

History of Ashland County, Ohio
By George William Hill, 1880.

JOHN CHAPMAN.

[The oddest character in all our history was John Chapman, *alias* Applesced, who was discovered in Knox county as early as 1801. A. B. NORTON.]

John Chapman, sometimes called "Johnny Applesced," because of a penchant for planting apple seeds, and the cultivation of nurseries, was born in Massachusetts, as is believed, in the year 1770. Nothing is known of his ancestry, except that they were genuine Yankees, poor, enterprising, and restless. His name was not "Jonathan," as it is generally printed in pioneer sketches, but plain John Chapman; hence, he is generally called, among the early settlers of this region, "Johnny Applesced."* It is remarkable he never communicated his

* This fact is gathered from a letter addressed to the Fort Wayne *Sentinel*, by Hon. J. W. Dawson, author of a history of Allen county, Indiana, dated October 11, 1871. He found "John Chapman" to be his true name, in looking over the papers of his estate, which was settled in the probate court of Allen county. For instance, two notes were filed against his estate, one dated at Franklin, supposed to be on the Great Miami river, in Ohio, February, 1804, payable to Nathaniel Chapman, one year after date, for one hundred dollars—"in apple trees or land;" the other, one hundred dollars, payable to some minor children named Ruddle, of the commonwealth of Massachusetts, when they became of age, both of which were signed by John Chapman. A better evidence of his name was found in the purchases of land, which

real history to his most intimate friends, and was equally reticent concerning his youth and school days. We have only a glimmer of his early instruction, and even there, but a single ray of light bursts through the clouds that hover over and about his boyhood. All agree that he was a good reader—eloquent at times—and that in conversation, when discoursing upon fine fruit, and the spiritual theories of his beloved Swedenborg, his dark eyes would flash with peculiar intelligence, while he discussed his favorite topics. It was clear to all that his education had not been neglected, for he possessed a fair fund of information upon many subjects not connected with his fruit enterprises.

The time when, and the reason why, he bade adieu to the sterile hills of New England, were never communicated to any one, so far as we have been able to learn. Whether the acceptance of the life of a recluse sprang from disappointment in a love affair, or was voluntary and a matter of choice, will never be known. As early as 1796-7, he was seen in the autumns, for two or three successive years, along the banks of the Potomac, in eastern Virginia, visiting the cider mills where the farmers were pressing cider, picking the seeds from the pumice. When he had collected a sufficient quantity of seeds for his purpose, they were carefully packed in linen or leather sacks, and carried on his shoulders or by an old horse procured for that purpose, across the mountains, to the territories west of the Ohio river. He generally had with him an axe, a hatchet, and a Virginia hoe, with which he cleared and dug in loamy or rich soil, along the banks of a stream, a few rods of ground, around which he erected a brush fence, and then planted his apple seeds. His first nurseries were planted, as near as we can learn, along the Tuscarawas, the Muskingum, the Licking, and Walhonding and its branches, Vernon river, the Lake fork, and the Jerome and Black forks. He probably passed up the Licking two or three years before he ascended the Walhonding, which took place about the year 1800. When the Butlers ascended Vernon river to the present site of Mt. Vernon in 1801, they found the eccentric John Chapman at the cabin of the wild, rollicking pioneer, Andrew Craig. He planted a number of nurseries along the banks of the Walhonding, and several along the Vernon river as high up as Mt. Vernon. These nurseries were placed at eligible points in the region of good farm land; and when the pioneers began to pour in, young fruit trees in abundance awaited their arrival.

It is not well ascertained when Johnny Chapman commenced planting seeds within the present limits of Ashland county, but from the fact that most of the territory

he made in Allen county, as well as in Adams and Jay counties, Indiana. The muniments of title, which he held, were in the name of John Chapman. He had a sister in Adams or Jay county, married to a man by the name of Broom, who was probably living at his death. This estate of Johnny was in litigation about ten years. So he did not die as poor as most people suspected.

