

An Adventurous Man: John Marshall Newton

Librarians often get a bad rap—an exception, of course, being our own Dale Flick. Like many other professions, and I won't mention lawyers at this point, librarians have been the subject of stereotyping, particularly by Hollywood: the shapeless, mousy female with her hair in a bun, fussily admonishing patrons to be quiet; or the pallid, hollow-chested man peering owlshly through his spectacles.

However, these stereotypes were not without some merit in the mid-nineteenth century, which makes the subject of this paper all the more interesting.

Few here this evening will recognize the name of John Marshall Newton, although users of the Mercantile Library have had ample opportunity to note the name, for adjacent to the director's office is a tarnished bronze memorial plaque presented in his memory by the library's board of directors.

Newton, a Vermont native, was the youngest of six children born to the Reverend Ephraim Newton and Huldah Chipman Newton. In 1833, when John was six, the family moved to Cambridge, New York, close by the Massachusetts border. Here, he played marbles, flew kites, learned archery from some transient Indians, and spent hours fishing and hunting. Above all he enjoyed reading. Hume's *Essays*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Law*, and Archbishop Tillotson's *Sermons* were childhood companions, along with *Robinson Crusoe* and novels by Frederick Marryat. However, given his parents' religious scruples, Lord Byron had to be read "by stealth."

Expected to follow in his father's footsteps, John entered Williams College. Years later, he confessed to "not having many pleasant recollections" of the school. He "never understood anything of algebra," hated natural science, and labeled the history being taught as "puerile nonsense." Yet he enjoyed reading history, having read Gibbon three times by age 16, and was shocked all the more by his professors' blunders. Two years at Williams was enough. Now twenty years old, he left his

disappointed parents to visit his favorite older brother Chipman, who owned a farm near Delphos, in northwestern Ohio.

Newton traveled by canal boat to Buffalo, paying a dollar for the two-week trip, and then on to Cleveland and Toledo by lake steamer, where he arrived with 95 cents in his pocket, having unwisely splurged on tumblers of milk punch during the voyage. At Toledo he talked his way into free passage down the newly-opened Miami & Erie Canal to Delphos. For two years he helped work the farm. He and Chipman also opened a general store, but they did poorly in the cash-starved region. Money was always to remain something of a stranger to John Newton. In 1850 he caught gold fever. California beckoned! A canal boat soon deposited him in Cincinnati where he took passage on *The Belle of the West*. And then his real adventures began.

First night out, the boat caught fire. Newton, sleeping uncomfortably on the deck, grabbed his rifle, coat and trunk and swam to shore before turning back to assist others, including, by his own dramatic account, a very attractive, dark-eyed young lady. Two days later he was back in the Queen City where he met a man who invited him to join his traveling party in Independence, Missouri, the jumping off point for California. The wagon train proved to be made up mostly of Pennsylvania Germans whom he found to be “good-natured enough, but excessively stupid.” This was not the last ethnic slur recorded in his memoirs. Eventually given a choice of driving a team of oxen or cooking, he wisely chose the latter.

As the wagon train headed across the prairie, averaging about 11 miles a day, Newton marveled at the numerous other wagons they encountered. “Like the moving of a mighty nation,” he wrote. Dangers on the trip abounded. They experienced fierce thunderstorms, a buffalo stampede, occasional Indian sightings, and eventually hunger as provisions ran low. Tempers flared and, he recalled, “Southerners were the worst.”

The Rocky Mountains proved formidable as promised, with the great wagons sometimes having to be carried around stone outcroppings. Finally they reached the “Great American Desert” in what is now Nevada. Forty miles of “white impalpable dust in which we would sink to our ankles . . . ,” he recalled, “the decaying carcasses of oxen and mules that everywhere tainted the air, the labored breathing of the cattle, and the dogged faces of the men as they wearily plodded through that accursed Desert without saying a word.” At one point the wagon train became totally lost, and as a last resort, with death hovering over them, they let the oxen choose the way. The beasts quickly turned almost ninety degrees, and with renewed energy brought the thirsty party to the Carson River the next morning.

