

# MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

---

VOL. XXIII

JUNE, 1890

No. 6

---

## SOME OLD NEW YORKERS

IN the March number of this magazine, for the current year, the editor contributes a graphic article on "Life in New York Fifty Years Ago," in which is asked, as an indication of what may follow: "What are personal memories without anecdote?" My own memories of certain old New Yorkers, including anecdotes, relate to a period subsequent to that embraced in Mrs. Lamb's paper; but some of the characters there mentioned were still playing their parts, entertaining and being entertained, at the time to which I refer, although new ones were rapidly coming upon the scene.

I remember, as a young man, while strolling up Broadway one afternoon—it was my first visit to New York and my eyes were about me—that, as I approached City Hall Park, the pedestrians in front of me slackened their steps, gazed earnestly at the lower front window of an unpretentious brick dwelling-house, and then passed on as if gratified by something they had seen. Naturally I turned my eyes in the same direction, but observed nothing more remarkable than the pale face of an aged gentleman, visible behind the window-pane, as he gazed upon the busy thoroughfare. Inquiring of a passer-by who the gentleman was that attracted so much curiosity, he replied: "John Jacob Astor, sir, the great millionaire."

There he sat, looking at the hurrying throng, and perhaps looking back at his long and prosperous career from small beginnings, unmindful that people lingered, as they passed up and down the great artery of the city, to look upon the richest man the United States had at that time produced. It was worth their while to do so, for his rise to affluence and influence from a poor German lad, a stranger on our shores, to the possessor of unexampled wealth, was the result of his own shrewdness, industry, and unbaffled will. This mere passing glimpse of what might be called the first Aster-oid in the planetary group of a brilliant family was all I ever saw of that notable man, for he died soon after.

With a foreseeing eye to the maintenance of an honored name, he

## A PIONEER AND HIS CORN-PATCH

Colonial days in Virginia, New England, the Carolinas, etc., carry us back a long way, but pioneer life in Kentucky is like a leaf just turned, and with the last word repeated on the next page. Mention the name of one of the old heroes, and you will be sure to find some one who remembers him or who has heard of him from his mother, or, at least, one who has known a son or grandson. If you can get into the locality where he lived, you may pass the name around from mouth to mouth of the "oldest inhabitants" and it will grow in interest like a rolling snowball.

There was no more prominent figure among the pioneers of Kentucky than Simon Kenton. You can place him side by side with Daniel Boone himself in your list of worthies, and not find many dissenting voices if any. What Boone was in middle and south Kentucky, Kenton was on the Ohio frontier, and that was preëminently the post of danger. As a boy he was nothing extraordinary, we are told, nor was there much of interest connected with his early years. If his life had continued as it begun, he would doubtless have proved a very ordinary personage. But one can never tell what that wily god Cupid is going to do with a man.

He loved a maid, and she loved somebody else. Filled with jealousy he entered an unbidden guest to the wedding, only to be taunted and forcibly thrust from the house by his successful rival and his brother. This roused the demon of revenge, and he forgot Him who says, "Vengeance is mine."

In a lonely wood he met the rival who had put him to an open shame before the woman he adored, and he lifted up his hand against him. There were no pistols nor swords, no surgeons nor seconds, none to witness save the God above; yet, when Simon Kenton saw his former friend and companion lying limp and lifeless on the ground before him, he looked for a moment on the deed he had done with blanched face and horror-stricken heart, then fled into the wilderness as if pursued by an avenging law.

