

A COVER & LETTER FROM HENRY C. KELSEY - LEADER OF THE KELSEY RING

By Andy Kupersmit

This cover and accompanying original enclosures are full of clues to an earlier time and place, as a little research will show. The enclosures are a four-page letter on official government stationery and a fifth page hastily written and included in the envelope, all in the hand of Henry C. Kelsey, leader of the Kelsey Ring. The Kelsey Ring ran state Democratic politics for the final three decades of the 19th Century. The Ring chose the party's candidates for governor, U.S. Senate and a host of lesser offices, and wrote the party platforms.



Fig. 1: Scott #148, 6¢ National no grill, cork cancel with “Trenton NJ Jul 4” and red “New York Jul 5 X” transit and “London Paid 15 JY 73” receiving datestamps, State of New Jersey Department of State printed corner card, endorsed “By Baltho” “White Star” mail - July 5” to London, England.



Fig. 2: Letterhead from a sheet of State of New Jersey stationery, Department of State, dated Trenton, July 4, 1873, showing a vignette of the State seal.

Kelsey's four-page letter plus postscript on State of New Jersey Department of State letterhead shown above and datelined July 4, 1873 to London, reads (in part):

My Dear Staff,

No fire-crackers for me –" not any" - neither races parade or orations. The day is warm but fine, not over bright & a fine breeze stirring.

Last night was very hot, thermometer 89° in your room whither we moved for a while in the evening in hope of more comfort. It was cooler however, 2 or 3 in our own rooms. The day was the warmest of the season, about 92° here, 96, 98 & 100 elsewhere...

I think notwithstanding this you could gladly exchange your location for today, if you could, to Long Branch to witness the big race between Bowling and the other crack nags – "Springbok" is the favorite it seems.

This last refers to the Jersey Derby, to be held on July 4th at the Long Branch race track, with its two top contenders, Tom Bowling and Springbok.

THE JERSEY DERBY.

TOM BOWLING VS. SPRINGBOK.

A DISPUTE ABOUT THEIR RELATIVE MERITS—WHAT SPORTING MEN SAY AND THINK.

Ever since the "Jersey Derby," which was run on the Fourth of July, all kinds of stories have been in circulation among the patrons of the turf relative to the respective merits of Tom Bowling and Springbok, the two most famous contestants, and of the way in which one was encouraged and the other broken up in the race. The "Derby" was of peculiar interest, both on account of the number of persons who witnessed the running of the horse, the celebrity of the contestants, and the amount of money which changed hands on the result. The betting, particularly, was of an extraordinary character, the greater part of the spectators becoming so interested in the race that they risked their funds in the most reckless manner. Confidence in Springbok had been nursed by the apparently knowing ones, until it seemed a foregone conclusion that he would win, and so the general public followed their lead and lost their money. That this was unfortunate for the crowds which were impoverished, can readily be conceived.

There were many whose confidence was so strong

porter next crossed the course, and at the opposite side found the stables of Col. McDaniel, the owner of Springbok, who was defeated by Tom Bowling. Col. McDaniel was seated on an empty keg in front of the stable, talking to several friends upon the merits of his stud and concerning the defeat of Springbok.

The Colonel is apparently about the same age as Mr. McGrath, but is scarcely so stout or straight in build. His face is ruddy and his manner courteous and congenial. He wore a straw hat, and his dress was plain but neat. He seemed to feel very badly about the defeat of his favorite, and explained the reasons in the following words:

"You see there was no fair play on the Fourth of July to me on this race-course. In the first place, when Tom Bowling came up to the post he began running about eighty yards away, which is against the rules of the association. No notice was taken of this, however, and when the tap of the drum sounded Tom Bowling got ever so many lengths ahead of Springbok before my horse even got in motion. Now, my horse can't beat Tom Bowling if he gets ever so many yards ahead at the start for the race ought to be a pretty close at the best. But Springbok did as well as could be expected under the circumstances. Why, that horse would have won, even with



Fig. 3: A lithograph from the Library of Congress shows "Summer Meeting at Long Branch," ca. 1870. This first Monmouth Park was built in 1870, closed in 1873 for financial reasons, and was replaced by the 1880s with a larger race track.¹ A newspaper account from July 7, 1873 (*New York Times*) describes the 4th of July races, mentioned by Kelsey, with Tom Bowling the winner, but not without some controversy.²

Kelsey continues:

The funeral of the Chancellor takes place on Monday at 1PM. Court has adjourned until Tuesday. Will probably adjourn for the term on the 14th or 15th...

