

Hannah Davis, a Pioneer Maker of Bandboxes

Some Facts About an Interesting Character of Jaffrey, N. H., and the Industry,
Unique of Its Kind, That She Started
By Margaret C. Robinson

BEFORE the present era of standardization both of things and of people, almost every small New England village produced men and women of such unique individuality and such compelling personality that they left an imprint on their community which lasted far beyond their own lifetime.

Such a one was Hannah Davis, born in the little town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in 1784, where she died seventy-nine years later, after making a name for herself throughout New England. The very old people of the town, from whose memories of her the faces in this article have been gathered, knew her in their early childhood as "Aunt Hannah" to the entire community, believed by young and old alike.

Few details of her early life are known. It fell in a period when the region was very wild, southern New Hampshire having been settled much later than Massachusetts, owing to the dangers which lurked in the dense forests in the form of Indians and wild animals. The town of Jaffrey was not incorporated until 1773, only eleven years before little Hannah was born. She was the offspring of rugged, hardy pioneers, of marked mechanical ability, which, fortunately for her, descended in the female line. Her grandfather, John Eaton, was one of the most picturesque of the early settlers of the region—a veritable Jack-of-all-trades, able to turn his hand to anything, and therefore invaluable in a pioneer community dependent for practically everything, on its own efforts.

A Jack-of-All-Trades

In an address given before the Jaffrey Village Improvement Society, a local antiquarian, Mr. Albert Annett said:

"In 1774 there came to the new town a man fit to rank with the minister in solid usefulness to the community. He was John Eaton from Bedford, Mass., a millwright and master of many trades. He kept an account book or journal, that he made for himself, and it gives us a good look into the simple, neighborly life of the times. The covers of the book were shaven oak boards held together with leather thongs. Though more than one hundred years old, it is still legible and in sound condition. In it may be found evidence that he was an obliging neighbor and a man of buoyant disposition. He recorded in his book not only business transactions but riddles and matters of neighborhood interest.

"A few excerpts from his book taken at random, will serve to establish his position in the community in which he lived. His spelling is sufficient evidence of his marvelous versatility. The following are a few of the services by which his neighbors were laid under obligation to him: 'wid richerson is in dat to me for day work sieder mill.' 'Jonathan Este is in dat to me for making a cart.' 'Samule Flint let me have a pach of Mell and again I had a par of Mittons of his wife and again I help him part of a day pach his barn.' He made 'tuggs,' and 'collers' and sleds; 'dugg' graves and made 'coffens'. He plastered chimneys, made casement (window

sash), leach tubs, 'ches pres' and 'exaltrees'. He mended 'saddels' and made plows and 'siesnaths; (scythe-snaiths), besides other articles too numerous to mention. He often changed work with his neighbors and occasionally lent his 'mear' to go a journey. He helped 'nearmire' Hayward rack his hay, and the said 'nearmire lat me have a yeard and a half of read cloth to make me a chaket.' This seems to complete the picture of the man, as chipper and assertive as a red-winged blackbird. He made flaxwheels, repaired 'big wheels' and was the handy man of the town."

One of the treasured possessions of the town of Jaffrey is the old Meeting House with its beautiful Christopher Wren tower, one of the finest in New England. There is a tradition that the frame of this building was raised on June 17, 1775 the day of the battle of Bunker Hill, and that the men at work on it heard in the distance the firing of the cannon. It may have been partly owing to the excitement aroused by these echoes of battle, possibly to the barrel of rum which graced the occasion, that when the day's work was ended, John Eaton, who, of course, had lent a hand at the work, celebrated the completion of the frame by standing on his head on the ridge pole. If he was wearing his red "chaket," it must have been a sight worth seeing—the gay figure high in air outlined against the western sky, where the sun was setting behind Grand Monadnock.

Such was Hannah Davis's grandfather.

Hannah's Father a Clockmaker

Her father was Peter Davis, a skilled maker of wooden clocks. Tradition states that he put 18 barrels of cider in his cellar one autumn, and that it was all gone by spring. If the story is true it is not to be wondered at that he accumulated little property, and left his wife and daughter in needy circumstances. The date of his death is not known, but his widow died in 1818, leaving Hannah a spinster of thirty-four, almost penniless. Stern necessity decreed that she must devise some way of making a living.

