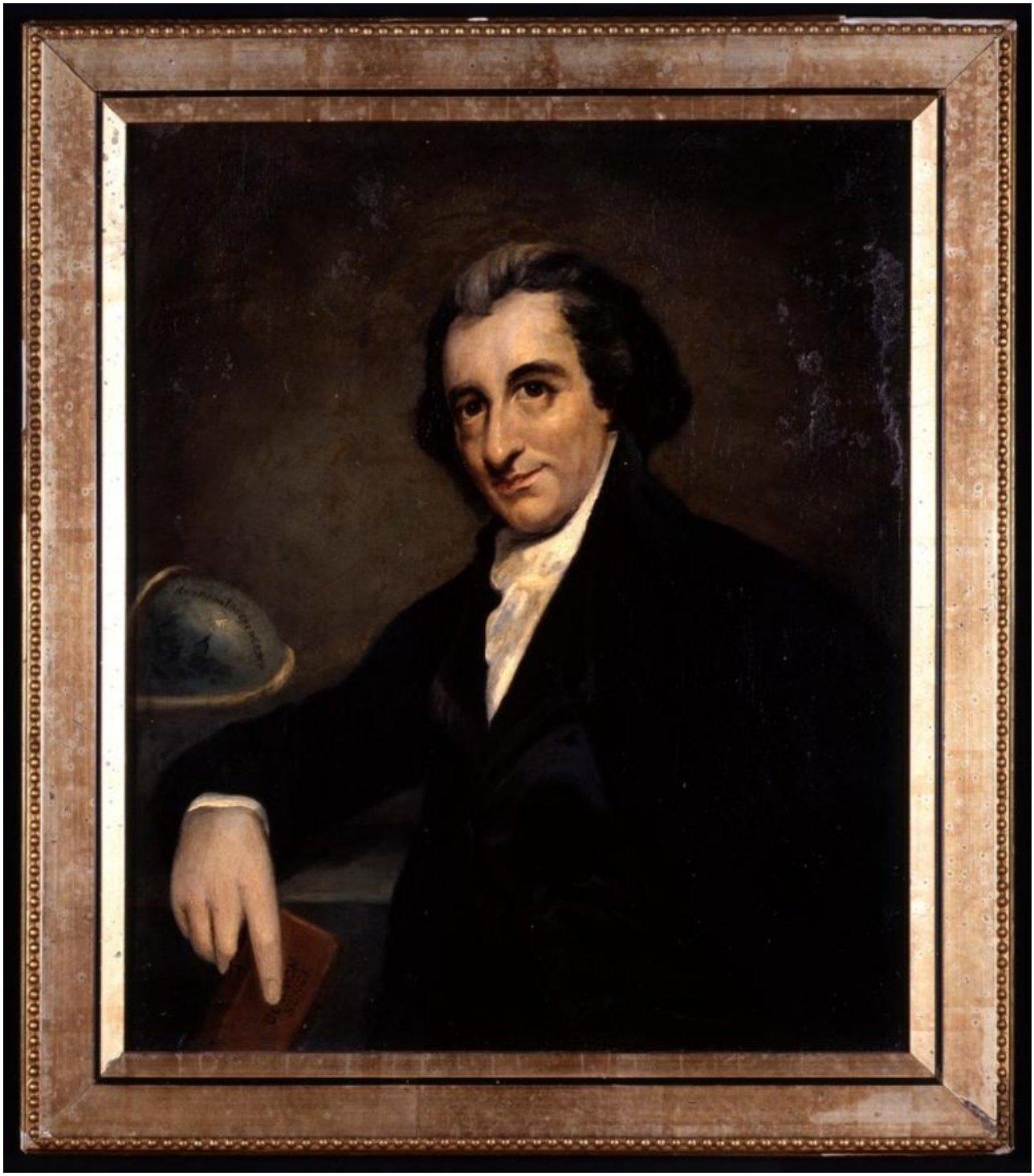
Blogging in the Early Republic



Why bloggers belong in the history of reading

I.