The Sierra Mountains provided the ultimate test, with the wagons often moving less than two miles a day. When the group finally reached the gold fields, Newton came down with dysentery and was unable to work for weeks. For the next year, despite continuing intestinal problems, he did odd jobs in Sacramento and Stockton, cooking, cutting wood, and finally keeping accounts for an illiterate storekeeper. At one point he earned his first gold, a \$5 gold piece with which he purchased two loaves of bread and a hunk of opium for his stomach troubles. Ah, frontier medicine. With returning strength he returned to the gold country. Nuggets continued to prove elusive, and panning proved less profitable than ferrying miners across a stream in a hand-made dugout canoe or selling fresh caught trout.

In his memoirs, Newton describes mining camp society, and his prejudices remained intact even fifteen years later. He had little good to say about Mexicans, Chinese, Hindus, Sandwich Islanders or Southerners, and his account describes various fights, arguments, thievery and even killings, the latter apparently elicited little comment from the hardened miners. Not wanting to spend the winter in the

mountains, he took the \$500 he had saved and headed for San Francisco where he hoped the sea air would resolve his intestinal issues. Well, that didn't happen.

Nevertheless, San Francisco offered many pleasures. But let's not jump to conclusions. After all, he was a Presbyterian minister's son! He enjoyed the theatre and visited gambling halls, but just for the music, he assured his readers. The gambling halls were large tents filled with tables and chairs. Three Card Monte and "21" were favorite games, and Newton enjoyed watching the faces of gamblers, as gold dust and nuggets exchanged hands. He also noticed the women—"I would not call them ladies," he made clear—who occasionally frequented the tents, quite likely trolling for clients. He also spent many afternoons watching the flow of humanity that passed along the wharf on a daily basis, but his greatest pleasure came from purchasing books from street vendors. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* proved a real find.

Finally, down to his last one hundred dollars and feeling no better, he sought a job on a majestic clipper ship. Unfortunately, the captain "saw I was no sailor and a very poor specimen of a landlubber." Still, determined to leave, Newton finally paid \$75 for passage on a cargo vessel headed for San Pedro, the port for Los Angeles. There he hoped to find work in the nearby vineyards for \$50 per month. However, when the ship's cook deserted in San Pedro, taking a boat and three cases of gin with him, Newton became the new cook. Then, it was back to San Francisco with a cargo of grapes. However, the weather God had other plans. For two weeks the ship lay calmed, and when provisions ran low, the crew ate the grapes. The captain's loss was Newton's gain. For when they finally arrived in San Francisco, his intestinal troubles had disappeared, and thereafter he strongly recommended sea air, grapes and hardtack for anyone suffering from dysentery. It is my understanding that this cure is not held in high regard by physicians today.

No longer interested in the city by the bay, Newton headed back to Stockton. Unable to find steady work there, he slept in an unfinished house, using wood shavings for a bed. Again, he survived by doing

odd jobs. Eventually he fell in with a group of Chinese miners whom he described as splendid cooks. "One never discovered anything like puppies or rats in their viands," he happily recalled. He also found continual amusement "in their oblong eyes and long queues."

Winter found him again in San Francisco where he quickly took passage on a ship bound for Ecuador. No sooner had he disembarked than he was asked to join some kind of armed uprising. He wisely declined. At one point, while exploring the countryside, he stopped at a monastery and discovered a fine library, not entirely filled with books of devotion. For several weeks Newton allowed Dante, Boccaccio, and Rabelais to entertain him, and he observed that these volumes "bore the marks of much more handling than the homilies and Lives of the Saints."

From Ecuador his adventurous spirit took him as an ordinary seaman on a schooner carrying flour to Hawaii, with a return passage to Chile. In Valparaiso, he spent several months working intermittently on local ships, but what he really enjoyed was his time with other "beach combers", drinking, eating and even sleeping on the beach. Valparaiso, with its cheap living and moderate weather, captured his fancy, and he never tired of watching naval vessels from all over the world. With bands playing, the ships would sweep into the harbor, suddenly turn into the wind, furl their sails and drop anchor. Above all, he enjoyed the personal "freedom" the city offered, so different than being a minister's son. He doesn't divulge just what this freedom entailed.

