

Orpha Turner

By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

Buried in the “Family Histories” files of the **Barker** Historical Museum is a typewritten copy of an original handwritten autobiographical sketch. It is unsigned, but the exuberant piece by a young woman just turned 21 on 9 February 1854 has a note on it: “Found in Family History file under **Taylor**,” which is not a lot of help since the young woman’s name was **Turner**, not **Taylor**. Orpha **Turner**. Once that identification was made, it was obvious that this is the young woman referred to by Elizabeth **Cowden Rink** in her article entitled, “The **Turners** in Chautauqua County” from *The Chautauqua Genealogist* Vol.15, No.2 (May 1992). In fact the early portion of the article summarizes much of what Orpha had originally written for her 21st birthday. Orpha’s sketch is so charming and so filled with local details that it should be available for anyone interested in our Pomfret predecessors.

[Some few typographical errors have been silently corrected.]

*Feb. 9th. Heigho! My 21st birthday!¹ Yes another year has gone to that bourne from whence no lost moments can return, yes and 20 have proceeded this since I first began an existence and how have they profited me? Much of it I remember with remorse as having been misspent alas too much, but how can we better make amend for lost time than by improving to the best of our ability what remains with — How well I remember 17 years ago today — We had just got comfortably settled in our Spring Creek² home which was a little log house with only one room surrounded by stately pines and hemlock so near that we feared their falling on the house in times of heavy wind. And one mile and a half to our nearest neighbor, on one side and two on the other and all the way through a dense forest. There all the childhood associations that I can remember were formed or most of them. I remember of being sent to John **Evers** to attend school when quite young and Oh I remember how sadly those few weeks past, my home was humble but I loved it and many were the tears I shed at that short separation. After that I went to school from home always attended by little George who led me by the hand so tenderly that my heart still yearns toward those days and I had one friend³ in those days that I still remember with much love, with her how oft have I wandered through the dark forest and beside the well remembered Spring Creek, she was a participator in all my childish joys and sorrows and I in hers. But we are separated now, she is doomed to new cares and interests as Mrs. Mary **Donaldson** In the year 1842, March 30th, father and mother took me to George **White**’s, a cousin of mothers that lived in Lodi, now Gowanda, to go to school. He was wealthy kept public house and 15 months was spent there much to my advantage. There again I had two warm hearted little friends, Mary **Locks** and Hepsabah **Tucker** and I remember many of the hours spent there with pleasure. I first attended a female school taught by Mrs. **Fisk** and Mrs. **Bradish** from there I went to a select school by Mrs. **House** next Mr. **Bacon**. I then returned home and staid I think a year during which I went from home one term to Albert **Eldred**. Father had a pair of steers that he wanted broke and the boys liked the fun so Augustus use to drive us to school with them. I enjoyed that winter well. The next year H.⁴ and I went to Ringsville, Ashtabula Co. O. She to work at her trade and I to attend school and I remember my stay there as the happiest part of my school girl days. The school was a very flourishing one, Mr. **Graves**, Mr. **Marks** and Mr. **Spencer** were the teachers. There too I had many warm friends among whom were Cornelia **Williams**, Lucy **Pratt**, Angeline **Ring** and Harriet **Davis**. While there I had the reputation of writing excellent*

compositions more on account of the fun they contained than anything else. Oh that I could redeem the precious moments that were spent there in inventing mischief. But Oh those were happy moments such as did my very soul good and I guess more than I remember them. I also spent 15 months in K. George was with me there and I can see but few dark spots in that time I think none excepting two fits of sickness of a few weeks duration also Hannah being ill a short time. Oh yes I can not forget the pains we felt on receiving a letter from home bearing the sad news of Geo. being very ill with the small pox or varzoloïd.⁵ Poor mother she endured a great deal there in the woods alone! After our return from K. I went to a school of 18 or 20 scholars in the same old school house where I had so often received instruction. It seemed strange that the scholars who had been to school with me so long should stand at all in fear of me, still a little girl with short dresses, high apron and hair curled in my neck; but I only went in for a short time as they had three months school already and I succeeded tolerably well. The ensuing summer I taught near Columbus in what was called the Win district, 15 scholars and 1 dollar per week, boarded around and had some times long to be remembered especially while I boarded at **Minnegars**. They had six cats and about twice as many dogs. Cooked by a fire place and the dogs and cats invariably regaled themselves from the same dish before the family. The geese always came into my room and awoke me in the morning and oh much more that I have not room to write here. Had the measles which laid me aside for four weeks and I heartily wished it could have been as much longer or at least long enough to keep me from going into that school again and I cared not how sick; but this was not to be and I was doomed to drag out three months which passed as drearily as any that I remember. The next winter Mr. **McGlachan** made a kind offer to take me home with him and attend school three months free gratis but the winter was far enough from being one of enjoyment. The ensuing summer I commenced a school in Concord and taught about six weeks when our folks moved to this place and I could not make up my mind to stay after they left. I well remember our moving, it was some time near the first of July, 1848. Father and I started about sundown (and that was the last look I gave to my old home till last winter) with a load, I walked most of the way to Samples and the roads being so rough our progress was slow, it was dark and muddy and I had to walk nimbly to keep up with the wagon and was all besmeared with mud by the time we reached Columbus. We spent the night there and proceeded on our journey the next day, arrived at Westfield about dark and spent the night. Arrived at this place the next day and I must say I was somewhat disappointed, the house⁶ a little old white washed thing with only two rooms but we have since built a comfortable house and we know how to appreciate it the better. The next fall after I came here I attended school at Fredonia⁷ half a term, walked from home and I think I went another half term in the winter, the next summer I taught one mile east of Fredonia, 14 shillings per week, 30 scholars and good satisfaction. The ensuing winter half a term at the academy again which was the last of my school days, S. and I had a room and boarded ourselves and enjoyed it first rate only one remarkable thing transpired during the time and I can not suppress a smile as I think of the manner that I performed. Oren⁸ was living in Fredonia and he being gone, Martha⁹ wished S.¹⁰ and I to stay with her, we had sat up that night very late attending to our studies that night and had only been in bed a short time when we heard a great noise but it being the usual time for serenaders it did not create sufficient alarm to thoroughly awaken us although we were partly conscious; but soon we saw the flames bursting furiously from the adjoining building¹¹ and with no thought save our own safety we leaped from our own beds I only putting on nothing save my stockings and a skirt keeping on my night clothes the while and I do not know how I came by it but an old shawl about my shoulders we ran down stairs and up street rail road speed. The

