

**N. P. Willis, "Letter from Idlewild," 21 July 1855**

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LETTER FROM IDLEWILD.

DEAR MORRIS,

AN old slouched hat, with a twine around it, hangs on the gilt peak of our dining-room mirror, as you doubtless remember. It is a venerable relic of longevity—old BILLY BABCOCK having worn it across the threshold of a second century—cost thirty-seven and a half cents, and in constant use from his ninety-ninth to his one hundred and third year. To obtain this brain-bridge between two centuries as a relic, I made an even “swop” with him, last summer, (as I described in one of these Idlewild letters), little expecting to see again, in this world, either the grey old head or my own promoted hat.

We were lingering over our breakfast, yesterday morning (July 3d), the two or three pleasant friends who are with us having run their gossip deep into the forenoon, when a shout from the children drew our attention to the window, and there came old Billy, stumping along through the pine grove with his peeled stick—his rags and perpetual smile in happy contradiction as before, but his prominent chin covered with a snow-white beard, which gleamed with a very new and becoming splendor from the confusion of his unwashed perpetuities. The announcement of who was coming was at once understood—the very bad hat on its gilt peak effectually daily-fying the mention and memory of the old man—and the first to run and welcome him at the door was a fair lady in most amusing contrast to his build and belongings, the elegant “La Penserosa,” in the prettiest of French caps and flowing *négligés*, her morning toilette as eloquent of the Present as he and his toggery of the Past.

Billy had walked twelve miles that morning (in his one hundred and third year, remember!) and had had no breakfast. He was soon fed and made comfortable, and then we ensconced him in an easy-chair and gathered around him—one of our friends, fortunately, being a walking hydraulic of History and Statistics, and pumping the far-down memory of the old man with the pipe and valve of well-adjusted question and data. His memories of Washington and the military operations on the Hudson, of the battle of Stony Point and of the hanging of André, and his impressions of the various great men who figured before his eyes in the days now passed over to History, were skillfully drawn up. Our friend (Sam. B. Ruggles) was delighted with the old veteran’s pertinacious and simple truthfulness, never allowing a question to lead him into an admission of what was not perfectly clear in his own mind, and denying many suppositions of knowledge which were made for him and which it would have added to his consequence to be possessed of.

He was honest and direct as if he had never thought of being anything else—a saving of trouble which was perhaps among the reasons for his lasting so long.

Mr. Ruggles proposed, after a while, that we should ask the Sun, that had shone so long upon Billy, to oblige us with his likeness; and, on explaining to the veteran what his old friend Daylight had learned to do, of late years, he consented at once, though with an amusing expression of reserved faith in the matter. Up in the mountains, where Billy is a vagrant, daguerreotypes were probably never heard of; and he evidently thought that he had seen his own shadow long enough to know all the sun could do in *that* line!

We soon had the ponies at the door, and hoisted in the old man—his peeled stick and tattered shirt in *alto rilievo* on the back seat, and about a century's difference between his age and that of my boy, who sat beside him. The day was not too warm, and the drive along the river to Newburgh was very delightful. Billy, probably (riding along so respectably now), was not even remembering my agonizing encounter with him, a year ago, on the same road—the old sinner staggering home drunk, in my virtuous trowsers, given him the day before! I should mention, by the way, that my last summer's hat, which came back upon the old man's head yesterday, after a year's wear, has a considerably altered expression. He had, as usual, slept out of doors occasionally, and the hat, which is his pillow, serves him also for a cold-victual basket, and a cushion in wet places; but the wear of this trying variety of service was not all. He had found the crown “too high to go through the woods with;” and, cutting off the lower half, he had reduced it to the proportions of a soup-plate—more convenient than becoming. I mention it to protect myself from its doing me injustice (as I am told the trowsers are doing) in a collection of autographs.

