



QUAKER HILL
(LOCAL HISTORY)
S E R I E S

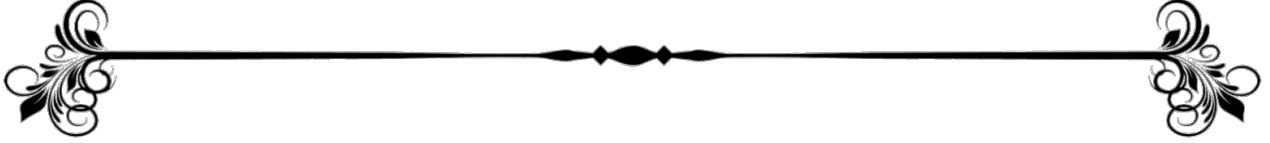
VIII. Richard Osborn.
A Reminiscence.

BY

MARGARET B. MONAHAN.

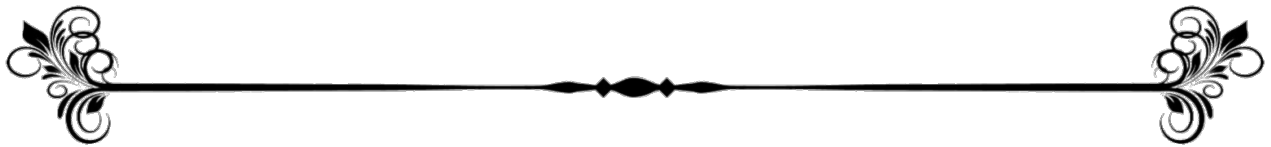


RICHARD OSBORN



RICHARD OSBORN
A REMINISCENCE.

Second Edition



BY
MARGARET B. MONAHAN.

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To My Good Friends

RICHARD AND ROBY OSBORN,

Who have never varied in their loving kindness toward me, since I came twelve years ago, a stranger, to dwell in their midst; and who, in my hour of greatest need, brought to me the veritable "cup of coldwater" in the name of our common discipleship, I dedicate the following pages.

Quaker Hill, September 6th, 1902.

RICHARD OSBORN A REMINISCENCE



QUAKER HILL has been described as “a place which is all length and no breadth.” This is but an epigrammatic way of saying that in miles its length is to its width, as six is to one.

Thus it is that Quaker Hill cannot be called a village or hamlet; being only one long street, with houses and farms on either side. The South, or Hotel end, hardly knows there is a beautiful North or farming end; the North hears but vaguely and infrequently of the South; while the Middle Distance maintains a courteous bowing acquaintance with both. Each little section has its own ways, its own traditions; the community of interest which inheres in a place having a central rallying point is lacking. This remoteness of living tends naturally to segregation; whether in time to come, there may be found interests strong enough to cause Quaker Hill people to become a solidarity, is a question; and in the answer to that question lies Quaker Hill’s future.

Its past, however, is its own, and what a past it is. From the time the Oblong was settled, about 1730, by Friends from Rhode Island, until a comparatively recent date, the Old Meeting House was the Jerusalem of the Hill people, “whither the tribes went up to the testimony of the Lord;” and to this day it attracts, as nothing else in our midst can do.

There was no lack of unity in the days when those strong, upright, uncompromising men and women sought and found, on this hill top, and in this building, their heart’s desire — “freedom to worship God,” and in the shadow of the Old Meeting House, lived out their lives of plain living and high thinking. Plain even to austerity was the living, rugged and difficult the conditions of existence; high indeed the thinking which turned out the pioneers of many of the advance movements of the last century and a half, and made it possible to say of old Quaker Hill, “this or that great enterprise for the uplifting of God’s creatures was born there.”

Here lived, loved and died, sturdy, Godfearing men and women; here they thought, prayed, testified, they were granted visions. They did their utmost endeavor for God and their right, and finally, dying, they were gathered to their fathers, and laid to rest beneath the sod at the western end of the plot of ground upon which the Meeting House stands. The turf grows green above them; “no storied urn, or monumental bust” marks their restingplace; but they left their mark not only upon this community, but upon the times in which they lived.

