

A title illustration from Samuel Adams Drake's
A Book of New England Legends and Folklore (1883, 1901).

TWO TREASURIES OF COLONIAL FOLK-LORE of Note.

There is no genre so universally affecting and enduring as the folk-tale, and there is probably not a country or nation on the globe that does not have its rich store and collection of such stories. Unlike non-lyrical verse, stage plays, histories, essays, *belle lettres*, the novel, or the short-story, folk tales, along with folk humor and music, are, in their origin, a product of and chiefly intended for common people. Yet from this humble beginning, it has at times been possible for them to be developed into literary forms of a much higher level of sophistication, and, indeed, much of Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek mythology, for example, would seem to have begun in some degree as a series of fireside tales, and that, in some instances, just happened to be sung; and from these in turn sprang the great epics and tragedies, as well as the many magnificent works of sculpture and painting. So that while Homer, and such bards as himself, presumably had opportunities to sing before kings and royalty, he was probably obliged to air and try his stories and verse beforehand among more ordinary souls. In this way, folk-tales, along with poetry and song, it could be said are both the fertile soil and raw material from which the preponderance of all subsequent literature springs and initially finds the form from which it is later shaped.¹

It is no little fitting then that they are often the first kind of story-telling we ourselves are introduced to as children, and if we think back on it, some of the most indelible recollections of our earliest literary education will be memories of some folk story or other we read or heard recited. As well as bringing us closer to our own cultural and national heritage, folk tales make accessible those of foreign peoples arguably better, by comparison, than any other art form or literary mode. Speaking from my own experience, I typically feel a more immediate and lasting affinity to peoples of, say, China, Japan, or Russia by way of their old folk-tales than by way of any modern novel or film from these same countries, and I'm inclined to assume that, generally speaking, their own feelings are probably identical and (relative to my culture) reciprocal to my own -- so deeply rooted in our collective hearts and psyches is the folk tale tradition and its story telling method.

Characteristically and in their genesis, folk tales use the medium of the spoken word. And yet with the development of writing and then printing, it has proved not strictly necessary to adhere to this convention. In fact, in the late 18th and early 19th century folk stories, starting with Bishop Thomas Percy's ballad-based *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765), became the basis of internationally famous and readily recognized book anthologies, such as those of the Brothers Grimm, and it was by means of books that the folk tale received a renewed lease on life in the midst of the increased strife, noise and crowds of modernity. Several of the most prominent pens of early United States literature used the folk-tale as one starting point of their writings; while in the process occasionally spinning out new folk stories of their own.

¹ In (partial) support of which contention, see Richmond Lattimore's translation of *The Odyssey*, introduction, p. 10.

Among these are Irving, Paulding, Bryant, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Whittier; so that in their stories and poems what many readers might think of as a time-honored tale or legend is, in a given instance, actually a modern creation of these authors' own devise. Conversely, a work routinely assigned to an author's invention it sometimes turns out is really formed from a yarn that long predated them. "Rip Van Winkle," for example, is a reworking to an American setting of the German folk story "Der Ziegenhirt" ("The Goatherd") that Irving first read in Otmar's (i.e., Johann Carl Christoph Nachtigal's) *Volks-Sagen* (1800) or else in Johann G. Büsching's *Märchen und Legenden* (1811), in English translation by Edward Taylor (1793-1839).² But as Irving himself confessed with respect to his *Sketch Book*, he was less interested in telling stories than in using them as vehicles on which to display his descriptive writing and "coloring" (of subjects.)³

It wasn't however till the late 19th century that efforts were made to attempt something like comprehensive collections of early American folklore. This is not surprising since it took the first half of the century just to revive interest and then gather tales for publication. This resurgence of folk stories made its initial printed appearance by way of magazines and newspapers, including the concoction of "new" legends (such as by the likes of the eccentric pseudo-historian George Lippard.) So that it is perhaps no coincidence that two of the best compendiums of early American folklore were put together by newspaper men. The two works in question are *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore* (1883, 1901) by Samuel Adams Drake (1833-1905) from Massachusetts and *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (1896) by Charles Montgomery Skinner (1852-1907) of New York. As well as journalist, Drake became a brigadier general of the Kansas militia during the Civil War, and if he had done nothing else would still be remembered otherwise as the author of a number of eminent volumes on American history and culture, including in-depth Revolutionary War studies of the Trenton-Princeton and Saratoga campaigns. Both Drake and Skinner were highly prolific writers who, along with the likes of Benson J. Lossing and Frank Moore, contributed enormously to solidifying and finalizing what Irving, et al., earlier in the century commenced. While Drake took time to include poetry as well as tales and sketches of forgotten colonial history, Skinner did not. And between the two, Drake's is indubitably and overall the higher quality and more finished work, possessing a hallowed warmth and antiquarian elegance rather lacking in Skinner. In addition, Skinner's work occasionally suffers from anachronistic racism, and, even more lamentably, he neglects to cite his sources. And yet in some regards, Skinner's effort is considerably more thorough in its coverage and number of tales, and remains to this day an inimitable source of rare and obscure folk-yarn curiosities which we might otherwise have missed; including not a few stories from Native American tradition and dating from pre-Revolutionary times.