This sister of Johnny, alluded to by Hon. J. W. Dawson, was Pertis, her husband's name was William Broom. They at one time resided on the farm now owned by William Cowan, in Green township, a mile north of Perrysville, on the road to Ashland. Broom had the care of one or two nurseries (owned by Johnny), in Green township,

along the Black fork belonged to Knox until 1813, we incline to the opinion he may have passed up the Black fork as early as 1808-9, for he had a very fine nursery one and a half miles west of Mifflin as early as 1811-12, and had, in 1809, obtained a small piece of ground for a nursery from Alexander Finley, near the present site of Tylertown, in Mohican township. Here he was ready with his choice apple-trees as soon as the woodman's axe began to echo through the forest. Besides the nurseries at Finley's and west of Mifflin, he planted one on the farm subsequently owned by the late John Oliver, in Green township, and a fine one on the bottom, near the present site of Leidigh's mill in Orange township, and sundry smaller ones in the east and west parts of the county, along the small streams, where the early settlers procured trees for a trifle. Ever restless, Johnny kept moving from point to point. His nurseries were not neglected, for he frequently returned and pruned them so as to make the trees symmetrical. His nurseries were scattered along the streams for hundreds of miles, and he consumed many months during the year traveling from place to place. Sometimes he would be gone several months, and then suddenly appear among the pioneers, all tattered and bruised by the briars and brambles, ready to give them fresh news right from Heaven. His usual charge for young trees was a "fip-penny-bit" apiece. As money was extremely scarce, Johnny was very accommodating; and if the pioneer could not pay the money he would sell in exchange for old clothing, and if he could not get such articles he would kindly close the contract, in a business way, by taking a note payable at some future period, and if he ever got his pay he was very much gratified, and if he never got it he seemed equally content and happy.

In the year 1811 he extended his operations into Richland county, planting several nurseries there, and probably one or two within the present limits of Crawford county. During the war of 1812-15, he often visited Mansfield, Mt. Vernon, Clinton, and the settlements along the forks of the Mohican and the Walhonding. When these sparsely settled regions were threatened by Indian invasion, he hastened from cabin to cabin notifying the pioneers of approaching danger, and conjured them to flee for their lives to the block-houses and places of safety. He was well known among the Indian tribes; and from his harmless demeanor, was regarded as a "great medicine man," and never incurred the hate and suspicion of the warriors. Thus, he was enabled to glide through the forests from settlement to settlement on errands of mercy, in entire safety. From Richland county, after the close of the war, he passed through Crawford to Upper Sandusky, and as early as 1825 into the present limits of Defiance county, and along the Maumee. In 1826 he visited John H. James, a leading lawyer at Urbana, concerning a nursery that he had planted sometime prior to that year, in Champaign county, and which had passed into the hands of a third party, owing to the neglect of the man from whom he had permission to plant it, to reserve the interest of Chapman. He doubtless had planted nurseries in Delaware county prior to 1826. From 1815



JOHNNY APPLESEED.

to 1843, when he made his last visit, he often returned to Ashland county, at which times he usually passed down the Black fork, among the Copuses, the Irwins, the Coulters, the Tannchills, the Rices, the Olivers, and the Priests. From thence, he passed over to Finley's; then up the Jerome fork, among the settlers along that stream, until he reached Jacob Young, Patrick Murray, and the Fast and Masons, at his nursery, near Leidigh's mill—rarely stopping in the villages—though occasionally he called in Miffin, at the Thomas hotel—in Ashland, at Slocum's; and in Mansfield, at Wiler's. When he did so, he always slept on the floor of the bar-room.

The precise period when he ascended the Maumee and entered the territory of Indiana is left in doubt. It is probable he had reached Fort Wayne as early as 1826; for in 1830 he was seen on the Maumee seated in a section of a hollow tree, which he improvised for a boat, laden with apple-seeds, and which he landed at Wayne's fort. Thus, as the pioneers infringed upon the location of his nurseries, he passed on, and continued to plant seeds in advance of the settlements, until death, that waits for no one, called the old man from his toil.

When interrogated on the subject of grafting, he would dilate on the evils of such a custom with as much earnestness as most surgeons would the operation of separating an arm or a limb from a human being, insisting that the true way to obtain good fruit was to let it grow upon ungrafted trees, because the native growth produced the finest fruit. How often he visited the cider mills in the east is not known; but the practice must have been kept up to a late period in his life, for he visited the pioneers of Green township as late as 1843, looking very much as he did a quarter of a century before. The old man generally traveled alone, and rarely had lodgers at his primitive camp-fires. We hear an occasional instance of parties, desiring to purchase trees, tarrying all night at his solitary hut.

