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The Worthington
Historical Society, Inc.
Worthington, Mass. 01098

DESCRIPTIONS

from

an

old

WORTHINGTON

LEDGER

Descriptive Catalogue
by
James Carter
312 Park Street
Boston, Mass.

CLEANINGS FROM AN OLD WORTHINGTON LEDGER

Some time ago I came into possession of an old ledger which had belonged to one by the name of John Watts.

Dating, as it does, as far back as 1808 and covering a period of about forty years, coupled with the fact that it contains many entries of an interesting nature, impelled me with the desire to trace the scene of John's activities. There were indications that he hailed from Worthington, Mass., and being reasonably sure that I would locate him somewhere in that immediate vicinity I recently set out from Hartford with the avowed purpose of having a walking tour all through that section. Even if I had had no definite object in mind, that part of the countryside is more than usually attractive because Worthington is almost 1,500 feet above sea level. There are many vantage points from which superb views are to be had and during the early part of October the hillides are adorned with mantles of exquisite beauty, such as only the Master Designer could create.

When I reached Worthington I made inquiry as to the location of the cemetery and having been directed to what is known as the Center Cemetery I made a hasty survey of some of the more likely stones. I had only been there but a few minutes when I experienced the thrill of standing at the grave of the man for whom I had been searching not so much with a feeling of curiosity as one of reverence. I seemed to get a glimpse of those far off days in the distant past. I pictured John's varied activities and the many occasions when he had traversed the road which leads up past the cemetery to what was once his finely located farm about a hundred rods or so up the hill to the west.

During my brief stay in Worthington I was fortunate in getting excellent accommodation at the Tea House of Mrs. Mrs. Rice and after explaining to her the special mission which had taken me to Worthington I acted on her suggestion that I get in touch with Mr. Clement Burr, a very fine old gentleman, who is descended from one of the first settlers in the place. It was from him that I gathered some interesting information concerning John. He told me where I would find the spot on which John's farm-house once stood, "but", he remarked, "all you will see now will be the ruins of the foundation of the barn and toward the rear you'll come upon his old wall, from which he has drawn many a bucket of water. Then, too, on the opposite side of the road, you'll find the ruins of the very first Church built in Worthington in pre-revolutionary days".

He told me also that the information had been handed down to him by his father that John had operated a saw-mill at the little brook -- actually named Watts Stream -- which parallels what is Worthington's main thoroughfare but time has erased all trace of it now. The only remaining evidence of any former activity there is an old disused track leading from the brook through the woods and I would judge that John used this in going to and from the farm.

It would give the reader a somewhat better background to the picture if, before dealing with the entries in the ledger, I were to give a brief outline of some of the domestic phases of John's life. He was born in 1781, the son of John Watts who served in the Revolutionary War. John was about 22 years old when he married Philura Annable who was then about 17. They had 15 children, of whom four died in infancy. The others were named John, Eliza, Martha, Jane, Mary, Samuel, William, Alonzo, Henry, Osmyn, and Lucy. The very nature of John's contact with so many men of the community established in my mind the conviction that he was a man of excellent qualities and I was pleased to have this confirmed in the biographical history of Hampshire County wherein it refers to him as having been a well-known and highly respected citizen, a whig in politics and a member of the Board of Selectmen. He and his wife and family were also regular attenders of the Congregational Church which stood on the site of the present church. Two of their earliest offspring, Laura and Moses, the one born in 1804 and the other in 1807, died only a few hours after birth and when I stood at their graves I felt as if I were turning back the pages of time and reading the story of parental hopes and disappointments.

My mental picture of John and his wife visualizes them as having been not only greatly devoted to each other but as having also given to their children a valuable heritage in the form of a home founded on christian principles. When their son Samuel passed away at the age of 31, it was characteristic of them that they should react to it in the way they did by having a stone placed at his grave bearing the following inscription:

"Farewell, dear companion, farewell.

Since Jesus has called thee I will not complain.

But look forward with the hope of a Christian sincere

In Heaven to meet thee again."