One April day in the spring of 1771 a solitary pedestrian might have been seen wending his way down the rugged mountain path on the western slope of the Alleghanies. At that time a strong tide of adventurous spirits was pushing westward into the enchantment of new and unexplored regions, but evidently it was not one of these. He had somewhat of the hunter's alertness of eye, yet very little of his eager anticipation;

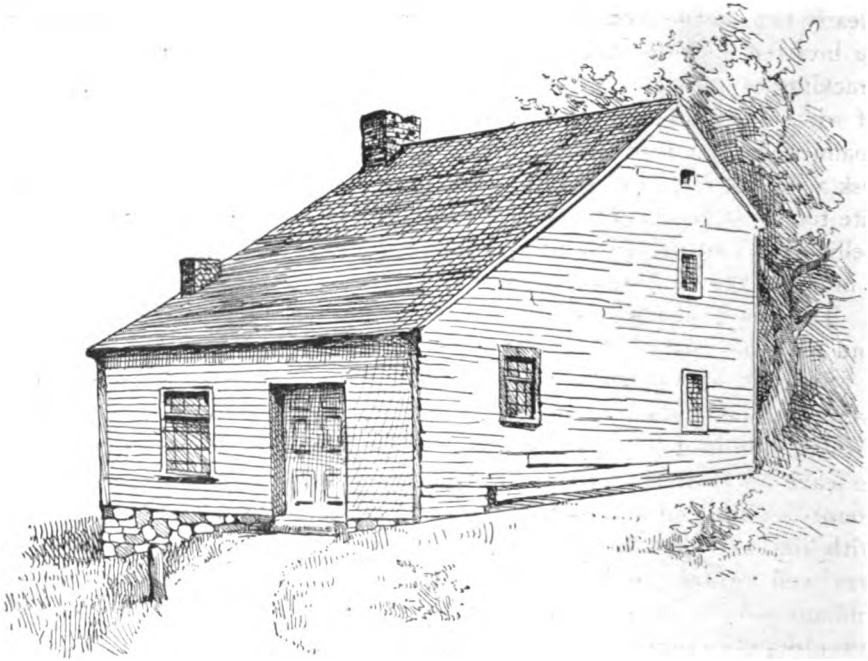
the young face wore a troubled, anxious look, sometimes almost like guilt, and he started and listened at every sound. As the faintest glimmer of the day dawn touched the mountain tops, he left the beaten path which he had been following by the moon's shadowy light, and turning into the thickest of the forest seated himself on a fallen tree close by the shelter of an overhanging rock. He seemed in no hurry to seek or prepare a breakfast, nor even to stoop and quench his thirst at the crystal spring by his side, but sat with his face in his hands, heavy sighs shuddering through his athletic young frame.

Can you guess who it is thus hiding from the daylight? Poor Simon Kenton! how we pity the boy—for he was nothing more—who with his own hand has hung such a cloud over his life! Pity him more and more as he wanders hither and thither among the rough frontiersmen, restless, listless, indifferent to life; his very name a thing of dread, and his only thought of the past one of horror and remorse.

He calls himself Simon Butler now, and having reached Ises ford on Cheat river he is comparatively safe and begins to look about for some means of earning a living. He has reached the border-land between civilization and the wilderness, where hunting, trapping, and trading are the order of the day, and he casts in his lot first with one party and then with another. Finally a chance companion tells him of the beautiful cane-lands of Kentucky. His enthusiasm rises, and a strange persistency to find them—and at once—becomes the end and aim of his existence.

Thenceforward the story of his life revolves around a single spot, and that the place where he found the cane, cut it down with his hatchet, and planted the first corn ever planted by white man in that part of the state. Collins's history tells us that in May, 1775, "They put in with their canoe at the mouth of Cabin creek, about six miles above Maysville; next morning, while hunting some miles back in the country, saw cane within a mile of the present town of Washington, built camp, and planted corn."

They had found the long sought cane-land, and here Simon resolved to stay, with only one companion. As far as he knew they were the only white people in all that country; but what was that to him? Perhaps it only meant the greater safety for one whose hand was stained with the blood of a fellow-man, and who could hardly yet feel perfectly secure from pursuing justice. It was a lonely summer, and the loneliness brought no peace of mind. Nothing but incessant stir and adventure could make him for a moment forget the past. He left his companion at the camp one day and indulged a restless mood by a tramp into the woods with his gun. Ten or twelve miles to the south he fell into one of the broad traces



SIMON KENTON'S PIONEER HOME.

made by the buffaloes, which were the only roads through the dense forest. This one led him to a salt lick close by Licking river. These salt licks, where deer, buffalo, and all the animals of the wood habitually came for salt, were of course the favorite resort of hunters. Simon had soon killed a buffalo, and taking part of it for his supper sought a suitable place to camp for the night.

