

Autobiography of Margaret (Otis) Walker

Margaret Elizabeth Otis, daughter of Harris Foster and Paulina Keese (Lapham) Otis, was born February 7, 1850 in Danby, Vermont, and was the second wife of Thaddeus H. Walker. This autobiography is undated. The original is held at the Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

The earliest remembrance I have is of my grandfather Lapham¹ carrying me on his shoulder out to dinner when he came to visit my mother.

My grandfather Lapham was a very good looking man, tall and large, his hair was white and had blue eyes, his name was David Lapham. I also remember when I was three or four years old I have a boil under my arm and I wouldn't let anyone touch it but grandfather Lapham and he came to the house and stood me in a corner and I raised my arm for him to lance it. That is the last remembrance I have of him. He was sixty-five years old when he died and I was about four years old. My grandmother Lapham² died at the age of forty-five, several years before I was born. Her maiden name was Semantha Vail.

Grandfather Otis³ was a physician and died before I was born. His name was Harris Foster Otis and my grandmother Otis name was Sarah Rodgers. She was a very small slight woman, light complexion. She as well as all others of her age wore false hair to cover her own and she always wore a Quaker bonnet for on both sides my relatives were Quakers.

My birthday place was Danby, Vermont and I was born Feb. 7th, 1850. My father⁴ was the seventh son. His father and mother lived on a farm and his father was a physician and considered wealthy for that time. My father's older brothers were Harvard graduates but did not improve their opportunities as their father thought they should and he being a very stern man would not send my father to College. But he was a great student and I suppose he had as good an education as most college graduates at that time. My father was a very remarkable man, he was a leader wherever he went.

When about twenty years old, my father married Elizabeth Haviland and from that union there were three children, two boys and a girl. John Grant, Sarah Rodgers and William Percy Otis. She died when William was two weeks old from scarlet fever. He married my mother⁵ when William was a year old and from that marriage there were five children, Edward who died at the age of three, Semantha, Margaret and Lydia and James Lawrence. The latter died at the age of sixteen.

At the age of four years I started to the District School which was four or five miles from our home, but there were several older brothers and sisters to go with me and we always drove back and forth. I can hear my voice now so plainly as I stood beside my teacher saying after her, in a little shrill voice, "A, B, C etc.

There was a little girl at this school to whom I took a great fancy and I always wanted to go home with her and stay all night. She was from a very poor family and one whom my mother knew nothing about and so naturally always refused my requests. After being refused several times, I made my mind I would go and so when it came time for me to go home after school, I told my brothers and sisters that mother had said that I could go home with this little girl. When they doubted it, I insisted that that was what mother had said, but I didn't anymore than get to her home when remorse overtook me

¹ David Lapham (10 Apr 1795 - 13 Feb 1853)

² Samantha Vail (26 Aug 1801 - 14 Sep 1849)

³ Dr. David Harris Otis (4 Apr 1775 - 8 Aug 1847)

⁴ Harris Foster Otis (3 Jun 1816 - 9 May 1861)

⁵ Pauline Keese Lapham (9 Jul 1822 - 27 Jul 1875)

and I wanted to go home. I didn't like anything they had to eat or anything about their house so I cried most of the time. It was have been very interesting to the little girl and her mother. Next day when I went to school my brothers and sisters didn't notice me at all, didn't seem to know me and at lunch time there was no way made for me to have anything to eat but I was allowed to crawl into the cutter to go home after school, but no one at home seemed to know me. There was no place set for me at the table. I did get something to eat by going into the kitchen. When it came time for me to go to bed (I always slept in a trundle bed next to my sister Lydia in my father's and mother's room) my mother tucked up Lydia but never saw me at all. I stood it until mother and father were in bed when I climbed in with them and very tearfully told them how sorry I was and that I would never do it again. That's the first wrong story I can remember telling. Not the last however, but it was the last time I ever ran away from home.

We lived at Danby Four Corners until I was about six years old and then we moved onto a very beautiful farm in Danbyborough, a Village of about three thousand.