Up the highway, to the northward, on the west side of the road, stands a comfortable farm house, gable end to the street. It is the site of the old Osborn place, where six generations of that name have lived, and one is still living, and where Richard Osborn and his father were born. Of these six generations, not a man has ever been known to use spirituous liquors, or tobacco, to indulge in any profanity, or to be guilty of a dishonest action.

The situation of the old place is excellent; sheltered from the violence of northeast storms, yet open to the southern sun and the pleasant western breezes, and commanding a beautiful view of the distant Catskill Mountains. An abundant spring of delicious soft water adds value to the place. Here, from Rhode Island, in 1760, came Paul Osborn, and his wife, Elizabeth. He was the first of that name in the Oblong, as it was then called. His nephew, Isaac, followed him some four years later. The house in which they took up their abode, was built of hand hewn timber, pinned together with oaken pins; a story and a half in height at the East end, with roof sloping long and low at the other, and one huge chimney in the middle, round which clustered three fireplaces, in as many different rooms. These were all the heating facilities the house afforded its inmates, but

“Blow high, blow low, no winds that blow, Could quench their hearth fires’ ruddy glow.”

The “great room with the bed room attached,” as it is called in a contemporaneous document,

and the kitchen, had each its cavernous fireplace, into which were rolled great logs from the forests that covered the hills; but of the “chambers above” these rooms, of which the same document goes on to speak, imagination fails to picture the iciness during an old-fashioned Quaker Hill winter.

This was at about the time when New York City, under the governorship of Mynheer Rip Van Dam, had grown phenomenally, till it numbered almost eight thousand inhabitants, and its northern suburbs nearly reached Nassau street. New York State was a (more or less) loyal British colony; George the Third was still Prince of Wales, and the War of the Revolution was in the shadowy future.

Life in the Osborn homestead was like that of any colonial yeoman, as farmers were then designated. By the aid of cumbrous implements of old country pattern, they tilled the fertile, productive fields, after they had cleared them of timber, and marketed such of their produce as they did not consume. Of wagons and such conveniences there were none, all journeying being done on horseback, all transporting of goods by means of saddle bags.

Within doors the women spun wool and flax, and wove homespun on hand looms. They dipped or “run” candles of their sheep’s tallow, and by their light, or that of the great wood fires, knit stockings of the wool of those same sheep. They cooked over the big logs, with hook and crane, and baked, in the great brick oven, loaves of “rie” and Indian, sweet, crisp, wholesome, delicious. But in these labors the mistress of the house, Elizabeth, could not share; for forty years she was blind. Yet did this affliction but endear her to her husband, a glimpse of whose loving tenderness we catch, in reading the provisions made in his will, for the well-being, comfort and convenience of his “dearly beloved wife, Elizabeth.” And the cares and duties of her household did not lapse, but were lifted and carried for her by one Mary Reynold, in such wise as to satisfy both Elizabeth and her husband, for he calls Mary “my esteemed friend; having had some knowledge of her good conduct in my family.”

To “friends traveling on truth’s account,” the doors of the old house always swung wide. Paul Osborn kept open house for “his friends, the people called Quakers,” during his lifetime, and his will provides in the most minute and careful manner for his wife, “the better to qualifye her to keep a house of entertainment for friends.” She is to have “half his movabel estate,” the yearly interest on a considerable sum of money, and also “speshues,” (whatever that may be,) of “wheat, Indian corn, rie, oats, sheeps woll, cotton woll, molesses, coffe, chocolate, turneps, and potates,” all to be “good and marchantable.” Isaac Osborn, his executor, is to provide “a sufficiency of firewood, cutt fit for the fire, likewise to draw the same, and make the fiers.” Also, “a good milch cow in the Spring, and the same in the Fall,” and “he shall keep the said cow well in the winter season at the barn with good hay, and in the summer season he shall keep her well with grass, handy for the conveniency of milking.” All these things to be for his “dearly beloved wife Elizabeth, during her nateral life,” and after her, in less measure, “the same to be to Mary Reynold.” The “littel meadow in lot 29,” he gives Isaac Osborn, “that he shall keep well all horses of friends my wife shall send him;” and should Isaac “neglect the injunctions herein enjoined,” and cease to keep such house of entertainment for friends, then his right to certain legacies “shall decend and revolve to them, him or her that shalt truely fulfil them.” And all his lands in the latter case, Paul gives to the “yearly meeting for Friends, those people called Quakers, of Philadelphia.” It is needless to say to those for whom the name, Osborn, is a synonym for rectitude, that the “injunctions herein enjoined” were carried out to the letter by the nephew.

