

Readers Theater: In The Words of The Settlers

A reader's theater for eight voices using excerpts from actual letters written to and by pioneer settlers in De Kalb 1803-1810. Excerpts selected by Hortense Brown for a presentation at the Town of De Kalb Historical Association in 2003.

E. Watson, Alexander McCollom, William Cooper, Nathaniel Smith, Thomas B. Benedict, Dorcas Arnold, Ichabod Arnold, T.L. Ogden.

The original letters are in the Cooper Family Papers at Stevens-German Library, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY or The Town Historian's Archives Town of De Kalb. Learn about important early events and the people who made them happen.

The bold face character names are not meant to be read as part of the script.

E. Watson

April 22, 1803,

Sir (Wm. Cooper),

I have, as you requested looked at your handbill or advertisement at Luis's. Although no man knows better than you the true Secret of subduing the wilderness & carving forest into cultivated fields. Still I think with due submission you are defective in not stating how settlers are to get into the country. I would therefore advise you to get at LEAST 1000 new advertisements struck off dwelling on the excellence of the soil & situation of this country. It's convenience to market by way of the River St. Lawrence and other navigable rivers crossing the lands and entering the noble river & then pointing out the road from Lake Champlain & the new road by Black River. The former road will draw you in settlers from Vermont. These advertisements I would send off by some person going to De Kalb. Let him take his course towards the Connecticut River near Hartford. Thence up said river, thence obliquely across Vermont on his way to De Kalb. Leaving his advertisements in every Tavern at every Meeting House & store on his way. I also recommend that you write the owners of Potsdam to advise them to send an active agent to settle that town. The more the country is settled the sooner we shall have good roads.

Yours cordially,

E. Watson

Alexander McCollom

Williamstown, November 30, 1803

Worthy Friend,

By the hand of Mr. Cook I send you a short statement of your business as it stands at present. Pray sir be so kind as to inform me by letter or some other regular conveyance whether those goods are sent on to Utica and what Regulations you have made respecting their getting on here. Also the quantity of goods which you have purchased or whether you think best for me to send through teams after them. I have purchased very considerable quantities of furs since your leaving this place and have every prospect of purchasing more when those goods are on hand. The want of powder and lead is great amongst the Indians. Which I could get my own bill for.

William Cooper

Williamstown, June the 13th, 1804

1st Because it is clear beyond a doubt that you are taking to drinking to excess. Which will confuse your ideas, destroy your good name, and injure me in my arrangements.

4th Because you have assumed to take to yourself my business without the shadow of orders and sent men totally ignorant of the art of surveying to run and measure lines already done by able and skillful surveyors. And have caused false lines to be run and marked materially changing the whole patent. 7th Because you treat the settlers with haughtiness and imperiousness that ill becomes a very poor encumbered young man especially that aged woman Pheobe Cook. Calling her damned old hag that you would kick her into the river etc. when her words and advice were for your good and her conduct highly proper.

That is all law business that I want you may do in and about this settlement. All surveying that the settlers or myself may want done. You are my choice to do it but in person! I hope you will not take this plain statement amiss as I declare I have nothing but your good and my own safety in view.

Yours with sober regard,
Wm. Cooper

Alexander McCollom

June 18, 1804

Pray excuse the apology which I am about to make for answering the many frivolous and groundless charges which you have, I trust, been lead to make against me from the babblings of an old foolish woman, who was never of sound mind and now in the years of dotage.

And by the bye let me remind you here that some of the charges I conceive you nor no other gentleman has anything to do with. And it would be highly absurd, degrading and even preposterous in me as a gentlemen although poor and dependent as you have been pleased to call me,

Picture to yourself the deplorable and I may say wretched condition we were all placed in on the bank of a River whose waters after the uncommonly hard winter had spread far beyond its usual bed and drove the greater part of the villagers from their habitations. The houses of those who were not suffers being all small and ill suited to admit, one, two or three large families, when scarcely of size adapted to their own convenience.