It was a serious question how this was to be done at a time and in a community which offered extremely limited opportunities for money-making by women. But here her inherited characteristics, more or less dormant up to this time, came into active play and solved her problem. She invented and became the sole manufacturer of the "nailed wooden Landbox" known all over New England.

How Hannah Made the Boxes

From the oldest inhabitants of Jaffrey I have gathered as much information as possible concerning her methods of work. She would look about in the woods until she found a fine big spruce tree suited to her purpose. She would then visit the owner of the woods and make terms with him for the purchase of the tree. She would hire a man to cut down the tree and haul it to her house. The log was cut into appropriate lengths, and these stood on end on a wooden platform. She had invented a machine, run by foot power (and it took a strong man to run it) operating a sharp blade, which neatly cut off vertically a thin slice from the log about an eighth of an inch thick, for the sides of the bandboxes. These were called scabboards. The first slices were of course not very wide; from these she made her little bandboxes, suitable for ribbons and trinkets. Some of these were only five inches high. As the slices grew wider the bandboxes grew larger, and some were fully as capacious as large suitcases of the present day. For the bottoms and covers of the boxes she used pine, of a little greater thickness, as the wood need not be bent.

The sides were curved into shape and nailed firmly while green. All her bandboxes were oval—not one had the round shape common today. To make these large bandboxes easier to carry, the owners frequently had strong cotton bags made into which the bandboxes would fit exactly. The bag was drawn up with a strong string, which when firmly tied would serve as a handle.

The neighbors contributed to Hannah's undertaking remnant of the gay wall papers with which their best rooms were adorned. With these she neatly covered the outsides, sometimes even the insides of her bandboxes. But she must have had some other source of supply for these coverings, as some of them—notably the famous "Napoleon" bandbox—show designs which can hardly have been used for wall paper.

Boxes Lined with Newspapers

The inside of the box was generally lined with newspaper, Daily papers were not common in those days outside the largest cities, but almost every respectable family in a community like Jaffrey subscribed to a weekly religious paper. As newspapers of that day are now rarely seen, the insides of Aunt Hannah's band boxes are by no means their least interest. On the lining of one which lies before me is an advertisement of a "New Hydropathic Cook-Book" which says: "We have at last a cook-book which we can recommend to our friends—one which children may take up and read without being shocked and brutalized by pictures of dissected carcasses and other abominations." Under the heading "Vegetarianism and Matrimony" the editor says: "We are compelled to defer a budget of letters from bachelors and maidens, called out by the agitation of the 'marriage question' in connection with vegetarianism, in our May and August numbers. Be patient. and look for something 'rich' in our January number."

One of the farmers near the town made it his practice to save his papers to sell to Aunt Hannah. His daughter, now a charming old lady over eighty, tells me it was one of the joys of her childhood to be taken by her father when he went to sell his papers to Aunt Hannah, for they we're paid for in bandboxes, and little daughter was allowed to choose the bandboxes!

One of the very interesting features of Aunt Hannah's work is that practically every piece carried her own imprint. A neat little printed ticket is pasted tidily on the inside of the cover, bearing its testimony:

Warranted Nailed
BAND BOXES
manufactured by
HANNAH DAVIS
East Jaffrey, N. H.

The local demand for bandboxes did not supply a market large enough to absorb the output of Hannah's little home factory. She used the boxes for barter with local merchants so far as possible to supply her simple needs, but she needed a larger market. That was her next problem.

Market in the Mill Towns

It was evident that she must seek her market, so her thoughts turned to the mill towns

where, before the great influx of foreigners, daughters of the best families of New England worked in the factories. Mr. Annett says:

“Aunt Hannah owned, as a part of her equipment, a wagon of the prairie schooner type, with a canopy or covering of white cloth; and when she had accumulated a shopful of her wares, she loaded her wagon to the roof, hired a sedate and trusty horse of her neighbors and perched amid her treasures, set out like a fairy godmother for the factory towns where finery did most abound. In the large towns of Manchester and Lowell she was well known; and when, as was her custom, she halted her van at the mill door at the hour of noon, she was sure of eager customers and a thriving trade. The factory girls brought the latest fashions back to their home towns, and they have been pictured riding on the tops of the old stage-coaches in their trips to and from their homes with Aunt Hannah’s bandboxes around them like satellites around a sun.”

In winter Hannah had a sleigh in which to deliver her wares. Her charges seem extremely moderate in this day of high prices,—her large bandboxes cost fifty cents, the small ones twelve.

