

# Autobiography of Leonard Armstrong

The following was originally intended as an appendix to Alvy Ray Smith, *Edwardian Riggses of America I: Elder Bethuel Riggs (1757–1835) of Morris County, New Jersey, and His Family Through Five Generations* (Boston: Newbury Street Press, 2006). It was removed for space considerations.

A book in the Family History Library in Salt Lake City titled *Life of John W. (Wells) Millspaugh, 1818–1858*<sup>[1]</sup> contains several parts of relevance to this work. The first part is a photocopy of a printed article about a military man, “Fightin’ Joe” Wheeler, and is disregarded here. The second part is a typescript of 20 pages, not including its title page, which page says, “Life of John W. (Wells) Millspaugh, 1818–1858, New York to Iowa, Dedicated to His Children & Descendants.” Pages 16–19 of this typescript contain the autobiography below. Clearly the (original) transcribers considered this autobiography as the third part, or “chapter,” of their book. Finally there appear two family group sheets, for the families of James and Cynthia (Corwin) Millspaugh, and of John Wells and Harriet A. (Armstrong) Millspaugh.

The (original) transcribers were two researchers I recognize as long-time contributors to the history of Bethuel Riggs and related families: Anna Isabel (Mortenson) Porter and Rose D. Kyle. Anna was loaned the original book, from which the (original) transcriptions of pages 1–19 were made, by Calvin Enos and Ruby (—) Stone, where Enos Stone was a descendant of Leonard and Rebecca (Riggs) Armstrong.

I re-transcribed the Porter-Kyle transcription below. To break up the lengthy paragraphs of the original, which are faithfully mirrored it is presumed by the Porter-Kyle transcription, new paragraphs are introduced, but always marked with an explicit paragraph mark, ¶.

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1. Porter, Anna I. M., and Rose D. Fisher Kyle. *Life of John W. (Wells) Millspaugh, 1818–1858*. Elfrida, Ariz.: 1967. Bound typescript. FHL 921.73 W564t..

## LEONARD ARMSTRONG

### Leonard Armstrong

(Grandfather of Ella ["Frances" interlined below] Phar Griffin)

A brief autobiography of Leonard Armstrong, father of Mrs. Millspaugh, written in his 93rd year, and respectfully dedicated to his numerous children and grandchildren[.]

My parents were born in Hartford [sic] County, Maryland. On the 24th of February, 1778, I was born and lived there until seven years of age, when my father moved to the State of Virginia, Rockingham County, where he bought a small farm. We were then in a new country with woods and plenty of government land all around us; so father entered two or three hundred acres and lived there ten or fifteen years. During this time, the country had populated so rapidly that land became valuable, and his was an object worthy of notice; and, as usually the case, he began thinking about moving West.

¶[Brother John, being of a more saving disposition than the rest of us, started to explore the country. He first went to Kentucky, where he had relatives, thence to Ohio, and finally to a spot on the Little Miami river familiarly known as the Lower Mill then owned by a Mr. Bearsley. Here he stuck his stake. Upon his return, he gave a glowing description of the country, and said we must go right there. Father then sold his farm for twelve or fifteen dollars per acre and began to make preparations for moving, which was no small undertaking.

¶[His family consisted of six sons and three daughters, viz: William, John, Leonard, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, Elizabeth, Alasana, and Priscilla. All the children except Elizabeth, who married Francis Settles, and moved to Green Brier, were to go to Ohio. William Robinson, a young man, apprentice to my brother, to learn the millwright trade, also was to accompany us, making a party of eight young men.

¶[After rigging our teams, we went to Mr. Settles' and remained a few days, then set out for a six weeks journey. The young men enjoyed the trip hugely. For amusement, we had a couple of long bullets, a little larger than hen eggs, and, when not engaged driving would amuse ourselves playing "long bullet." Occasionally we lost the bullets and would fall a long ways behind the wagons while hunting them.

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When we came to Gauley river, it was so high that we could not cross it for several days, and what was more, we had neither flour nor meal and were obliged to buy corn at one dollar per bushel and pound [sic] it in a mortar, for something to eat. We thought the times pretty hard, yet we survived them.

¶We next came to the Big Kanawah, where the salt works were situated. There we sent the horses by land, and began to construct a boat. We finished a small rough one, moved our plunder in, and started on the water—everything went merry as a “marriage Bell.”