Henry Clarke Wright was an antebellum American reformer whose eclectic interests ranged from antislavery to radical pacifism to health reform and beyond. Born in 1797 and educated as a minister, he later abandoned institutional religion and became a prolific writer and speaker. In countless lectures delivered across the American North and the British Isles—where he spent most of the 1840s—Wright inveighed against war, corporal punishment in the home, slavery, loveless marriage, church and state, traditional medicine, and much else.

Above all, Wright wrote. According to the count of his only biographer, he authored eleven books, numerous articles in reform newspapers like William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, and over two dozen tracts and pamphlets. The Irish abolitionist Richard D. Webb, who hosted Wright in his Dublin home in 1844, reported to a mutual friend in Boston that Henry was lately spending "the greater part of the day writing in his room. I suppose he thinks he is shaking the world, but I can perceive very little of the motion so far."

As a writer with grand aspirations for shaking the world, Wright was also an inveterate journal keeper. For most of his adult life, he filled a steady stream of over one hundred diaries. In these, comments on world events and social reform jostle with reflections on the diarist's loveless marriage and his struggle for faith. While private, the journals were also public. Wright mailed pages and even whole volumes to his friends or read them excerpts from the diaries, and many pages were later published in his numerous books. Thus, as his biographer Lewis Perry notes, in the case of Wright, "distinctions between private and public, between diaries and published writings, meant little."

In *Human Life: Illustrated in My Individual Experience as a Child, a Youth, and a Man* (1845), one of his published writings in which diary entries were frequently excerpted, Wright confessed that "writing a journal does me good. I can let off my indignation at the wrongs I see and hear. I am far happier when I write a little every day. I take more note too, of passing events, and see more of what is going on around me. I live less in the past and future, and more in the present, when I journalize . . . It saves me from many dark hours to write down what I see and hear and feel daily. My soul would turn in upon and consume itself, if I did not thus let it out into my journal."

Wright died in 1870, already a relatively forgotten reformer. Yet—and I speak from my own experience in 2005—his reflections on writing are eerily evocative of what it is like to blog. Wright shared several traits with the prototypical blogger—his eccentric range of interests, his resolution "to write down what I see and hear and feel daily," his use of journals to "let off" rants of "indignation," his utopian conviction that writing might change the world, and (not least) his practice of spending the "greater part of the day writing in

his room." Was Wright a blogger? Are not his journals the fossilized originals of a species?

II.

If you scoff at this suggestion, this is probably because you hold this truth to be self-evident: In the course of human events, blogging is the newest of newcomers.

After all, blogs—short for "Web logs"—are Web pages, which means that they cannot be older than the World Wide Web. Moreover, a blog refers to a kind of Web page that has only become widespread in the past five or six years. Blogs are frequently updated pages that list brief, time-stamped posts. These can contain text, links, images, or all of the above. Though seemingly ubiquitous today, the form itself is relatively new, even in the abbreviated history of cyberspace. The term "Web log" was never used until circa 1997, when it was coined to refer to a few dozen journals that were being published online by early Internet users, mainly as annotated lists of links to interesting Web pages.

As these early bloggers began to link extensively to other blogs, the "blogosphere" was born—about fourscore and seven months ago. That makes the career of the blogosphere only slightly older than that of Britney Spears—hardly a hoary age, and certainly not old enough for Henry Clarke Wright to be a blogger.

Yet as blogging has quickly become a cultural—and now political—phenomenon, speculations about the historical precursors to blogging have become matters of course. Tens of thousands of new blogs are now created every day, on subjects ranging from the highly personal to the political, from careers to crochet, from academia to art, from movies to "moblogs"—collections of photographs taken using mobile phones. Technorati, a special search engine that tracks links between blogs, now follows over ten million blogs. In the last few years, the dynamic growth and diversification of blogging has attracted attention from journalists, political pundits, and scholars, and many pixels are now being spilled about the political influence of blogs—as bellwethers of opinion, as sources of trenchant social criticism, as innovative forms of citizen journalism, or as tools for political organization.

