

One of Nature's Noblemen: James Breck Perkins, by Marjorie B. Searl

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Rochester and Brighton, New York were James Breck Perkins's adopted homes. He was born to Hamlet Houghton Perkins and Margaret Breck Perkins in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. His mother was "finely educated, [had] a well balanced mind, and a decided taste for literature."¹ His father drowned in the falls at St. Croix in 1850, leaving Mrs. Perkins with three children, including three-year-old James, whose childhood in Wisconsin would currently be termed 'free range,' "spent in roaming the woods and fields and acquiring a devotion to nature that he never forsook. Without formal schooling, he was taught to read by his family; he reveled in Scott, Dickens, and stories from Roman and English history."² When he was six, his mother brought the family to Rochester, where her parents were then living, and it was here that his formal education began in the public schools. He graduated at sixteen from the Rochester Free Academy with a scholarship to the University of Rochester. There, President Martin Brewer Anderson recognized his potential and encouraged him to visit Europe during his junior year, a trip made possible by a loan from a still-unknown source.³ Wanderings through England, France, and Italy whetted an appetite to pursue and deepen his French studies at the University, where he graduated at the top of his class in 1867. Perkins chose law as his profession and, in the fashion in which he did most things, he worked hard and was highly regarded by his peers. In addition to his private practice, he was city attorney between 1874 and 1878. Having securely established himself, in 1878 he married Mary, the youngest daughter of Civil War General John H. Martindale. French history continued to beckon, however, and the couple travelled back and forth to Paris, permanently residing there from 1890-95, when he haunted French libraries and archives doing research for his scholarly publications of 17th and 18th century French histories.

Sometime between 1886 and 1887, James Breck and Mary Perkins took possession of a home and acreage on East Avenue, even as they continued to travel to France - early "jet-setters."

¹ The most detailed biographical information related to James Breck Perkins and his family can be found in *Wisconsin Biographical Dictionary 2007-2008 edition*, edited by Caryn Hannan and published by State History Publications LLC, Hamburg, Michigan, 2008.

² *Ibid*, p. 311.

³ From Sibley family correspondence held by the George Eastman Museum, we know that he enjoyed friendships with Elisabeth Atkinson, niece of Emily Sibley Watson, and felt at home in the East Avenue home of Hiram Sibley: "Mr. Burns came in Tuesday evening very soon after the inimitable Breck [James Breck Perkins], who took the Parlor, and remained until after ten o'clock..." Elizabeth Tinker Sibley in Rochester to her daughter, Emily Sibley Watson, in New York City, April 25, 1873. It was not unusual for Mrs. Sibley and others in her social circle to assist worthy students by financing their studies and travels.

In 1898, the year in which Charles Mulford Robinson interviewed him for the *New York Times*, Perkins was elected to the office of New York State Assemblyman as well as to the prestigious National Institute of Arts and Letters, now known as the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and his place in the national cultural history was assured.⁴ In the article, Robinson bicycles to the Perkins home on East Avenue in Brighton, New York, a suburb of Rochester. Robinson pauses outside the Perkins home, providing the reader with a harmonious view of a prosperous gentleman's domain:

On this road, four and a half miles from his office, which is in the centre of the City of Rochester, stands the home of James Breck Perkins. Its windows and piazza overlook the links of the Country Club. The house is on a slight eminence, which, however, is as good as a hill in flat country, and one may look over the links, gay with their little flags, or down the long sloping lawn and beyond the road to a clump of trees that has almost the dignity of a grove, or back and westward over the owner's broad acres. The house, barn and clustering outbuildings are painted red, giving a warm dash of color to the cool green expanse. Looking toward or from the house the scene is very peaceful, rural. Man and nature are close together in their joint sincerity, and nothing could appear further from the scene's suggestion than the artificiality of a Bourbon court and the intrigues of a Richelieu and Mazarin.

Dinner is presently announced, but on the way to the dining room we must step to the porch to note how the blossoms have come out on an apple tree. "I care a good deal more for the blossoms than I do for the fruit," says the historian of France.

The portieres that had shut off the dining room are now drawn aside and reveal a room closely corresponding to the library. The furniture is old mahogany, and the soft glow of the tall candles, which are the only light, well preserve the apartment's antique character. There is a candelabrum on the mantel, and four tall white candlesticks are on the table. The curtains are not yet drawn at the windows, and we look out on field and evening sky. Table talk roams far. There is discussion of Wagner and the operas at Baireuth. Mrs. Perkins is an accomplished musician, and Mr. Perkins is fond of music, and has sound musical judgment. There is talk of farming, of books, and travel. "It used to be one of my dreams," says Mr. Perkins, "to penetrate 'Darkest Africa,' but I never got nearer the goal than a trip up the Nile."

"A trip up the Nile" indeed took place six years previously, in 1892-3, when Mr. and Mrs. Perkins had taken up permanent residence in France. They met wealthy socialites and philanthropists James and Emily Sibley Watson and Emily's son

⁴ Robinson, Charles Mulford. "Authors at Home. XXIX. James Breck Perkins." *New York Times*, June 11, 1898.

J.G.Averell in Marseilles, where the party traveled by steamer to Alexandria, Egypt. There, they boarded the houseboat *Sesostris* for a three-month Nile adventure. According to Emily Sibley Watson's letters in the collection of the University of Rochester's Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, the trip was a delight and the companionship convivial – "The Perkins are delightful companions and we have the nicest times together."⁵ Nicknames were given to all, and Perkins was called the Tiger, after a recently published short story, *The Lady or the Tiger* by Frank Stockton. Even a stint on a sand bank, which delayed their progress, did not dissipate the group's enthusiasm for everything they saw.

Tranquil days in their Brighton country home were short-lived, as Perkins was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1901, and served in that capacity until his death in 1910. His congressional duties were periodically interrupted by legal cases, most notably the heresy trial of Dr. Algernon Crapsey, minister at Rochester's St. Andrew's Church in 1906. While she accompanied her husband in Washington, Mary Martindale Perkins made history by proposing, in 1908, a club for Congressional wives. The club was ratified by the House and the Senate in 1908 and the resolution signed by President Theodore Roosevelt, making it the first club in the world incorporated by an act of Congress. Mrs. Perkins, clearly a force, was described in one newspaper article as one "whose rule [among Congressional wives] is as absolute as that of "Uncle Joe" is in the National House of Representatives."⁶ Mrs. Perkins's strong leadership and concern for the place of women alongside their politician husbands did not translate into endorsement of women's suffrage, however; she chaired the Rochester anti-suffragists committee, a group that also included Mrs. James Sibley Watson, Sr. among other prominent women.

After nine years in congress, during which time he rose to be the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, Perkins died of cancer. He was eulogized in the House and Senate by his colleagues, each bringing more accolades to the floor than the previous speaker. Perhaps the briefest comment was the most descriptive: Representative Alexander of Wisconsin named James Breck Perkins "one of nature's noblemen. To know him was to admire, respect, and love him."⁷ He and his wife are buried in Mount Hope Cemetery.

⁵ Letter from Emily Sibley Watson to Elizabeth Tinker Sibley, January 28, 1893, collection of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

⁶ Buffalo Courier, March 6, 1910, p. 37. "Uncle Joe" Cannon was Joseph Gurney Cannon, speaker of the US House of Representatives from 1903-1911.

⁷ *James Breck Perkins (Late a Representative From New York) Memorial Addresses Delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States*