Such was the “plain living” of Paul Osborn; in his “high thinking” consisted his *life*. At this time the Oblong Meeting was a power. On First Days the Meeting House was filled with a devout throng of worshippers, many of them coming from great distances, walking barefoot and carrying their shoes in their hands. In this assemblage Paul Osborn spoke, from time to time. No record of his testimonies is left; but one may imagine the form they would take during the restless excitement and suspense of pre-Revolutionary days, as well as when, a little later, the presence in the meetings of uniformed soldiers served to point the moral of his words. There is extant no connected story of

his life, some of its more important dates even, are missing. He emerges at intervals from the shadowy past, through the medium of disconnected anecdotes, but all of those portray marked traits of individuality. There is something gigantic about this fine, strongly marked, individual character; he might have sat for the portrait of Valiant-for-Truth, in Bunyan's immortal allegory.

During a visit of a party of "friends traveling on truth's account," from England, he felt moved to journey with them, to preach and teach, and when they left, he too rode away, on horseback, setting his face toward the Carolinas, which in due time he reached, and whence after many months he returned; but no record of this most interesting journey has been preserved. On his homeward way, he arrived at length, on First Day, within a few miles of Quaker Hill. "The road winds upward all the way," from the Connecticut valley, shut in by leafy fragrant woods, until the top of the hill is reached, when there suddenly bursts upon the view a vision to quicken the heart — the everlasting hills, stretching for miles along the horizon. As Paul Osborn, reaching the crest of the hill, beheld this harbinger of home, he was met by a minister of another denomination, who, reining in his horse, called Paul to account for infringing the sacredness of the Connecticut Sabbath, by traveling on that day. It would have been quite within reason for Paul to urge the fact of his wife's affliction — her blindness — in extenuation of his haste — but humor is a prerogative of every Osborn, so he gravely replied, without entering into particulars, that he was but hastening home to his wife, who had not seen him for forty years; whereupon he was allowed to go on his way rejoicing by the solemn busy-body in other men's matters.

In 1776 the war cloud that had muttered and lowered over the Colonies broke; and the next year the tide of war surged up and down the Harlem valley. One First Day morning, in the mellow October days of that year, the worshipping stillness of the Friends' Meeting was broken by the tramp of horses, and the jangling of spurs, as a band of soldiers rode up, dismounted and entered the building. They remained quiet and reverent, till the handshaking of the elders closed the meeting; then the commanding officer rose, and in the name of the Continental Congress took possession of the building for a hospital for the troops, and as such it was used all that winter. After this, meetings were held in the "great room" in the house of Paul Osborn, and were often frequented by soldiers stationed in the place, who listened attentively to the speaking, and left quietly at the close of meeting.

In 1780, four years after the beginning of the Revolutionary war, Paul Osborn died, and was buried on his own land, and no man knoweth of his sepulchre at this day, and no stone marks the spot. But "e'en in his ashes live his wonted fires," and he being dead yet speaketh.

His nephew Isaac, next in descent, was born in 1743, in Salem, Massachusetts, where he remained till he followed Paul Osborn to Quaker Hill. As a youth he lived through that most curious and dreadful manifestation of superstition and cruelty, the Salem Witchcraft. It naturally made a deep impression on his mind, susceptible as it must have been at that period. Doubtless he had many a gruesome tale to tell, on winter nights, when the stars sparkled brighter and brighter as the bitter cold silently strengthened, or when snow flew, and the wind howled round the house, and up and down the great chimney throat, while the fire in the "great room" snapped defiance to the cold. Of these stories unfortunately, only one, and that slight and vague, has been preserved; namely, that of a young girl's being seen to hold a rifle, straight and steady poised upon the tip of her extended forefinger.

