

Blessed Apple Grower

MISSIONARY, NURSERYMAN, AND FOLK HERO, THE FACTS ABOUT JOHNNY APPLESEED ARE AT LEAST AS INTERESTING AS THE LEGEND..



By Gregory LeFever

Around the year 1800, John Chapman of Leominster, Massachusetts, was described as a slightly built man of barely medium height. Yet, over the next forty years, he grew into a towering figure of American folklore.

As Johnny Appleseed, he enchanted waves of settlers moving west into Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. And while the many recollections, news accounts, children's stories, and even movies about him contain much exaggeration, the facts surrounding Johnny are altogether as interesting as the tall tales.

When sifting fact from fiction about Johnny, it's important to remember that almost every "fact" is subject to debate. One reason is that, from about 1810 until he died in 1845, he was a celebrity to the pioneers – hundreds of whom took him in for a night or a few days – and they loved creating and embellishing stories about him, making him into a fascinating frontier eccentric. It wasn't until 1871, about twenty-five years after his death, that Harper's New Monthly Magazine published the first in-depth article about Johnny, again relying on some facts and a lot of legend.

What has emerged in recent years due to dedicated research is quite different from the image of the carefree fellow with a cooking pot for a hat, skipping barefoot through open meadows in springtime, joyfully strewing apple seeds wherever he went – the cute, idealized image made popular by the 1948 animated short film "Johnny Appleseed" from Walt Disney.

We now know that Johnny was, first and foremost, a passionate Christian missionary, and secondly a nurseryman of uncommon ability who earned a respectable living selling apple saplings to settlers. He blended these vocations beautifully, helping many hundreds of families secure land under provisions of the Northwest Ordinance, and offering them a means to grow their own fruit – meanwhile satisfying his own inner need to spread the "good news." In both ways, it seems, Johnny was a godsend.



Into the Wilderness

Johnny's early life has been more thoroughly documented recently, but the bare facts are that his mother Elizabeth died in 1776 when he was not quite two years old and his father Nathaniel was off fighting in the Revolutionary War. He and his older sister stayed with relatives until their father returned from the war in 1780 and was quickly remarried to Lucy Cooley, with whom he had ten more children.

Johnny was twenty-three and his half-brother Nathaniel sixteen when the two left Massachusetts in 1797 to head west – some accounts put their departure at about five years earlier – into Pennsylvania. Records show that in early 1798 Johnny established his first nursery, along a creek in northwestern Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, he and Nathaniel continued to roam parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio, planting a few nurseries as they went, until 1805 when Nathaniel rejoined their father and his large family to help build a homestead in eastern Ohio, while Johnny wandered farther west.

One area that remains a mystery – and therefore the subject of several conflicting stories – concerns Johnny's romantic life. Notable Ohio historian Henry Howe wrote in 1903 that Johnny remained a bachelor because a woman in Perryville accepted a marriage proposal from another man just before Johnny had a chance to propose to her, breaking his heart. A stranger story is that he had paid a family to care for a young girl he'd met so that he could propose to her when she reached the age of fifteen, but when he made a surprise visit to the home, he found the girl flirting with another young man, which provoked Johnny into breaking off the relationship.

A more common account, however, is that marriage simply did not suit Johnny's chosen lifestyle, with him often telling people, "I'll not marry in this world, but will have a pure wife in Heaven."

Bringing the Good News

There are many accounts of Johnny greeting the settlers who welcomed him into their cabins with, "I've got good news, right fresh from Heaven." He often said his real mission on earth was to plant the word of God among these lonely and weary families.

"We can hear him read now, just as he did that summer day," a woman recalled in the Harper's magazine article. "We were busy quilting upstairs and he lay near the door, his voice rising denunciatory and thrilling – strong and loud as the roar of wind and waves, then soft and soothing as the balmy airs that quivered the morning-glory leaves about his gray beard. His was a strange eloquence at times, and he was undoubtedly a man of genius."

As a child, he attended a Congregationalist church in Massachusetts, later admitting he was put off by the harsh and judgmental image of God he heard from the pulpit. Around 1800, he first encountered the writings of the Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Christian who emphasized God's infinite love and who wrote about conversing with angels during his frequent visits to Heaven, reminiscent of today's near-death experiencers.

Johnny, too, said he often crossed back and forth between this existence and the spiritual realms. He too told friends of his conversations with angels and of having met the spirit of his future wife in the hereafter.

In remote cabins, often by firelight, Johnny preached a gentle and joyous Christianity, reading parts of the Bible – the Sermon on the Mount was among his favorite pieces – and sections of Swedenborg's spiritual writings. Because he could carry



JOHNNY APPLESEED.

This image of Johnny Appleseed is probably quite historically accurate, depicting him in more traditional clothing and hat. He was strictly opposed to pruning and grafting, which raises questions about the pruning knife in his hand. This 1862 drawing is from "A History of the Pioneer and Modern Times of Ashland County," a portion of Ohio where Johnny spent considerable time.