“The Chancellor” refers to Abraham O. Zabriskie, who was appointed Chancellor of New Jersey in 1866. He died on June 27, 1873 on a trip to California shortly after ending his term.³

The rest of the four-page letter relates to personal affairs, house sales, and investments in the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad. For the curious, a transcription (as best as possible) is included at the end of this article. Of interest to the author is a sentence at the bottom of page 3 that reads, “The ‘grey beards’ of the Cincinnati Society are dining with Peter today ...” The Cincinnati Society was founded in 1783 by officers of the Continental Army and their French counterparts who served together in the American Revolution. Its mission was to promote knowledge and appreciation of the achievement of American independence and to foster fellowship among its members.

Most interesting, however, is the “fifth” page (the hastily written postscript) which appears to be a large part of a ledger page on which Kelsey writes,

“Ben Lee has just been in telling me about the constitutional coms.⁴ (Jacob L.) Swayze was on the rampage – wants to abolish Chancery & Errors & Appeals. Also all fees, passes, etc. Elect all offices by the people, judges included. I will send you the evening report from the *Sentinel*. The effect of all this can but be to bring more ridicule upon the whole job. Parker’s crop of glory from this seed promises badly. Let ‘em go it.”

The writer signs the 4-page letter as “Kelsey” and the extra page with an “H.”

New Jersey Secretary of State Henry C. Kelsey served in that post from 1870 to 1897.⁵ Together with Benjamin F. Lee, Clerk of the N.J. Supreme Court for 30 years, and the recipient of the letter, Henry S. Little, Clerk of the Chancery Court, the three men were called “the Kelsey Ring” (also known as the “State House Ring”) -- New Jersey's own Tammany Hall. And this letter involves all three!

Marc Mappen, in his book *There’s More to New Jersey than the Sopranos*,⁶ describes this era of New Jersey history in a less than flattering light:

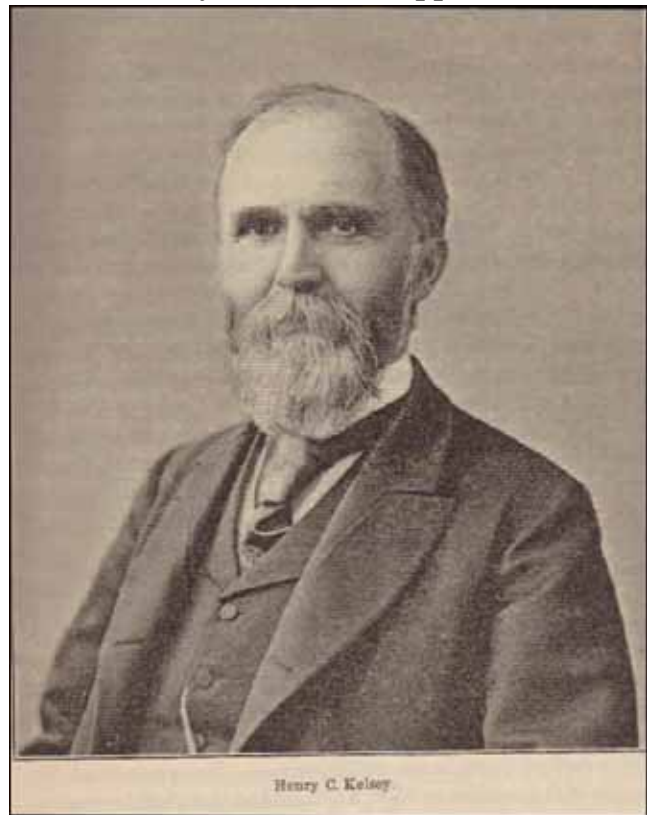


Fig. 5: Henry Cooper Kelsey. Kelsey was the leader of the Kelsey Ring. The Kelsey Ring consisted of Kelsey, Benjamin Lee and Henry Little. This letter was written by Kelsey and sent by him to Little while Little was in London during the summer of 1873.⁷

A COVER & LETTER FROM HENRY C. KELSEY ~ Andy Kupersmit

[R]eal power rested with the so-called “State House Ring,” the leader of which was Henry C. Kelsey, who served as N.J. Secretary of State for a quarter of a century.

