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James B. Finley Letters

12-30-1847

Letter from Thomas Coke Wright to James B. Finley

Thomas Coke Wright

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Since I have been county Auditor of this county by

by returning good for evil I have made warm friends
out of bitter opponents. I have also proved the good
effects of kindness upon prisoners in our jail. By visiting
them and lending them books to improve their minds and
begin the tedious hours of imprisonment I have never
failed to gain their friendship and awaken feelings of gratitude.
By the way though I am not a church member I am the
only person here that I know of who ministers to them who
are in prison. A ^{friend} ~~friend~~ ^{friend} ~~friend~~ who went to the Penitentiary
from this place was so attached to me that he earnestly
requested the sheriff to take me along. I accordingly went and
he parted with me at the jail gate with tears in his eyes.

I purpose writing his life as soon as I can find time. Giving
a brief account of his adventures previously to his coming to
Kenia, the burglary, pursuit and capture, conduct in prison
plan of escape, trial and conviction his speech before
sentence with extracts of his letters to my self & the Sheriff after
he professed to have reformed. In point of composition
they are equal to good magazine writing. I did write
and publish an account of the pursuit and capture which
was read with more interest than any thing else in the paper.
I wish you would have the goodness to write me an account in
particular of his sickness and death I am aware you were not
present, but presume you were informed. If it would not be
improper I would like to know his true name not to expose, or
make any use of in my intended biography only for my own
satisfaction. I think I will make it as interesting as a romance
though it will be true if he told me the truth.

I began to write this the next
morning after receiving yours but so numerous have been my interruptions
that I could not finish it. I intend to keep your letter as long as I live

With my best wishes for your health

happiness and prosperity

I remain your sincere friend

Thos. Coke Wright

Kenia Oh Decr 30th 1847

Dear Sir

Yours of the 29th was received the next morning. I promptly
made your return and had your certificate recorded which I
enclose. I was pleased to have it in my power to oblige you
even in ~~so~~ so small a matter and so I should ^{have} been a
matter of importance. I have not the satisfaction I believe
of being personally known to you, yet I am one of your
humble admirers and what is better I esteem and love
you. I expect you remember my grand father by my
mother's side William Owen - a venerable white headed man
of old Union settlement. His house at Norfolk Va was the first
place Bishop Asbury found a home and a welcome when he
first came to America. Grand father lived to be nearly 85 years
old. He was noted for his ardent piety and blameless life
he was never known to eat a crust of bread or take a drink
of water without lifting his hands in prayer and thankfulness.
He came nearer "judging always" than any person I ever knew.
I presume you may have heard of my Mother now dead &
gone. She wrote and had published in different papers and
periodicals enough poetry on religious subjects to fill a volume
to say nothing of prose. I say with all candour & sincerity, that
I never saw a woman of such a wonderful retentive memory
or had gone through such an extensive range of substantial
reading. She was familiar with the British Classics, history
biography, polite literature and her attainments in medical
knowledge were considerable. From a pasquinade to a speech
which would not have disgraced an average member of Congress
she was competent to write. The best efforts of her genius were
devoted to the cause of religion and morality. Oh what a dear
kind, affectionate, pious talented mother I have lost - a loss
unparable. But unless on the tears which now fill my eyes
They can't recall the dead.

My Father Samuel Wright joined
the M & E church in 1787 the year before Ohio was settled
at Maumett, and there he is yet. He told me he
attended a general camp meeting on the 27th of October last

That day he was 80 years old having been ^{married} a 40 years
When I was a boy, I have heard old men say who knew
him well from child hood, that he never was known to swear
an oath, tell a lie, be drunk, or cheat a person out of
a cent in his life. He has gone on the even tenor of his way
venerating and leaving his maker, loving his fellow creatures—
a kind husband and affectionate father. He is almost entirely
called "Uncle Sammy". The neighbors are kind to him like
children to a parent. His own children all ~~by~~ but myself are
gone to "that undiscovered country from which bound no traveler
returns". We were knit together in the bonds of love & affection
which nothing but death could sever. In parting with one
the survivors were overwhelmed with grief unutterable. Then it
was that Father who had sympathized with every pang of
the sufferer, and did every thing that the most devoted
affection could prompt. Had doctored - nursed - tended and
prayed for. No sooner had the immortal spirit taken its
flight, he was the only one who showed any resignation &
firmness and spoke words of calmness and consolation to
the survivors. I have been astonished at that old man, while
we were blinded with tears and distracted with grief, he
rose in moral grandeur and resignation as for shipwreck
to us as we were to him in knowledge of books &c. While
talking to us and exhorting us to try and meet the departed
in a better world. There was something in the tone of his voice
which imparted consolation in a mysterious kind of way. He
was cheerful and perfectly resigned to the dispensations of Providence.
He has garnered all the affection he had for all on one alone.
He frequently walks to town to see me a distance of nearly
two miles. He is a blacksmith and not long since made
a jack knife cut and cut, stamped the first letter of
his name ^{on the blade}, and sent to a Methodist preacher in Tenn;
whom he dearly loved but had not seen in nearly 40 years.
I hope you will excuse me for writing so much about
my folks—my Mother held you in great estimation in
her life time and the old man whose warm heart age
has not chill'd dearly loves Brother Kindley as he always

Kenia R. Lewis 24th Feb 1874

calls you. I thought perhaps some amount of your old friends
might not be uninteresting to you.

My mother commenced our
education as soon as we could help her alphabet. There is an
example in point of the advantage to children of having
an intelligent mother. The children learn their first lessons from
her lips and they can give them the right bias at the start that
may direct all their future lives. I was a small boy when we
came to this country yet so well had she enabled me to cultivate
memory that I could recite 32 elegant speeches from some
of the best orators together with ~~very~~ many beautiful quotations
in poetry. As soon as we arrived here, 36 years ago. This winter
I commenced going to school to ~~see~~ your brother J. P. H.
—a man whom I loved as dearly as if we were related, by
the ties of consanguinity, and he fully returned it. He loved
me next to his own children. Every Friday evening before
dumpling school I delivered one of my speeches on my best
style giving a fresh one every time until I had gone through
my stock. He was so fond of hearing me speak that after
I quit school he used regularly to send for me on Friday
evenings to deliver a speech. I heard him tell an anecdote
of his preaching one Sunday some where on Canaan creek, when
a storm came up in the midst of his address, and said he
having learned part of one of Cokes Speeches I recited it
with good effect. After he left here I walked all the way
to Digue to pay him a visit. He tried to get a place in
a store in that place but did not succeed. Dear and fondly
do I cherish his remembrance.

Your account of the moral
reform in the Penitentiary is truly encouraging. I am
satisfied the like never was before. This is the way to make
it answer the purpose for which it was originally designed—
to reform the offender and restore him to society even
to respectability. True conquests are only made by kindness.
I have proved that in my limited sphere

you could not get hold of the letter I wrote to Mr. Kindley some time for me