

General Phelps Tangles With Congregational Minister

Colebrook, Jan. 9th, 1871

Gen. E. A. Phelps

Dear Sir:

This is the first moment since our last meeting I have not been too busy to write you.

Though I do not see how you can misunderstand me, your manners towards me when I was last at your house would indicate that you do very much. That I may do all in my power to remove such misunderstandings allow me now to make a plain statement. In the first place, I received what has seemed to me a remarkable bill in installments. I think I received great injustice from your mill. In view of it there seemed two ways for me to do – agree to pay the bill and say nothing; there were two grave objections to this – First, It would not be doing as I would be done by. Second, I have now a lot of logs, which I should not dare entrust to your mill, and this you would see by my disposition of them, and it would seem on my part like mugging, and in that you would wholly misunderstand me. The other way, which I thought safer, better and more manly (I am liable to be mistaken, I am aware), was to pay the bill and at the same time explain to you my judgment of the bill, and let that explain my future course in regard to logs. I went when I was in great haste (as I must go to carry [?] mills) to get the bill receipted, and make my statement. The result, you know. I had not the least thought of offending you. I had no anger or passion, or ill feelings towards you, and our talk, though earnest on both sides, I had no thought could degenerate into passion; and as I look upon the matter now and analyze my own feelings, I cannot discover any passion except in the one word or sentence in answer to you to me, in which I said “I can go out”, and this in a low tone, for on the instant I felt anger rise, and it is well to talk low then. Yet instantly the anger fled, and I felt it no more.

And now to the immediate cause of provocation: You must look upon it from your stand point, yet I can tell you mine. In the first place, I was unguarded as I had no thought you could be offended at me in our straight, plain talk. Anger stirs up anger, and I had none that I was at all conscious of, whatever I said.

In the second place, I should be entirely willing if it were worth the serious judgment of community, to have all our words published, that people might judge whether I really committed so grave an error. If so, I will call your attention to your words in Town meeting to Deacon Grant and Mr. Deming. If I should receive such rebuke for my words, which I had no thought of impinging your honor, honesty or dignity, I think they must have been justified in calling for “Coffee and pistols for four”. Still, I then thought, and think now that your remarks in the meeting were legitimate and proper. I refer to this only to show how unwise it must be to give remarks their worst possible construction. And here let me say that if you will come to me with as kind feelings as I had and still have toward you, you shall be very welcome to come to our house very often and to stay as long as you can find it for your convenience. And now, as I have failed in speech to represent the bill to your consideration, I will again try, hoping I may be able to do it in writing, and will represent it by parable as near as possible according to my best

judgment. Suppose I have a slaughter house and keep beef for sale. I have sold you, we will say, a side of beef; suppose it a year and a half ago. The beef was duly put down and has been eaten up, but by the way, you sold a fore quarter to your neighbor or hired man. It weighed 150 pounds. The boys who butchered it gave me the weight of 450 pounds. I, long after, without looking into the matter at all, bring in my bill for 450 pounds. It surprises you, but you come and pay it, at the same time calling my attention to its appearance – the beef is gone, it is all past – you do not suggest or wish any deduction from the bill, but to call my attention to its appearance, and let that explain why you do not come for beef again.

You say something like this – Here is charged 450 pounds – yes, and it was half a cow – yes, I sold a quarter, (and consequently had to weigh it) for 150 pounds. That would have made the sides both weigh 600 pounds, which is full weight for a large cow. If the sides each weighed 450 pounds, the beef must have weighed 900 pounds besides the hide, which is very remarkable.

Now would I be justified in answering to you as you did to me when I went to get the bill receipted under circumstances as exactly similar as is possible (according to my best judgment.) Time, and the use of the lumber having removed from me the proof, except in one little portion to represent.

If I was unguarded in expression, and offered you thereby, it was because I was not omnifcent, and could not foresee at what you would take offence, for I solemnly protest I had no design or thoughts of giving it.

With the highest esteem for your family, believe me,

I am, as ever,

Faithfully Yours,

H. A. Russell

In the same envelope with the forgoing letter is Phelps' reply in the form of a note rather than a letter. The above is clearly signed "H. A. Russell", and this note is addressed to "Rev. W^m Russell", as is the address on the envelope. This Rev. Henry A. Russell became the minister of the Colebrook Center Congregational Church in March, 1868, and as such was the "sworn enemy" of the North Colebrook Baptists. Rev. Russell lived at 667 Colebrook Road.

North Colebrook, Jan. 16th, 1871

Rev. W. Russell

Dear –

Please receive this beef reply to yours of the 9th instant.

First – you complain of "receiving a remarkable bill in installments" and "great injustice from your mill".

What you may know and fully appreciate the injustice done you – I herewith put you in possession of figures and facts that may be of interest, if not of benefit to you.

The first logs you had sawed was May, 1868 – 10 logs, all less than 100 feet to the log. Nov. 1868 – 31 logs, all but 15 under 100 feet each. February, 1869 – 63 logs, of which number 16 less than 100 feet. Nov. 1869 – 29 logs, of which number 14 were less than 100 feet. Whole numbers of logs sawed to above last date – 133. Of said number, less than 100 feet – 55.

As it regards “installments”, of which you also complain, I will say, my terms for sawing are cash, and others than yourself I have charged interest from date of saw bill. You well remember, I presume; I have never presented you with a saw bill except the one you now have receipted. You called at my house and of your own option on the 2nd of February last, I requested to pay up your saw bill, which was done by you cashing the balance due of \$48.23. The bill of August 6th of \$3.00 was not at that time returned to me by my sawyer.

The last mentioned bill I presented to you and the number of installments you see, is only one. I have never asked you for your bill, or charged you interest, as I have done to others, and for this other customers ought to complain – not yourself. As to the “lot of logs I now have, which I should not dare interest to your mill”. I shall not think you “muggin” if they are taken to some other mill, and I will here say we had better understand that no more of your logs can be sawed at my mill. I am convinced the less business we have with each other, the longer will our friendship continue. As to your excitability on both occasions – February 2nd 1870 and January 4th, 1871, I will refer you to **our recollection**, and here I remark you are the only gentleman that I ever rebuked for using improper language and insinuations to me in my own house.

I presume Deacon Grant and Deming are able to fight their own forensic battles without the quixotic aid of “Coffee and pistols for four” from friends or enemies.

I see no parallel in the slaughtering establishment you have presented, and hope both of us will hereafter escape the shambles

Reciprocating the highest esteem for your family, I am, Respectfully Yours,
E. A. Phelps

PS It will be very unpleasant to forego the friendly relations so long existing with the Mills family, and I shall not. . . . *This post script has been crossed out, and the sentence never completed. The reference to the Mills family, who built and lived at the house Rev. Russell lived in 1772, refers to the fact that Russell's wife was the niece of Mrs. Samuel E. Mills, who supplied the Henry A. Russell family a home when Russell was hired as minister for the Congregational Church in Colebrook Center, in March of 1868.*

On a small scrap of paper tucked inside Phelps' reply are two sentences that were written showing his feelings, but which were not included in the reply itself. They are:

“– charging on me false accounts and resorting to specious reasons to cover-up”

The second: “our doors will be open to yourself and family at all times. . . “ (Obviously meant as mockery.)