It is a matter of surprise to many how he survived so long, while roaming through the forests, without defensive weapons, illy clothed and half famished for healthful food during the inclement seasons of the year. He always refrained from taking the life of animals—never, if possible, even disturbing their lairs or haunts. So, he never procured sustenance in that way. His food was generally meagre, and consisted of berries, nuts, vegetables, and a little corn-bread or mush made from meal given him in exchange for trees, or as a matter of charity. He carried with him a few cooking utensils—a tin pan, which served the double purpose of a hat and a mush-pot, when he had no other head-gear. He would rarely eat at a table with families—and never until he felt sure there would be enough left to satisfy the hunger of the children, always manifesting a great affection for young people, especially little girls, for whom he always had some little keep-sake, consisting of a piece of ribbon or calico. This peculiarity throws a faint explanation over his monomania for the life of a hermit. The shadow of some bright little lady of New England still clung to the heart of this strange man.

When he remained any length of time about a nursery

he erected a pole hut, over which he placed a bark roof after the manner of the Indians. He then gathered leaves and made a very comfortable bed upon which he slept, while the wolves and other wild animals gave him a sort of rude welcome to their precincts by assembling in the vicinity of his slumbers and giving him nightly serenades. He often slept on the ground in the midst of the forest near a small fire, erected to cook his scanty meal and protect him from freezing, if the weather was cold. At other times he reposed upon the leaves beside a log, with his pan and other traps by his side, and seemed to be the object of special interest and regard of both wild animals and savages, for he always escaped injury from both. In his tenderness for every sentient creature he was a greater humanitarian—or if you please, "animal-tarian," than even the famous Bergh, of New York city; for it is related that more than once he suffered the chill night air and winds of autumn rather than singe the wings of the mosquito by his camp-fire. In this respect the affection he possessed for the brute creation seems to have been fully reciprocated, for the fiercest animals and Johnny Chapman seemed to have had a truce. He avoided them and they avoided him.

His dress was a marvel of scraps and tatters. It consisted, invariably, of cast off, badly worn garments, given him by the pioneers in exchange for young apple-trees. He always seemed thankful for such small favors, and by the aid of such articles—ill-fitting, patched and shabby—he protected himself against the wintry blasts. Upon his head he generally wore a crownless hat, much dinged and limbered with rough usage, which he often ran his hand through and carried on his arm. Sometimes he turned his tin pan over his crownless hat, in the top of which rested a testament and a well-worn volume of Swedenborg, which he declared was an infallible protection against snakes, wild animals, Indians, and all other evils. At other times he wore a pasteboard hat, with an enormous rim, which he conceived protected his face from the scorching rays of the sun.

His feet were generally covered, in the winter season, with old shoes, or one shoe and a boot: sometimes one foot was bare, undergoing, in most rigorous weather, a sort of penance for some imaginary violation of Johnny's religious whims. At other times, he wrapped his feet in old rags or bark, and tied on a sort of wooden sandal, which protected the bottoms of his feet against thorns and rough stones. Sometimes he was seen slowly advancing through the snow, with one foot entirely naked, breaking the crust with the other, on which he wore an old boot or brogan, which he had picked up at some cabin. Being asked why he favored one foot more than the other, he replied that the one with the boot on had once been bitten by a rattlesnake, and had suffered more than the other, and deserved to be favored.

While clothed in such habiliments he presented a most ludicrous appearance, and it was hard to repress a smile on meeting him; yet such was the regard of the pioneers for this strange old man, that even the children of the cabins greeted him respectfully when he entered and craved the privilege of lying upon the floor a short

time to give them fresh news, right from Heaven. "Almost the first thing he would do when he entered a house, was to lie down on the floor, with his knapsack for a pillow, and his head toward the light of a door or window, when he would carefully take out his old worn books, the exponents of the beautiful religion that Johnny so zealously lived out. We can hear him read just now, as he did that summer day, when we were busy quilting up-stairs, and he lay near the door, his voice rising and thrilling, strong and loud, as the roar of the waves and winds, then soft and soothing as the balmy airs that stirred and quivered the morning glory leaves about his gray head." *

His charitable impulses were such, that when he met a poor emigrant going west, shoeless and penniless, he would part with his last shoe and penny to help the stranger and his family on their way. Rude and uncouth as to appearance, he was not without sensibility and modesty; and often excused himself from entering the cabins of the settlers, "because his clothing was not fit." In conversation, he was attentive, polite and chaste in all kinds of company. He was a small man, rather bony and sinewy, about five feet nine inches high, with dark eyes, thin beard, and dark hair, which he generally wore long. Sometimes he could be induced to clip his beard, which rather improved his appearance, for his face was more round than bony, and was rather pleasant in expression, when he engaged in conversation.