The following are three samples each from Drake's *Book of New England Legends and Folklore* and Skinner's *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land*; reproduced here with the hope that it will encourage readers, particularly lovers of early American lore, to obtain for themselves the full collections of these truly precious and invaluable writings. Growing up, I myself sought in vain for books such as these; only instead to come upon most welcome, yes, but severely abridged children's volumes which contained a few of such stories. Had someone back then directed me to the originals from which they emanated, I've no doubt that in retrospect I would have felt myself eternally in their debt.

~~~~~\*\*\*~~~~~

### **Excerpts from S. A. Drake's *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore* (1883, 1901)<sup>4</sup>**

#### **THE SOLITARY OF SHAWMUT.**

By J. L. MOTLEY.

---

<sup>2</sup> This story in turn would seem to have originally stemmed from the Christian "legend" of the Seven Sleepers dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and subsequently related in the writings of Gregory of Tours. Gibbon gives the fable's full history in *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3, ch. 33, pt. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Irving's individual tales, and scattered and spread through diverse volumes of his, are largely and at their core of a folk-tale character. In 1998, editor Charles Neider has done readers and students a signal service by putting together a most convenient repository of them all; titled *The Complete Tales Of Washington Irving*.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://archive.org/details/abooknewengland03drakgoog>

A SOLITARY figure sat upon the summit of Shawmut. He was a man of about thirty years of age, somewhat above the middle height, slender in form, with a pale, thoughtful face. He wore a confused dark-colored, half-canonical dress, with a gray broad-leaved hat strung with shells, like an ancient palmer's, and slouched back from his pensive brow, around which his prematurely gray hair fell in heavy curls far down upon his neck. He had a wallet at his side, a hammer in his girdle, and a long staff in his hand. The hermit of Shawmut looked out upon a scene of winning beauty. The promontory resembled rather two islands than a peninsula, although it was anchored to the continent by a long slender thread of land which seemed hardly to restrain it from floating out to join its sister islands, which were thickly strewn about the bay. The peak upon which the hermit sat was the highest of the three cliffs of the peninsula; upon the southeast, and very near him, rose another hill of lesser height and more rounded form; and upon the other side, and toward the north, a third craggy peak presented its bold and elevated front to the ocean. Thus the whole peninsula was made up of three lofty crags. It was from this triple conformation of the promontory of Shawmut that was derived the appellation of Trimountain, or Tremont, which it soon afterwards received.

The vast conical shadows were projected eastwardly, as the hermit, with his back to the declining sun, looked out upon the sea.

The bay was spread out at his feet in a broad semicircle, with its extreme headlands vanishing in the hazy distance, while beyond rolled the vast expanse of ocean, with no spot of habitable earth beyond those outermost barriers and that far distant fatherland which the exile had left forever. Not a solitary sail whitened those purple waves, and saving the wing of the sea-gull, which now and then flashed in the sunshine or gleamed across the dimness of the eastern horizon, the solitude was at the moment unbroken by a single movement of animated nature. An intense and breathless silence enwrapped the scene with a vast and mystic veil. The bay presented a spectacle of great beauty. It was not that the outlines of the coast around it were broken into those jagged and cloud-like masses, -- that picturesque and startling scenery where precipitous crag, infinite abyss, and roaring surge unite to awaken stern and sublime emotions; on the contrary, the gentle loveliness of this transatlantic scene inspired a soothing melancholy more congenial to the contemplative character of its solitary occupant. The bay, secluded within its forest-crowned hills, decorated with its necklace of emerald islands, with its dark-blue waters gilded with the rays of the western sun, and its shadowy forests of unknown antiquity expanding into infinite depths around, was an image of fresh and virgin beauty, a fitting type of a new world unadorned by art, unploughed by industry, unscathed by war, wearing none of the thousand priceless jewels of civilization, and unpolluted by its thousand crimes, -- springing, as it were, from the bosom of the ocean, cool, dripping, sparkling, and fresh from the hand of its Creator.

On the left, as the pilgrim sat with his face to the east, the outlines of the coast were comparatively low, but broken into gentle and pleasing forms. Immediately at his feet lay a larger island, in extent nearly equal to the peninsula of Shawmut, covered with mighty forest-trees, and at that day untenanted by a human being, although but a short time afterwards it became the residence of a distinguished pioneer. Outside this bulwark a chain of thickly wooded islets stretched across from shore to shore, with but one or two narrow channels between, presenting a picturesque and effectual barrier to the boisterous storms of ocean. They seemed like naiads, those islets lifting above the billows their gentle heads, crowned with the budding garlands of the spring, and circling hand in hand, like protective deities, about the scene.

On the south, beyond the narrow tongue of land which bound the peninsula to the main, and which was so slender that the spray from the eastern side was often dashed across it into the calmer cove of the west, rose in the immediate distance that long, boldly broken purple-colored ridge called the Massachusetts, or Mount Arrow Head, by the natives, and by the first English discoverer baptized the Cheviot Hills. On their left, and within the deep curve of the coast, were the slightly elevated heights of Passanogessit, or Merry Mount, and on their right stretched the broad forest, hill beyond hill, away. Towards the west and northwest, the eye wandered over a vast undulating panorama of gently rolling heights, upon whose summits the gigantic pine-forests, with their towering tops piercing the clouds, were darkly shadowed upon the western sky, while in the dim distance, far above and beyond the whole, visible only through a cloudless atmosphere, rose the airy summits of the Wachusett, Watatick, and Monadnock Mountains. Upon

the inland side, at the base of the hill, the Quinobequin Eiver, which Smith had already christened with the royal name of his unhappy patron, Charles, might be seen writhing in its slow and tortuous course, like a wounded serpent, till it lost itself in the blue and beautiful cove which spread around the whole western edge of the peninsula; and within the same basin, directly opposite the northern peak of Shawmut, advanced the bold and craggy promontory of Mishawum, where Walford, the solitary smith, had built his thatched and palisaded house. The blue thread of the River Mystic, which here mingled its waters with the Charles, gleamed for a moment beyond the heights of Mishawum, and then vanished into the frowning forest.