The State House was not only the scene of corruption, but for much of the late nineteenth century was itself a prime example of that corruption, a sort of palace of plunder. There was an open bar with marble, glass, and mahogany, open for business near the center of the building in the quarters of Barney Ford, the superintendent of the State House and a lieutenant in the State House Ring. By every account, Barney was a popular fellow with legislators, governors, lawyers, judges, and local officials, and reputedly was a go-between in bribery and looting. A friendly saloon with free liquor was part of his hospitality.

The rest of the State House had been spared no expense. It was later found by a Senate investigating committee that the costs of the capitol building had gone from \$19,000 in 1888 to \$71,000 six years later, that a construction project that should have cost \$7,500 wound up costing \$27,817, and that a flagpole and flag on the front of the State House cost \$1,350. (This was in an era when the average worker made around \$700 a year.) Expense accounts were padded with three-dollar lunches - regarded as outrageously extravagant. Printing contracts were enormously inflated. Furniture and carpets purchased for the State House were taken away for private use... Favorite contractors were making a fortune by overcharging, and the State House Ring was benefiting from kickbacks.

But as many things in life, there are two sides to the story and the man, and while Kelsey may have controlled the Democratic Party at that time with a firm grip, it was also a period when much was accomplished – including the new Railroad act in April 1873 which freed the State from the crippling Camden & Amboy Railroad monopoly (even though, as the letter shows, Kelsey and his colleagues had a financial interest in the success of the competition; why else would he be discussing stock prices?), and the revision of the 1844 State Constitution through a series of amendments (in place of a constitutional convention), which were prepared and approved by the Legislature in 1875, certainly beneficial to the State as a whole. Kelsey’s memorials all praise his appreciation of the arts and his interest in promoting education.

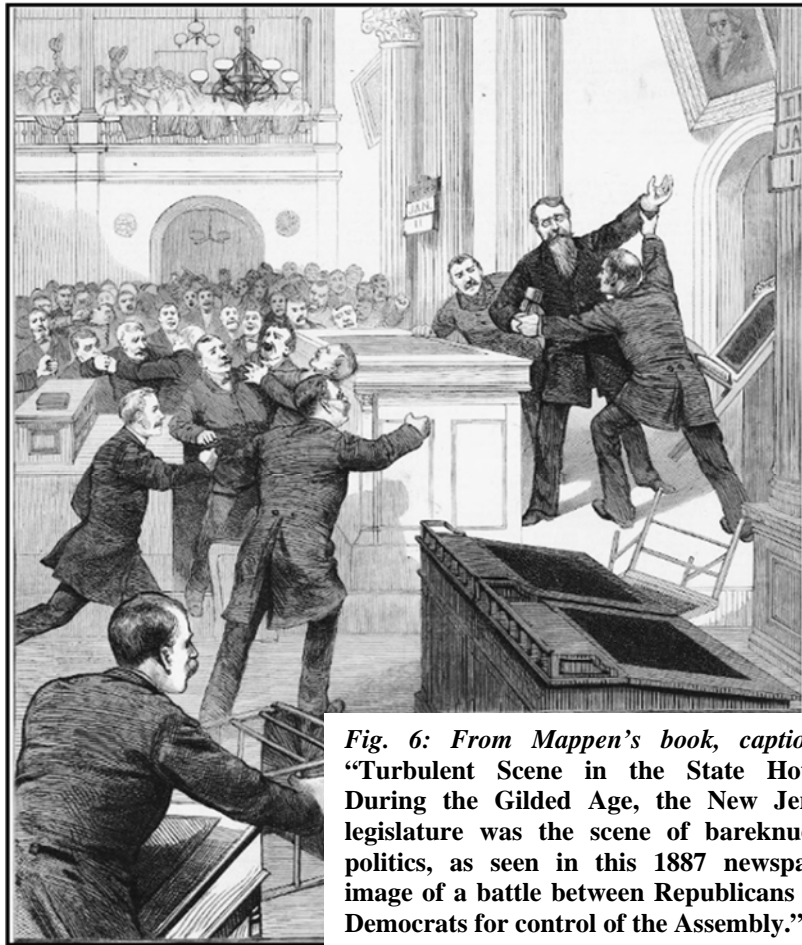


Fig. 6: From Mappen’s book, captioned “Turbulent Scene in the State House: During the Gilded Age, the New Jersey legislature was the scene of bareknuckle politics, as seen in this 1887 newspaper image of a battle between Republicans and Democrats for control of the Assembly.”