Thomas Paine, blogger?

For every writer who says that blogging is beginning to shake the world, there

is another who confesses that it is difficult to feel the motion. But it is worth noting that both the true believers in blogging and the skeptics are leavening their debates with allusions to history—along with suggestions that blogging is not as new as you think. Three years ago, in the *New York Times*, Emily Eakin called the blogger a "new breed of pamphleteer," who would have pleased George Orwell, "if he had lived to surf the Internet." The headline declared that the "ancient art of haranguing"—practiced so well by pamphleteers like Orwell and "master rhetoricians" like Daniel Defoe and Thomas Paine—"has moved to the Internet, belligerent as ever."

For Eakin, blogs were both "new" and "ancient"—the same old whining in new wineskins. Yet on the whole, writers about blogging cannot seem to decide whether blogging is more continuous or discontinuous with the past. Bits of historical flotsam float, willy-nilly, through many discussions about blogs, available for use by boosters and critics alike. In 2002, for example, blogger Andrew Sullivan compared the invention of group blogs to the way that "reviews and magazines started out decades and centuries ago: a few like-minded souls collaborating on a literary-political project." Sullivan mused that "perhaps blogs—and the technology that enables them—will take us back to the 18th century. I sure hope so." Similarly, on his blog PressThink, media critic Jay Rosen has argued that if bloggers are the faces of journalism's future, their faces are also turned toward the past. "The people who will invent the next press in America—and who are doing it now online—continue an experiment at least 250 years old." Rosen admires TomPaine.com, a progressive Website for news and commentary, because it "leaves the arrow pointing backward to Paine the troublemaking democrat and political journalist, reviving his name for symbolic purpose in the present." Fittingly enough, TomPaine.com has a blog.

Yet if some writers use history to compare blogging to some halcyon yesteryear, other writers use history to put a damper on the hype. A recent *USA Today* headline advised "blogophiles" to "chill," admonishing them that "you're not the first to do what you're doing." "Thomas Paine was basically a blogger—in 1776," wrote technology columnist Kevin Maney, who also identified the works of Orwell and Martin Luther as "historical antecedents" for blogs. "The printing press gave Luther a way to distribute his thesis—an early version of blogging. Next thing, we had Protestants." Blogs, said Maney, are just "another turn of history's wheel, not a radical departure."

Are blogs really just another turn of history's wheel? Yes and no. Bloggers do have some historical antecedents in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. But the usual suspects in the examples above—Paine, Luther, Orwell—are in various ways misleading. Treating these highly influential writers as analogues for bloggers serves a particular understanding of blogging as primarily political. Moreover, it perpetuates a picture of the blogosphere that is skewed toward elite and highly visible blogs. The better analogues for bloggers may not be towering literary figures like Paine, but more forgotten writers like Wright. The arrow for blogging should be left pointing backwards, as Rosen suggests, but where it points is another question.

III.

Just five years ago, blogs were still a rarity, but since September 11, 2001, their numbers have skyrocketed. The growth has been especially staggering among "poliblogs" and "warblogs," many of which model themselves on the punditry of sites like Glenn Reynolds's Instapundit. By the 2004 election, prominent bloggers like Ana Marie Cox of Wonkette were being invited to the presidential nominating conventions of both parties, and mainstream news organizations have proclaimed polibloggers a force to be reckoned with. In 2002, Joshua Marshall, who blogs at Talking Points Memo, helped to discredit former Senate majority leader Trent Lott for his statements on racial segregation, which led to Lott's eventual resignation. More recently, bloggers exposed forged memos used by CBS News for a story on President Bush's military service during the Vietnam War.