Such was the scene, upon a bright afternoon of spring, which spread before the eyes of the solitary, William Blaxton, the hermit of Shawmut. It was a simple but sublime image, that gentle exile in his silvan solitude. It was a simple but sublime thought, which placed him and sustained him in his lone retreat. In all ages there seem to exist men who have no appointed place in the world. They are before their age in their aspirations, above it in their contemplation, but behind it in their capacity for action. Keen to detect the follies and the inconsistencies which surround them, shrinking from the contact and the friction of the rough and boisterous world without, and building within the solitude of their meditations the airy fabric of a regenerated and purified existence, they pass their nights in unproductive study, and their days in dreams. With intelligence bright and copious enough to illuminate and to warm the chill atmosphere of the surrounding world, if the scattered rays were concentrated, but with an inability or disinclination to impress themselves upon other minds, they pass their lives without obtaining a result, and their characters, dwarfed by their distance from the actual universe, acquire an apparent indistinctness and feebleness which in reality does not belong to them.

The impending revolution in Church and State which hung like a gathering thunder-cloud above England's devoted head, was exciting to the stronger spirits, whether of mischief or of virtue, who rejoiced to mingle in the elemental war and to plunge into the rolling surge of the world's events; while to the timid, the hesitating, and the languid, it rose like a dark and threatening phantom, scaring them into solitude, or urging them to seek repose and safety in obscurity. Thus there may be men whose spirits are in advance of their age, while still the current of the world flows rapidly past them.

Of such men, and of such instincts, was the solitary who sat on the cliffs of Shawmut. Forswearing the country of his birth and early manhood, where there seemed, in the present state of her affairs, no possibility that minds like his could develop or sustain themselves, -- dropping, as it were, like a premature and unripened fruit from the bough where its blossoms had first unfolded, -- he had wandered into voluntary exile with hardly a regret. Debarred from ministering at the altar to which he had consecrated his youth, because unable to comply with mummery at which his soul revolted, he had become a high priest of nature, and had reared a pure and solitary altar in the wilderness. He had dwelt in this solitude for three or four years, and had found in the contemplation of nature, in the liberty of conscience, in solitary study and self-communing, a solace for the ills he had suffered, and a recompense for the world he had turned his back upon forever.

His spirit was a prophetic spirit, and his virtues belonged not to his times. In an age which regarded toleration as a crime, he had the courage to cultivate it as a virtue. In an age in which liberty of conscience was considered fearful licentiousness, he left his fatherland to obtain it, and was as ready to rebuke the intolerant tyranny of the nonconformist of the wilderness, as he had been to resist the bigotry and persecution of the prelacy at home. In short, the soul of the gentle hermit flew upon pure white wings before its age, but it flew, like the dove, to the wilderness. Wanting both power and inclination to act upon others, he became not a reformer, but a recluse. Having enjoyed and improved a classical education at the University of Cambridge, he was a thorough and an elegant scholar. He was likewise a profound observer, and a student of nature in all her external manifestations, and loved to theorize and to dream in the various walks of science. The botanical and mineralogical wonders of the New World were to him the objects of unceasing speculation, and he loved to proceed from the known to the unknown, and to weave fine chains of thought, which to his soaring fancy served to bind the actual to the unseen and the spiritual, and upon which, as upon the celestial ladder in the patriarch's vision, he could dream that the angels of the Lord were descending to earth from heaven.

The day was fast declining as the solitary still sat upon the peak and mused. He arose as the sun was sinking below the forest-crowned hills which girt his silvan hermitage, and gazed steadfastly towards the west.

“Another day,” he said, “hath shone upon my lonely path; another day hath joined the buried ages which have folded their wings beneath yon glowing west, leaving in their noiseless flight across this virgin world no trace nor relic of their passage. ’Tis strange, ’tis fearful, this eternal and unbroken silence. Upon what fitful and checkered scenes hath yonder sun looked down in other lands, even in the course of this single day’s career! Events as thickly studded as the stars of heaven have clustered and shone forth beneath his rays, even as his glowing chariot-wheels performed their daily course; and here, in this mysterious and speechless world, as if a spell of enchantment lay upon it, the silence is unbroken, the whole face of nature still dewy and fresh. The step of civilization hath not adorned nor polluted the surface of this wilderness. No stately temples gleam in yonder valleys, no storied monument nor aspiring shaft pierces yonder floating clouds; no mighty cities, swarming with life, filled to bursting with the ten thousand attendants of civilized humanity, luxury and want, pampered sloth, struggling industry, disease, crime, riot, pestilence, death, all hotly pent within their narrow precincts, encumber yon sweeping plains; no peaceful villages, clinging to ancient, ivy-mantled churches; no teeming fields, spreading their vast and nourishing bosoms to the toiling thousands, meet this wandering gaze. No cheerful chime of vesper-bell, no peaceful low of the returning kine, no watch-dog’s bark, no merry shout of children’s innocent voices, no floating music from the shepherd’s pipe, no old familiar sounds of humanity, break on this listening ear. No snowy sail shines on yon eternal ocean, its blue expanse unruffled and unmarred as the azure heaven; and ah! no crimson banners flout the sky, and no embattled hosts shake with their martial tread this silent earth. ’Tis silence and mystery all. Shall it be ever thus? Shall this green and beautiful world, which so long hath slept invisibly at the side of its ancient sister, still weave its virgin wreath unsoiled by passion and pollution? Shall this new, vast page in the broad history of man remain unsullied, or shall it soon flutter in the storm-winds of fate, and be stamped with the same iron record, the same dreary catalogue of misery and crime, which fills the chronicle of the elder world? ’Tis passing strange, this sudden apocalypse! Lo! is it not as if the universe, the narrow universe which bounded men’s thoughts in ages past, had swung open, as if by an almighty fiat, and spread wide its eastern and western wings at once, to shelter the myriads of the human race?”

The hermit arose, slowly collected a few simples which he had culled from the wilderness, a few roots of early spring flowers which he destined for his garden, and stored them in his wallet, and then, grasping his long staff, began slowly to descend the hill.

