

**AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY  
MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS**

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***NAME OF COLLECTION:***

Ayer, Thomas Prentiss, Diaries, 1846-1884

***LOCATION(S):***

Mss. boxes. "A"

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***SIZE OF COLLECTION:***

one manuscript box (33 volumes)

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***SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON COLLECTION:***

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***SOURCE OF COLLECTION:***

Purchased from Carmen D. Valentino, 2004

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***COLLECTION DESCRIPTION:***

Thomas Prentiss Ayer (1818-1893), the son of Nathaniel and Elizabeth Fosdick Ayer, was born in Charlestown, Mass., on 24 October 1818. He married, on 31 May 1843, Lucy Adelaide ("Addy") Watson (1821-1845), by whom he had a son, Thomas Prentiss ("Soney") Ayer (1845- ). He married, second, on 12 December 1854, Lydia Maria Symmes (1831- ), by whom he had a son, Henry Whittier Prentiss ("Harry") Ayer (1859- ). Thomas Prentiss Ayer died on 12 October 1893.

Thomas Prentiss Ayer was a Boston commission merchant for T.D. Quincy and Co., Unitarian churchman, and local politician in East Cambridge and Winchester, Mass. Very active in town affairs, Ayer served as the president of the Winchester Savings Bank, from 1872 to 1873, and as a founder of the Winchester Young Men's Association. He served as a Cambridge town councilman from 1850 to 1852, as a Winchester selectman in 1861, and as Winchester town meeting moderator several times in the 1870s and 1880s.

This collection consists of thirty-three handmade fascicles bound of cut ledger paper and paper covers, each a journal neatly inscribed with Ayer's initials, the title "Journal" and the year (missing are 1850, 1853, 1855, 1875, 1880, and 1881). Each is specially hand ruled to record morning and evening wind direction and weather, daily lowest temperature and brief remarks.

Ayer begins his diary at age twenty-seven, five months after his wife's death from illness, survived by a seven-month old son. Addy was buried in Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery (lot no. 2245), which he later sold. Ayer suffered from deep grief as he struggled to raise their son, whose boarding out with his sister-in-law and other relatives and progress he regularly recorded until his hiring of housekeeper

Lydia Maria Symmes in 1854. Lydia soon became Thomas' wife, although Ayer remained faithful to his first wife's memory.

*“Was married this evening at my house by Rev M. Masters of Woburn to Lydia Maria Symmes—a duty I felt I owed to my Boy as well as myself, may the union prove a happy one.—had a very pleasant party of about 50 neighbors & relations.”* [12 December 1854]

Ayer's diaries are unusual for this period (especially the earlier decades) in noting public events in both the Commonwealth's capital and smaller towns, a consequence of his commute by “car” to his Boston office. They chronicle his life over a thirty-nine year period, noting annual hobbies and interests, sleighing and potato gardening chief among them, and personal reactions to national and state events, from the ante-bellum fugitive slave crisis in Boston and the inauguration of Zachary Taylor, which Ayer attended, through the Mexican and Civil Wars, the deaths of leaders like Daniel Webster, whose funeral he attended, President Lincoln and Wendell Phillips, the Tilden-Hayes fiasco, and Grover Cleveland's election. Along the way, Ayer records the building of his home in Winchester in great detail, the birth and progress of his second son Harry, the effect of periodic monetary crises such as that in 1857 upon his business, and state political conventions and lectures he attended as a Whig over the course of his long life.

See Contents List.

**American Antiquarian Society  
MANUSCRIPTS DEPARTMENT**

THOMAS PRENTISS AYER, DIARIES, 1846-1884  
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