

## What Makes a Diary?: Pearson's Diary and the Conventions of Diary-Writing

By Mandy Blakeman

Jonathan Pearson began his diary in 1828, and with 50 years of dedication to diary writing, he left behind a detailed wealth of historical knowledge that has proven to be incredibly valuable upon study. Pearson is a great figure in Union College history: student, tutor, professor, treasurer, and librarian are all pieces of his public persona. However, this type of historical view greatly limits the critical examination of historical figures; Pearson was more than his public persona, something that a well-kept diary as a literary form often reveals. Diary writing “is a missing literary genre: the pre-literary consecration of a writer’s experience, fears and prejudice in partly unrefined form. Most writers keep some sort of literary journal, but only in the last hundred years has it become fashionable or widely acceptable to prepare it for publication” (Merry). In this way, Pearson’s diary can reveal much about his later writings as an academic and provide valuable insight into him as a person. The form’s “partly unrefined” qualities give a candid and intimate view into its writer, Pearson, in this case, one that seems almost too private upon first glance.

Pearson records a wealth of personal fears, prejudices, misgivings, anxieties, and uncertainties, a view of him that would have been lost to history if not for the diary. While the exact inspiration for Pearson to keep such a far-reaching diary is unknown, he did write it at a time where personal expression in all its forms was on the rise, and a diary was a popular choice to do so (Welsch). The Protestant Christian revival of 1800-1830, known as the Second Great Awakening, emphasized individual understanding of and thinking about God; as a deeply religious man, Pearson likely began his diary in the spirit of discovery (*Second Great Awakening*). He often uses the diary as a space to muse on [what it means to be a christian](#), [the unfairness of human suffering](#), and [the tempting draw of sin](#), among other topics related to exploring his personal faith. Regardless of his purposes, Pearson’s diary can be used to discover a great deal about Pearson as a person and how he fit into the broader trends of his age.

Diaries in general are a unique literary form in that they both adhere to and break different conventions of writing. The look of a diary is familiar: date at the top, often beginning with “Dear Diary...” and an explanation of the day’s events and ponderings. The diary’s page is a free place to record whatever the diarist wants to, leading to a candid and deeply personal narrative that can be advantageous to historical study. One historian notes:

Compared to many other kinds of written sources, ... diaries seem at first to be strikingly 'private' kinds of writing... And yet... [all] were created and exchanged by classes of literate people who had the time and means to reflect and correspond. Consequently, in any given era, diaries and letters tend to follow certain shared forms or styles of what was considered to be appropriate or satisfying to express. Thus, although "private" in one sense, letters and diaries also may be seen as following certain widespread, "public" cultural conventions of expression (for example, diarists addressing their diaries as persons) and topic (letter-writers talking about weather or health). For historians, then, it seems best to think of these writings as being personal rather than private texts, inspiring us to look for commonalities among the individual examples. (Stowe)

Private implies a sense of secrecy in content and in act, which a diary was anything but in a historical sense. The act of diary writing itself, then, is a reflection of the norms of the time, an inherently public act. The traditional attributes of a diary, such as the "Dear Diary" form, or noting the date of each entry, reflected the status of the literate and educated that Pearson certainly fits into; diaries proved a personal commitment to and a skill at writing among the educated. Pearson himself notes at the beginning of his diary, "This is my first attempt at a diary, which I have continued till this day gradually increasing it in size and improvement". How else would one mark "improvement" in such a personal piece of writing if not for adhering to the standard practices? In this way, diaries are extremely useful at deducing the cultural and social norms of the day based on what the diarist chose to include or not include.

However, the concept of a conventional diary is a bit of a misnomer, as freedom and personal expression are at the heart of what makes a diary what it is. Each diarist had the freedom to change the general conventions to fit their needs, and so diaries vary widely. Pearson, for instance, altered the form by omitting a sense of audience; he does not address the diary as a person (in the sense of "Dear Diary..."), nor does he address himself in the future, or any potential readers. He uses frequent abbreviations for people and places that are difficult to decipher without some type of key, one that unfortunately died with Pearson long ago. He perhaps unintentionally alters the form with poor and inconsistent spelling throughout. These quirks of Pearson's adapted diaristic form, however, can still be used to glean much about Jonathan Pearson as a person rather than a persona.

By participating in the practice of diary writing, it is clear that Pearson belonged to a higher social class that valued literacy and education and had the means to procure it. Even at 15, when he begins the diary, Pearson has an understanding of the importance of social standing. He frequently proves that he is well-read, including excerpts from newspapers, poems, and hymns at different points. For instance, he quotes a poem published in the *Columbia Sentinel*, a local newspaper, in one of his [June 1828 entries](#), but provides no commentary or analysis on the chosen poem, instead choosing to let the placement and the poem speak for him, in a way. Perhaps most importantly, he frequently relies on convention to write his diary, especially early on in his writing, sometimes letting what was expected of a diary entry to stand on its own.

## Works Cited

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