~~~~\*~~~~

THE PHANTOM SHIP.

THIS marvel comes to us in a letter written at New Haven, where it happened, to Cotton Mather, and printed in his “Magnalia Christi.” As Wagner has confirmed to our own age the immortality of the Flying Dutchman, so have Mather and Longfellow decreed that of this wondrous sea-legend. There is no power in science to eradicate either of them. One would not have his illusions rudely dispelled by going behind the scenes while “Der fliegende Hollander” is being performed; and he does not ask if under such or such atmospheric conditions a mirage may not have deceived the good people of New Haven in the year a. d. 1647.

In that year a Rhode-Island-built ship of about one hundred and fifty tons’ burden, carrying a valuable cargo, besides “a far more rich treasure of passengers,” put to sea from New Haven. Among those who sailed in her were five or six of the most eminent persons in that colony. The ship was new, but so “walty,” that Lamberton, her master, often said that she would prove the grave of passengers and crew. It was in the heart of winter; the harbor was frozen over, and a way was cut through the ice, through which the ship slowly passed on her voyage, while the Reverend Mr. Davenport, besides many other friends who witnessed her departure, accompanied her with their prayers and tears until she was lost to view.

An ill-omened gloom overspread the scene, to which the prayer of the pastor lent an emphasis of its own. They who were departing heard these solemn words of invocation, wafted like a prayer for the dead to their ears: "Lord, if it be thy pleasure to bury these our friends in the bottom of the sea, take them; they are thine: save them!"

When, in the following spring, the ships arriving from England brought no tidings either of ship or company, "New Haven's heart began to fail her." This, says the narrative, "put the godly people upon much prayer, both public and private, that the Lord would -- if it was his pleasure -- let them, hear what he had done with their dear friends, and prepare them with a suitable submission to his holy will."

