

Daniel W. Douglass: Early Escapades

(Douglass, Mullett, Risley, and other early names in Fredonia)

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Barker Museum Newsletter
Winter 1993*

In the *Fredonia Censor* of June 10, **1868** there appeared a long and solemn obituary for **Daniel W. Douglass** extolling his sober virtues and pointing out that, although he had been buried in **Michigan** where his son **Edward** resided, “if his sepulcher had been here many an old friend would have laid a token on his bier and shed a tear at his tomb”.

Maybe so, and quite proper too. But some of his old friends might also have recounted some of his escapades as they were to do in print some years later. Let us not forget that we had forewarning of this aspect of his personality when, in **1812**, he and **James Mullett** rode the same horse pell-mell to the mouth of the **Canadaway Creek** to help repel the **British**. During the wild and muddy ride, **Douglass** managed to fall off giving **Mullett** the golden opportunity later to point out that in that contest with a great power, **Douglass** obviously was the first to fall.

There are other anecdotes as well, with **Douglass** as the perpetrator. The first account is by **Hanson Risley** who, despite the difference in their ages, was a good friend for many years. “He noticed me as a school boy”, **Risley** wrote, “and seemed to have a liking for me, and sometimes amused and teased me with his dry humor”. For example:

*The Episcopal Church rector used to offer a third service in a Forestville school house before a church building was put up. It was the practice of many in the Fredonia congregation to drive there and join in. One Sunday **Hanson** and his brother **Laurens** borrowed their father’s brand new carriage. It sported a “leather top and silver mountings” and was pulled by a matched pair of horses.*

Of course, they took with them “a load of the village girls”. Unfortunately, the weather was rainy and the road slippery. On their return, they had to cross a log bridge spanning as 8-10 foot ditch. As they turned on to it, the team slipped and down they went, horses, carriage, and girls into the muddy water below. They survived, though wet and bruised. Not so the carriage. Rescued by a nearby family, they made it home to tell their sad tale to what parental reactions we can but imagine.

*Next morning young **Hanson** on his way to school met **Mr. Douglass**.*

*Well, **Hanson**, you met quite an accident yesterday”.*

“Yes.”

*“Ran off the logway by **Holt’s!**”*

“Yes.”

“Didn’t break any limbs or injure the girls much I understand.”

“No.”

“Broke the carriage all to pieces.”

“Yes.”

“Did your father seem to be much disappointed?”

Now, if we only had that anecdote to go by, we might wonder how accurate a picture we were given, but we have corroboration from **Hanson**'s uncle, the venerable **Levi Risley**.

In fact, **Levi Risley**'s reminiscence involves two “Eccentric Characters” as the **Censor** headline in the October 24, **1888** issue called them, **D.W. Douglass** and **Joshua Turner**.

One morning **D.W. Douglass** came riding by the **Risley** store on Main Street and invited young **Levi** to accompany him. Tempted, **Levi** got in but explained that he could not ride too long. The response was “Hold on and I will tell you a story about that old chap,” and he pointed at **Joshua Turner** where, at his saddle and harness factory “**Turner** as usual sat out on the steps taking observations”. The story had to do with **Turner** “and another fellow” who turns out to have been **Douglass** himself.

A good many years ago the neighborhood down below the old burying ground was composed only of the **Rev. Joy Handy**, **Isaac Barnes** and **Oliver Barnes**. In one of these families were domiciled two as nice young ladies as were in town. The other young fellow (**Douglass**) had been introduced to them and one Sunday night went to make them a call. It was summer and short nights, and as with such company time flew fast. It was about three o'clock before the fellow came to his senses. He started out in great speed, and as he got near the foot of the hill by the burying ground he saw in the dark a person he was going to meet, and that person was **Turner** on one of his early walks. **Turner** and [...] [**Douglass**] boarded at **Abell**'s new hotel and sat at the same table.

Something had to be done and quick. [...] [**Douglass**] rolled his hat up in the skirts of his long coat and tucked them up on his back to make it look like a traveler's pack, as it was not uncommon for travelers in those days to carry things in that way, and grabbing up a stick for a cane he brushed his hair over his face and in a limping gait he veered to one side of the road and passed by congratulating himself that **Turner** had not cracked the nut, as nothing was said. Breakfast came at the hotel and **Turner** showed no disposition to scorch him. He then felt sure of his safety and congratulated himself again that he had cheated **Turner** – the old rat.

About ten years after that [...] [**Douglass**] lived up on the [West] hill and he had a lot of steers that he had in pasture on the **Barber** and **Hilton** place, and he went up one morning before daylight to see if none of them had escaped. As he came into the road to return he saw a man coming. The man [**Turner**] halted and tucked his coat tails up his back and grabbed up a stick for a cane and then passed [...] [**Douglass**] on the other side of the road as near the fence as he could walk and that was the last of the farce.

An anonymous writer in the **Censor** of December 7, **1870** adds to the legend of the humorous **Mr. Douglass**.

D.W. Douglass, noted for his dry humor and for taking everything easy, was one of our earliest and long continuing merchants. He sold goods a longer time in Fredonia than any other merchant [...] J.B. Catlin had opened a store in a small building [...] Now it happened that on Mr. Catlin's second visit to New York, he occupied the same room at a public house with Mr. Douglass, who, being an old merchant, was not easily scared by debts. In the night, being awakened by the groaning and apparent restlessness of his room mate, Mr. D. inquired what was the matter? "Oh," says Mr. C., "I have got to see them to-morrow; I can't pay them up, and it troubles me dreadfully". And now comes opportunely the truly philosophical advice. Says Mr. D. in his usually good humored manner, "Why, Catlin, go to sleep! Go to sleep! Let your creditors lie awake!

Neither **Douglass** or **Turner** was the only local wag. There was one, unnamed, who played a most un-Christian trick on an early Episcopal parson. The **Rev. C.W. Low**, a florid, rotund, somewhat pompous fellow, nevertheless "was as guileless and credulous as a child" according to **Franklin Burritt**. **Low** was extremely fond of the best cuisine, keeping cows and hens to minister to his pleasures.

One of the Village scoundrels took the opportunity to explain to the parson that "Epsom salts given to hens would stimulate marvelous production. It fell to my lot, as a clerk in my father's store, to supply the parson with the medicament". Apparently the **Rev. Low** was quite unacquainted with the laxative qualities of Epsom salts. "When the result of the experiment was patent," some kind soul, in pretended innocence, asked **Low** for his assessment of the results. The response in its entirety was "P-R-O-D-I-G-I-O-U-S."