Eventually duty and homesickness caught up with him. Signing on as a coal heaver on the U.S. Steamer *Massachusetts*, Newton departed for home by way of the Straits of Magellan. Discharged in Portsmouth, Virginia, some months later, he made the happy acquaintance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* while waiting to receive his pay. Then, he travelled by steamer to New York City and by train to Troy, New York. A week later he arrived at his parents' door, much to their surprise for he had been away for more than five years and had not written them in over a year.

Now it was time to settle down, or as settled as John Newton could get. First, his father offered him his farm, if he would look after him and his mother in their declining years. Well, that had no appeal. Then, an uncle recommended a law career, but Blackstone proved dreary reading, not half so exhilarating as *Vanity Fair*. "He read a great deal of everything," he recalled, "and . . . studied but little." That was it for a legal career. Having ruled out farming and law, and having no interest in theology or medicine, his restless disposition, however, remained intact. When a close friend suffered from intestinal problems, Newton recommended a sea voyage as a curative. No mention of grapes was made. It was off to Key West for the two of them. Four weeks of a fish and turtle diet encouraged the young men to head for Havana, Cuba, where they enjoyed evenings of Latin music and romantic glimpses of dark-haired Cuban señoritas passing by in their carriages. Finally, with good health restored, they returned to New York.

Still at a loss as to what to do, in early 1856 Newton made a quick trip to Canada to look into some thousand acres of land that his late grandfather owned. The land proved to be swampy and the timber of little value. No future there. After returning to New England in the middle of winter by sleigh, he again turned his thoughts westward. A sheep farm in Iowa would be just the ticket to material comfort. Out to Des Moines he went, but he quickly discovered that the best land was already taken. Next he travelled to Omaha, on the very edge of the frontier, where he constructed his own sod house and lived in it for almost a year. By this time, however, primitive living had lost its appeal, and in the spring of 1857, now almost thirty years old, Newton returned to Cincinnati, where his brother Chipman had moved.

For the next several years he worked as a clerk or bookkeeper, drifting from one boarding house to another. In 1865 he took a position as secretary for the Adams Fire and Marine Insurance Company, and later he became deputy county clerk for Hamilton County. In the meantime, to quench his thirst for

reading he had joined the Mercantile Library, and shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, he married Lavinia Graham, daughter of a prominent Cincinnati. Several children soon followed.

In 1864 he joined the Literary Club and was instrumental in reviving the club after its Civil War hiatus. The following year the club elected him secretary, and in 1867 he is listed as a trustee, a position he held again in 1872-73. While a member of this club, he presented nine papers, four of them marked as budget papers. Topics ranged from the East India trade to the private life of Shakespeare. Most memorable, however, were the several papers drawn from his experiences at sea, including "The Firemen's Mess" and "Nine Months on a Man of War," both highlighting his experiences on the *U.S.S. Massachusetts*.

In 1874 or 75, when he moved to Belmont Avenue in College Hill, he resigned from the Literary Club, no doubt finding the Saturday evening trip into town by either carriage or horse-drawn omnibus too difficult. He later served as mayor of College Hill before becoming librarian at the Mercantile Library. Newton ably served there from 1879 to 1897, dying quietly at his desk—so quietly, noted his daughter, that his glasses "did not slip from his nose." If his Cincinnati years seem both placid and unremarkable—a marriage, three children, desk jobs, and so forth—those years when he went adventuring remain all the more remarkable. What drove Newton remains unclear, for we have only his neatly handwritten account, an account in which much is described but which lacks any real introspection. Was he just a young man with an itch to wander? Was he searching for a life beyond the narrow confines of his parents' wishes? Could a woman have been involved? Whatever his reasons, one would be hard pressed to find another Cincinnati, much less a librarian and Literarian, who experienced the dangers, the hardships and challenges, and the wonders that John Marshall Newton did. Curiously, after taking up residence in Cincinnati, he seems never to have travelled again.