One afternoon in June a great thunderstorm arose out of the northwest. After it had spent itself, -- after this grand overture had ceased, -- the black clouds rolled away in the distance, and the skies again became serene and bright. All at once, about an hour before sunset, the people saw a large ship, with all her sails spread and her colors flying, coming gallantly up from the harbor's mouth. But such a ship as that had never before been seen; for notwithstanding the wind was blowing dead against her from the land, she moved steadily on against it as if her sails were filled with a fresh and favorable gale. The people looked on in wonder and in awe. The strange vessel seemed floating in air; there was no ripple at her bow, nor on her deck any of the bustle denoting preparation to anchor. All those who had assembled to witness the strange sight gazed in stupefaction. The children clapped their hands and cried out, "There's a brave ship!" while up the harbor she sailed, stemming wind and tide, and every moment looming larger and more distinct.

At length, crowding up as far as there is depth of water sufficient for such a vessel, -- in fact so near to the spectators that the figure of a man standing on her poop, with a naked sword, which he pointed seaward, was distinctly seen, -- suddenly and noiselessly, as if struck by a squall, her main-top seemed blown away, and, falling in a wreck, hung entangled in the shrouds; then her mizzen-top, and then all her masts, spars, and sails blew away from her decks, and vanished like thistledown, leaving only a dismantled hulk floating in the quiet haven. As if yielding now to an invisible but resistless force, this too began to careen dangerously more and more, until it went down before the eyes of the beholders in a mist-like cloud, which after a little time melted away, leaving the space lately occupied by the Phantom Ship, as everywhere else, clear and unobstructed.

The wonder-struck lookers-on, while this weird counterfeit of a wreck at sea was enacting before their eyes, could so far distinguish the peculiar form and rigging of the Spectre Ship as to be able to say that "This was the very mould of our ship, and thus was her tragic end." The learned and devout Mr. Davenport also declared publicly, "That God had condescended, for the quieting of their afflicted spirits, this extraordinary account of his sovereign disposal of those for whom so many fervent prayers were made continually."

Mr. Bryant, writing to the poet Dana in 1824, says that he had formed the idea of constructing a narrative poem on this subject; but upon finding that the legend had already been made use of by Irving, he abandoned the purpose, which Longfellow subsequently carried out, with dramatic effect, as follows: --

A ship sailed from New Haven;
And the keen and frosty airs,
That filled her sails at parting,
Were heavy with good men's prayers.

But Master Lamberton muttered,
And under his breath said he,
"This ship is so crank and walty,
I fear our grave she will be!"

And at last their prayers were answered: --
It was in the month of June,

An hour before the sunset
Of a windy afternoon,

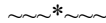
When, steadily steering landward,
A ship was seen below,
And they knew it was Lamberton, Master,
Who sailed so long ago.

On she came, with a cloud of canvas,
Right against the wind that blew,
Until the eye could distinguish
The faces of the crew.

Then fell her straining topmasts,
Hanging tangled in the shrouds,
And her sails were loosened and lifted,
And blown away like clouds.

And the masts, with all their rigging,
Fell slowly, one by one,
And the hulk dilated and vanished,
As a sea-mist in the sun!

And the people who saw this marvel
Each said unto his friend,
That this was the mould of their vessel,
And thus her tragic end.



THE CHARTER OAK.

WERE an American schoolboy to be asked to name the most celebrated tree of history, he would undoubtedly mention the Charter Oak. Other trees are locally famous; but this tree may be said to have a national reputation.

It is now not quite thirty years since the sturdy oak itself went down before one of those terrific storms that it had for centuries refused to budge an inch to; but so firmly had it become rooted in the event of history which first drew conspicuous attention to it, that this will be as soon forgotten as oak will. Nothing illustrates like this the strength of old associations, or more clearly expresses that demand of the human mind for something that may establish a relation with the invisible through the visible. The Charter Oak is no more. Yet it is still the tree that commemorates to most minds the preservation of the Colonial Charter, more distinctly than the event itself does the tree; for it is undoubtedly true that when we cast our eyes over the field of history we instinctively seek out those objects that rise above the common level, like steeples above a city. One sees there the Charter Oak; the chapter of history then swiftly unfolds itself.

The fall of this mighty monarch of the ancient forests occurred in the year 1856. It was announced throughout the Union as a public calamity; and in Hartford, where the Charter Oak had almost become an object of veneration, the intelligence created a feeling of loss to the glory of the city which nothing in the way of monuments could make good. The smallest pieces of the tree were eagerly secured by relic-hunters, and they are still carefully treasured up, in order to perpetuate, in the thousand forms into which a piece of wood may be turned, the memory of the brave old oak from which Hartford derived its familiar sobriquet of the Charter-Oak City, of which her citizens are justly proud.