One or two events stand out very vividly in my mind about this time. One was when I returned from school one afternoon and found my baby brother Lawrence, to whom I was always most devoted as long as he lived. The other was that we had a very handsome Irish girl who worked for my mother and who was always very kind to me and liked to entertain me with stories. She would sit me on the table while she was ironing and tell me about the fairies in Ireland who lived in the bogs and how she had seen them jump from hillock to hillock and disappear in the gloaming. I went to Mass occasionally with her which always made a great impression upon me.

We moved to Manchester when I was about eight years old because my father had purchased a very interesting place of ten acres in order to give us children the educational advantages of that City. But at this time he had a very strong desire to move West, for he felt the opportunity for investing money much better there than in Vermont. In Kansas at that time he could get a high rate of interest so we only lived in Manchester three years.

I was a very imaginative child and was very much disappointed that Manchester had the same kind of a sky, grass, etc., as we had in Danby for I expected everything to be different. When we moved into the house at Manchester, I was very anxious to go over it with the other children to choose my room, etc., and everything was all excitement. My mother was very tired, trying to get things settled so that we could all sleep comfortably that night. My brother who was a baby and would creep around everywhere in the dust and dirt and mother had asked me once or twice to take the baby, which as a rule I was always delighted to do, but now I was so excited that I did not want to sit still. So she sat me down pretty solid in a large rocking chair and put the baby in my arms and told me to take care of him while she was so busy. So I put my arms around him tight and let him holler, not making the slightest effort to entertain him and mother seeing this, let me have him for a good long time.

When we arrived at Manchester I attended the Public School for a while and I was very timid and shy. My father took my brothers and sisters and me the first time and the teacher put us in the front seats until other places could be found for us. A girl, several years older, who sat just opposite, reached over and said to me, "Did I see that monkey there"? When I answered "No" she told me to look in the glass when I got home. My sister heard her say it and seeing my face get very red felt sorry for me, so as soon as school was out she ran up to the girl and bumped her head right into the girl's stomach so that she fell down.

I attended the Public School a year, then I went to school to a Miss Orvis who had started a private school in the principle hotel in Manchester. She selcted [sic] twelve little girls and we went to her for two years. She wanted my father to leave me with her to educate when the family moved West but, of course, they would not do that.

One of the most impressive things while we lived in Manchester was the graduation of my brother William at Burrs Seminary. I was permitted to sit up and go to the evening exercises to hear him deliver the valedictory. He looked so handsome and

spoke so well that everyone was delighted with him and at the close the stage was covered with flowers, presented to him and as he gathered all he could carry and walked off the stage, I nearly burst with pride.

At this point I would like to tell a little story which always interests the children.

I was very fond of apples and we always put in many barrelss [sic] in the fall in a dark room in the basement which was formerly a wine cellar. One day I wanted a particular kind of an apple very much and kept teasing my mother to ask someone to get it for me. My mother told me that everyone was busy and there was no reason why I could not take a candle and get it myself which I finally decided to do. But being afraid of my shadow always it took much courage to descent [sic] into the dark regions of the cellar but I found the barrel with the desired apples I wanted and reached down to get it when suddenly a horrible noise and a great furey [sic] monster rose beside. I dropped the candle and everything right into the barrel and ran like mad to get up the stairs but my brother William, who was the guilty party and had donned my father's fur overcoat in order to represent a bear was frightened almost as badly as I was and called to me to come back, that it was brother William and he would tell me a story, anything I wanted and never being able to withstand one of brother Williams' stories, I finally returned and sat down beside while he entertained me for a half hour with stories of giants, etc., until my face was of natural color and I had ceased to tremble.