There are ninety different accounts in the ledger, a study of which discloses the names of many of the most prominent men of Worthington over a century ago. As it must contain all of several thousand entries, I shall necessarily have to confine my remarks to only a limited number. For instance, it contains the following entries charged to the account of Capt. James Kelly:

| | |
|--|--------|
| To two thousand shingles | \$4.00 |
| To sawing 2665 feet of hemlock boards | 6.67 |
| To sawing 738 feet of 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch plank | 3.62 |

Turning to another account under the heading of Capt. John Stone, it shows that John Watts had sold him 620 feet of ash boards for floors for the negligible sum of \$6.20. One day Capt. Stone had occasion to go to Northampton which cannot be far short of twenty miles away. The Captain borrowed one of John's mares for what must have been in those days a very tedious journey over rough and crudely built roads and as compensation for the use of the horse John was eighty cents to the good.

Samuel Cleaveland wanted John to deliver a cord of wood but as there are no available records which would indicate Samuel's place of abode I cannot in a position to determine who got the best of the deal. Judge for yourself when I tell you that John charged Sam's account \$1.13 on this transaction.

Accounts, however, weren't always settled in coin of the realm. Sometimes the debtor, either from choice or necessity, gave his services in return. As an illustration of this, Sam Cleaveland worked one whole day in John's interests breaking flax, in consideration of which Sam's account with John was credited with 75 cents. By way of variety, Sam chopped wood for two days, as a result of which his indebtedness to John was further reduced to the extent of \$1.50.

With certain other debtors, it was pretty much of a trading proposition, a typical example of which is the account which Beta Warner maintained with John. Here are a few of the items charged to Beta:

| | |
|--|--------|
| Half a ton of hay | \$7.50 |
| Killing hogs half a day | .25 |
| Killing a calf | .17 |
| Making 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ barrels of cider | |
| @ 20 cents per barrel | 3.30 |
| Appraising Beta's father's estate | 1.10 |

As an offset to the foregoing the following credits were applied to Beta's account:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 1 day's work of yourself and oxen | 1.50 |
| 3 pigs at one dollar each | 3.00 |
| 4 lbs. of butter | .50 |
| Making one great coat | 17.00 |
| 12 lbs. of flax | 1.45 |

The two next items call for somewhat of an explanation. In the older days the life of the school-teacher bore no comparison to the conditions prevailing today. With the extremely limited facilities at their command, it is remarkable that they were able to accomplish the things they did. The remuneration was pitifully small. The little old time country schoolhouses

must have taxed the health and patience of both teacher and pupils alike but they managed somehow, much to their credit. A perennial problem was the obligation that rested upon each district to find suitable living quarters for the teacher and in many sections it was the custom for the school-teacher to be furnished room and board at each of the pupils' homes, her wages depending as to the number of children in the home she attended school. Considering the size of John's family it isn't surprising that he found it necessary to make arrangements with Mrs. Warner to assume his obligation to the school district and, in consideration thereof, Peter's account is itemized as follows:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| By boarding school mistress 8 weeks | 3 00 |
| By boarding school-teacher 9 days | 1 12 |

Assuming 37 meals for the nine days, it works out at a fraction over 4 cents a meal but just what they consisted of and the manner in which they were served is something which will have to be left to our imagination. It stands to reason, of course, that if a man's earning capacity was around 75 cents a day, the rate for boarding a school-teacher or anyone else would have to assume some such proportions as indicated above. Any a married man would have to provide food, clothing and shelter for his family on an annual income of probably less than \$250. Is it any wonder, therefore, that beef should sell for somewhere between 3 and 5 cents a pound and that butter could be had for 18½ cents a pound? Even at these prices, there would be many families which would have to be satisfied with something less costly at times. They undoubtedly had their problems then, just as we have ours now, and while the people of 1931 might be somewhat envious of the extremely low prices which prevailed in those by-gone days, our forefathers would be none the less surprised if they but knew that their great-great-grandsons were earning more in a day than they did in an entire week. Even the "budget" of its purchasing power, the dollar of 185 years ago would, on the average, be worth at least a part of a \$5.00 bill today.

Now for another glance at the ledger and I find that Gains Pown suggested John or one of his sons to help dig a well. Shortly thereafter John was digging a grave for Gains and the inscription on his grave-stone bears testimony as to how this came about. It reads:

"Blooming in health until the tub it fell
& ended his days within the fatal well."

Dr. David Porter borrowed a horse from Joan. He was going to be riding for several days visiting his patients and the price agreed upon was \$2. This was in the month of March 1815.