The Charter Oak stood on the slope of Wyllys's Hill, in the city of Hartford; and it had stood on the same spot for centuries. No man knew its exact age; but there is little doubt that it was an object of

eneration to the Indians long before the discovery of America by Columbus. Tradition says that when the white people began to build here at Hartford, Mr. Samuel Wyllys, who was one of these pioneers, was busy clearing the forest away around his homestead, and he had marked this tree for destruction with the rest; but the savages who dwelt in the neighborhood so earnestly begged that it might be spared, because its first putting forth its leaves had been a sign to them from immemorial time when to plant their corn, that at their request the oak was left standing.

Some idea of the great age of this historic tree may, however, be formed by considering its dimensions. Thirty odd years before it fell to the ground, a wreck, it measured thirty-six feet in circumference at the base. The famous hiding-place in its trunk had then nearly closed up, although the old people could remember when it would easily admit a child into the hollow cavity of the tree. The same generation believed this to be a sign that it had fulfilled its mission. When Mr. [Benson J.] Lossing visited it in 1848 he found the trunk then having a girth of twenty-five feet around it at one foot from the ground; and the opening at the bottom was then a narrow crevice only large enough for a person's hand to go in.

This oak appeared to have lost its upper trunk during some battle with lightning or gale, so that many others of its species of more recent growth surpassed it in height; but the accident had also enormously strengthened the lower trunk, and extended the spread and thickness of the limbs, which continued to flaunt defiance in the face of the elements that were surely destroying them piecemeal. In time the tree had recovered its old symmetry of form, while its foliage was still remarkably rich and exuberant. Year by year it became more and more closely imprisoned within the walls of the growing city, until it stood a solitary, though not unregarded, survivor of its race and time.

There is another relic intimately associated with the Charter Oak for which the people of Connecticut have a great regard. Hanging up in the office of the Secretary of State, in the State Capitol, in a frame made of the Charter Oak, is the venerable original charter of the Colony, bearing not only the autograph, but the portrait of King Charles II. It is the genuine world-renowned document whose mysterious disappearance one evening, about two centuries ago, caused such a hubbub to be raised throughout the Colonies; and it is, therefore, of all the historical treasures of the State the most valued.

The story of how the Colonial charter was saved from the clutches of Sir Edmund Andros is a stirring episode of those stirring times, when Tyranny, boldly unmasking, began openly to threaten New England with the loss of all her time-honored franchises. In contempt of their chartered rights, King James II had appointed Sir Edmund governor over all the New-England Colonies. Neither the wishes, the interests, nor the happiness of the people were to be for a moment considered. It was to be a rule of iron, and a man of iron was chosen for it. The first step was to seize and declare void the old charters. Massachusetts had already been dispossessed of hers; everything there was in confusion. It was now the turn of the other colonies. With this object Sir Edmund despatched to the Connecticut authorities an order demanding in good set terms the surrender of their charter; for even the arbitrary James would have it appear that he paid some respect to the majesty of the law by observing its forms; and the charter, being a royal grant of power, could not be ignored. The people of Connecticut considered this an act of usurpation, and their representatives naturally hesitated. But the charter not being forthcoming on his demand, Sir Edmund determined to let the good people of Connecticut know with whom they had to deal. He was a man of action; and he quickly put himself at the head of his soldiers, and went to fetch the instrument at the point of the sword. Never before had a body of royal troops trodden the soil of the Land of Steady Habits. Now, their errand was to sow the seeds of rebellion and disloyalty. The Governor, nursing his wrath all the way, arrived at Hartford in no gentle frame of mind; and going at once to the House where the Colonial Assembly was sitting, he strode into the chamber and imperiously demanded, in the King's name, the immediate delivery to him of the charter, at the same time declaring the old government to be dissolved and its proceedings unlawful. The representatives of the people saw the structure that their fathers had raised falling in ruins around them. There stood the dictator. Open resistance would be treason. But certain of the members, had resolved that he should never have the charter, cost what it might. Wishing to gain time, the Assembly fell into debate over the matter, while the King's viceroy haughtily awaited its determination without leaving the chamber. The countenances of all present were anxious and pre-occupied. The debate grew warm, and Sir Edmund impatient. It became so dark that candles were lighted. The charter was then brought in and laid upon the table in full view of every one present. A hush fell upon the Assembly, every

man of whom knew that the crisis had been reached. By this time the house was surrounded by the populace, in whom the feeling of resistance only wanted a spark to set it in a flame. But a better way had been found. All at once the lights in the chamber were extinguished; and when they were officiously relighted, the precious instrument was gone! The faces of that body of men when this fact dawned upon them must have been a study.