His wife Mary Irish died, leaving him two children, Paul and Phoebe; and he never married again, though often advised to do so, giving as a reason that "he thought too much of his children." He was a sturdy, robust man, of fine physique; his hair was snow white from his youth, and he was a stranger to all effeminacy. After the death of his wife, he took up his abode in the east end of the old house, and slept in the bedroom attached to the great room. With the mercury ranging several degrees below zero for days at a time, and no fire in the room, it would seem to the present generation a veritable "chamber of horrors." The only mitigation of the cold of the room came by means of the

warming pan, a brass receptacle for hot coals, set on a long handle, filled from the live embers of the hearth, and thrust, all glowing with grateful heat, between the “homespun” flannel sheets. But even this luxury was eschewed by the rugged old man, who, until near the close of his life, did not allow the warming pan to be brought him, saying “he could not sleep so warm.”

Isaac Osborn was a silent but striking figure in the Friends’ Meetings held in the “great room.” He never spoke in meeting; but the man himself attracted more attention from the Continental soldiers present at the meetings, than the speech of some more loquacious friends. At the least approach of restlessness on the part of any one of the soldiers, the others would whisper, “Keep still, keep still, — maybe he will preach by and by.”

There was at that time a hat factory situated at the foot of the long hill to the north of the Osborn place, and owned by one Joseph Seelye. When Isaac Osborn was eighty years old he instructed Joseph to make for him a hat, of the approved fuzzy beaver type. This was duly accomplished, to the entire satisfaction of Joseph Seelye, who said with pardonable pride, when delivering it to its owner:

“There Isaac, that is a good hat; it will last thee all the rest of thy life, *if thee dies in any sort of season!*”

One is rejoiced to know that it did not outlast Isaac, but that he lived to order and to wear other hats. He died at the age of ninety-six years and six months, from a fractured skull, the consequence of a fall.

Of his two children, Paul the elder was the father of Richard Osborn. No facts about him seem to be obtainable, except the dates of his birth, in 1782, his marriage to Jemima Titus, in 1806, and finally his death, in 1867. Of traditions, this one survives, a tribute to his mercifulness to the brute creation. A neighbor once remarked that if he *had* to be a horse, he would like to be Paul Osborn’s horse. He had three children, Isaac, William and Richard, all born on the old place.

Richard Osborn, the present head of the family, was born in 1816. His earliest recollections hover round the room back of the “great room,” in which stood an old-time high bedstead of the catafalque order, and of such altitude as to require steps for its attainment. Under this structure in the daytime was rolled a trundle bed, to be rolled out each night for the accommodation of Richard and his brother William. Opposite to the Meeting House, among the picturesque old willows, stood a little schoolhouse in which was held a Friends’ school, and here his school days were passed.

He was a farmer’s son, and as he grew to manhood business and inclination frequently carried him northward down the mile-long hill to Dover. At the foot of the hill lived Ira Hoag, who had several daughters, of whom one, Roby, attracted the attention and awakened the interest of Richard Osborn, and presently they were engaged to be married. The wedding took place Nov. 23d, 1842, in the New Meeting House. In the old building, in 1770, their grandparents had been married.

The day was bright and warm, with the keen tingle of Autumn beneath its softness, and the sparkle of a light snow flurry at nightfall. Richard Osborn and his friend, Daniel Congdon, rising betimes, harnessed the horses, put them to the best carriage, and drove to Dover where the bride and her sister Mary awaited them. Her wedding gown was thick, lustreless silk, of a ‘delightful yellowish olive, her bonnet white, Beneath it her dark hair was smoothly banded, and from its demure shelter her eyes looked gravely out. His vest was a fine tawny brown, of a sprigged pattern; both gown and vest as artistically harmonious as the product of an Eastern loom, Pieces of both are sewn into a patchwork quilt, now a family heirloom.