Our young adventurer was at this time only about twenty years old, yet he had already learned the caution of a veteran. Coming back to the lick next morning he was still within the shelter of the trees and bushes when he discovered that he was not alone. It was neither elk nor buffalo but a human being who was there before him, but whether white man or Indian, friend or foe, he could not tell. He hoped it was some white man who had wandered down the Ohio as he had done, and would be induced to cast in his lot with them. Yet he had reason to know the Indians were not going to be slow to dispute with him the possession of this fair portion of their hunting grounds, and he apprehended an encounter, which would not be the first time he had measured cunning with them.

The style of dress in those primitive days did not distinguish very

clearly the savage from his white brother, and even the skin often became so bronzed by exposure as to give no sure sign of race. At the first crackling of a twig the stranger leaped behind a tree, and now the game of wits began in earnest. The space between them could have been spanned by the load which each gun carried, but neither was willing to risk a shot at the head that dodged back and forth from behind the opposite tree, lest he should find he had killed a friend. At last one of the belligerent parties ventured upon a friendly shout; it was answered, and in a moment the two men were seated by the spring like old acquaintances.

The new-comer was Michael Stoner, who was in Kentucky with Boone, and who told Simon of the settlements in the interior.

Simon took his new comrade back to his camp, and he and Williams were soon persuaded to break up for the present and go with Stoner to visit the kindred spirits of whom they had learned. Simon only thought to leave his corn-patch for the winter, and Mr. David Hunter, one of Mason county's oldest citizens, says he was back again in 1776, bringing Boone with him, and that they planted corn together there that year. But Boone was well content with the rich lands he had already acquired, and the Indians soon became so troublesome on the Ohio front that even Simon was obliged to desert his favorite camping ground for some years.

These intervening years, however, were not uninteresting. Watching as a spy along the line of the Ohio (1777-1778) he learned more and more of that prudence which is linked with courage, yet without unlearning the daring which is ready to risk life for a comrade. It was ever one of his proudest memories that during this very period, while he was still a youth, he had it in his power to save the life of Boone himself.

One long year of the time he spent in captivity (1778-1779) and learned never-to-be-forgotten lessons of Indian cruelty, and one of disinterested kindness, equally ineffaceable, from the trader's wife who aided his escape at Detroit. He had fought desperate battles with the Indians, side by side with Boone, Clark, and others, and guided many an immigrant through perilous paths to comparative safety within the settlements. But of far greater import than all these to Simon Butler, as he was known, was the day when, among a party of travelers, he discovered one from his old home county in Virginia, and the dread and horror that had followed him all these years gave quick room to joy, when he learned that William Veach, the man he thought he had killed, was alive and well.

Thenceforth he gladly resumed his own name, and all could see the change this blessed news had wrought. The buoyancy and joy of life he had lost on that fatal day, came back with a bound and made a new man of him.