In your seventh charge you say that I treat the settlers with haughtiness. But by the bye let me further state to you that I can prove that some of the family from whom you have gotten the greatest part of your information has sworn that they would and will, it lays in their power breed a quarrel between you and myself and I trust it ought not to end here unless they make due confession and open recantation of some of the lies they have been cross enough to propagate about me and that to my prejudice.

Your interest I will attend to in every point and shall be happy in doing any act that shall promote it, not injuring myself and the people who have sworn to injure me in your esteem are worthless and whom you well know to be such as I am informed.

I hope you will let them know your displeasure at their conduct, before you leave this place as I and others who wish me well are much concerned about this thing. If any further explanation is necessary, I stand ready and willing to make it. With due respect I remain yours.

A. McCollom

Nathaniel Smith

Woodbury, August 12, 1804

Dear Sir (Wm. Cooper) I had the pleasure to receive a line from you some time since & was happy to hear that the important business of manufacturing female children succeeded so well in Williamstown. This affords a sure indication that the wilderness will bud & blossom like a rose I anticipate the pleasure of seeing you in that country this Fall & for that purpose I shall leave here about the first of October unless I hear something farther from you. If you are not likely to be at Williamstown on or about the tenth of October next I will thank you to inform me immediately, and I will vary the time of my departure accordingly.

I am sir yours with the highest sentiments of respect.

Nathaniel Smith

NB If you will mention a time when you will meet me at any place you shall name, whether at Albany or anywhere on the Mohawk River. I will endeavor to be at the place you shall name punctually, in order to have the pleasure of your company through the woods. N. Smith

William Cooper

October 21, 1804

I am in good spirits about the mills, as the water must have fell ever since I left you. Hope no time was lost in laying the lower works, as it will now certainly go. You had better be explicit in the terms of sawing for although we may oblige them by sawing Hemlock and basswood to the shares you will find some will think they ought to have all and more too.

Mind you give full and fair notice that logs must be placed where you order them on the bank as disputes will arise if it is not obviously understood and inform all that this will be done for none but the actual settlers. Accept pine timber and no longer than one winter unless we find it will answer to some other timber and even this I shall have leave it to you to do as you think best under the present situation of the prop again do not suffer any man but those you order to take away the mantelpieces

Now my dear sir keep yourself as steady as you can through the winter. So that we may be ready to go at the gristmill early in the spring which hope will not go on so tardy as the sawmill has.

William Cooper

Cooperstown, February 5th 1805

I have thought as you are a young man with out any other prospects than that of your industriousness and reputation yet to be established (which I wish to protect). That in June by which time I hope to have the new store done. I will examine all the goods, and accounts with care when they are moved in. and should there be a prospect of your going on with the present capital so as to net me 6 percent annually, that you may have the same for 7 years unless I discover you are sinking the stock. In that case it will be best for me to save all I can, as I cannot lose my property which I have got by the dint of industry. Collect the debts as fast as you can from such as are off the Patent and those on, strive to get something that will turn to money to help yourself to a new apportionment of goods.

Begin saving as poor young beginners always must. Keep a true account of every farthing either severally or individually taking out of the store. Answer your creditor's letters with dispatch.

By Potter Goff I shall send a full and complete power of attorney to my brother and him to transact all my business in my absence. Reserving to you the care of the store until we make some arrangement in June.

Nothing gives a man consequence like a meek and quiet deportment attending to his business. Steadily, not claiming knowledge, but acting wisely with modesty for it is better that a man show but half what he knows, than a particle more.

Thomas B. Benedict

Williamstown, August 15, 1805

I have to inform you that the Gristmill is now ready to run. The sawmill Jackson has entirely new rigged & it is doing well. The chain & chuck have arrived. The machine for drawing up logs operates well. The barns are to be raised this day. Nothing is as yet done to the frame of the Hotel. Haskins

has done his work on the wall of the cellar. It is however very rough work. Harris has been here a long time making brick but has done very little work. Lee has made sixty thousand brick & will burn them next week. He is very anxious to have you come on so as to settle with him. He appears to be a very candid man & has worked well. I think business here wants you at the helm sir. If you can make it convenient, I think you would find your Aus(care?) in coming into this quarter as soon as ten or twelve days.