After three years in Manchester we left to Kansas. Transportation was such that it took us a week to go. There were no pullman or dining cars, but we were given twenty minutes to eat at the stations and at every terminal we had to wait several hours. Some of those terminals, I remember, were Rochester, Buffalo and then at Detroit we had to ferry across the River. The next incident that I recall was that our engine broke down on the prairies of Missouri where we stayed all day. My brother and I gathered flowers and broke off large branched [sic] or redbud and trimmed our seats with it. We had left snow in Vermont. When we reached St. Joe we had to again ferry across the River to Leavenworth where we stayed all night and Sunday morning we took a stage, (our family filling it) to go to Topeka, a distance of sixty miles which we made in a day. By the end of that day we children were so tired and cross that we did not like anything to eat or anything else.

When we arrived at Topeka, -April 1860, the only Hotel was the dingy old Capitol house. My father had had a home built so that we were able to move right in but we first had dinner at the Hotel and then we all went over to the house. The landlady let her little girl walk over with us. She was about my age. We were so happy to be out of the stage and away from the cars.

Soon after we arrived at the house we saw a man running towards us. He wanted my father at once and he told me that John Richie, an army man, had shot an officer and they wanted my father at the hotel. It frightened me very much to hear about it. Father seeing my frightened face and thinking I might quiet me, said that I might go with him, also the little girl who was with us. We arrived at the hotel, just in time to see the murdered man brought in, which stroke terror to my soul and I fled home crying and begging to go back to Vermont. After a while my father came home and tried to soothe me. He told me Mr. Richie was a friend of his and not a bad man that this Mr. Arms had been drinking and had threatened Mr. Richie and had shot in self defense. John Richie was an abolishmentist [sic] and had been fighting to keep Kansas a free state but I was too little to understand and my one thought was what a cruel man this Mr. Richie was. I thought how big and white his teeth looked and what an awful man he must be. Mr. Richie was acquitted at his trial and I learned to like him very much later on.

That year Topeka was made the Capitol. There was a strife between Topeka, Compton and Lawrence as to which should have it but Topeka won out and I loved the song "Topeka Got the Capitol, for So the People Say".

My father was elected Mayor the first year. Topeka had then about five hundred inhabitants. We were very well acquainted with the territorial governor and the

leutenant [sic] governor, both whose names were Robinson. There were several very nice families living at Topeka at this time. That fall Kansas was admitted as a State.

Soon after we arrived a private school was started by two young men, which school I attended and my remembrance is that it was a very fine school. I attended this institution until the beginning of the War when these two men enlisted. I was a very dramatic event the day they informed the children that they were going to the War and said Goodbye. The school was closed and we never saw them again. One of the young men was killed and the other became permanently blind.

A few weeked [sic] before Fort Sumter was fired upon, my father met with an accident and died. He was having his office made over and the back stairs had been removed. He was leaning against the door which opened onto these stairs when the door gave way and he fell to the floor below. He only lived twenty-four hours. I remember everything very vividly, the men who came to get my mother and brother. It was early in the morning and the children were still in bed but we dressed in a hurry and stood like frightened little things, waiting and watching while the neighbors prepared the house and the room for him.

That summer of 1860 was the year of the great draught. No rain all summer. The heat was intense. The earth cracked in places and nothing grew or could survive the terrible heat. We had to send over into Missouri for everything we had to eat. The following fall my brother William was taken sick with typhoid fever and lived only two weeks. He was taken violently delirious and remained soe [sic] the entire time. William, although much older than I, taught me so many things and I was very proud and fond of him. We had several horses and William would come up on horseback, take me up with him and off we would go, until I became a perfectly fearless rider. William was a very brilliant student and had passed his entrance examinations from Harvard University, expecting to go the next fall. His death was a great blow to the family.

After my father died the War came on and the next two years were the most exciting ones for everyone. Living on the border line as we did, our State was subject to continual raids. My father's business had been loaning money and he had shown excellent judgment. His securities were considered perfect. A great deal of this money was loaned on valuable lands, but the War coming on as it did, destroyed land values and everything else. Therefore, my mother had a very hard time for a few years. She was obliged to take these lands in lue [sic] of money and had instead of interest coming in, heavy taxes to pay.