Ruth Granger attended the Congregational Church and seemingly was in the habit of using a pew which belonged to John. As evidence of that, the church account contains the following entry:

| | |
|------------------------------|--------|
| To purchase of a pew 2 years | \$1.00 |
|------------------------------|--------|

Lemuel Fuller, on the 10th day of May 1842, bought two ox hides weighing 215 lbs. for which he was charged \$12.90, at the rate of 6 cents a pound.

Sylvanus Persons put in half a day's work at haying and he was richer by 23 cents that night.

John Tinker borrowed a one horse wagon to carry turnips and when it came to settling up he was only 17 cents out of pocket.

Daniel W. Hest found it necessary to go to school some time of the winter 1844 and John carried him over that long stretch of rough road. For the party was of 20 cents.

Heberiah Tinker was obligated to the extent of 31 cents for school-house tax and evidently John liquidated this indebtedness and charged Heberiah's account.

I have selected the following entries as affording an indication of the general trend of the prices of different commodities, subject, of course, to a certain amount of variation as between widely separated periods.

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| 5 bushels of corn | \$5.00 |
| 1 bushel of rye | 1.25 |
| Half a bushel of salt | 1.25 |
| 4½ bushels of oats | 0.85 |
| ½ bushel of turnips | .15 |
| 4 bushels of apples | .90 |
| 2 lbs. of merino wool | 5.00 |
| 1 bushel of wheat | 2.10 |
| 57 lbs. of beef @ 3 cents per lb. | 1.71 |
| 50 lbs. of hickory nut flour | 2.50 |
| 1 Trundle bedstead | 1.50 |
| 2 quarts of flax seed | .40 |
| 1 lb. of tobacco | .50 |
| 1 two year old heifer | 15.00 |
| 21 lbs. of wool @ 40 cents per lb. | 8.40 |
| 10 bushels of potatoes | 1.67 |
| 5 lbs. of sugar | .30 |
| 10 lbs. of butter | 1.30 |
| 12 pumpkins @ 2 cents each | .24 |
| 1000 feet of lath | 1.00 |
| 20 lbs. of ham @ 12 cents per lb. | 2.40 |
| 400 feet of clapboards (year 1845) | 3.00 |
| 30 feet hardwood plank 3½ inch. thick | .50 |
| 2 hogs weighing 108 lbs. @ 7¢ per lb. | 7.56 |
| 1 10½ lb. cheese | .84 |
| 2 lambs @ \$1.00 each | 2.00 |

In addition to his regular farming duties John seems to have been a general handy man. He supplied all kinds of lumber. Of occasion he would mend a hinge, repair a wagon-wheel, saw runners for sleds, grind an axe, hire out his oxen and horses on various miscellaneous enterprises. Sometimes through force of circumstances he would be called upon to dig a grave, a number of entries being recorded along the following lines:

To dig a grave for your child
To dig a grave for the
To dig a grave for the person who led the funeral with me.

The fact that John's farm was located only about five minutes' walk from the cemetery was no doubt a governing factor in his being asked to render such solemn service, if not as a regular thing, at least as an emergency accommodation.

Inevitably, the time would come when John himself would be laid to rest beside the tranquility of that hallowed place, and so it was that he passed away on May 3, 1862 at the age of 71. Philara, his wife, outlived him 17 years, the curtain finally falling on her earthly pilgrimage on August 15, 1869 at the advanced age of 88.

Gradually, all of their numerous offspring joined them and now quietness reigns on what was once the scene of considerable activity. Oliver Goldsmith must have had some such place in mind when he wrote -

"Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o'ertops the mouldering wall."

Well might he have said of this place also:

"How often have I pass'd on every side,
The sheltered cot, the cultivated field,
The never-failing brook, the busy mill,
The decent church that top'd the neighbouring hill,
The hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade,
For talking age and whispering lovers made."

And so I left Worthington with a feeling somewhat akin to regret. My desire to find out something about John and his family had been gratified but my visit was all too short. Its bracing air and its numerous delightful walks keep beckoning me to return. William Cullen Bryant who was born in Cummington, only about five miles from Worthington aptly described those surroundings when he said -

"For wheresoe'er I looked, the while,
Was nature's everlasting smile."