Th. B. Benedict

De Kaib, January 10, 1806

Enclosed is the petition for building the bridges. On presenting the petition to the inhabitants of Cambray: I was greatly surprised to find Doct. Townsend opposed to it. He would not sign it himself & by his influence prevented any of his settlers signing it. His opinion of it was that it was premature.

I some time since wrote you that Dimock had been cast away on Lake Ontario with our goods on board the boat. Immediately after hearing of the misfortune went out to Sandy Creek where the disaster happened. There was property to a large amount on board the boat and property to a considerable amount was lost. We have lost about \$250 worth the rest is saved and in our store. As yet I enjoy unusual good health. Hoping we shall have the pleasure of seeing you this winter.

Th. B. Benedict

De Kaib, June 29, 1806

Dear Sir I have to inform you that Dimmock has arrived but has brought me no goods. The Cooks have not got in their logs yet. Whitmarsh drives on his work very fast. Woodhouse has done working with Campbell. He has hired several hands & is going on with Mr Stacy's house immediately. I fear Campbell will not prepare the house as fast as Whitmarsh will want. In case he should not shall I hire more hands? From present appearances there will be a deficit of lathe. Shall I get in some logs if your brother does not get lath fast enough?

Your brother is anxious to know if you have bought a yoke of oxen for him. Please inform me if you paid K X Van Ransaler. All well at your brothers.

Th. B. Benedict

De Kalb, July 18, 1806

Whitmarsh has finished the chimneys he has lathed the lower part of the house and is lathing the Ballroom. He will however be obliged to quit the house entirely in two or three days for want of joiner work. Not a floor is laid, not a stroke of your work is done to the upper stories. Campbell worked a few days and after you left us, he then went to finish the doctor's office.

Campbell says he will work at the Hotel when he has completed the doctor's office, but cannot before. A few days work would put the Hotel in a situation that he could lath it. I have not been able to get any person to work the mine yet. The small pox folks are doing well. I sincerely wish you would write immediately as convenient and direct me how to proceed with the hotel for Whitmarsh is so cross that I cannot live many days if he scolds me much more.

Th. B. Benedict

De Kalb, July 31, 1806

Campbell would have been able to have got to work at the Hotel very soon, had he been well. He has been sick which has put him back so that he will not be able to finish the Doctor's House under some (?) n; and the Doctor will not release him to work at the Hotel. The reason is he expects to take wife soon, and he wants a shelter for her. Workmen are to be got, but I do not know the terms upon which you would hire. Whitmarsh's case seems hard to him. Two men by the name of Eggleston & Walker are making the sash upon the terms you agreed with Jackson. And would work after the sash was finished, if they knew it would be agreeable to you. If you can possibly come out soon I think it would be for your interest. Or if you will give me particular and explicit orders, I will endeavor to obey them.

William Cooper

For erecting a stone dam across the river, in sixteen feet of water, for blowing a canal six perches in length. fourteen feet deep, eighteen feet wide at the top, and ten feet wide at the bottom, through a solid rock. For blowing half the width of the foundation of the grist mill and sawmills, ten feet deep, out of a solid rock, for filling up the other half of the foundation,

and thirty feet beyond the gristmill in twelve feet water, with 2630 loads of stone. For erecting the gristmill, with two run of stones and all the appendages. For erecting the sawmill with additional wheels, to draw, with a great chain, of one hundred feet in length, boats, logs &ca into the mills. For erecting a dwelling house, a good frame barn, clearing and fencing twenty five acres of land around the mills. For the loss sustained by the first saw mill being undermined and overset by a freshet. Provisions and miscellaneous expences. See Amos Comely's Account of the particular items

Amount \$9,049

William Cooper

Cooperstown, December 30th, 1808

Albert Gallentine Esquire (Secretary of state)

