

**Extract from a letter written by Peter Hastie to his aunt, Mrs James Scott, 16 March 1834** (NLS shelfmark: Acc. 12249/2)

Peter Hastie wrote this letter to his aunt in Selkirk about two years after he first arrived in America. He describes his arrival in New York City during the cholera epidemic, and his attempts to find work. The last page of the letter is written over the first page in order to save paper.

**Transcript**

Hamilton, Madison County, State of N.Y.

16<sup>th</sup> March 1834

My Dear Aunt

When I think of the length of time that has elapsed since the date of my last letter to you I feel most heartily ashamed of myself. I must admit that all the reasons I could offer (however strong some of them may be) in excuse of my conduct will hardly amount to a palliation of it. I will therefore not attempt a defense, and must just trust to your mercy for forgiveness. I may however provide amendment: my next letter to you will be dated the end of June or the beginning of July. You have no doubt heard of me from various quarters, particularly by Mr Johnstone whom I requested to inform you of my welfare. I shall notwithstanding give you some account of my wanderings since the date of my last. The summer of 1832 I spent in New York and its neighbourhood . – New York was the head-quarters of the Cholera, but I thought it better to face this dreadful scourge in a place where I could command assistance, than to flee before it in the hopes of avoiding it & thus run the risk of having to stand the encounter single handed. I suffered a good deal from what has usually been called the premonitory symptoms; once or twice I came very near having a decided attack of cholera: I still live however to bless God that he thus spared my life. I was then without employment; to seek for it in that season of distress was entirely out of the question: when the disease had left that part of the country, I began to look about me, making applications to various quarters but all without success. I at last determined to go to the South (my health being such as to induce me to think that I would be better there than in the North during the winter season) with a view to this I wrote to Mr Archibald – an

engineer superintending the Coal mines & rail road of the Delaware & Madison Canal Company – with whom I had become slightly ac-

quainted in the early part of the preceding summer – I requested an introduction to an Eminent Engineer near Baltimore. Mr A. in reply approved of my plan, but at the same time offering me a situation with him as Clerk etc, till something better should occur. After consulting with my friends I agreed to accept of his offer, running the risk of the cold climate. I went to Carbondale in the North of Pennsylvania about the middle of November 1832 and continued there till the end of the following June. I then through the kind & friendly influence of Mr. A. obtained a situation in one of the parties of Engineers engaged in making surveys for a Canal, called the Chenango Canal (pronounced Shenango) I have continued in this party ever since (excepting about two months during the middle of the past winter) & I expect to continue on the work, if I keep my health, till its completion which is to be in October 1836. – I spent my time in Carbondale pleasantly enough; my health was better, during the winter, than it had been since I came to America; & I found Mr A. a man such that it was a very great pleasure to be near him – He is truly a most excellent man, and in many respects a very uncommon one. He has been a very kind friend to me, & I believe that I can count on his assistance in all my future undertakings – Indeed I have been told that he has been heard to say that if he succeed as an engineer that I shall never want employment. Mr Jervis, the Chief engineer on this Canal, is Mr A's particular friend. – In conducting a public work of this kind, the Chief engineer is the man who has the control of all the engineering operations throughout the whole extent of the work. If the work is an extensive one (as in the present case, where the Canal is to be upwards of 90 miles in length) the line is divided into sections of 12, 15 or 20 miles, on each of which sections an engineer is located (called a Resident Engineer) whose duty it is to superintend all the details of the work done on his section – These sections again, are usually subdivided into smaller divisions of about a mile the work on which is let out to a set of men called contractors at so much per cubic yard etc. Each Resident has under him a

party of young men, usually 8, viz, Assistant Engineer or Leveller, Surveyor, 2 Rodmen, 2 Chainmen & 2 axemen. I have held the office of Leveller hitherto, & will probably continue to do so during the summer: but I have received some pretty intelligible hints that Mr Jervis