Up the long hill to the Meeting House they drove, through the still dreaminess of the Indian Summer day, the glory of the hazy, purple hills before them, around them a symphony in sunlit greys and browns, and above, the measureless blue depths of the sky. It was Wednesday, the day of the regular midweek meeting, and the house was crowded. The young couple took their places upon the facing seats, and the meeting began. Daniel Haviland was minister and he spoke at length. Then, after a short pause, Richard Osborn and Roby Hoag arose, and, clasping hands, spoke alternately the few solemn sentences of the Friends’ marriage ceremony, which have united them for sixty years

in a union so excellent, so perfect in all respects, that even the casual observer feels it is not for time only, but for eternity. Then was brought forth the marriage certificate, fairly engrossed in the bridegroom's own hand, and many names of those present were affixed, after which it was read aloud. This being done, and kindly greetings offered, Richard and Roby Osborn drove back to her home. The wedding was well furnished with guests, and four fat turkeys graced the board that day. Ten years ago, in the beautiful Indian Summer of 1892, and the still more beautiful Indian Summer of two well spent lives, the golden wedding was celebrated, and three of the guests who had been signers of the original certificate, affixed their names to the second one, being followed by two sons, a daughter, and five grandchildren.

Mr. and Mrs. Osborn lived for awhile near what is now called Cass's Corners, and then moved to the site of the present postoffice. Here stood a brick house in which Lafayette had stayed during the memorable year of 1778; this house they occupied for some years. It was then taken down, and the bricks being good, they were built into the house Mr. Osborn now occupies, this latter house being moved down from Seelye Hill. The lumber of which it is built was drawn in the rough from Poughkeepsie, by Joseph Seelye, in 1834. To drive to Poughkeepsie and back in a day was then no uncommon feat, and was once accomplished by Mr. and Mrs. Osborn for the purpose of exchanging a stove, whose draught was imperfect. In 1850 the first whistle of the railroad running through the Harlem Valley was heard, and to the listening ears on Quaker Hill, Mr. Osborn quotes one of his neighbors as saying that "it had a very pleasant sound." In 1870 the Pawling Savings Bank was incorporated, and Mr. Osborn was elected a director, an office he still holds. He was for twentyone consecutive years clerk of the Nine Partners' Meeting, located at what is now called the village of Millbrook; and he has served as clerk of some Meeting, for, in all, fifty seven years. He has always been, and is to-day, a clearly defined exponent of the faith of his ancestors. Like a silhouette of the olden time, clean cut, distinct, shadowless, he stands against a chaotic background of modern thought; decided, uncompromising in his views; but so just, so kind, so upright, so full of goodness, in short so lovable, if one may be permitted the word, that those who know him are well-nigh won to his opinions, through the strength of his personality. The facts of his life presented to-day, are few, simple, and insufficient to account for the undeniable influence he has wielded in the community. In migratory America, the fact that he is living to-day, with the sixth generation of his name, in the very spot his ancestors took possession of, one hundred and forty-two years ago, gives dignity to his surroundings; but to himself alone are due the respect, consideration and affection which are accorded him by his friends and neighbors. His life is the mellowed fruit of a strenuous ancestral training; and he keeps the simplicity of his forefathers without disdaining the larger opportunity of his own day.

Gone are the days of great fireplaces, and their wood fires; of hook and crane, of home spinning and weaving, of pillions and saddle bags; we look back at them with a kind of wistful regret for their lost picturesqueness, but with no longing to return to them and their paucity of resource. To-day, the sharp, insistent rasp of the telephone bell makes incessant, mandatory calls upon the Osborn family, and they may order their stoves, (or their hot water heating plants,) from Poughkeepsie, New York or Chicago, in five minutes.

Well did the men and women of those past days fulfill their devoir, living up to the light of their times; well shall it be for us of the present dowered age, if we be found, not degenerates, but worthy heritors of a worthy past.

"Life greatens in these later years; The century's aloe flowers to-day."