Sir, you may think it strange that I should address you on a subject relative to my own private concerns. But as our public affairs stand at present- I have concluded to inform you that I am about to move a quantity of provisions to a quarter of this state that may create suspicion. For five years past I have been employed in forming a very large settlement in the county of St Lawrence on the margin of the United States. To this settlement I have annually sent provisions without the public taking any notice of it other than as a thing of course. The stagnation of trade in the interior of the state has multiplied settlers near the Canada lines misery so much so that a partial famine will be experienced among the new settlements if those interested in their advancement do not, while the waters are frozen and the sleighing continuous, forward supplies. I have hundreds to aid in their infant state. To whom in the next month I shall send c/ 15d barrels of pork, a quantity of flour, a load of flax and a load of (footweels?). All of which is made on my farms in Otsego and are soley intended to feed and facilitate my own settlers in St Lawrence say 150 miles distant. At other times this would be justly approved, but this settlement being situated as it is and the contempt I have of being suspected is the cause and must be my excuse for this communication.

T. L. Ogden

New York, 29 July 1809

Dear Judge (Cooper), I have just received your letter with out date on the subject of the road subscription and am sorry to find not withstanding your former "Experience & knowledge in land matters" that both your memory & judgement are in this instance very defective. As to the road going to far south you ought to recollect that this point was fully discussed between us, and that you finally agreed with me that in order to secure the cooperation of the proprietors in Macomb's purchase, we must give up the idea of passing through the ten towns and pursue the route now proposed which pass within 5 or 6 miles of De Kalb and by a cross road through the heart of that town afford a communication with Ogdensburgh & the river on the one hand and the whole interior of the county on the other. By a similar cross road through Potsdam or Canton we expect to go to Madrid, and though ten miles further distant from the proposed Turnpike than you, are satisfied to be brought thus near it. Believing in the old proverb that half a loaf is better than no bread and that it is much better to have a good road passing within 20 miles of our land, than to have no road at all, or impassible road for 80 miles.

But if this road be less advantageous to us than on through our own lands, recollect that it is not made at our expense, but at the exclusive cost of the proprietors in Macomb's purchase. We being only obligated to loan to the extent of 2 1/2 cents P acre if called on. But (as I anticipated) 4/5 have subscribed in money, so that very little money can be wanted by way of loan. It is nevertheless necessary that we should all subscribe in order to make up the quantity required by the articles of association to render them obligatory.

I have constantly represented De Kalb as ready to join in the measure, and you cannot be off with credit to yourself or me. This is a child of your own begetting and you must not desert it! I shall therefore expect (as I have a right to do) that you instruct the concern here to come forward for 60 or 50000 acres (the amount of land in De Kalb), as we in behalf of Madrid have done for 60000. Harrison, Patroon, Parish, LeRay, Potsdam, McCormick etc etc. have come forward manfully to carry into effect a plan originating with you & it will never do for you to discourage it.

I am yours in haste,
T. L. Ogden

Dorcas and Ichabod Arnold
De Kalb Jan 28, 1810

Dear Father and Mother, Brothers and Sisters,
I take this kind opportunity to inform you we are all well and hope this will find you all enjoying the blessing. I want to hear how you got home. I hope you will not fail coming here again. I send my love to Edward and Katie and want to see them here. Land is rising very fast, and I want you all to come and buy land. Our country is gaining very fast.
D. A.(Dorcas Arnold)

I take the pleasure of finishing Dorcas' letter. I have no other news to tell you but good. We have had a very easy winter so far. We have had no snow til the twenty fifth of January, then five inches. I have had the fortune to purchase of the Jackson farm sixty seven acres adjoining mine. A great market for all kinds of produce at the garrison. Wages (are) very high. There is more than fifty men in this neighborhood (earning) from fourteen to twenty dollars a month (working) at lumber. Long staves is reported will fetch three hundred dollars per thousand or more. Judge Cooper is dead. We have new landlords.
Ichabod Arnold

I want you to send some wormseed and dried apples. We send this by one of Dr Bower's sons in Providence. I believe there is seven stores at the garrison.