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JOHN TAYLOR, PITTSBURGH'S EARLY ASTRONOMER¹

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PITTSBURGH, famous throughout the world for the achievements of her men of industry, this past week has centered attention on the great service of her men of science. The opening of the Buhl Planetarium on the North Side has brought before us many facts, traditions, and personal reminiscences of scientists who hold high rank as astronomers.

But my story tonight is of a man, best known in another connection, who also looked at the stars in the sky above Pittsburgh with both knowledge and understanding, for long before Langley or Brashear started their work a clergyman-astronomer by the name of John Taylor settled in the little town growing up at the junction of our three great rivers. Such modern devices as telescopes of great power were of course unknown to Taylor, nor could he make the heavens familiar to the public through the dome of a planetarium. But the stars shown as brightly one hundred and forty years ago as they do today, and it is fitting that on the

¹ Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on October 31, 1939. Mrs. Adams is a member of the Pennsylvania Society of the Colonial Dames of America, a former regent of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and a Fellow of the Institute of American Genealogy. She is engaged in genealogical research at headquarters in the society's building.—*Ed.*

east wall of that beautiful new building, carved in great letters in the stone itself, appears that verse from the Scriptures with which Mr. Taylor headed the first lecture in his course in astronomy at the night school of the old Pittsburgh Academy: "The Heavens Declare the Glory of God and the Firmament Sheweth His Handywork."

The life of John Taylor resolves itself into several distinct periods.² Born about 1753 on a farm in Ireland, he spent many years at Trinity College, Dublin University, studying for the Presbyterian ministry with additional training in medicine, but showing his greatest proficiency in the arts that are based on mathematics. Speculation, only, enters into consideration of the motive for his coming to America, for we have no facts concerning this. Indeed, the first official record of him is found in our earliest census printed in 1790.

The year 1789 was eventful for Mr. Taylor, for it was then that he married Susannah Huston, the widow of an officer of the Revolutionary War who had died at West Point of a wound received some years previously. In addition to a wife, Mr. Taylor at the same time acquired a family of three stepdaughters. Although listed as a Minister of the Gospel, he was engaged in teaching in the Academy at Philadelphia, which, about this time, united with the College to form the University of Pennsylvania.

The ten years between his marriage and the settlement of the family in Pittsburgh took them from one end of Pennsylvania to the other. We wish we knew the underlying motives for these frequent removals. In a family narrative his stepdaughter says: "Mr. Taylor wanted to get to the backwoods where there were plain, honest people and no rogues. Mother told him he would never get to that place while he lived."³ Teaching, preaching, some practice in medicine, and some small farming activities make up the story of these ten years.

Church records give 1797 as the beginning of Mr. Taylor's service

² An earlier account of Taylor's life, which stresses his many years of service as a clergyman, appears in Charles W. Dahlinger, "Rev. John Taylor, the First Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh and His Commonplace Book," *ante*, 1:3-25, 85-96 (January and April, 1918).

³ Recollections of Sarah Huston Limber, recorded about 1857 by the Reverend Mr. A. M. Reid of Steubenville, the husband of her granddaughter, and copied by the late Franklin T. Nevin, who in turn supplied the author with a copy.

for the Episcopal congregation of Pittsburgh. The exact date has been difficult to establish, but we know that it was in 1800 that the Taylors came up from the country near Jordan's Landing to make this their permanent home. The family at this time consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, their four children, Hannah, Susan, John, and Christopher, and in addition, Polly and Lydia Huston, the daughters of Mrs. Taylor's first marriage.

Quite naturally, Mr. Taylor's service for the religious life of the community has been emphasized, because he was the first settled minister of the Episcopalians and served until 1817, a period of twenty years. His life must have been a full one during these years for we know there were many sermons preached, funeral services held, baptisms performed, and marriages solemnized. In this latter aspect he was what we would call today "the popular parson," for to him to be married went many young people who were not members of his church. Apparently, the blessing of Father Taylor counted for much in the community.

Often quoted is a comment by one of Trinity's later ministers, who intimates that Mr. Taylor was perhaps more interested in the study of the stars than in the work of the church. However, for a man to come to a frontier community where there were no regular services of his church, and in a few years build up a congregation strong enough to erect one of the best buildings in the town, we think was an accomplishment. This John Taylor did, and that he drew around him many of Pittsburgh's most influential men is seen by a glance at the subscribers to his salary for those years.