Illus. credited NJ Office of Legislative Services Library

Trenton, July 4, 1873

My Dear Staff,

No fire crackers for me – “not any” – neither races, parades or orations. The day is warm but fine, not over bright & a fine breeze stirring. Last night was very hot – thermometer 89° in your room whither we moved for a while in the evening in hopes of more comfort. It was cooler however, 2 or 3 in our own rooms. The day was the warmest of the season about 92° here – 96, 98, 100 elsewhere. I think notwithstanding this you would gladly change your location for today, if you could, to Long Branch to witness the big race between Bowling and the other crack nags – “Springbok” is the favorite it seems. The funeral of the Chancellor takes place on Monday at 1 PM – Court has adjourned until Tuesday, will probably adjourn for the term on the 14th of 15th.

I have had your house insured for \$4000 – 3 years at 1% - prem \$40 which Meredith will pay. I have put Van Camp & Worthington and E. H. Murphy at work to rent or sell it at \$7000, their commission is 1% - I went to Saml D Bailey & Son, but they require a contract binding for a year and giving them the commission whether they sell or not, that I declined making. The other parties think it will sell – and commission is to be paid only to him who sells –

I send you a lot of slips from various papers, selecting such items as I think most likely to interest you. I was rather surprised at the conviction of Chalworth, yet perhaps it should have been so. It’s safer but yet wrong. Phelps made a very strong argument,

Meredith has given me \$2000 – all he had – which I shall pay on the Del., Lack, & W stock tomorrow – together with \$3000 or \$4000 of my own. That is ample to carry it – The dividend will go wholly to our credit – over \$5000.

The stock still stands at about 97½. The “grey beards” of the Cincinnati Society are dining with Peter today and so we have ice cream for dinner. I put you down in London about Monday next – the 7th – and know how anxious you are sure to put foot on shore but when you get there make the most of it & God bless you. We await word from you anxiously.

Wife joins in regards,

Faithfully, Kelsey

P.S. Ben Lee has just been in telling me about the constitutional coms.* Swayze was on the rampage – wants to abolish Chancery & Errors & Appeals, also all fees, passes, etc., elect all officers by the people, judges included – I will send you the evening report from the Sentinel. The effect of all this can but be to bring more ridicule upon the whole job. Parker’s** crop of glory from this seed promises badly. Let ‘em go it. H

*Fig. 7: Transcription of the Kelsey Ring letter, involving all three key players – Kelsey (the sender), Little (the recipient) and Benjamin Lee, mentioned in the text. * refers to the Constitutional Commission, and ** is a reference to Democratic Governor Joel Parker.*