ground was frozen like a rock, my stockings rolled down around my ankles and nothing but a night cap on my head and my hair braided up (so as to wave the next day) in to little horns each side of my face, I do not wonder that Olive **Hamilton**¹² thought me crazy. Mart saved mostly all her furniture and oh how comical she looked with the old leghorn bonnet stuck on two hairs holding Samalia on one side and I on the other as firmly as though we were her prisoners ploughing her way through the crowd and I might say through the fire for she made me go so near that I burnt me. The **Woleben** block and three or four dwelling houses and a nice cabinet, and I think carriage shop was burned. Shall I ever forget that night! S. and I went to school no longer. The next summer we taught in Laona, 14 shillings per week, between 30 and 60 scholars for me and nearly the same in her school, bad success, hard scholars and discouragement. Taught three months and here Sept 1, 1850, my first journal was commenced.

This is a brief outline of my education and teaching from my fourth birthday which is as vivid to my mind as most that have succeeded it. Oh how my little heart leaped for joy that morning as I stood in that "old armed chair" splint bottomed and ancient, singing to the top of my voice, "I'm four years old today!" But alas my joy as it has so often been since was changed by a trifling circumstance. Our folks were eating breakfast and I asked for a piece of bread and butter, because I was waiting, father handed me a piece of bread but instead of butter, covered it with potato peelings, my dignity was insulted and I could only find relief in a hearty bawling spell.

Oh what a delightful eve this is, light fleecy clouds with now and then a bright jewel sparkling upon its bosom and the crescent moon riding in grandeur on the blue expanse and shedding its solemn silvery radiance on this earth makes the evening one of surpassing loveliness, and what makes it the more pleasant to me, my dear brother G.¹³ and friend S. are with me. Take it all together, this has been what kind of birthday! Ah some as happy moments as I ever experienced I have seen today, and some have been dark and gloomy

1. Orpha **Turner** was born on 9 February 1834.
2. 9 February 1837. There was an early **Evers** family in Spring Creek.
3. This was probably Mary Amanda **Deming**, born 3 December 1831. She married Daniel **Donaldson** of Spring Creek village.
4. Probably her older sister Hannah.
5. Varioloid, a milder form of smallpox.
6. M. **Turner's** house is shown on the 1854 map of Chautauqua County on the south side of today's Webster Street between Seymour Street and Chautauqua Road.
7. Orpha Elizabeth **Turner** was at the Fredonia Academy for three terms in 1848-1850 beginning when she was 16.
8. Oren may be her brother Orren.
9. Martha/Mart: unidentified.
10. "S." is apparently Samaria (misspelled Samalia) **Bartholomew** who attended the Academy with Orpha in 1848-50. The **Bartholomew** and **Turner** families lived next door to each other on Webster Street.
11. An arsonist set a building afire just west of the Main Street bridge on the north side of the street on the night of 27 February 1850. The fire spread, destroying five buildings there.

At the same time the old **Woleben** Block (45-53 West Main Street) was set on fire and completely destroyed. Orpha **Turner's** account reads as though she and Samaria were rooming next to the **Woleben** Block, either in the small house just behind it on today's Forest Place or in the house next east of the **Woleben** Block owned by Joshua **Turner**.

12. Olive A. **Hamilton**, who attended the Academy for four terms in 1849-1852.

13. "G." is probably her brother George.