Oliver Ormsby, son of one of the four original trustees of 1787; Dr. Nathaniel Bedford, a trustee of 1787 and a pioneer physician; Dr. Peter Mowry; Col. Presley Neville and his son Morgan; George McGun-
nigle, who came over the mountains from Carlisle after the Revolutionary War and in whose house many early church services were held; and Capt. Nathaniel Irish, whose grave yet remains in Trinity church-
yard—all these are among the charter members. We also note Henry Baldwin, famous lawyer and later associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, and Judge Samuel Roberts, highly esteemed among Pittsburgh lawyers and a member of the building committee of the

Round Church. There, too, is Thomas Collins, also a distinguished lawyer and John Taylor's intimate friend. Tarleton Bates, killed in a duel over a political dispute; Ephraim Pentland, editor of the *Commonwealth*; Thomas Stewart, his son-in-law; and Walter Forward, lawyer and editor of the *Tree of Liberty*— all were concerned in this controversy, and all worshiped under the ministry of Father Taylor.

Mr. Taylor's skill as a teacher has many times been set forth. Thomas Ashe, the English traveler, considered him quite outstanding as an educator. Perhaps the most interesting of these accounts is the tribute to Henry Marie Brackenridge, who with his father, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, figured so largely in the life of Pittsburgh. We give his opinion of his old teacher: "My father . . . very wisely concluded to send me to the academy of the town, where there were two excellent teachers, Mr. Mountain, of the Greek and Latin, and the Rev. John Taylor, of the other branches, who was particularly an excellent mathematician, and as good a man as there is any use for in this wicked world."⁴

The brick academy, of one room on the first floor and two above, was situated on the south side of Third Street near Cherry Alley. There was good teaching in that academy we well know, for Mrs. Starrett speaks of the high esteem in which the early masters were held and of the fact that they were consulted in civic matters and on moral issues. Speaking further of Mr. Taylor, she says: "He was, undoubtedly, one of the cultural leaders of the town."

Chapman's *Old Pittsburgh Days* comments on Mr. Taylor and says he was a fine scholar, especially in the line of astronomy.⁵ This brings us to the evening classes of the academy where John Taylor taught astronomy from 1801 to 1807. How far ahead of his time was this simple, unassuming teacher and preacher it is difficult for us to realize, but there must have been a unique quality in his methods. He owned a fine set of globes that he used in class and advertised in the daily paper, where he assured the success of budding almanac-makers, since "any person who has made a tolerable proficiency in Mathematical knowledge, if his curiosity prompts him, may, in the course of one quarter, learn the whole

⁴ Agnes L. Starrett, *Through One Hundred and Fifty Years: The University of Pittsburgh*, 39 (Pittsburgh, 1939).

⁵ *Old Pittsburgh Days* by T. J. Chapman, 229 (Pittsburgh, 1900).

process of making an Almanack."⁶ He seems to have had no fear of giving away trade secrets.

In his lectures he made his points with clarity and authority, and the precise and orderly arrangement of his material shows how much time went into preparation for his work with students. The lectures on astronomy always opened with a verse of Scripture, for to him the order of the universe was a constant marvel, only to be attributed to a Divine Being.

In December, 1827, there was formed a cultural group called the Pittsburgh Philosophical and Philological Society. Its object was the dissemination of scientific knowledge, and lectures were given by both local and outside speakers. For many years this society was the leading literary factor in western Pennsylvania. All the prominent citizens, including professors, lawyers, doctors, and students of special subjects, took part in its activities. The character of its work is shown in the order of business during the winter of 1828 and 1829, which lists, first, a lecture on astronomy by the Rev. Mr. John Taylor.

Surveying, an important profession in those early days, was among the subjects taught by Mr. Taylor in Pittsburgh. Maps showing his work are in existence, perhaps the one of greatest interest being the plan of Lawrenceville in 1815. This shows the holdings of William B., father of Stephen Foster. In a letter from Mrs. Evelyn Morneweck, a granddaughter of William B. Foster, appears the following: "My father, Morrison Foster, told me that his oldest brother, Wm. B. Foster, Jr., who afterwards became Vice-President of the Pennsylvania Railroad, first studied surveying with Father Taylor." An early history of Pittsburgh, she also observes, states that Father Taylor drew up all the early maps of the city.⁷

Mrs. Morneweck's letter gives an interesting picture of those times taken from the reminiscences of her grandmother, Eliza C. Foster, who described the wedding of William O'Hara and Molly Carson on July 9, 1809:

"General James O'Hara was a fair specimen of an Irish gentleman. His bearing, the whiteness of his locks, the fairness of his complexion, and the

⁶ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 9, 1801.

⁷ Evelyn Foster Morneweck to the author, February 9, 1937.

ruddiness of his skin, told that he was descended from a healthy stock in the Emerald Isle.