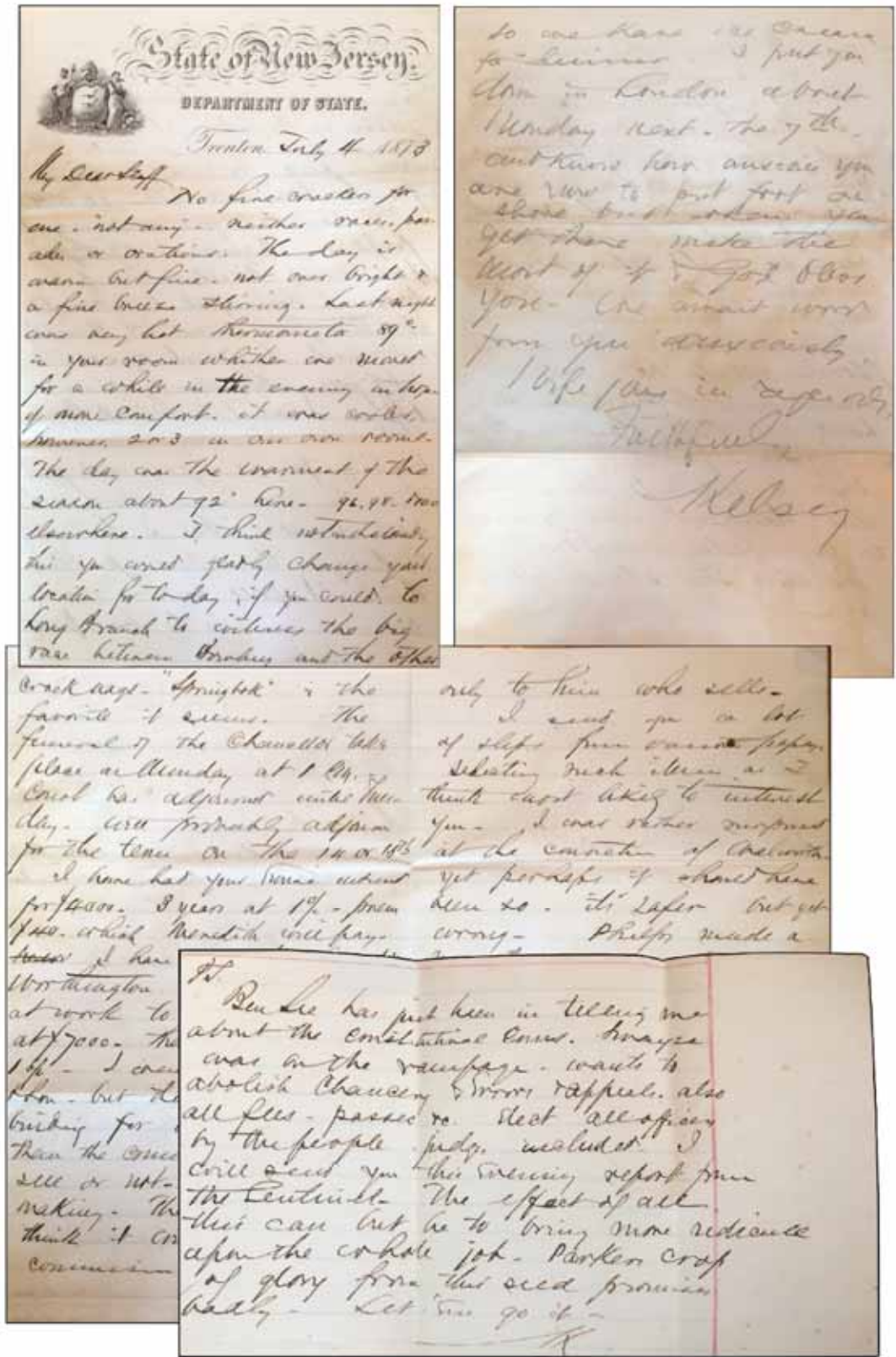


Fig. 8: Showing the actual pages of the letter, including the State seal and Kelsey signature, as well as the postscript.

ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ “Summer meeting at Long Branch,” by: H. Schile 36 Division St., N.Y. [between 1870 and 1873] from the Library of Congress image collection, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/pga.02691/>.
- ² For the full story of this race at the 1873 Jersey Derby, go to NYTimes Archives for July 7, 1873 and July 11, 1873 at Jersey Derby: <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9C07E5D71539EF34BC4F53DFB1668388669FDE> and July 11, 1873 at NYTimes Archives at <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9501E0DB1F3BE532A25752C1A9619C946290D7CF>
- ³ An extensive biography of Abraham Zabriskie as a jurist (as well as his predecessors) at <https://sites.google.com/site/bergencogenweb/home/biographies/zabriskie-abraham-oothout-1>
- ⁴ A Constitutional Commission to consider revisions to the State constitution was formed in 1872 – in lieu of a Constitutional Convention, and 28 amendments were recommended and included in the State constitution as a result, under the approval of the legislature, in 1875. One result was the elimination of the specific local (or special interest) law which gave the Camden and Amboy Railroad sole rights to any railroad lines between New York and Philadelphia, thus opening the door for other companies to begin expansion – including the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western, mentioned earlier in this letter by the writer. See Robert F Williams, *The New Jersey Constitution, A Reference Guide, Westport Ct, 1990* and *The General Railroad Law of the State of New Jersey: approved April 2, 1873* at Hathi Trust at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112078747810;view=1up;seq=1>.
- ⁵ Information on Kelsey can be found at <http://trentonhistory.org/Kelsey.htm> and on the Thomas Edison State College site, https://www.tesu.edu/documents/Campus_with_a_History.pdf.
- ⁶ Marc Mappen, *There's More to New Jersey Than the Sopranos*, Rutgers University Press, 2009 - https://books.google.com/books?id=7IZGnDLuTgC&dq=kelsey+ring+1871&source=gbs_navlinks_s. Cartoon (p. 181).
- ⁷ Photo from FindaGrave website at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/14774912>, picture credit Scott Balyer.