The first definitive article about Johnny Appleseed was in an 1871 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine, which featured this fanciful drawing of Johnny about 25 years after his death. This drawing helped create the eccentric image of the rough tunic, bare feet, and strange hat that became embedded in the public's imagination. (Courtesy Ohio Historical Society, Robert Price Collection)

few books with him, he divided Swedenborg's volumes into separate chapters and left them with families to study. On his return visits, he would collect the chapters and lend the family other chapters until his next visit, and so on with the neighboring families along his journeys.

In fact, Johnny used the profits from his nurseries to acquire more Swedenborg books to distribute to the settlers. He is known to have bartered hundreds of acres in exchange for Swedenborg's writings. In 1817, a publishing operation in Manchester, England, dedicated to printing Swedenborg's books, took note of Johnny's nursery business by stating: "The profits of the whole are intended for the purpose of enabling him to print all the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg and to distribute them through the western settlements of the United States."

Selling Saplings, Not Apples

Another dramatic departure from the legend about Johnny concerns his keen business sense. The legend has him planting orchards so settlers could harvest apples, but in reality he planted nurseries so he could sell apple saplings to the frontier families.

This made good business sense because 1787's congressional enactment of the Northwest Ordinance – which opened for settlement the huge territory south of the Great Lakes to the Ohio River and west to the Mississippi River – made it a condition of holding a land grant that the new owner plant 50 apple or pear trees within the first three years. Congress felt that requiring these orchards would discourage land speculation, and Johnny was only too happy to help settlers comply.

Operating always along the edge of pioneer settlement, Johnny predicted where new families would seek land. His ability to locate sites well suited for settlement was a key to his success. In the springtime, he planted nurseries in these areas, built brush fences around them, hired men or boys to watch over the nurseries, and then moved on to plant other nurseries and to collect new seeds from cider mills.

Walking back and forth through the wilderness, he returned during the summer months to mend fences and cultivate the seedlings in his far-flung nurseries. With his uncanny sense of timing, when the new settlers arrived, his nurseries usually had several hundred apple saplings he could quickly sell for at least a nickel apiece. Other times, he sold the entire established nursery. These transactions meant the settlers obtained the young trees they needed for securing their land grant and growing their own fruit, while Johnny reaped a healthy profit.

Johnny often described the apple as "a rare and perfect gift from the Almighty," yet regarded pruning or grafting of apple trees to be "absolute wickedness," according to the Harper's article. The result was that the apples from Johnny's trees were very, very sour. While they may not have been good for eating or for pies or fritters, they made excellent hard cider and apple jack, two popular alcoholic beverages on the American frontier – and perhaps yet another reason for Johnny's extraordinary popularity with the pioneers.

All Friends, No Foes

Over the years, it became a real distinction to have Johnny stay a few nights with one's family, an event that usually proved to be a delight for children and adults alike. His friendly, spiritual demeanor also appealed to some of the settlers' fiercest enemies.

Because he operated on the outskirts of white settlement, Johnny was frequently in contact with Native Americans, including some who were engaged in outright war against the pioneers. He once stated he'd walked more than four thousand miles through the wilderness and never encountered a single insolent Indian, blaming most of the conflict on settlers' mistreatment of the Indians. In turn, the Indians are said to have considered Johnny as being touched by the Great Spirit, many regarding him as a medicine man or shaman.

Likewise, much of Johnny's legendary gentleness with animals appears to be factual. He had a huge soft spot in his heart for lame and broken-down horses that settlers had abandoned in the wilderness. Finding these discarded animals, he often paid people to care for them and then gave the horses to needy families on the condition that they treat the horses well. There's also an often-repeated story about Johnny saving a wolf caught in a trap, where Johnny bandaged the wounded animal's leg and the grateful wolf became Johnny's pet for months to come.

Some of the animal legends tend to stretch the imagination. It's doubtful that he extinguished his bonfires because mosquitoes were getting burned, or that he never swatted a fly. In his later years at least, he was mostly vegetarian, although an 1845 newspaper account has him eating bread and cold meat on a street in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and there seem to be no stories of him ever turning down a home-cooked meal that included meat.

“Clad in Coarse Raiment”

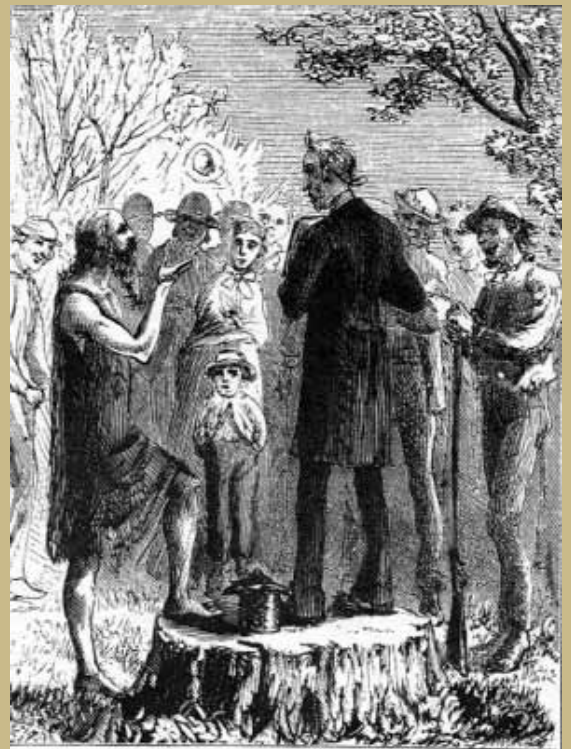
As with almost all Johnny Appleseed stories, the descriptions of his appearance are a mix of fact and fiction. He is frequently depicted as wandering year-round through forests and meadows always barefoot, his clothing in rags, and with a tin cooking pot as a hat. This was the description in the 1871 Harper's magazine article that established Johnny as a folk hero and embedded the image in the American imagination.