He was dressed in the aristocratic garments of Seventy-six, his locks frizzed and powdered and his long hair queaued behind . . .

With his right hand he held the arm of Parson Taylor, a short, stout, stern fair philosopher, like many of Erin's sons; for he was also of that land. "I hear you want some marrying done, Mrs. O'Hara. I was just putting out to survey a farm for Mr. B. . . . when they told me I was wanted down here to splice a young couple." "You are always accommodating, Mr. Taylor," said she, rising in the presence of the clergyman, for it was not customary to receive company standing as it is now.

"Yes, Madam, the way to make the people serve me is to perform kindnesses of various descriptions for them, so I thought this bit of a job could be done up this evening and then I could make an early start tomorrow to the surveying. But I must say I like this business much the best."

Geography and navigation were subjects that John Taylor taught at different times. One wonders whether some of the details about early waterways and maps of the Pittsburgh district might not have been the work of our versatile subject. We know he worked closely with Zadok Cramer on the yearly almanacs and while Mr. Cramer began the publication of the valuable *Navigators* in 1801, there is no intimation that Taylor's work was other than that of calculation. We would like to know who drew the map of Pittsburgh showing the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers displayed in the 1826 edition. When reproduced in a printed book, a map would, of course, have lost all distinguishing marks such as characteristic lettering and handwriting. Therefore there is no way of comparing with the originals.

It is difficult for us who live in this modern generation to imagine what the advent of the almanac meant in the homes of the early residents of such towns as Pittsburgh and the still more isolated sections of the countryside. A farmer nowadays gets his weather forecast over the radio. One hundred and fifty years ago, only through such publications as the several almanacs could the farmer anticipate general weather conditions and so be guided in his planting of crops.

Almanacs were published usually for specified geographical regions. New England, New York, Philadelphia, and Lancaster all printed issues for those neighborhoods and another series for the western section of Pennsylvania and states adjacent were the famous almanacs compiled

and published by Zadok Cramer of Pittsburgh. As we study this region, and in imagination see the great number of travelers passing through the town to the newly opened lands of Ohio, Kentucky, and the farther west, we realize how many of these almanacs must have been carried on the journeys by river, boat, and wagon. They were small in size and cheap in price, too, selling for as little as fifty cents a dozen.

The almanacs dealt with several subjects, but whatever else might be lacking, the publication was not an almanac unless it contained weather predictions for the following year based on astronomical calculations. Ancient history in the form of dates and items of information often filled in stray spaces. Short sermons occupied other corners, and recipes, household hints, cures for various diseases and paragraphs dealing with agricultural matters all found a place in a well worked out almanac.

The subject of this sketch, the Reverend John Taylor, was responsible for the calculations in Cramer's almanacs. His work was recognized as of the highest quality, and generally, if he had made the calculations, a notation to this effect appeared on the title page. Later, when others were also making calculations, the fact that such persons had studied under Mr. Taylor was noted as giving authority to the work.

The first almanac printed in the German language in this region was published in Pittsburgh in 1815. John Taylor also furnished the calculations for this and excerpts from the preface have been translated as follows:

This is the first German Calendar to be printed and published here in the western country. . . . It is generally known that the Honored Mr. Taylor (who has made the calculations for this calendar,) for many years had done excellent work in the English Pittsburgh Magazine Calendar. His long residence here in this vicinity, and his accurate observations on the weather, which he has been making for many years, place him in a position to make increasingly better weather forecasts.⁸

Zadok Cramer died in 1808, but the almanac that he had started was continued under his name for many years. The publication of this with other such printing was perhaps the largest asset of his estate and the business was carried on for the benefit of his widow and daughter by his administrators, one of whom was Mr. Taylor. Throughout the years

⁸ Translation by the author from *Der Neue Pittsburger Calender*, 6 (Pittsburgh, 1815).

until his death, John Taylor prepared by far the larger number of all the calculations for the several local almanacs. Some of these calculations in his own handwriting have been preserved and are still in the possession of descendants of his family. After his sudden death in 1839, the uncompleted manuscript that he had in preparation was published. We are glad that this, his last work, appeared not as the almanac of any other publisher, but that it is properly named *Taylor's Almanac*.

The religious note struck by Mr. Taylor whenever possible can always be picked out; for example, in connection with the weather forecast, he adds the calendar of the church year. His own poems, one verse for each month, appear in other Pittsburgh almanacs. In June of 1816 we read:

A nobler scene invites my thought to roam
Not what is past, but what may surely come,
As far as poets yield to prophet's name,
Her place in Arts, Astronomy doth claim.
Astronomy! O, Science all divine,
What praises can be spoken that are not thine.