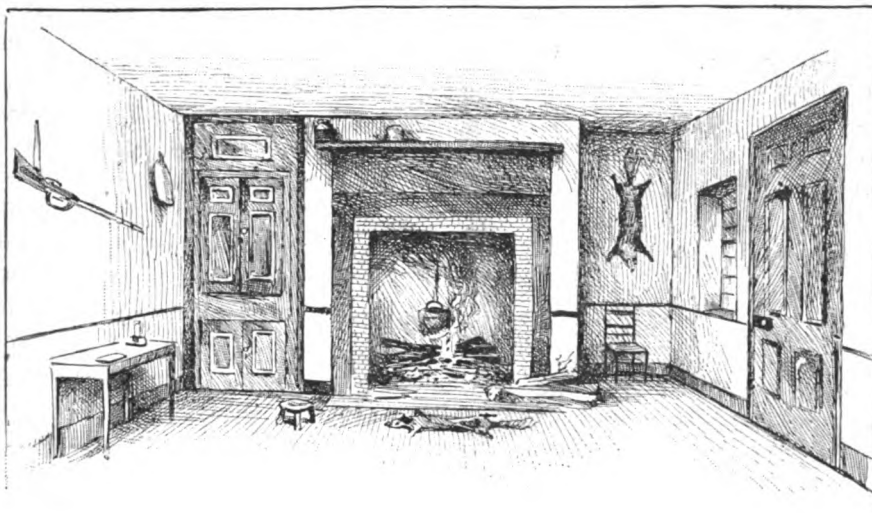
This was in 1782. He was now a man of twenty-eight, old perhaps for his years, but splendidly developed in every way; a man on whom any one would look with admiration, on whom everybody depended, and a stroke from whose sinewy arm would not leave much of any ordinary man. But it was with no intent of hostile purpose or test of strength he went back to Virginia in the fall of 1783. He was too thankful to find his old rival a living man to cherish any ill-will against him or his wife. No doubt the youthful passions had burned themselves out long ago, and his only thought of the woman would be one of curiosity. But he wished to bring his father and mother back with him to Kentucky, to make up to them for the years of filial duty which his rash boyhood's act had rendered a blank.

Through his personal influence and exertions a fort had been built on Salt river, where he had already prepared a home for his family, for the Indians were still too troublesome on the Ohio to admit of his taking them to that point, however much he might desire it. Yet he did not fail to watch his opportunity to get back, for if there was one spot on earth he loved better than any other it was that where he had first found the cane—that acre of ground where he had planted his first corn and raised his first crop *on his own land*. In the fall of 1784 he ventured to build a cabin near his beloved corn-patch, and began to look about for emigrants to unite with him in building a fort. Among the first families who joined him were those of John Dowden and Rev. William Wood. Thereby hangs a possible romance.

This redoubtable pioneer Simon Kenton had, as we know, early tasted of the tender passion to his sorrow. Having reached the zenith of his manhood, he revisited the scene of his early love and found his heart healed of its wound. Within two years thereafter this John Dowden and family join him, and the family includes a daughter pleasant to look at, modest and industrious. And now we come to the sequel of a courtship. Among the oldest records of Bourbon county, in which this settlement was at first included, occurs the following entry:

“Married, by virtue of license from James Garrard: Simon Kenton to Martha Dowden, May 14th, 1787.” Signed, William Wood.

Here then he anchored at last. He might go and come as the interests of the infant colony should demand, but his heart was doubly where home and wife both bound him. He naturally considered himself the owner of all that region of country, and he sold his broad acres in quite a lordly way to any who came to buy. Seven hundred acres were bought by one company who aspired to be the founders of the first town on the Ohio boundary. Rev. William Wood was of the number, and also Arthur Fox.



SIMON KENTON'S LIVING-ROOM.

Quite early in the history of the infant town, a second Mr. Wood took up his abode there, whose little daughter is mentioned as the first child born in the town; and we learn from her daughter that two little girls, this Dolly Wood and Betsy Fox, were born that same day in the very same room.

Thus in course of time there sprung up within a mile of Simon Kenton's station a thriving village, which, in honor of the young nation's hero, received the name of Washington. It was laid out very pretentiously for the city of northern Kentucky, and made rapid strides in that direction until Maysville gradually gained precedence from being on the river. As the Indians retreated before advancing civilization, the settlers one by one ventured to forsake the protection of the palisaded fort and build themselves comfortable houses in the neighboring town. But for once Simon Kenton was content to be left behind, and built his new house close by his original corn-patch.

"Ah," said a Mason county friend, when I mentioned the *spell* that corn-patch had woven around me, "his old house is standing there still." Thenceforth, like Simon Kenton, I knew no peace of mind until I could make a pilgrimage to the spot. Puffing, whistling, clattering, our train steamed into Maysville one evening, and as the bustling, noisy engine passed out of sight, we felt the restfulness of nature's sunset stillness.

