

# JOHN LANDIS, PAINTER.

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The first of a series of historical papers bearing on early Lancaster portrait painters, as arranged for by a joint committee of the Lancaster County Historical Society and the Iris Club, which is planning for the portraiture exhibition in November, were submitted at the September meeting of the Historical Society by Mrs. M. N. Robinson and Mr. F. R. Diffenderffer. Mrs. Robinson's paper on "John Landis, Painter," is as follows:

The compilation of this paper was undertaken with many misgivings. Not the least obstacle in the way was an entire ignorance regarding the man in question. That, however, as research went on, ceased to be a dominating factor in the case; and by degrees the truth became evident, that while as an artist John Landis may not have been prominent among the painters who have at times dwelt within our county limits, his life may have afforded more of story and of interest than did the biography of others of greater reputation.

One of the oldest families in Lancaster county is that of Landis. The name is said to be of French origin. As early as 1717, three brothers, Benjamin, Felix and John, all Swiss Mennonites, came to America and took up land in Lancaster county, then Chester. A grandson of Felix Landis settled in Dauphin county, and from him the subject of this paper is descended.

Henry Landis, the father of John,

was a farmer. According to his will, recorded in the Court House at Harrisburg (Book P, page 339) he was the father of twelve children, Jacob, Barbara, married to John Walters; Mary, married to George Hocker; Henry, John, Elizabeth, Anna, Samuel, Adam, Sarah, Ann and Joseph. The will is dated October 23, 1823, and was proved April 9, 1824.

The future "artist, poet and tourist," as he calls himself was born October 15, 1805, at the Engle place on the Middletown road, about one mile south of Hummelstown, and ten miles from Harrisburg. The farm was on the banks of the Swatara, and he speaks of himself as "hailing from the Cave Farm," Echo Cave being located on the place.

Very early in life he showed a marked talent for drawing and painting. Born of Lutheran parentage, his familiarity with the Bible suggested his fitness to study for the ministry. He finally decided to learn the printer's trade, and served out his apprenticeship with John Wyeth in 1822, who then printed the "Oracle of Dauphin." His fellow apprentices were the late Judge Murray and M. D. Holbrook. He was a lad of no ordinary ability, and very soon mastered his trade. He then became a partner in the only Jacksonian Democratic paper then published in Reading, and was a partner for six months, and then divided his time between York, Harrisburg and Lancaster until 1833.

His next venture was to open a lottery office, which he continued until the law was passed abolishing lotteries in this State, approved by Gov. Wolf March 1, 1833. It is said that at one time he won a prize of \$50,000. He went into the notary business and made considerable money, which he

managed to squander in various ways. He "studied for the medical profession," he says, "when I had a fortune of \$3,000 before the Fine Arts."

He began to paint in 1830. Naturally inclined that way, it was easy to induce him to follow his own inclinations. His becoming an artist is thus accounted for: "A traveling portrait painter came to Harrisburg and stopped at the hotel where Landis boarded. Learning that John had money, it was an easy matter for the painter to make him believe he was fitted for the profession—that he would become a Raphael in the course of time. John naturally became an artist in a very short time." He began with portrait painting, spent thousands of dollars in pursuing it, painted fourteen small single portraits, among them one of Mr. Chambers Dubbs, and one of Gen. Zachary Taylor. Of this last there is a funny story told. It was painted in the shop of a house painter, Cruikshank by name, with whom Landis was intimate, and from whom he bought his paints. A reception was to be given to Taylor at Coverly's Hotel, and Landis was very anxious to complete his picture in time. During his absence at dinner, Cruikshank, who knew something of painting himself, was dissatisfied with the eyes, and undertook to correct them. In his efforts to improve Landis' work he made the General cross-eyed. Landis never noticed what had been done, finished his portrait, and, at the reception, forced his way to Gen. Taylor's side, and proudly unrolled his achievement. Alas! the painting had been rolled up when wet, and the result can better be imagined than described.