Early records of births, marriages, and deaths in this region have proved to be a most valuable source of information to historians and genealogists, for these correct lists of events connected with persons hereabouts antedate our first Pittsburgh directory. We wish it were possible to say that the reward was commensurate with the service rendered. Mr. Taylor was paid an average sum of fifty dollars per year for this work and many times the money was not forthcoming until several requests for payment had been made. One of his daughters, who was often sent to collect this money, said that it was the most disagreeable of errands.

How Mr. Taylor did this work while living in town, we do not know, but family accounts that have been handed down all tell of the joy it was for him to carry on these studies during the summers that he spent in the country.

After Mrs. Taylor died in 1828, her husband made his home with his daughter Hannah, Mrs. John Irwin, who lived in Allegheny. Here he spent the winter and in the summers visited his stepdaughter, Mrs. Limber, at her home in Mercer County. The close bond between Sally

Limber and John Taylor is shown in her "Recollections," quoted above, where we get glimpses of those happy summer months when Grandfather Taylor was able to do the things he cared for most in this world. The love of the stars and the study of the heavens was to him the dearest of all and here he had leisure for making his beloved astronomical calculations for the next year's calendar.

This life in the country was simple, since much of it was spent in his own garden, where he raised many a fine crop and doubtless secured much of the experience which he set forth in his almanac. The Little Shenango Creek flowed through the farm and one of his delights was the swimming afforded by this stream. A sundial that he had made himself was in the yard near the house. He had a table of wood, the top of which was covered with sand, and this was also part of his working equipment, for it should be remembered that paper was an expensive item in those days and not to be used unnecessarily. The banks of the Little Shenango also proved an economical and practical substitute for writing paper, and oftentimes Mr. Taylor would draw his figures and make his calculations in the sand on the shores of the stream, later transferring them to the more permanent paper form. James Sheakley (governor of Alaska, 1893-1897) writes that when a small boy on a visit to his Grandmother Limber, he found his step-great-grandfather Taylor completing such a calculation down by the river. Whether accident, design, or boyish curiosity was responsible for this discovery, Governor Sheakley does not specify, but his vivid memory was of the confusion that resulted when he jumped with his bare feet into the middle of this sand picture.

Mr. Taylor made the trip from Pittsburgh to Sheakleyville, in Mercer County, by stagecoach, and in those early days the journey was not an easy one. Even after the stage had set him down, there were four miles more to cover, but awaiting him was a little old mare on whose back it was possible to hoist his bulky frame. Somebody was always there to go beside him because of the danger of his falling off.

The summer of 1838 was his last in Mercer county for it was in August that a bolt of lightning, during a violent electrical storm, struck the house, leaving in its wake great sorrow through the death of Grandfather Taylor who was killed by this bolt.

The account given by one of the Limber daughters describes the storm:

Grandfather had been out that evening, watching the sky. He said there was going to be an electric storm. It commenced about nine o'clock. There hadn't been a bit of rain for six weeks. . . . It commenced to blow and storm. . . . It was terrible. Maggie and I slept upstairs in the second story. . . . Grandfather's [room] was on the first floor. . . . At twelve o'clock there was an awful stroke. . . . The flash of lightning came down the rafters in our room and seemed to run along the logs to Grandfather's room. It burned the pine partition. . . . [Mother] went into his room. He was lying on his bed with his head turned toward the window; he must have been watching the storm.⁹

Mr. Dahlinger in his account of the death of Mr. Taylor speaks of it as tragic. Sally Limber did not feel that way about it for in her "Recollections" she says that grandfather very much dreaded the idea of a lingering illness and did not like the prayer in the Episcopal prayer book which asks that we be delivered from sudden death. In view of the interests of his life we must believe that instead of being tragic this sudden death was the one he himself would have chosen. Lightning to him was not a terrible force, striking victims in its wrath, but an element of nature to be studied. Looking at the lightning on this August night, we realize that it was truly the hand of Providence that delivered him from possible illness and suffering and gave him his last glimpse on earth of the heavens that he had so long loved. Life in Mercer County had always been agreeable to him and his death there seemed most appropriate.

That the community dearly loved him we know from a family account which describes the gathering for the funeral as too large for the house and tells of the service in the orchard and the respect shown to Mr. Taylor by the great number of people who were in attendance. He was buried in the little family burying ground on the hill that looks down on the little river whose banks had been his workshop and playground for so many summers.

