

## Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, December 8, 1885, with transcript

Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. L Capt. Osborne's House, Edgartown, Mass., Tuesday, December 8th, 1885.

I have just arrived in Edgartown from Vineyard Haven and it has occurred to me that before I open any of my note-books to recommence my genealogical work I better write to you. This is write is it not? If I don't do it before I open my books — when will I?

That is a conundrum. Do you give it up? !! Ha ha!

But joking aside — I think it is about time that I should render you some account of my doings on the Island. I would have done so before but in the first place I was not feeling well or bright and in the second place I was so staggered at the amount of valuable material within my reach — all to be copied “before the seventh of December” — or lost — that I devoted all my time indoors to copying records. It was write — write — write — till I could write no more — not even to you my sweet little wife — and I would go out for a walk with my fingers cramped and numbed. You will understand how busy I have been when I say that in four days I have copied 206 pages of records. I appreciate more than I ever did before the beauty of Hood's poem of the “Song of the Shirt” but the eternal “stitch — stitch — stitch” — should have been spelled in a different manner. Now I have given you “Firstly” and “Secondly” my reasons for not writing fully to you and in respect to “thirdly” and lastly I won't do so any more!

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The records of Tisbury are kept in the town of Vineyard Haven and a fire that occurred there a few years ago destroyed all the old Record Books with the exception of one which still exists — but in a most dilapidated condition. In some places the ink has faded and

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in very many cases the records would be utterly unintelligible to one not acquainted with the prevailing surnames of the Island. The words near the edges of the pages have been almost rubbed out by the licked thumbs of town-clerks applied during nearly two centuries to turning the pages. In all that time no clerk has made an Index to the volume or even paged the leaves so that every inquiry regarding an entry must have necessitated a long and laborious search through the entire volume — (for there is no order or method in the arrangement of the contents) — and each search has involved many applications of the licked thumb!

No wonder the leaves are ragged and dirty — no wonder the records are fading away.

The history of the township has not been written nor are Genealogies intact of the families inhabiting it. The destruction of this volume would involve the loss of much valuable genealogical material — and I therefore determined to attempt to duplicate it. I tried to copy all the records in time to reach New York by the seventh of December but it could not be done. There were other places also I wanted to visit. I want to see the early records of Edgartown and visit some of the deaf-mute families. I had to decide — either to go and leave my work half done or stay and finish it .

Now I do believe that whatever is worth doing at all is 3 worth doing well — and I have decided to stay — and finish my work now while I have the chance — if it takes all winter! A glance at the enclosed map will show you the importance of the Tisbury Records to my investigation. The Island is divided into four townships — Gayhead, Chilmark, Tisbury and Edgartown — and within the last three or four years Cottage City has been set off as a separate township. With Gayhead though it borders on Chilmark I shall probably have nothing to do. The inhabitants are separated from the people of Chilmark not only geographically by the queer series of lakes shown on the map — but socially — by difference of race. Gayhead is a sort of Indian Reservation — inhabited now, I understand, chiefly by a mongrel race consisting of half-breeds between Indians and Negroes. Even the coloured barber of Vineyard Haven repudiates all connection with the people. He

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glories in being a “Coon” of pure blood — and does not belong to them kind of coloured people! The social distinctions are so marked that I doubt whether the records of Gayhead will be of any value in throwing light upon the marriages of the Chilmark ancestors.

Tisbury, on the other hand, lies between Chilmark and civilization. Immigrants into Chilmark had to pass through Tisbury and marriages between the people of the two townships have been at all periods so common that the early records of Tisbury are essential to a complete understanding of the family relations of the early inhabitants of Chilmark alone. I have a copy of all the records of all the births, marriages and deaths of all the people of Chilmark from the earliest time to the present and have desired to supplement 4 this by a copy of the early records of Tisbury preceding the present century — and such of the early records of Edgartown as will complete my knowledge of the ancestry of the present inhabitants of Chilmark.

I have completed my copy of the early records of Tisbury — or at least of such records as are now in existence and here I am now in Edgartown to see what next is to be done. I will visit the Town-Clerk's office tomorrow and consult with Mr. Richard L. Pease — an aged inhabitant of this town — who has made a study of the families on the Island. I understand he has visited every graveyard on the Island and has copied the inscriptions. The people of Vineyard Haven tell how he used to scrape the moss off the old tombstones to enable him to decipher the inscriptions. I expect much assistance from him. He is quite an old man and it may be too late to secure what information he possesses — if I postpone my visit to some later date. So here I am — and here I am going to remain for the present. My only regret is that both the cables connecting the Island with the mainland are broken and so I am cut off from telegraphic communication with you. All telegrams are brought from Wood's Hall in the steamer which makes only one trip a day and even this is uncertain in December — for the steamer does not run in stormy weather.