Whether this misadventure was the cause of his abandoning portraiture

is hard to say. He began to paint historical and Biblical subjects. Of the latter were the "Resurrection" and "Christ Preaching and Healing Diseases." This last was destroyed when the Lutheran Church in Harrisburg was burned in 1838. His studio was filled with many square feet of pictured canvas. He painted "Washington at His Devotions," with the unfortunate effect of making the "Father of his Country" look as if his throat had been cut. Then came the "Battle of New Orleans," 14 by 22 feet, in the execution of which he says he risked his life "crossing the Susquehanna during an ice-flood, in mid-winter, to procure the portrait of Gen. Adair Senator from Kentucky," for it. He took the painting to England to exhibit it, but lost large sums in the enterprise. The English would not go to see it, because all the dead soldiers in the foreground were red-coats. He returned, exhibited it in the rotunda of the capital to induce the Senate to appropriate \$30,000 for its purchase. Col. W. A. Crabb had charge of the bill, and Mr. W. Grimshaw discovered the horse had five legs. This defeated the project. Mr. Landis corrected the error, but future applications failed. The painting cost him just \$53. He did not even send to Philadelphia for "artists' colors," when his friend Mr. Cruikshank could furnish him with everything he needed in that line. Of this painting he said that it was "the most wonderful and valuable, being unequalled on the earth." Other pictures of his were the "Resurrection," "the Head of John the Baptist" and "St. Peter's Release by an Angel."

In 1830 he had smallpox, and while lying abed with that disease he had a vision of the Lord, who called him

"Anointed," and commissioned him to preach, which he did after that period. When recovering from that disease he started from Harrisburg for Lancaster, and between the latter place and Columbia the wagon broke down, and Landis had an arm fractured.

Not content with painting, he aimed at distinction in letters. About 200 hymns came from his pen, a "Treatise on Poetry and Painting," the "Soul's Aid," "Heroic Poem, Life of the Messiah," and other effusions. Here is a specimen of his verse:

"Landis! great Poet Painter 'f the  
time

By Pencil touches and in Rhyme;  
Thy Poetic fire is displayed;  
In Heaven's glory arrayed!  
In Celestial Seraphic lay—  
All glorious! like the noon day;  
Mirac'lous light and melody!  
Commingle together sweetly."

In his early years he was inordinately fond of dress and excessively vain. On one occasion, attired in a new broadcloth suit, kid gloves, high silk hat and polished boots, a costly ring on his first finger, and sporting a handsome cane, he stepped up to a friend, exclaiming: "Say, don't I look like a Frenchman?" Pride, religion, and an unsuccessful love affair—the lady finally married a Mr. Weidler—unbalanced his mind.

Part of his life was spent in Lancaster, where he endeavored to sell his books. Among his works was one entitled "Discourses on the Depravity of the Human Family, Particularly Applied to These Times," 1839. One of his associates was the artist Peter Grosh, to whom he gave hints as to the mixing of colors.

In his capacity as tourist he visited England, and later on, as an "Oriental Tourist," he visited the Holy

Land. By this time his religious fervor had unbalanced his mind, and when within a few days' journey of Jerusalem he was found by a band of roving Bedouins on the desert, weary and footsore, suffering from fever. The Arabs soon noticed that Landis was of unsound mind, and, having a religious reverence for such unfortunate children of Allah, they carried him to Alexandria, from which point the American Consul returned him to the United States.

Despite the winning not only of his lottery prize, but of his "triumph over Du Solle and Geo. R. Graham in his fi. fa. suit for \$10,000, for libels, in 1845," he was very poor in the latter days of his erratic life. It is said by some that the world is willing to accept you at your own valuation of yourself. Considering himself "an artist of indubitable inspiration, by consequence of inspired poems and paintings," he, nevertheless, was "refused money and patronage and compelled often to live on dry bread and water." At one time he braided straw hats for a living in a smith shop he occupied in the vicinity of Chambersburg, and came near being burned to death by the straw catching fire while he was in bed one night.

In person John Landis was of ordinary height and weight, with pale, swarthy complexion, and dark, melancholy eyes. He was quiet and unoffending, never profane in his language, and abstained from drink and tobacco. In brief, he was a religious fanatic of the Dunker type, and wore a broadbrim hat, long surtout, long hair and beard and looked sanctimonious.

He was alive in 1851, but the date of his death, which is said to have occurred in an almshouse, is unknown.

In conclusion, it may be said that this paper is a compilation only. Much of it may be found in the early numbers of Dr. Egle's "Notes and Queries," and for some of the most interesting personal items I acknowledge my indebtedness to Prof. J. Aug. Beck, of Harrisburg.

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