This, at least, is the conventional history of blogging. But the story is a skewed one. Although famous poliblogs receive the lion's share of attention from bloggers and journalists alike, most blogs go largely unnoticed by the mainstream media. Of the millions of blogs tracked by Technorati, the vast majority are not concerned primarily with political influence or alternative journalism. There are knitting blogs, book blogs, poetry blogs, academic blogs, cooking blogs, photo blogs, religion blogs, gossip blogs, teaching blogs, parenting blogs, and more.

The full history of blogging, then, cannot be told simply as a story of how the poliblogs rose into mainstream consciousness or acquired political influence, because that story fails to account for the size and heterogeneity of the blogosphere as a whole. Yet when historical analogies to blogging are offered, they usually reinforce the idea that blogging is mainly a political enterprise, dominated by a few leading figures. Consider the historical figures mentioned above as the progenitors of blogging—Paine, Luther, Orwell. Organizing a genealogy of blogging around such monumental writers only underlines the sense that prominent poliblogs are the endpoints in a teleological progression of popular political writing. Blogging analysts who focus on the elite poliblogs are likely to see their aspirations for influence as defining features of blogging itself, as if most blogs exist primarily to act as molders of public opinion.

Instead, I would like to suggest some analogues to blogging from antebellum America that contradict a history of blogging built on a long list of great writers. Those analogues can be found not primarily in the history of writing, but rather in the history of American reading.

Most historians agree that major transformations in printing and reading took place in the United States between 1750 and 1850—changes that seemed as phenomenal to contemporaries as blogging seems to many in our own time. At the beginning of this roughly hundred-year period, printed material was scarce, and the diffusion of information was severely limited in terms of time and space.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, colonial printers used their presses mainly to publish official proclamations, almanacs, commercial newsletters for merchants, and occasional sermons. But these materials were not produced in large quantities, and print was even scarcer in rural areas than in port cities.

Yet by 1850, this scarcity of print had given way to a bewildering abundance—a rapid growth no less impressive in its own time than the exponential proliferation of blogs in the last few years. Newspapers began to crop up not just in major urban areas but in smaller towns, and as print became more abundant, it was also diffused more widely and rapidly, thanks to a transportation revolution fueled by steam, railroads, and internal improvements like roads, canals, and an expanding postal service. These changes were, of course, not unique to the United States, but even foreign travelers to the young nation were awed by its burgeoning print culture. Alexis de Tocqueville, after touring the United States in 1831, wrote, "[W]hen I compare the Greek and Roman republics to these republics of America, the manuscript libraries of the first . . . to the thousand newspapers that crisscross the second . . . I am tempted to burn my books so as to apply only new ideas to a social state so new."

Tocqueville's references to republicanism and a new social state were not coincidental, because social and political democratization was both a cause and effect of the print revolution. In the colonial period, print remained scarce partly because information was thought to be a privilege of the few. As historian Richard Brown has argued, those with power—political and religious elites, wealthy planters and merchants, white men all—controlled the flow of knowledge, and access to print and public information required deference to their power. The shift from a scarcity of print to abundance was therefore accompanied necessarily by a measure of increased democratization. Such, at least, was what Tocqueville concluded. In answer to Europeans who thought that reducing taxes on print would "increase newspapers indefinitely," he argued that "newspapers multiply not only relative to their cheapness." In addition, "the empire of newspapers" would grow "as men become equal."

The growth of the empire of newspapers had two related effects on the practices of American readers. First, the new surplus of print meant that there was more to read. Whereas readers in the colonial period had been intensive readers of selected texts like the Bible and devotional literature, by 1850 they were extensive readers, who could browse and choose from a staggering array of reading choices. Second, the shift from deference to democratization encouraged individual readers to indulge their own preferences for particular kinds of reading, preferences that were exploited and targeted by antebellum publishers. In short, readers had more printed materials to choose from, more freedom to choose, and more printed materials that were tailored to their choices.