So timid was Aunt Hannah in her old age, that she kept an axe in her front hall and whenever there was a knock at the door she answered it carrying the axe in her hand.

Baptist Church Builds Her a House

The Baptist Church in East Jaffrey played a large role in Hannah’s later life. She was one of the charter members of this church, deeply interested in its welfare. The other members repaid her devotion by an affectionate care for her which is greatly to their credit. In her later years when she had suffered the misfortune of a broken hip and was unable to carry on her work of self-support, the church built a house for her in which she lived until her death.

A few years ago the Village Improvement Society of Jaffrey decided to revive the memory of their early townswoman by collecting and exhibiting as many as possible of Aunt Hannah’s bandboxes. An announcement of this plan in the press brought various responses from unexpected sources, the most extraordinary being a letter from a man of sixty-nine whose memories of “Aunt Hannah” dated back to his earliest childhood. He wrote:

Dear Madam—In last week’s issue of the Peterboro Transcript I noticed with pleasure the announcement that you were to give an exhibition of Hannah Davis’s bandboxes. How quickly that carried me back some sixty-five years to the time I first knew “Aunt Hannah” (that being the way we addressed her). When I was four years of age my folks lived on the “Martin Farm,” not far from Aunt Hannah’s house. I remember my mother’s taking me to see Aunt Hannah make bandboxes. While at that young age I was not much interested in bandboxes, I remember her taking me in her lap and telling me stories of her young life and of wild animals and Indians—the kind of stories that interest and hold the attention of every boy. Later my folks moved to the village and as I grew older, with other boys, we often formed groups of six or eight and decided we would go up and see Aunt Hannah and have her tell us stories and sing to us.

She was never tired rehearsing the trials and hardships of her young life. While she was an interesting talker, she would not be classed as a singer of note, yet we could understand her words, therefore paid little attention to the tune. I remember one piece she always sang for us and which greatly amused us was the “Frog in the Well,” and the way she would rattle it off was fun for us boys. I presume several of the older people in Jaffrey can recall hearing

her sing this piece.

I also remember the love and respect the old people had for Aunt Hannah. Whenever the mothers called, they left samples of their cooking or some useful article. It seemed to delight the people of those days to aid the grand old lady; therefore it was but natural that the boys and girls entered into the same spirit. It was not uncommon for some farmer to donate a load of wood and leave it in her yard. I will relate an instance in connection with a cord of wood that had been so donated, and in connection with which we boys became the principal performers, owing to a happy suggestion by our beloved school teacher. Always trying to influence us for some good, when she learned of this load of wood being left with Aunt Hannah the thought came to her that, if her boys would take their saws and axes and march up to that wood-pile the following Saturday, cut it up and put it in the shed, we would be showing our respect and love for the dear old lady.

So well did our teacher present the situation, that when she called for the boys that were willing to go, all hands were raised at once, and, as I recollect, she selected some fifteen of the older ones, ranging from ten to twelve. It was agreed that we should meet in front of the store Saturday morning, bringing saws, sawhorses and axes; at the appointed time all was ready, and we took up our march for the raid on Aunt Hannah's wood pile; arriving there we told her what we had come for and she was very much pleased. We then put our tools in place and commenced the attack, each boy trying to outdo some other; at noon the pile was very small. Aunt Hannah came to the door and asked us in to dinner, for it appeared that as soon as we commenced to work outside, she began inside providing such as her condition and limited means could provide for a hungry set of boys. After we had our fill she sat down in her old-fashioned high-backed rocker (the chair I can see today as plain as if it was now before me) and interested us with songs and stories. When well rested, we went out and finished our work, bidding Aunt Hannah goodbye and receiving her blessing.

Sincerely yours,

FRED A. TRACY

She lies buried in the lovely old cemetery at Jaffrey Center, on a pine-shaded slope facing Monadnock—a spot which might well have inspired MacDowell's lines, which mark his own grave only a few miles away:

A house of dreams untold—
It looks out over the whispering treetops
and faces the setting sun.

The simple stone which marks her grave says:

Hannah Davis

Died

Nov. 29, 1863

Ae. 79

“For I know that my Redeemer liveth”

So vividly was Aunt Hannah remembered in the community where she had lived that thirty years after her death a group of young girls in her church, members of a Mission Band called “The Gold Gatherers,” erected a window in her memory. It says:

In memory of Aunt Hannah Davis

Erected by the "Gold Gatherers"