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James B. Finley Letters

6-2-1849

Letter from Thomas Coke Wright to James B. Finley

Thomas Coke Wright

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Each prisoner on leaving his cell is exposed to a ~~point~~ ^{series} of small suns from right and left from one end of each corridor.

to the other ~~the~~ ~~warrior~~ he leaves his. Gibbon in giving an account of the Pictish guards says, 40 soldiers cannot keep in subjection 4000 citizens, nor can 4000 keep under 40000 but their power double much faster beyond than their numbers beyond that as 40000 will disciplined soldiers or in strong garrisons can keep in subjection millions of peasants and citizens. So this place is so ingeniously contrived as to give power to a few to keep many in subjection. For as Capt Patridge said one man armed with a loaded pistol is equal to 100 unarmed men for though he can kill but one of them yet ~~not~~ ~~one~~ ~~no~~ one knows but that one may be himself. This is all I have written about the prison and it has been

himself. They is all I have written about the prison and it has been so long since I saw it that I am not sure what I have written is correct. I too near the conclusion I have the following. Such was the end of a man calling himself A J Hamilton who might have succeeded in any profession or adorned any walk in civil life and been universally beloved & esteemed—might have lived to good old age with all these accompaniments which should attend it "such as love obedience, honour & troops of friends." Instead of that he died a convicted felon in a state prison, away from all who were dear to him. No tender mother, no kind sister, or friendly relative to have reared his bed side like ministering angels shedding tears of sympathy and soothing and alleviating his sufferings—No friendly hand to close his eyes, not a tear shed over his pale remains. Such a fate ought to be a solemn warning to young men not to permit a love of wealth—an unduly desire to become rich tempt them from the path of honesty, uprightness, integrity and candour.

"Sincerely
 These founts of virtues, let no mortal leave thy sacred path
 Thy sacred path; although the earth should gape
 And frown the gulph of hell destruction cry
 To take denunciations wending way"

Immediately following the above I have made some remarks answering to the inquiry of ~~Mr~~ May then Langley has put mine? &c &c
I do not suppose Dr Telf will get half of it in the book. I think I will make Jake Punks adventures right down interesting - it will read like a romance if I can compose it properly. It will end with his being killed in 1836 in Vermont and Glencoe while assisting the sheriff and his posse. He had successfully done the same thing several times before in Ohio. My writing about it has been a benefit to me in giving me practice in composition. It covers more than 60 pages such as I sent up including his speech and the best parts of some of his letters. Do you know what your old Adam Hank came for Ohio?

May Heaven grant you length of days
health prosperity and happiness &c &c
your friend

Thos: Cooke Wright

Kenie White June 2nd 1849

Dear Uncle

Yours of the 31st ult. came to hand this morning. I was afraid you were sick not having heard from you so long after I had written. I have had lots of opportunities to send ~~my~~ manuscript to Cincinnati since I wrote to you last. I expect I shall have an opportunity next week. I am ~~not~~ surprised you did not receive the paper containing an account of Hunt. I sent it to you because I supposed you would remember him. I expect you have met him in Mass meeting. I will send you another paper if I can find one. My account of Hunt has been copied in a paper in Cincinnati and another in Boston. I will have the description of the Penitentiary copied in our paper when I receive it. I did not in my account of H. undertake to describe the prison. Knowing it would be better done in your book. In fact I feel myself incapable of describing it unless I were to be there several days and then I could not begin to do justice to it. The following is all I have said about it. ^{She was} taken to Columbus in the stage the journey being performed in the night. ^{24/11} She seemed to be enlivened by the motion of the carriage and conversed with some show of cheerfulness. This conversation was interesting showing a wide range of practical knowledge. She sketched the characters of our leading statesmen of both parties with ability and discrimination. Her topographical knowledge was very extensive and accurate and her power of description forcible. A great poet has said "She is a

hastard to the times who does not smack of observation? This reproach could not be applied to him; for he was a person of immense observation which let nothing escape. Towards midnight he fell asleep and as the moon light shone on his pale well chiseled features and ample forehead the thoughts of ^{his} attendance naturally reverted to his miserable destination. There was a young man in the prime of life, of talents address and varied practical knowledge with courage and firmness — one who might have shone in any profession — at the bar — in the pulpit, or halls of legislation with honour to himself and advantage to the public. Now a felon convicted of a midnight dastardly burglary and robbery and doomed to state prison for a term of years. The stage moved at Columbus just after day light and turned up the river to the place of destination. The Sheriff remarked in a lovely good humored manner "Hamilton yonder is the place", on a look he immediately put his head out of the window and the first glance caused his eyes to suffuse with tears. There stood looming giganteally in the fog that imposing structure with its tiers of iron bound windows — its massive stone walls battlemented like some ancient feudal castle — conjuring up in the imagination, dragon keep, turret, bastion, &c. of one of these Baronial strong holds of the middle ages — filling the soul with vague undefinable feelings of terror and mystery. The stage drew up at the porters lodge or gate house where there was a guard with his bright musket convenient. Passing through the prison walked with alacrity in advance of his attendance over the well worn flags along whose smother surface so many unhappy men have trod their fetters

J. C. Wright

being about to be ushered into a new life of subjection, of toil, privation and degradation — to become painfully & practically acquainted with the secrets of that immense "prison house". In the office of the warden he parted with his conductors whom he earnestly requested to call on him before returning to Kenia. After breakfast they returned for the purpose of examining the internal arrangement of this immense complicated establishment — a community within a community — a community of its self — where the smiting engine, the whirling wheels, the flying shuttles and clattering hammers mingled with the din of various machinery would seem to produce unmitigable confusion but such is not the fact. Hundreds of human beings with silent tongues and busy hands are employed with as much regularity as so many machines. "Then passive limbs to measured tasks confined
Obedient the impulse of another's mind"

Each one the companion of his own thoughts and "thick coming fancies". The entrance to the ~~inner~~ inner hallum is well calculated to strike a damp upon the feelings of prisoners who for the first time are about to pass its gloomy and ponderous portals. Near the far end of the hall or entry there is a strong palisade of upright beams of timber with spaces between them through which musquetry can be discharged. A gate studded with knobs of iron admits through this palisade and out side by an ingenious contrivance something similar to heisting and shutting a small gate a person can pass or upon the great iron gate which leads into the prison yard. This gives additional protection for should the prisoners make a rush at and secure the big gate when opened they would be stopped by the wooden wall and be exposed to a close and deadly fire of small arms through the intervals between the beams. This place might not unfitly be termed the citadel of the whole establishment.