These were prime conditions for the emergence of reading practices similar to blogging. For nineteenth-century Americans, unprecedented access to reading

material “bred the feeling of independence,” argues Brown. “Instead of being obviously and directly dependent on public officials and social superiors for information,” readers could now “acquire information on their own in the marketplace, more or less on an equal basis.” But as readers became more extensive in their reading, they also had to develop principles for selection. What should one read, when there was so much to choose from? And now that information was not always mediated by the interpretations of colonial elites, how should one deal with the glut of information available? As Brown continues, “Selecting what information to acquire replaced access itself so as to emerge as a central challenge for people in varied social circumstances.”

One of the ways that readers met these challenges was to “journalize,” to borrow the word used by Henry Clarke Wright. Surrounded by ephemeral print, many began to make references in their journals to what they had been reading—the rough equivalent of what bloggers do by linking to a Web page. During the Revolution, for instance, Christopher Marshall, a Philadelphian radical and friend of Thomas Paine, peppered his journal with references to the papers, often with brief comments on the news. “Sundry pieces of news last night in the *Evening Post*, Numb. 147,” he jotted in December 1775. Earlier in the year, after recording the casualties at Bunker Hill, Marshall tipped his hat to “*Evening Post*, No. 74, and J. Humphrey’s *Ledger*, No. 25″ for the information. With more news available, diarists like Marshall began to construct their own networks of information, annotating the news to create a record of their reading.

Wright’s journals, written decades after Marshall’s in a period of even greater print abundance, similarly recorded his reading and punctuated that record with commentary. One typical Wright entry must have been written while reading the latest paper brought by the Atlantic packets that ran from Liverpool to Boston: “*News from England*. Queen Victoria has a daughter. Millions of dollars are being expended to celebrate the babe’s birth. This money comes from the mouths of the children of the poor who cry for bread . . . The British Army in India has been defeated by the Natives. What right has that robber Nation to hold Dominion over India? Only the Robber’s right. England is a Robber and a Pirate. Great excitement in England on the Woman Question.” Wright’s selection of news—mixed with his views—demonstrated the freedom with which antebellum readers interacted with printed news.

Other readers skipped over copying from their papers and simply cut out articles to paste directly into scrapbooks, scribbling commentary in the margins around the clippings. In his book *City Reading*, historian David M. Henkin describes a multivolume journal by New Yorker Edward Neufville Tailer Jr., entitled “Journal of Some of the Events Which Have Occurred in My Life Time.” In the 1840s and 1850s, says Henkin, clippings from newspapers began to “dominate Tailer’s diary,” which became a “record of his daily reading habits.”

As individual readers freely made choices about what information to acquire, they also freely came together as groups of like-minded readers. In the more

heavily urban Northern states, Americans began to join voluntary associations at remarkable rates—library clubs, lyceums for hearing speeches and discussing ideas, political parties, and religious and reform organizations. Each of these associations was also a reading community, which connected members by official publications and common reading habits. Within these groups, readers also found new opportunities to become writers, as many amateur writers now produced articles for reform papers or poems for religious magazines. Whereas private reading choices in the colonial period had governed vertical relationships between elites (who possessed information) and non-elites (who did not), reading choices in the early nineteenth century became public matters, defining horizontal relationships among individuals who met on a more equal footing. Tocqueville also noted this aspect of the print revolution when he observed in the United States "a necessary relation between [voluntary] associations and newspapers: newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers."

IV.

Perhaps there is a similar relationship between blogging and the print culture of the twenty-first century, a culture that now includes not only an abundance of printed pages, but also an abundance of Web pages. American readers at the turn of the nineteenth century found themselves afloat on a sea of print, whose tide had risen along with democratic ideas about the diffusion of information. They responded to these liberating circumstances by selecting what to read and interpreting the news according to individual preference. Privately, records of reading—and the writing they inspired—could be kept in journals and scrapbooks. But those private records also pushed readers outward into communities of like-minded readers. In these communities, readers also became writers.