The tradition is -- for of course no official record could be made of such an act of treason -- that when the candles were put out, the box containing the royal patent was snatched from the table, hurried out of the chamber, and thrust into the hollow of the tree that has ever since borne the name of the Charter Oak. This daring act was performed by Captain Jeremiah Wadsworth; and it subsequently saved Connecticut from having imposed upon her the same humiliating terms that were granted under favor of King William to the old Mother-Colony.

But notwithstanding his main purpose had thus been thwarted, Sir Edmund took upon him on the spot the reins of government, by a formal declaration which is entered upon the record, closing with the ominous word "finis." So the people of Connecticut had after all to submit, until the Revolution in England tumbled King James's rotten throne about his ears, and in its turn wrote "finis" at the end of his fatal dynasty in characters large enough to convey their warning to his successors, -- "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."

~~~~~\*\*\*~~~~~

#### **Excerpts from Charles Montgomery Skinner's *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (1896)<sup>5</sup>**

##### **POKEPSIE.**

The name of this town has forty-two spellings in old records, and with singular pertinacity in ill-doing, the inhabitants have fastened on it the longest and clumsiest of all. It comes from the Mohegan words Apo-keep-sink, meaning a safe, pleasant harbor. Harbor it might be for canoes, but for nothing bigger, for it was only the little cove that was so called between Call Rock and Adder Cliff, -- the former indicating where settlers awaiting passage hailed the masters of vessels from its top, and the latter taking its name from the snakes that abounded there. Hither came a band of Delawares with Pequot captives, among them a young chief to whom had been offered not only life but leadership if he would renounce his tribe, receive the mark of the turtle on his breast, and become a Delaware. On his refusal, he was bound to a tree, and was about to undergo the torture, when a girl among the listeners sprang to his side. She, too, was a Pequot, but the turtle totem was on her bosom, and when she begged his life, because they had been betrothed, the captors paused to talk of it. She had chosen well the time to interfere, for a band of Hurons was approaching, and even as the talk went on their yell was heard in the wood. Instant measures for defence were taken, and in the fight that followed both chief and maiden were forgotten; but though she cut the cords that bound him, they were separated in the confusion, he disappearing, she falling captive to the Hurons, who, sated with blood, retired from the field. In the fantastic disguise of a wizard the young Pequot entered their camp soon after, and on being asked to try his enchantments for the cure of a young woman, he entered her tent, showing no surprise at finding her to be the maiden of his choice, who was suffering from nothing worse than nerves, due to the excitement of the battle. Left alone with his patient, he disclosed his identity, and planned a way of escape that proved effective on that very night, for, though pursued by the angry Hurons, the couple reached "safe harbor," thence making a way to their own country in the east, where they were married.

~~~~~\*~~~~~

THE TORY'S CONVERSION.

In his firelit parlor, in his little house at Valley Forge, old Michael Kuch sits talking with his daughter. But though it is Christmas eve the talk has little cheer in it. The hours drag on until the clock

⁵ See: <http://archive.org/details/mythsandlegendso06615gut>

strikes twelve, and the old man is about to offer his evening prayer for the safety of his son, who is one of Washington's troopers, when hurried steps are heard in the snow, there is a fumbling at the latch, then the door flies open and admits a haggard, panting man who hastily closes it again, falls into a seat, and shakes from head to foot. The girl goes to him. "John!" she says. But he only averts his face. "What is wrong with thee, John Blake?" asks the farmer. But he has to ask again and again ere he gets an answer. Then, in a broken voice, the trembling man confesses that he has tried to shoot Washington, but the bullet struck and killed his only attendant, a dragoon. He has come for shelter, for men are on his track already. "Thou know'st I am neutral in this war, John Blake," answered the farmer, -- "although I have a boy down yonder in the camp. It was a cowardly thing to do, and I hate you Tories that you do not fight like men; yet, since you ask me for a hiding-place, you shall have it, though, mind you, 'tis more on the girl's account than yours. The men are coming. Out--this way--to the spring-house. So!"

Before old Michael has time to return to his chair the door is again thrust open, this time by men in blue and buff. They demand the assassin, whose footsteps they have tracked there through the snow. Michael does not answer. They are about to use violence when, through the open door, comes Washington, who checks them with a word. The general bears a drooping form with a blood splash on its breast, and deposits it on the hearth as gently as a mother puts a babe into its cradle. As the firelight falls on the still face the farmer's eyes grow round and big; then he shrieks and drops upon his knees, for it is his son who is lying there. Beside him is a pistol; it was dropped by the Tory when he entered. Grasping it eagerly the farmer leaps to his feet. His years have fallen from him. With a tiger-like bound he gains the door, rushes to the spring-house where John Blake is crouching, his eyes sunk and shining, gnawing his fingers in a craze of dismay. But though hate is swift, love is swifter, and the girl is there as soon as he. She strikes his arm aside, and the bullet he has fired lodges in the wood. He draws out his knife, and the murderer, to whom has now come the calmness of despair, kneels and offers his breast to the blade. Before he can strike, the soldiers hasten up, and seizing Blake, they drag him to the house--the little room--where all had been so peaceful but a few minutes before.