Historians and folklorists tend to believe that he did travel barefoot for thousands of miles along his lifelong journey. But so did a lot of other people during that time and place, where pioneers are often described as barefoot during the warmer months to extend the life of their shoes and boots. Descriptions exist of Johnny wearing sandals and shoes during the snowy months, probably either self-made or given to him by families he visited.

Apparently his clothing was truly ragged. He is often described as wearing shirts and pants full of rips and holes, usually ill-fitting. For several years he is said to have cut neck and arm holes in the large burlap bags in which coffee beans were shipped, wearing the bags like ponchos. Mostly, Johnny's clothing was simple, durable and free – fashion and style meaning nothing to him.

And as for his cooking-pot hat, current thinking is that he carried a tin pot with him and may have plopped it on his head now and then to amuse children. But anyone who has tried to walk across a room with a pot for a hat is aware of the difficulty and discomfort it causes. The pot hat is another element of the Harper's article – which also contended that Johnny sometimes created make-do cardboard visors for his pot hat. Other accounts described him as wearing more traditional hats of his era.

One apparently factual incident speaks directly to Johnny's appearance, as well as to his religion. Around 1840 in Mansfield, Ohio, a traveling minister stood one day on a tree stump and preached a harsh sermon to townspeople on the sin of extravagance, chastising them for using calico and store-bought tea, among other things. Bystanders reported that Johnny stood at the edge of the audience, beyond the preacher's line of vision, listening uncomfortably to the harsh scolding.



This drawing from the 1871 Harper's magazine article depicts the incident in Mansfield, Ohio, around 1840 when a preacher was chastising townspeople for living too extravagantly, saying there were no more Christians "barefoot and clad in coarse raiment." When Johnny stepped forward as proof of a true "primitive Christian," the preacher was stunned and immediately ended his sermon.

(Courtesy Ohio Historical Society, Robert Price Collection)

"I ask you," the preacher shouted, "where now is there a man who, like the primitive Christians, is traveling to heaven barefooted and clad in coarse raiment?" Again the preacher shouted his question. Finally, Johnny came forward, dressed in his coffee-bag cloak and placed his bare foot on the stump in front of the preacher. "Here's your primitive Christian," Johnny announced. The preacher was so startled that he stopped his sermon and walked away.

A Labor of Love

Always keeping to the western edge of pioneer settlement, after 1840 Johnny spent most of his time in northeastern Indiana, continuing to plant nurseries, though not at the pace of his more youthful years. As with almost every other aspect of his life, Johnny's death is clouded by confusion. The Harper's magazine article says he lived until 1847, but Indiana newspapers in both Fort Wayne and Goshen reported his death in March of 1845, making him seventy years old at a time when a man's average life expectancy was forty.

The newspapers reported that Johnny had been seen in Fort Wayne just two days prior to his death and that he had spent his last night the cabin of the William Worth family. Accounts say he preached to the family that evening about the Sermon on the Mount, slept on the cabin floor, and was found the next morning "with his features all aglow with the supernal light." A doctor who'd been summoned said he had "never seen a man in so placid a state at the approach of death."

Very likely, Johnny died of "winter plague," a term for numerous ailments that strike during the cold months, most commonly pneumonia.

There has even been some dispute over his burial site, but the preponderance of evidence is that the Worth family buried him in a family cemetery on an adjacent farm owned by the Worths' friend David Archer. A wooden headstone has long since disappeared, and at least one other Fort Wayne site claims to hold the grave.



A grave marker in Fort Wayne, Indiana, honoring Johnny Appleseed. The grave is believed to be somewhere near this marker, on the site of the former Archer family cemetery, but the original wooden grave marker is long gone. At least one other site in Fort Wayne claims to hold Johnny's actual grave.



One thing for sure, Johnny died financially comfortable. Over the years, he had owned and had planted nurseries in nineteen counties across Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana. He sold thousands of seedlings and saplings along with several hundred acres, and at the time of his death was able to bequeath 1,200 acres to his full sister Elizabeth.

Some time later, as news of his death spread, a particularly moving eulogy is reported to have been given before Congress – although some dispute this as well -- by U.S. Senator Sam Houston. The Texan former war hero said of Johnny: "This old man was one of the most useful citizens of the world in his humble way. He has made a greater contribution to our civilization than we realize. He has left a place that never can be filled. Farewell,

dear old eccentric heart, your labor has been a labor of love, and generations, yet unborn, will rise up and call you blessed."