To this day the name of John Taylor is held in honor in Mercer County. Newspaper men there have always had great admiration for his

⁹ From notes, made by the late Franklin T. Nevin, of a conversation with Mrs. Eliza Lamber Long of Greenville, daughter of Sallie Limber (or Lambert), on December 17, 1909.

mental accomplishments, and on one occasion a group of writers was inspired to devote an annual pilgrimage to his memory. The program, carried out at the Taylor Falls, near the farm, was made up of excerpts from his writings and reminiscences of his personality. It is quite understandable therefore that Mercer County people raise their voices in protest whenever the suggestion has been made that John Taylor's remains be removed from the little family cemetery, which overlooks the farm, to a place near the grave of his wife in Trinity churchyard, Pittsburgh.

No likeness of either Mr. Taylor or his wife has been found. If there were early portraits of either, it is probable that they were burned with their house. But chance remarks here and there and family tradition have enabled us to build up a mental picture of John Taylor, for we are told that he was a fine-looking man in his prime, standing six-feet-one in height, of ruddy complexion, and with blue eyes. In later years his reddish hair became only a fringe and his head was covered with a wig. To the last he retained his clear skin, which was said to be as unwrinkled as an infant's. One of his descendants asked him when he was an old man if he had been good looking in his youth. The answer was: "I was comely."

Many are the references to his love for children and their love for him. The fairy stories he told them, his singing of the twelve good old tunes God made for Ireland, his whimsical delight in keeping his audience keyed up at such times—all give us glimpses of another side of John Taylor. He was an excellent performer on the violin, and with much patience and sympathy he helped the young people to understand something of this art. Then there were the occasions when young members of the family had been out for an evening's entertainment and upon returning always went into grandfather's room to talk it all over and to hear his wise comments and receive his sage advice.

Mrs. Taylor is described as a handsome, brilliant, and charming person. Beautiful and quite elegant in appearance, she was deeply religious. She had been raised a strict Presbyterian, and it seems most fitting that her grave, covered with a flat slate stone, lies midway between the Episcopal and the Presbyterian churches on Sixth Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh. Among the descendants of her first marriage have been two

governors, James Sheakley, fourth governor of Alaska and a Democrat, and Alfred M. Landon, former governor of Kansas, and, as we all know, a Republican. Other descendants of this first family are today living in and about Pittsburgh as well as in Mercer County. From her second marriage, to John Taylor, are descendants by the names of Irwin, Nevin, Travelli, Adair, Schweppe, Reid, and many others. Hannah Taylor married John Irwin, first burgess of Alleghentown, for whose family Irwin Avenue is named.

John Taylor's famous globes have disappeared; the sundial that he made is no more; his surveying instruments have gone; and only fragments from the long past remain of the things that he actually handled. His Commonplace Book and his Manuscript Prayer Book are treasures owned and highly valued by a descendant. To Mr. Charles Dahlinger, who transcribed these records in connection with his article about Mr. Taylor, we owe a debt of gratitude. From this little book were taken the incomplete records of the early years of Trinity as they appear in the first register of the church, a copy of which is owned by this Society. The lecture notes already referred to were given by a great-grandson, the late Franklin Taylor Nevin, to the University of Pittsburgh. Another gift of Mr. Nevin, to Trinity Church, is a specially bound book of Common Prayer presented to Mr. Taylor by his friend, Thomas Collins. Two framed certificates of ordination, one as deacon and the other as priest, hang on the walls of the vestry room of Trinity, and in the church vault are little notebooks giving subscribers to his salary. An original marriage certificate signed by John Taylor is in the possession of the writer of this paper and there are also the almanacs on which he lavished great thought and care.

John Taylor lived at different times in his life in both old Allegheny and Pittsburgh, but in neither place is there any public memorial to him. Even in Trinity Church itself there is no tablet to tell that he was their first minister, although we should note the memorial pulpit in which one carved figure is designed for him. Our politicians have highways, boulevards, bridges, and tunnels named for them, and somewhere in this great city there should be a reminder that John Taylor, Minister of the Gospel, teacher par excellence, surveyor, astronomer and almanac

maker, friend of the poor, intimate of the educated, and beloved of the children, spent eighty-three years and more on this earth.

Here was that rare personage, a man who always practiced what he preached. His own words give the reason and we close with them: "The cheerfulness of a well regulated mind springs from a good conscience, and the favour of heaven, and is bounded by temperance and reason. It makes a man happy in himself, and promotes the tranquility of those about him."¹⁰

¹⁰ *A Lecture on Witchcraft*, by the Rev. John Taylor, A.M. (Pittsburgh, Eichbaum and Johnston, 1819).