The culprit is brought face to face with Washington, who asks him what harm he has ever suffered from his fellow countrymen that he should turn against them thus. Blake hangs his head and owns his willingness to die. His eyes rest on the form extended on the floor, and he shudders; but his features undergo an almost joyous change, for the figure lifts itself, and in a faint voice calls, "Father!" The young man lives. With a cry of delight both father and sister raise him in their arms. "You are not yet prepared to die," says Washington to the captive. "I will put you under guard until you are wanted. Take him into custody, my dear young lady, and try to make an American of him. See, it is one o'clock, and this is Christmas morning. May all be happy here. Come." And beckoning to his men he rides away, though Blake and his affianced would have gone on their knees before him. Revulsion of feeling, love, thankfulness and a latent patriotism wrought a quick change in Blake. When young Kuch recovered Blake joined his regiment, and no soldier served the flag more honorably.

~~~~\*~~~~

### **THE WHITE DEER OF ONOTA.**

Beside quiet Onota, in the Berkshire Hills, dwelt a band of Indians, and while they lived here a white deer often came to drink. So rare was the appearance of an animal like this that its visits were held as good omens, and no hunter of the tribe ever tried to slay it. A prophet of the race had said, "So long as the white doe drinks at Onota, famine shall not blight the Indian's harvest, nor pestilence come nigh his lodge, nor foeman lay waste his country." And this prophecy held true. That summer when the deer came with a fawn as white and graceful as herself, it was a year of great abundance. On the outbreak of the French and Indian War a young officer named Montalbert was despatched to the Berkshire country to persuade the Housatonic Indians to declare hostility to the English, and it was as a guest in the village of Onota that he heard of the white deer. Sundry adventurers had made valuable friendships by returning to the French capital with riches and curiosities from the New World. Even Indians had been abducted as gifts for royalty, and this young ambassador resolved that when he returned to his own country the skin of the white deer should be one of the trophies that would win him a smile from Louis.

He offered a price for it -- a price that would have bought all their possessions and miles of the country roundabout, but their deer was sacred, and their refusal to sacrifice it was couched in such indignant terms that he wisely said no more about it in the general hearing. There was in the village a drunken fellow, named Wondo, who had come to that pass when he would almost have sold his soul for liquor, and him the officer led away and plied with rum until he promised to bring the white doe to him. The pretty beast was so familiar with men that she suffered Wondo to catch her and lead her to Montalbert. Making sure that one was near, the officer plunged his sword into her side and the innocent creature fell. The snowy skin, now splashed with red, was quickly stripped off, concealed among the effects in Montalbert's outfit, and he set out for Canada; but he had not been many days on his road before Wondo, in an access of misery and repentance, confessed to his share of the crime that had been done and was slain on the moment.

With the death of the deer came an end to good fortune. Wars, blights, emigration followed, and in a few years not a wigwam was left standing beside Onota.

There is a pendant to this legend, incident to the survival of the deer's white fawn. An English hunter, visiting the lake with dog and gun, was surprised to see on its southern bank a white doe. The animal bent to drink and at the same moment the hunter put his gun to his shoulder. Suddenly a howl was heard, so loud, so long, that the woods echoed it, and the deer, taking alarm, fled like the wind. The howl came from the dog, and, as that animal usually showed sagacity in the presence of game, the hunter was seized with a fear that its form was occupied, for the time, by a hag who lived alone in the "north woods," and who was reputed to have appeared in many shapes -- for this was not so long after witch times that their influence was forgotten.

Drawing his ramrod, the man gave his dog such a beating that the poor creature had something worth howling for, because it might be the witch that he was thrashing. Then running to the shanty of the suspected woman he flung open her door and demanded to see her back, for, if she had really changed her shape, every blow that he had given to the dog would have been scored on her skin. When he had made his meaning clear, the crone laid hold on the implement that served her for horse at night, and with the wooden end of it rained blows on him so rapidly that, if the dog had had half the meanness in his nature that some people have, the spectacle would have warmed his heart, for it was a prompt and severe revenge for his sufferings. And to the last the hunter could not decide whether the beating that he received was prompted by indignation or vengeance.

---

*Wm. Thomas Sherman*  
1604 NW 70th St.  
Seattle, Washington 98117  
206-784-1132  
[wts@gunjones.com](mailto:wts@gunjones.com)  
<http://www.gunjones.com> and [http://www.scribd.com/wsherman\\_1](http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1)

*For Lee's Legion on Face Book:*  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LeesLegion/>