His religious sentiments were as remarkable as his other traits. He was a devout and ardent disciple of the great Swedish seer, Emanuel Swedenborg; and always carried portions of his works. Whenever an opportunity presented, he entered upon the discussion of the peculiar doctrines of Swedenborg, upon which he expatiated with great warmth and eloquence. Sometimes he carried a volume of Swedenborg beneath his waistband, from which he distributed fragments whenever he could get a reader, until a volume had disappeared. His ideas upon marriage were as eccentric as upon other topics. He excused himself from entering that state on the ground that he had a vision, in which two angelic ladies visited him to encourage his single blessedness, by the assurance that if he held out in this world, he would secure two wives in the world to come! While relating this circumstance, a wag took the liberty of interrogating Johnny as to the occupation of people in the other world. Johnny seemed to think people would recognize the marriage state there, and pursue much the same occupations they did here. The wag said:

"So you think men will follow the same occupations in Heaven?"

Johnny—"I really do."

Wag—"Do people die in Heaven?"

Johnny—"I think not."

Wag—"Then my occupation is gone; for I am a grave-digger!"

Johnny seemed somewhat quizzed by this argument,

* Recollections of Johnny Applesed by Rosella Rice, contributed to Knapp's History, page 32.

but still consoled himself on the idea of having two wives in the spiritual land of Swedenborg. His theological tenets taught him it was wrong to deprive any creature of life; and he carried this doctrine so far as to refuse even to kill a rattlesnake, after it had bitten him. His kindness to horses was such, that when he found an old or worn down animal turned out to die, by pioneers; he would always conduct it where it could get food, or hire some one to feed it. From some intimations dropped by him at Mansfield, and other points, it is believed that he was regularly ordained by the disciples of Swedenborg, and sent west as a missionary. Some expressions of his when Rev. Adam Paine, a sort of Lorenzo Dow, was once preaching on the public square in Mansfield, confirm this impression. In winding up an eccentric discourse on the sin of pride, Paine called out: "Where now is your barefooted pilgrim on his way to Heaven?" Johnny, holding up his bare peddals, exclaimed: "Here he is." A repetition of all the anecdotes concerning this strange wanderer would fill a volume. He was just as happy in the solitudes of the forest, communing with the author of all, as he lay gazing at the stars, where he could almost see the Angels, as in the midst of his nurseries or among the pioneers.

How, and where did he die? He died at the house of William Worth, in St. Joseph township, Allen county, Indiana, March 11, 1845. Some days prior to his decease, information was conveyed to Johnny, who was some fifteen miles distant from Mr. Worth's, near where he had a nursery, that some cattle had broken into it; and he immediately started. When he arrived he was very much fatigued, having exhausted his strength in the journey, which being performed without intermission, and on foot, was too great a task for the poor old man. He laid down that night never to rise again; for he was attacked with pneumonia, which baffled medical skill, and in a few days he passed into the spirit land. Mr. Fletter, a neighbor of Mr. Worth, who laid out the body of Johnny, states, he had on when he died, next to his body, a coarse coffee-sack, with a hole cut in the centre, through which he passed his head. He had on the waists of four pairs of pants. These were cut off at the forks, ripped up at the sides, and the front thrown away, saving the waist-band attached to the hinder part. These hinder parts were buttoned around him, lapping like shingles, so as to cover the whole lower part of his body; and over all these were drawn a pair of what was once pantaloons. In this garb he died as he had lived*.