intends to give me a residency as soon as an opportunity offers. I hardly expect this, however, before another year elapses . – This is a State work, that is to say it is done for the general good of & at the expense of the State of New York . – The Resident Engineers get \$4. a day the assistant engineers from \$1 ½ to \$2; the surveyors \$1 ¼ to \$2. and the other young men \$1. – per day. – Hitherto I have got only 1 ½ dollars a day which is sufficient to maintain me respectably. My main object is to acquire information & it will be my own fault if I dont get that now. I find my knowledge of Mathematics of great use to me: Few or none of the engineers on the works know as much of this subject as I do. Some of them know nothing about it. During the spring of last year, my health was not so good as in the preceding winter; I recovered during the summer & during the months of October & November I could say I was quite well, exercise in the open air seems to agree well with me. In December I caught cold & was not so well during the Winter but I have been pretty well for some time past. I think that with care (under God) I may yet be able to weather the storm & recover my health entirely. After our parties broke up in the month of December I went south to Carbondale (which is about 110 miles from this) to see my friend Mr Archibald and his Lady. I stayed there about 7 weeks & then went down to New York to see my friends there – I remained a few days & then proceeded up the North or Hudson River to Albany – thence to Utica & Hamilton – The head quarters of our party will be during the summer at Madison, Madison County – State of New York. When you write to me, address, Care of P.R. Root Esquire (Mr R. is my principal, & is the Resident Engineer on the summit level of the Canal) – By the way, Mr Archbald is a Scotsman by birth he was born & lived in one of the Islands of the Firth of Clyde till the age of ten or twelve years when he emigrated along with his parents & their family to the State of New York – His mother is a Wodrow, a descendant of Wodrow, author of the “History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland”. I have received I think

two letters from you, one by Mr Johnstone & the other at the end of last summer. These I have not now by me my trunk being at Madison about 6 miles from this. Many changes have occurred among my friends since I left Scotland some of which I did not anticipate. I was a little surprised to hear that my Uncle Ebenezer had purchased the Dalglish Estate: He is a singular man but I am disposed to think his plan a good one: Had I room, I would give you my reasons for saying so. I have not been in the way of hearing much of Scottish or English news since I left New York; to make up for this want in some degree at least, I

have become a subscriber for the Boston reprint of the Edinburgh Review, beginning with the October n<sup>o</sup> for 1833. I expect to derive some pleasure from this source during the Summer – We have not much time for reading – our time being completely occupied in the details of business – during the whole of last Summer & fall, we breakfasted at 6 o'clock started immediately for our work which might be at the distance of 1, 2, 3 or 4 miles from our boarding house, we continued in the field all day till nearly dark, dinner being generally sent out to us: during the heat of summer I found myself sometimes fatigued when night came I am led to believe we wont be quite so much out of doors in future. I like the business of Engineering & will stick to it as long as I possibly can. Mr Johnstone left America with a very bad impression both of the Country (see 1<sup>st</sup> page.)

and its inhabitants: His objections no doubt, were in some respects just: Still I cannot help thinking that he decided too hastily, & with too slight a survey both of the country and its inhabitants. But every man must judge for himself in these respects. – His salary was pretty good, 500 dollars a year; but I can easily suppose that it must be two very different things to teach the children of the more wealthy inhabitants of Edinburgh and the children of the common population of New York: I have made some inquiries, & I have come to the conclusion that hardly anything would induce me to become a Teacher in the United states. – I find however that I can get along very well with the Americans & I dont dislike the Country. Both have their faults, but where can we find a country, or nation, or people without them? I will at least try the matter fairly: I find that I am getting over my prejudices & am becoming familiar with the manners & customs of those around me. Besides the better educated of the Americans are a remarkably pleasant set of men, they will bear comparison with either the Scottish or the English . – I have however seen so much (& I have felt some) of the dislike which some of my countrymen feel for every thing that is American, for some time after their arrival in the country; that I have determined to advise no one to Emigrate: I shall give such information as may be in my power to any one who may want it, but I shall endeavour to avoid going any further. Let me hear from you as soon after the receipt of this as your convenience will permit. I have not heard from your quarter of the country for a long while & I am getting impatient to have some intelligence of you send your letters via Liverpool, thence per first packet for New York: Letters come much sooner to America by way of Liverpool, than by any other route. – Make my best

respects to all my friends specially my uncles James Scott and James Beattie & my aunt Jane. Farewell My Dear Aunt and believe me to be Your affectionate Nephew

P. Hastie