

Thomas Hill's Letter to Fred Knapp (August 18, 1859)

One of Reverend Thomas Hill's biographers said of him that "he was admired by scientists for his theology and by theologians for his science." An outstanding undergraduate student at Harvard and a member of the class of 1843, Hill resisted both his mathematics professor's wish that he pursue a career in mathematics, and his biology professor's hope that he become a botanist. Instead, he followed his lifelong dream to be a minister, entered Harvard Divinity School upon graduation, and received his ordination in 1845. By the late 1850s he was comfortably ensconced in the pulpit at the Unitarian First Church of Waltham, Massachusetts. His connections with Antioch College were tangential at best when, during the summer of 1859, he became a candidate for president.

At the time, inaugural president Horace Mann lay dying in his home in Yellow Springs. With a successor yet to be named, Mann exhorted Trustee Henry W. Bellows, a prominent Unitarian minister of New York, to take the job. Bellows did not accept the mantle, but gave instead his cousin by marriage as a candidate, Thomas Hill. This happened during a period of intense denominational strife over control of the College, and whoever the second president of Antioch was going to be would have much influence over its direction as either a Christian or Unitarian institution. Cognizant of this and other issues bedeviling his prospective new employer, Hill wrote the following soul searching letter to an old Harvard schoolmate, Frederic Knapp.

August 18, 1859. Thomas Hill to Fred Knapp

I suppose that Henry [Bellows] told you of our talks together about Antioch. Since his departure to Walpole I have had some good long talks with Dr. Gannett and Dr. Walker [the Rev. Ezra Stiles Gannett, pastor of the Arlington Street Church, and the Rev. James Walker, President of Harvard]. I am astonished at the unanimity with which all say that I am the man for Antioch. I cannot feel so. I cannot but feel some uncertainty about my executive and administrative ability,--my ability to carry out the ideas which I know are good and solid. Still I would not hesitate to try to do my very best in all respects, if all things else were favorable. In saying this I would not attempt to conceal that it is very painful and inconvenient in all respects for me to tear myself out of this place to go a thousand miles westward, and I most sincerely wish that the Christians at Antioch would utterly refuse to have a Unitarian Minister as President. However I dare not hope it, I am afraid that they will formally appoint me and then I suppose I must go. When once I feel that there is no escape, I have no doubt that courage and zeal will arise in my heart.

But if the Christians there want me they must send for me. As for going to the Miami Conference before I am appointed President, I simply say that I won't. I am sure it would be bad policy in every way. If I go to Antioch at all it will not be before the formal election.

Again if the Trustees want me to go to Antioch they must take me as I am, encumbered with the promise to write and deliver a course of twelve lectures next winter in Boston. I cannot afford it, (in any sense of the word afford) to omit or postpone them and I must have time to write them.

Finally, my dear Fred, I really don't think I can go to Antioch at all. The fatal point of view in the case is the money view. I have no property, and I have five small children. I do not feel it right for me to jeopard their comfort and well being and I can't do it. The unmarried man may serve the Lord in any way, but the married man is to serve Him by serving his children. The professors and teachers at Antioch are also mortal and must have bread.

The average receipts for three years past have been \$8,000, the expenses \$13,000. The deficit of \$5,000 is to be made up by the notes of certain gentlemen, donations to the college, falling due every six months. About two thirds the receipts of the College are therefore contingent on the number of students, every 30 students, it appears, netting to the college the income of about \$11,000. Of course if the President should at first contrast unfavorably with Mr. Mann, and be a little less popular,--or if there should be a failure in the crops a year or two, or if the number of men advanced in years who come to college should diminish and leave the ranks to be supplied only by younger men--or if the standard of scholarship should be raised a little too suddenly and exclude too many applicants for admission,--or if any other of a score of causes should operate to cause a diminution in the number of students even for a single year, the fluctuation would be felt in our salaries, and it would worry and distract me to have it so.

Even if my own salary were fixed to be paid out of the subscribed fund, and so made sure, I think it would be a terrible hindrance to my freedom and efficiency of action to see my confreres suffer. I cannot feel willing to undertake this pecuniary responsibility through thick and thin. I admire the heroism of those who like Mr. Mann sacrifice all personal considerations and sink their private fortunes in sustaining the work they have undertaken; but I have not the heroism myself, and cannot feel it my duty to undertake a work for which I am not fitted. The literary and scientific interests of the College, its moral and religious interests, I should devote myself to, with great zeal, and I trust with sound discretion,--but I could not do it unless I was as sure that my own and my teachers salaries would be paid punctually and in full every three or six months as I am about the pay of the public school teachers in Waltham,--I certainly could not do it while I felt that not only my own bread and butter, but that of all the teachers under me was dependent, not on the wisdom, but on the popularity of my measures, on how many scholars I brought in. I cannot possibly get up in myself the confidence in my own popularity and success which would make me feel sure of the receipts from room rent and tuition remaining \$8,000 and therefore I cannot consent to go.

Now if it were possible to have a guaranty that the income shall be actually not less than \$13,000 or some other fixed sum per annum for three or five years, that would change the matter. But I do not suppose that I shall be left in my own happy and quiet sphere of life in

Waltham.

The thought of leaving is very painful, not only because of the painfulness of tearing away from Massachusetts, the State of my adoption and where I have lived the largest and by far the best half of my life,--but because continual illness has partly broken my spirits and made me less hopeful of the future, less buoyant and elastic than formerly,--(even making me feel sometimes disposed to retreat to farming and to forswear all intellectual pursuits whatever, instead of going into new and untried responsibilities.)

Still I know also that there is enough stamina left in me to make me do well at Antioch, if there was a certain income there. I don't want to go, but if I ought and must, then I suppose I can.