Miracle as the taking of likenesses by daguerreotype certainly is, the process—especially on the scale practised in rural villages—has no very startling aspect of sublimity. The alchemistic hierophant of the sun's great mystery—(the man who daguerreotypes you)—goes about it with a commonplaceness tedious to endure, ludicrous to remember. Billy was simply acquiescent. His business was to oblige the friend who was to give him a dinner and some old clothes after the job was over; but as to understanding or believing in likenesses painted that way, he was not going even to try. The look of funny incredulity which this feeling of mere acquiescence naturally gave to his features, was faithfully copied, of course, in the daguerreotype. It adds to the effectiveness of it as a picture, though it impairs somewhat the character of frank simplicity of his every-day expression.

The daguerreotypist was somewhat embarrassed with a subject in shirt-sleeves, the unusual prevalence of white disturbing his experience in light and shade. The various trials, before he could satisfy himself, occupied nearly an hour, during the whole of which tiresome period and process, Billy sat patient and motionless—wide awake, but with not a nerve restless or discomposed. The man expressed his wonder at the self-command of his old sitter and at the steadiness with which he looked straight at him as directed while the plate was under the action of the light. Indeed, that the tough system of the centenarian has had no experience of neuralgic wear—that he is a man born without nerves—is, I fancy, one of the secrets of his longevity. To this and his inexhaustible good-humor may mainly be attributed, I have no doubt, his duration under all sorts of hard usage by poverty and exposure.

A man one hundred and three years old, seeing his own likeness for the first time, was a dramatic moment, I thought—but Billy evidently did not feel the poetry of it. I held up the naked plate to him, and he said, “Why, it *is* like me!” with a sort of reluctant

acknowledgment of surprise, but immediately felt about for his hat, “to be going,” glad it was over. He was not up to giving his mind the trouble to comprehend it, and if I was pleased he was very glad, and I was very welcome. This was what his manner said, as we hobbled him down stairs to the street and got once more under way for home.

But the sun’s taking Billy’s likeness was not to be his only honor for that day. We had brought him safely back and refreshed his inner man and given him his expected bundle. The ladies and children were about taking leave of him—his long stick in hand and his face turned towards the mountains where he is to vagrantize for the summer—when it occurred to him to turn and inquire, whether, in that closely-tied and yet unexamined bundle, there happened to be a *coat*. The old chap’s sagacity had smelt out the weak spot in my charity. *There was no coat*. The fact was, I had looked over my slender remainders of that article, in making up the parcel, and there was nothing I could well spare except a dress coat, for which I have no further occasion in my hermit life, but which would scarce be “a fit” for Billy, besides the proba-Billy-ty of his swopping it for grog at the first wood-chopper’s shanty in the mountains. No! I had it to confess to the old man that his feel of the weight of the bundle had told him truly. It was composed only of the light-weighting articles of nether and under wear. But his expression of disappointment was overheard. “Is it a coat he wants?” exclaimed the Hon. S. B. R., stepping forward and pulling off his own (a new summer frock of the latest fashion), and insisting on drawing it over the cotton tatters of the veteran’s dirty shirt.