Vineyard Haven must be a beautiful place in the summer time. It is surrounded by woods of great extent — the land being perfectly valueless for agricultural purposes. These oak

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forests are intersected with romantic little roads. You can walk for miles and miles without leaving the woods. Even in December there is a silent beauty in the woodland paths and I have spent from two to three hours 5 of each day wandering among them. The sadness of the fallen leaves has something in it attractive to me and the coldness of the December air is bracing and invigorating. I have thoroughly enjoyed my rambles of the last day or two — I feel better and stronger and I have picked up roses in the winter woods! Dry toast and eggs have brought me down — and brought me up . I am so much stronger that a two hours sturdy tramp has brought me home refreshed instead of tired. On the shore of Vineyard Haven there is a queer little sprawling house — so old that no one knows when it was built. It has been built horizontally instead of vertically. If I remember rightly it is only one story high and though small covers a good deal of ground on account of its horizontal extension. One door is labeled with the name of “Stevens” and another door at a considerable distance away — for the one house looks like a row of cottages — bears the sign “Sailors Free Reading Room.” The whole place has the flavor of a museum about it.

On the porch are the bones of whales and the figure-heads of extinct whaling ships — and over the roof is a ship-weather-cock and the points of the compass. So that the sailors can see the direction of the wind by the direction of the bows of the ship in relation to the points of the compass underneath. On the shore below there is a solitary pier. Vineyard Haven itself is full of schooners of all sorts and sizes at anchor. It is a veritable “Haven.” They are not there permanently. They come and they go but the harbor seems always full like the conjuror's drinking cup which is never empty however much you drink. The schooners drop into the Haven on the way to New York and do not venture out — more especially in the 6 winter time — until the wind is in the right direction to carry them safely through the dangerous straights that lie between them and New York. The wind turns — up go the sails and away they go — but before nightfall the harbor is again full. From all parts of the world they come and when the dangerous coast is neared — all eyes are strained — for the East and West Chop Lighthouses — that make the entrance to a safe and comfortable harbor. And when the schooner is safely anchored and the men hunger for news of the

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outside world — a boat is let down and headed for the lonely pier that shows the locality of the “Sailors Free Reading Room.” There they find the files of the Boston and New York papers and the papers of New Bedford and other places with all the shipping news that they want to know. And there they find a venerable man — the Revd. Mr. Stevens — a Unitarian Minister — who takes a personal interest in each one — welcomes him voyage after voyage — and discourses about the affairs of this world — and I suppose about the next. And there they find beside the door an open box as large as a trunk — filled with old numbers of Harper's Monthly — Scribner's — the illustrated Weeklies — and odds and ends of novels — and (not a few religious tracts) — contributed by the inhabitants of the Island for free distribution to the sailors.

They read the news of the day and back they go to their ship — each man with a number of books or magazines under his arm — to wile away the weary hours on board. And they bring to Mr. Stevens relics from far off shores to show their esteem until now he has quite a museum of curiosities stowed away in the house. A quiet happy looking man — living a quiet — unobtrusive — but useful 7 life. One of his rooms is fitted up as a Chapel for sailors to which all are invited irrespective of creed. A conspicuous notice is posted up “Free seats. Free gospel. NO CONTRIBUTION BOXES. No respect to persons on account of dress, color, or religious opinions. ‘The Word of God is not bound’ to any sect, party, or nations.”

The place seems to be supported by some Unitarian Society who pay Mr. Stevens a salary — (I suppose) — to superintend it. He has been there for seventeen years and I have no doubt is doing a good and useful work. The religious element was quite subordinate. I heard that Mr. Stevens had a copy of the Mayhew family tree — so I went there to complete my copy as it was only half done.

I sat in the Reading Room for about three hours working while the sailors came in and out. Mr. Stevens spends a portion of his time in his study in a different part of the house and pops into the Reading Room every now and then to talk to the seamen. It was really very

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interesting to hear what went on. They would tell him from what part of the world they had come all about their cargo, etc., and he would help them to select books and magazines from the box at the door. Altogether I was very much impressed with the usefulness of the Reading Room and I told him that if he was only nearer Washington I might be able to give him a lot of old magazines and illustrated papers for distribution.