Greeting the friends who were waiting with their carriage, we were soon driving up the long hill out of Maysville, enraptured with the beauty that tempted our eyes in every direction. We tried to imagine ourselves in

Simon Kenton's shoes, roaming the forest clad hills, with the hoot of the owl and the cry of the panther stealing on our ear in the gathering twilight. And as we lost sight of Maysville on the river's brink, we pictured to ourselves the tall cane-brakes, where buffalo grazed and Indians hid, yet the delight of pioneer's eyes because they mean rich land. It was soon noised about what had brought me to the neighborhood, and with true hospitality every one was ready to aid and abet me in my researches. As we gathered in the home circle that evening, one of the ladies said: "I can tell you a good deal about Simon Kenton's house, for it was my grandfather, Samuel Tebbs, who bought it from Simon Kenton, adding some rooms to the east to accommodate a large family. It passed successively to his daughter, Mrs. Tom Forman, who was my aunt, and to her husband's brother, Joe Forman, and in 1860 or thereabouts was sold by the latter to Dr. Marshall, who pulled down my grandfather's addition to build a handsome front, sparing the oldest portion, as he told me, because built by Kenton. From him it came into the hands of its present owner."

It was easy to verify the sale of property by Simon Kenton to S. B. and T. Tebbs, and notwithstanding, as recorded in the county clerk's books, its boundaries are so largely designated by trees, bushes, and rocks, it is not difficult to ascertain with some degree of certainty that the land on which this house stands was the tract then sold, with appurtenances, etc.

This house was, of course, the centre of interest for the time, and we chose an early evening to drive to it, having in company the granddaughter of Samuel Tebbs who succeeded Simon Kenton in possession, and a near relative of Joe Forman who bought it of his brother, Samuel Tebbs's son-in-law. The lady who lived in the historic house kindly bade us go where we would and see all we could, opening for us the door from the large, handsome hall of the new front building into the older part of the edifice. "We stood, indeed, on historic ground." The great, wide fireplace, still to be traced though built up, must have been six by five feet; and the high, narrow cedar mantel, taken away but a few years since, was well remembered by several of the party. In the same wall are two deep cupboards, one above the other, with doors of the all-abounding walnut, richly darkened with age. The small room and the little entry containing the stairway are to the north of this large room. In the northwest corner chamber over this there is a narrow stairway leading up over the deep-silled window to the garret. A tradition hangs about the place, that the first Mrs. Kenton, having been up in the garret spinning flax, fell down some narrow stairway and ne'er went up again—in short, broke her neck. It may have been this stairway, or that which some one tells us used to go



up on the outside, long since taken away. It was a sad ending to the pretty little romance of the great pioneer's second love; a sad fate for the buxom maiden who had so abundantly consoled him for his early disappointment—the industrious little wife who was doing her best to prove a true helpmeet in the establishment of his fortunes. As we came downstairs again, haunted by the pathetic ghost of the industrious housewife, we stopped to take one more look at the old family-room. A peep into the quaint old closet recalls another incident which had been told at the dinner-table.

Little Dolly Wood lived to be eighty-six years old; she remembered as a girl in her teens having spent a day with Mrs. Kenton at this house. It must have been the second Mrs. Kenton, for in 1798 the intrepid pioneer took to himself another wife, one Elizabeth Jarbo, and Dolly Wood was only twelve years old at that date. On that memorable day Dolly helped Mrs. Kenton to set the little table, taking the dishes no doubt from this very closet, and then watched her bring forth the *corn-bread* and *tea*. Perhaps the child's face fell a little when she found that was all, for Simon Kenton was considered one of the grandees of the neighborhood. Mrs. Kenton's French blood gave her quick insight, and the unvarnished sincerity of those days sounds like curtness as she answered the girl's thought with: "It's as good as we deserve, child."



GENERAL SIMON KENTON.

Externally the house is of frame, except that south wall of stone that has been rebuilt, very much dilapidated now with roof sloping down to first story. A small, square, four-pane window opens westward from the garret, which is only over the one main room. This very window may have served Kenton for a port-hole in firing at the Indians, as from 1788 to 1793 were stirring times on the Ohio. A bloody conflict was no rare occurrence, until that last incursion when Kenton with a small party ambuscaded the Indians at the fort and killed or scattered them all. Kenton's hospitality was equal to his means; this house was always generously open to the wealthy emigrant and the benighted traveler.