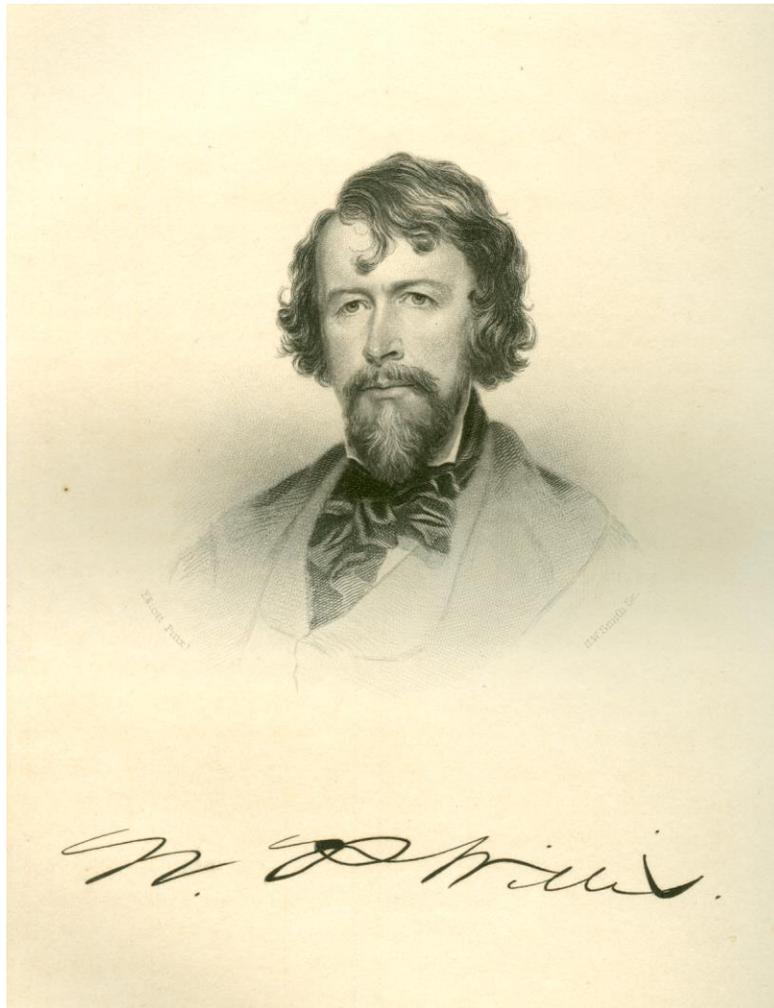
And so walked off a man of a *hundred years ago*, in the coat of a man of a *hundred years ahead*. Mr. Ruggles, as we all know, is the look-out at the mast-head of the Age—giving to Public Progress, in many ways, his far-seeings into the next century to mark its charts by, and know its channels and dangers—and, of all men’s coats in the world, old Billy Babcock were most drolly clad in his! It was a fossil of the Past in the shell of an embryo of the Future—two centuries at least between the vibrations (*forward*) of the pulse which the coat covered at morning, and the vibrations (*backward*) of the pulse which it covered at night!

How long this remarkable old vagrant is likely to live, I should scarcely venture to guess. He “loafs,” to and fro, between here and Jersey, his four or five generations of descendants (one hundred and sixty-five of them, he says, and all poor) scattered along through the mountains, and he looks still vigorous enough to outlive the half of them, and some of us. Die when he will now, however, we have his likeness—and *his hat!* Come and see how the two explain each other, my dear Morris, and believe me yours,

N. P. W.

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The following portrait illustration is published in:  
*The Knickerbocker Gallery: a Testimonial to the Editor of the Knickerbocker Magazine*  
(New York: Samuel Hueston, 1857) opposite page 451.



[End of text.]

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

Editors of this weekly newspaper were George P. Morris and N. Parker Willis.

This text also appears as "Letter X" ["ten"—ed.] in Nathaniel Parker Willis, *The Convalescent* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1859): 80-86. The volume is a compilation of the letters previously published in the *Home Journal*.

A description of Willis's residence on the Hudson, "Idlewild," is found in "Visits to Country Places, No. 4," *Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste* (Philadelphia) Vol. 6 (November 1856): 497-498. A stereograph of the residence is viewable via The New York Public Library Digital Gallery.<sup>1</sup>

For further information regarding Willis, see David Shulman, "N. P. Willis and the American Language," *American Speech* 23:1 (February 1948): 39-47; Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Sandra Tomc, "An Idle Industry: Nathaniel Parker

Willis and the Workings of Literary Leisure," *American Quarterly* 49:4 (December 1997): 780–805. See also the entry for Willis in the Lehigh University online resource, "The Vault at Pfaff's: An Archive of Art and Literature by New York City's Nineteenth-Century Bohemians."<sup>2</sup>

Samuel B. Ruggles was a noted New York lawyer, real estate developer, and highly respected public servant. Further information regarding Ruggles can be found in Daniel G. Brinton Thompson, *Ruggles of New York: A Life of Samuel B. Ruggles* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946). The New York Public Library has two boxes of his papers including a finding aid.<sup>3</sup>

1. [http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?G91F051\\_034F](http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?G91F051_034F)
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