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## W. F. Stearns to William Cowper Nelson (7 August 1857)

William Forbes Stearns

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University of Mississippi,  
Oxford, August 7<sup>th</sup> 1857.

My Dear boy:

Your father remarked, in the course of a conversation which he held with me last night, that you desired to attend Yale College, rather than to graduate here or at any other Southern institution.

As an old friend of your parents, one who has known you from your infancy, and who may be presumed to possess some information on the subject of collegiate education, you will not consider me intrusive when I offer you a few words of practical advice.

Why do you wish to go to Yale? Is it not solely because you understand that to be a College of such high reputation, that you suppose its diploma would be regarded, by all those who know you had obtained it, as conferring upon you a more elevated rank, among educated men, than you would be entitled to claim as a graduate of any Southern College? Let us suppose, now, that, as a graduate of Yale, you would be regarded by your acquaintances, as better educated than an alumnus of the University of Mississippi, for example. Would not that be the sole advantage which, as the possessor of a diploma from Yale, you could promise yourself? It does not follow, by any sort of necessity, that, because Yale College has acquired a higher reputation, as an institution of learning, than the University of Mississippi, therefore the education imparted to students in the University is at all inferior to that of Yale. It is not every established reputation that is really deserved; as men soon discover by mingling a few years with the world. Understand me: I do not wish to depreciate Yale College; but I would have you bear in mind the fact that it is an old institution, having existed since 1701. Its alumni are counted by thousands. They are widely scattered over the United States; and, very naturally, each remembers his alma mater with grateful affection. Will not these facts sufficiently account for the popularity — the high reputation — of Yale, without supposing that its graduates are better

educated than those of other American Colleges? You are to remember, also, that the University of Mississippi is not yet ten years old. Our alumni, as yet, are not only few in number, but they have so recently entered the great arena of life that, for the most part, they have not yet had time for the attainment of such positions as might enable them to exert an appreciable influence upon public opinion. It would be very singular, therefore, if the University already had a high reputation as an institution of learning; but, nevertheless, it may still be true, that, for every valuable purpose, our education is as thorough as that of Yale.

I speak not of myself; but I can and do say, of my brethren of the Faculty, that they are able, and learned, and competent to teach, as the men who fill corresponding positions, in any of the Colleges of America. Most of them have been tried elsewhere; and my individual opinion of their qualifications, is fortified by my knowledge of the estimation in which they are held by distinguished educators, in this, and other States. We have the men to do the work required; and it only remains to inquire whether they have the necessary tools, with which to work. In some one or two departments, — certainly in regard to this Library, — we cannot compete with Yale or Harvard; but with respect to most of the departments of collegiate instruction, our means, for imparting knowledge and illustrating science are fully equal to those of any other College in the United States. In some particulars, we can present advantages, of which no other College in the Union can boast. If, therefore, any young man, of good natural abilities, who graduates here, does not leave our hall, well educated, the fault will be his own. Gentlemen who were entirely competent to form an opinion on the subject — being, themselves, graduates, of Yale and Harvard, and engaged in the work of education — have stated to me that the Commencement exercises, of our graduating class, were of an order superior to any thing they had ever witnessed in those institutions. According to these views, then, you can be educated without resorting to Yale.

But, even supposing you could be more thoroughly educated at Yale than here; have you ever considered the disadvantages under which you must labor if you go there? You are a native Mississippian, and your constitution is delicate. How will you bear the rigors of four winters in Connecticut? If you become ill, how long must you languish for the presence of your mother, before, even with all the haste she can employ, she will be able to reach the sick bed of her suffering son? And, above all, how can you endure, day after day, for years, the studied insults which your fellow-students, your instructors, and the fanatical people of Connecticut will be continually heaping upon you, and upon the land of your birth, and its people and institutions? And if, "enduring all things" to the end, you should remain there until you could bear away a diploma impressed by the broad seal of Yale; do you think you would exhibit it more than once after your return to your home? I do not; for I know, that, on account of the sectional ill feeling now prevailing - and daily waxing more and more fierce - between the North and the South, the very fact that you had chosen to resort to a Northern and notoriously abolitionized institution for your collegiate education, would cause you to be looked upon with suspicion by those <sup>with</sup> whom you sported in your childhood; and it would not be until you had passed an ordeal of trial, and proved yourself to be untainted by the contamination of your <sup>the</sup> collegiate associations, that you would again be regarded with confidence of former years. Remember: gold, even, may be purchased at a ruinous price.

Suppose, however, that you were to be educated here. Consider: would you not thereby secure some almost inestimable advantages? In all probability, there will be at least three hundred students here next session. They come from every portion of the State. They are to furnish, from this rank, the leading minds - the men of mark and influence - for the next generation of Mississippians. During your College course, you will become acquainted with at least a thousand of your fellow-students. With many of them, you will form such friendships, as are only formed in early life,

and such as Death only has power to dissolve. When you go forth as a man, and engage in the great struggle of life, it will not be a matter of trivial moment whether you have numerous, attached, and influential friends, among the educated men of every County in the State, or whether you are to undertake your weary task alone, or with such companionship only as you may pick up by the way-side, among strangers, after the first freshness of youthful feeling has forever passed away.

You may well believe one who has had sore experience of the trials and sorrows of life, when he tells you that friends are not only useful to us, as aids, but that there are no such friends to be found in our later years, as those who were the friends of our dawning manhood; and that the pleasures of friendship are among the sweetest charms of our existence. Where, then, ought you to seek, and make, your friends? In the land where your own lot is cast; where you intend to live and die; or among those who have always been, and ever will be, strangers, if not foes, to you and yours?

You may not be able to recognize the truth of the remark; but it is true, that no College ever yet made any man great. If a man has within himself the crude materials of greatness, and will devote himself with diligence to the cultivation and discipline of his mental faculties, he may be greatly assisted by collegiate training; but he may become great, by greater labor, without such assistance. But, whether he have that assistance or not, every thing depends upon himself. If he is indolent and apathetic, all the Colleges in the world could not make of him a great man.

I have written to you in haste, and at much greater length than I anticipated when I took up my pen. Think over what I have written; and do not decide for Gale without long, serious, and deliberate reflection. Neither depend too confidently upon the conclusions of your own mind. Take counsel of some older friend, in whose judgment you can confide.

Mr William C. Nelson, }  
Holly Springs, Missi. }

Sincerely, your friend,  
Wm. F. Stearns.