He was buried in David Archer's graveyard, two and one half miles north of Ft. Wayne, near the foot of a natural mound, and a stone set up to mark the place where he sleeps. He remained a firm believer in the doctrines of Swedenborg. His calm and resigned manner attracted the attention of his physician, who enquired about his religious tenets, asserting that he never saw a patient so resigned†. Johnny Chapman was a

*Hon. J. W. Dawson's letter to the Fort Wayne *Sentinel*, 1871.

†Letter of Richard Worth to the *Shield and Banner*, of Mansfield, describing the last hours of Johnny Applesed. William Worth, at whose house he died, has been dead several years.

good man. He possessed many virtues. He was honest—upright, and harmless. He seems to have been specially fitted by Providence to prepare the wilderness for the reception of emigration and civilization.

The lovers of choice fruit in Ohio and Indiana owe him a monument to be erected over his remains, as a token of their high regard for the cheerful sacrifices he made, to contribute to the comfort and happiness of those seeking homes in the western wilds.

APPLESEED JOHN.

Old Johnny was bent well-nigh double
With years of toil and care and trouble,
But his large old heart oft felt the need
Of doing for others some kindly deed.

"But what can I do?" old Johnny said;
"I, who work so hard for daily bread?
It takes heaps of money to do so much good,
I am far too poor to do as I would."

The old man sat thinking deeply a while,
Then over his features gleamed a smile;
While he clapped his hands with a childish glee,
And said to himself: "There's a way for me!"

So he went to work with might and main,
But told to none the plan in his brain.
He took stale apples in payment for chores,
And carefully cut from them all the cores.

When he filled his bag, he wandered away,
And no man saw him for many a day.
With the well-stuffed bag o'er his shoulder flung,
He marched along and whistled or sung.

He seemed to roam with no object in view,
Like one who has nothing on earth to do;
But, rambling thus o'er prairies wide,
He paused sometimes and his bag untied.

His sharp-pointed cane deep holes would bore,
And in every hole he placed a core;
He covered them well, and left them there,
In keeping with sunshine, rain, and air.

Sometimes for days he waded through grass,
And saw never a living creature pass;
Though oft, when sinking to sleep in the dark,
He heard owls hoot and prairie dogs bark.

But sometimes butterflies perched on his thumbs,
And birds swarmed round him to pick up his crumbs.
They knew he carried no arrow or gun,
And never did mischief to any one:

For he was tender to all dumb things
That crept on the earth or soared on wings;
He stepped aside lest a worm should die,
And never had heart to hurt a fly.

Sometimes an Indian, of sturdy limb,
Came striding along and walked with him.
Whichever had food, shared with the other,
As if he had met a hungry brother.

When the Indian saw how the bag was filled,
And noticed the holes that the white man drilled,
He thought to himself 'twas a silly plan
To be planting seed for some future man.

Sometimes a log-cabin came in view,
Where John was sure to find jobs to do,
By which he gained stores of bread and meat,
And welcome rest for his weary feet.

He killed potatoes and lood the corn,
And mended shoes that were somewhat worn;
He taught the babies to use their legs,
And helped the boys to hunt for eggs.

He was so hearty at work or play
That every one urged a longer stay;
But he replied: "I have something to do,
And I must go on to carry it through."

The boys, who were sure to follow him round,
Soon found what it was he put in the ground;
So, as time passed, and he traveled on,
All the folks called him "Apple-seed John."

When he used up the whole of his store,
He went to cities and worked for more;
Then off he marched to the wilds again,
And planted seeds in prairie and glen.

In cities some said the man was crazy,
Others said, No; he was only lazy.
But he took no notice of jibes and jeers;
He knew he was working for future years.

He knew that trees would soon abound
Where once a tree could never be found;
That a flickering play of light and shade
Would make dancing shadows on the glade.

That blossoming boughs would form fall bowers,
And sprinkle the earth with rosy showers;
And the little seeds his hands had spread
Would form ripe apples when he was dead.

So he kept on traveling, far and wide,
Till his old limbs failed him and he died.
He said, at last: "'Tis a comfort to feel
I've done good in the world, though not a great deal."

Weary travelers, journeying West,
In the shade of his trees find pleasant rest;
And often they start with glad surprise
At the rosy fruit that around them lies.

And if they inquire whence came such trees,
Where not a bough once swayed in the breeze,
The reply still comes, as they travel on,
"These trees were planted by Appleseed John."

—LYDIA MARIA CHILD.