Mr. Stevens directed my attention to a curious fact that impressed me powerfully at the time. It was this — that although the water in the Harbor was perfectly still — and the sea outside perfectly calm so far as one could see — we could hear the breaking of huge billows against the shore. The unmistakable surging of huge waves in a storm and yet the water was quiet.

Another point was that the sound came not from the sea side of us but from the land — to the south — and he assured me that it was due to the waves dashing on the other side of the Island — more than nine miles away! It was caused by the ocean waves after the storm of the preceding day. He said it was a matter of common occurrence in the stormy winter months and that the sight on the south shore was a grand one. It would not pay however to drive over there — as it would probably quiet down in a few hours. I am inclined to think that the sound must have been transmitted through the ground instead of the air — as it would be a most extraordinary thing if such a sound could be transmitted nine miles through the atmosphere and then be audible.

Another extraordinary phenomenon he told me about. It seems that on the 10th of October last about 3 o'clock in the afternoon — his grandson — Waldo — (a boy of about 13 or 14) was picking cranberries with a party of others occupied in the same way — at a cranberry marsh about a mile and a half away when the whole party were startled by a loud volcanic sort of rumbling sound from the ground near them — followed by a Natural Flood — Rock-explosion sort of effect. A mass of water — estimated as about the diameter of a large dining room table — in the middle of a neighbouring pond was thrown up into the air to a height of 10 or twelve feet. I cross-questioned a man — a Mr. Cleveland who was

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an eye witness and heard other versions. His 9 story tallied with that of the boy's. The water immediately subsided leaving a cloud like steam over the spot which gradually drifted away and "dissolved into thin air" like Shakespeare's ghost. Huge circular ripples seemingly several inches above the general surface of the water appeared on the pond and after a little general disturbance all was quiet again. Mrs. Cleveland the wife of my informant thought that immediately after the upheaval the level of the surface in the middle of the pond was lower than at the edges but her husband did not think so — nor did there appear any change of level that could be observed. The cause of this upheaval — which is quite unprecedented on the Island — is a mystery.

The circumstance has not yet been brought to the attention of any Scientific man capable of judging but it appears to me it should be investigated.

On Sunday afternoon Mr. Stevens drove me to the spot where we were joined by Mr. Cleveland and Waldo. I had the benefit of hearing the story again upon the spot — but the phenomenon appears as inexplicable as at first. I wonder if Major Powell would be the man to inform. It should certainly be investigated.

I have indicated the little pond where the upheaval occurred upon the map by an arrow head. It is on the farm of Mr. Alexander Smith.

On the shore beside the pond I was much struck by the presence of numerous circles drawn in the sand — as if with a pair of compasses. Some were three feet in diameter — others six inches. I could not at first imagine the cause until I noticed or had it pointed out to me that each circle had at its center a bunch of long grass or a piece of sea-weed with one end buried in the sand. The wind — blowing the long stems — now this way — now that — had caused the free end of each trailing stem to trace a circle in the sand.

I also found on the shore some large shells like those exposed for sale at sea-side summer resorts. I did not know before that such large shells were found on our shores and had always supposed that they had been brought from more southerly shores than

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ours. I will bring some home for Elsie and Daisy. I have also collected some "Irish Moss" a species of sea-weed from which a jelly is made by boiling and which is used here in the preparation of blanc-mange.

By the bye — isn't this letter long enough? If I go on this way I won't get at my records at all. It is late too. I have been so busy telling you about myself that I haven't answered any of your queries — or asked after any one at home. You can see what a change this is for me. I haven't been able to think of Mr. Gleeson or school since I came. It won't be long before I am home. I think I will be in New York Saturday night. Will you join me there if I telegraph you. Answer me by telegram directed to Brattleboro, Mass., Post Office. We can go off somewhere for Sunday and do some shopping together before we return.

I love you very much my little wife. Don't think I forget you if I seem to write by fits and starts.

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Thank Daisy for her nice little note which only came this evening. Ask Elsie to write to Papa too. Love to all and kind remembrances to Dr. Radcliffe. I hope you have seen to his comfort at the Laboratory — even if Maguire was to go out.

Your loving, Alec.