The blogosphere as a whole represents a similar pattern in a different medium: confronted by an ever-growing number of Web pages and a massive amount of online information, bloggers use their blogs to mix quotidian reflections about life together with records of their reading. Like Christopher Marshall and Edward Tailer, they link these reflections back to the sources—"clipping" sites that interest them. But their interests and choices about what to read also connect them to small communities within the blogosphere, much as a reader-writer like Henry Clarke Wright was drawn into the circle of abolitionist and pacifist reformers by their common pathways through the abundant print culture of the antebellum North. The typical blog links not only to pages outside of the blogosphere, but also to other blogs, and these links often create small networks of like-minded bloggers. In addition, most blogs are equipped with technology that allows readers to leave comments on posts or to alert authors that they have replied to a post on their own blog. Through these interactive practices, associations of a certain kind are formed. To paraphrase Tocqueville, Web pages make blogging networks, and blogging networks in turn make their own Web pages.

This historical analogy, of course, represents my own highly individualized

selection of readings from a huge abundance of writing both on the blogosphere and on early American print culture. But the fact that I can make a selective reading is a testament to the phenomenon of democratization and information growth that I am describing. Moreover, there are virtues to my selective reading. By comparing the rise of blogging to events in the history of reading rather than to epochal events in the history of political dissent, we can take into account a larger number and a wider range of blogs. Not all bloggers are would-be Thomas Paines. But almost all bloggers make their own small worlds by offering highly individualized collections of reading choices. Through these choices as readers, they also join virtual associations of other readers. The basic practice that underlies most blogging is therefore not unprecedented. Historically, when an abundance of public information is conjoined with democratized ideas about the flow of information, something like blogging usually results.

Of course, for all the similarities I have outlined between bloggers and antebellum diarists like Henry Clarke Wright, there are probably as many differences between the two periods. You might point out, for instance, that if Wright had possessed access to a computer and a broadband Internet connection, he could have written even more than he did and reached even larger audiences. He could have. But the vast majority of bloggers, despite their considerable technological advantages over Wright's paper and ink, have regular audiences and communities that may be even smaller than Wright's circle of friends. And despite our differences from antebellum readers, the central challenge for us, as it was for them, is not how to gain access to an abundance of information, but how to decide what information to acquire and which associations to make. In real terms, bloggers do have access to more information than nineteenth-century readers did, but there is only so much information that any one reader can digest, so the problem for both still becomes what to read and how to read it.

Indeed, blogging demonstrates the persistence of a key truth in the history of reading, an insight as obvious to Tocqueville as it should be to most bloggers today. The insight is that readers, in a culture of abundant reading material, regularly seek out other readers, either by becoming writers themselves or by sharing their records of reading with others. That process, of course, requires cultural conditions that value democratic rather than deferential ideals of authority. But to explain how new habits of reading and writing develop, those cultural conditions matter as much—perhaps more—than economic or technological innovations. As Tocqueville knew, the explosion of newspapers in America was not just a result of their cheapness or their means of production, any more than the explosion of blogging is just a result of the fact that free and user-friendly software like Blogger is available. Perhaps, instead, blogging is the literate person's new outlet for an old need. In Wright's words, it is the need "to see more of what is going on around me." And in print cultures where there is more to see, it takes reading, writing, and association in order to see more.

Further Reading:

Lewis Perry, *Childhood, Marriage, and Reform: Henry Clarke Wright 1797-1870* (Chicago, 1980); Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York, 1989); David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York, 1998); William Duane, ed., *Extracts from the Diary of Christopher Marshall, 1774-1791* (reprint, New York, 1969); Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, 2000), 172-80, 289, 493-95. Most of the journals of Henry Clarke Wright are located at the Boston Public Library and the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

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