr. Thomas which was published at page 32 of the Year Book of the Dutchess County Historical Society for 1919 under the title: Henry Livingston.



SAMUEL F. B. MORSE*

By

LEILA LIVINGSTON MORSE

Mr. President and members of the Dutchess County Historical Society:

I can't begin to tell you how happy I am to be here today—here at Locust Grove, where I was born fifty-four years ago, and to have with me my father, born here also, eighty years ago, and my cousin, Clara Morse, the daughter of Grandfather's youngest son, Edward Lind Morse (who wrote the *Letters and Journals of S. F. B. Morse*, from which book I shall mostly quote today.)

I am thankful to say that my earliest recollections are placed here—the old springboard, the old well, the wasps in the room over the porte cochère, the two iron dogs by the front steps, the fuschias in the iron urns on the lawn and hundreds of

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little incidents—the old *Mary Powell* steamboat at night (my signal for bedtime) the lovely flowers,—all give me a particular thrill in meeting you here today.

My grandfather showed very early in life his love of home when he ran away twice from Andover at the age of seven and his home-life with parents and brothers was a particularly happy one. Soon after leaving Yale College he went to Europe to study painting but he was faithful and constant in writing home. On his return to America he had to spend most of his time away from his family, painting portraits, and, even after his marriage, this work kept him much away from his dearly loved wife and children and his wife's death while these children were still little was a crushing blow.

The want of a place which he could really call home was an ever present grief. It is the dominant note in almost all letters to his brothers and is rather quaintly expressed in a letter to his daughter, Susan, in 1838: "Tell Uncle Sidney to take good care of you and have a snug little room in the upper corner of his new building where a bed can be placed and a table and a chair and let me have it as my own, that there may be one particular little spot which I can call Home. I will there make three wooden stools, one for you, one for Charles and one for Finley and invite you to your father's house." This was in 1838, six years after his inspiration in Paris for an electro-magnetic telegraph and he was still trying to make the world see its advantages. Not until 1846, eight years later, could he consider buying a home. In that year he went up the river "to look in the vicinity of Poughkeepsie." The following year, 1847, he writes to his brother in July: "I have this day concluded a bargain for a part of the old Livingston Manor* two miles south of Poughkeepsie; about one-hundred acres. I am almost afraid to tell you of its beauties and advantages."

It was here in this peaceful retreat that he carefully and

*Locust Grove was never a part of Livingston Manor. The Manor was in Columbia County. Mr. Morse had reference to the estate of Henry Livingston at Poughkeepsie which, however, was not constituted as a manor.

systematically prepared the evidence which should confound his enemies in all future patent litigation and calmly awaited the verdict with faith. He was now fifty-seven years of age—in 1848—when he married his second wife, Sarah Elizabeth Griswold of Utica, New York, and proceeded at once with her to Louisville and Frankfort, Kentucky, to be present at his first suit against O'Reilly. One point only was decided against him and it is worthy of notice that this decision which denied to Morse the *exclusive* use of electro-magnetism for Recording Telegraphs has never been of injury to his instrument because no other inventor has devised an instrument to supersede his. The Court decided that the electro-magnetic telegraph was the sole and exclusive invention of Samuel F. B. Morse and, if better instruments could be made for the same purpose, electro-magnetism could be used.

In 1868 he writes one of his sons: "I am seated at my table in the half-octagon study under the south veranda. Never did the Grove look more charming. Thomas Devoy has proved a most truly honest and efficient overseer."

Unfortunately for me I was not born until eight years after my grandfather's death and so cannot bring to you any personal reminiscences. He was a wonderful husband and father, kind and understanding and generous beyond words. I am glad to say that he had a wonderful sense of humor and his great faith in God carried him through a life of great struggles and disappointments, even to the time of his death, in fighting for his rights to his invention. His mind was active to the very end and he never ceased to do all in his power for the welfare of mankind. In 1871 he went with his family to New York and it is recorded that, with an apparent premonition that he should never see his beloved Locust Grove again, he ordered the carriage to stop as it drove out of the gate and, standing up, looked long and lovingly at the familiar scene before him before telling the coachman to drive on. As he passed the Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery on the way to the station he exclaimed: "Beautiful! Beautiful! But I shall not lie there. I have prepared a place elsewhere." He died the following spring in his New York home."

My Father arrived yesterday from California after a long, hot and tedious trip and begs to be excused from more than just a brief greeting to you. But that he would like to give. My father.

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