Troubles of another kind than red-skins were gathering around Kenton's devoted head. We think of him as he walked the earth in those

days, unlettered, it is true, and with only the refinement which springs from a noble and generous nature; but a king among men as the lion among beasts, in strength, in courage, in honesty, uprightness and boundless hospitality, and in many other manly virtues—and then we turn regretfully to the record of disappointments and injustice that embittered his last days. He was ignorant as a child in the ways of the world, no match for speculator or sharper. The beautiful cane-lands he knew he had won in fair fight from the savages, it was hard if he had to defend them from the white man too; yet, owing largely to his own carelessness, acre after acre of these very lands fell into the hands of those who could never have earned them by the bravery and hardihood which was the first price.

Valiant pioneer as he was, he was ill qualified for the management of a large estate, and what he did not lose by irregular surveys, etc., he was obliged to dispose of for debt, until, harassed by intolerant creditors, with nothing left of all his vast possessions but the few acres around his home, he sold that and removed to Ohio to try his fortunes once more in the wilderness. Mr. Hickson of Maysville tells me, on well-authenticated data, that when he left Kentucky he carried with him not only his second wife, but his *two mothers-in-law*—think of it!—and that they lived happily together for some years. What an amiable man he must have been! His fame as a soldier preceded him to his new home, and he was very soon elected brigadier-general of Ohio militia. Once after this, in 1813, we find him fighting among Kentucky troops under Governor Shelby and General Harrison with all his former intrepidity, and this was probably the last fighting he ever did.

A few days after my visit to the Kenton house I had opportunity for quite a long talk with Mr. David Hunter. He has reached his eighty-fourth year, loves to talk of old times, and is delighted to recall the incidents, events, and traditions of his early life. "Remember Simon Kenton," said he: "oh, yes, I remember him well, when he was staying over there at his brother John's. You can see where the house used to be before it got burnt down, just across the fields. It was when he was in prison bonds that he was staying there, you know."

I confess I did not understand how he could be in prison and yet staying at his brother's. Perhaps I am not the only one stupid enough to think Simon Kenton, the grand old pioneer, was actually confined for two years within four walls because he could not pay his debts. In answer to my question, Mr. Hunter explained the custom of giving prisoners for debt the range of ten acres about the prison. In this case the judge allowed liberty of the *county*, and nobody objected as it was Kenton.

This was more than twenty years after he left the state. History does not tell us how the matter was finally adjusted, but Mr. Hunter says one Billy Worthington brought a bill into the legislature to have the law for imprisonment for debt repealed, or at least made less stringent, taking Simon Kenton for his text; and thus he was released.

Only once more, as far as we know, did he revisit the beloved canelands of Kentucky, and that was in 1824. There were some tracts of land in the mountains which he still claimed, though they had been forfeited to the government for taxes during his long absence. When in his seventieth year he determined to undertake the journey to Frankfort to see if he could not induce the legislature, then in session, to release them. Where he had once roamed the unbroken forests, now arose before his eyes a flourishing town. But he who had borne so conspicuous a part in the early history of the colony rode down the streets all unknown. The street boys gazed at him curiously, but no hand was stretched out in recognition. At last General Thomas Fletcher saw and knew him, and he was soon introduced and received with all honor, as he should have been. His remaining lands were promptly released from every claim and a pension voted him.

To the last day of his life his heart would glow with pride and staunchest loyalty to his adopted and best-loved state, as he told of that visit to Frankfort. When it became known that Simon Kenton was there the people gathered in numbers to see and shake hands with the old hunter and warrior. He was placed in the speaker's chair in the legislative hall, and introduced to legislators, judges, officers of government, and crowds of citizens, as the second great pioneer of the West.

From this time he lived his quiet life in contented obscurity, and died at a good old age, eighty-one, at his home in Logan county, Ohio.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY.

*Annie E. Wilson*