¶On the 22nd of June, 1800, we anchored at Columbia, near Cincinnati, and by this time our horses had arrived. A gentleman took us to a small cabin, we moved our women folks in, and found that to be all the cabin would hold. We boys wheeled our wagons in front, and lived in them until our house was built.

¶Brother John then took us to the spot where he had stuck his stake, and we tried to buy Mr. Bearsley out, but he refused to sell, so we paid Judge Goforth twelve hundred dollars for the site of what is known as the Upper Mill, with one hundred acres of land, and began to build a house. Some began cutting timber, others logs (saw), and some to clear a place for a house. We took our logs to Round Bottom mill and got plank for enclosing and flooring, into which we moved on the 22nd of July, just one month from the day we landed at Columbia.

¶We next commenced to build a dam across the river. That required three years of hard labor and a great deal of sickness. First, we made a platform of poles, upon which we built cribs about six feet high, with the upper sides planked and backed with gravel, and then hauled stone to fill the cribs. But before we had filled them a freshet came and swept away everything except the stone. This taught us that stone would stick, while timber would swim. Then we began hauling stone to build our dam again, filling it in as we went, and succeeded in making it permanent.

¶Our next step was to build a saw mill. We built the frame upon which to place the mill, not knowing how high the water would rise, and after setting the mill on it, sawed some time doing a good business. When lo! another freshet, and away went the mill gliding away down the river, and as the neighbors said, “awing as it went.” We boys stood with our hands in our pockets viewing the grand spectacle without power to prevent it, yet, while it was still in sight, we began another. We went to the house and

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told father and his answer was, "Well, boys, I am glad you take it so easy." In short time we had both a grist mill and a saw mill running for father and then we boys began thinking of scattering.

¶William and John bought out Mr. Bearsley of the Lower Mill, tore away the shanty, and built the house that now stands there. Thomas and I procured the title to the island southeast of the Upper Mill containing sixty-odd acres, and near the mouth of the stream, running around it, we thought to build our mill but had not land on the south side of the stream, so we bought two acres at ten dollars an acre, and here began our fortunes that proved to be hard ones.

¶We again undertook the arduous task of building a dam, and having sand upon which to build, found it more difficult. We built a fore-bay [sic] twenty-four feet wide, over which we erected a saw and gristmill, and got everything into nice running order. So one morning we started up, and after breakfast as we returned, saw the water boiling up on the lower side of the forebay, throwing up dirt and sand, and while we stood looking, the dam was emptied, washing a cut under the forebay nearly ten feet deep. This put a stop to our milling for some time, but we had friends and a many good friend and some rallied a half dozen teams and went to hauling stone, and put under the forebay one hundred and fourteen loads, and I think they remain there still.

¶We also had carding machines and a pulling mill. About this time, we made a temporary division of the business. During this time we had a great deal of sickness, some of my brothers becoming sick from its effects. The six brothers now owned the three mills, the Upper, the Middle and Lower.

¶For some time I had been living with brother Thomas, and I began to thinking of living with someone else, so I got my eye on a pretty girl in Kentucky about seventeen years of age, by the name of Rebecca Riggs that seemed to fill the fill [sic] and made proposals. After a time she accepted, and on the 28th of November, 1811, we were married. During the winter I attended the saw mill, sawed the lumber for, framed, and built my own house, and in March moved into it, and then we were in our own home, beginning a toilsome life.

But to return to an item: When in 1805, Aaron Burr was hatching his treason, we were employed by the government to build flat boats for the expedition to his island retreat. We received \$100 apiece and were to

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build ten, but before they were completed the trouble was settled and the government had to sell them at public auction for twenty-two dollars apiece. At this time there were no steamboats on the river and no brick houses in Cincinnati. The only building of note was a storehouse.

¶A short time after I was married, I became Justice of the Peace and served the people six years to the best of my ability. The merchants of Cincinnati, I think, recommended me for county commissioner and I was appointed for three years. Next I was sent to the legislature in 1830 or 31, and served as best as I could, but I did not like the trade. Principle seemed to be left out in the cold . . . . Although I had made—shoes, buckets, tubs, chairs, tables, bedsteads, bureaus, buggies, wagons, harness, barrels, spun and wove, and worked at the millwright business and was fifty-two years old, I was a young hand here and unacquainted with their plans of procedure, but I kept my eyes open and attended strictly to business—

¶In about a month, the friends of Hamilton resolved to incorporate a Universalist Church and petitioned the house for a Charter. As the petition was directed to me, I handed it in and it was referred back to me. I drew up my bill, and when it came before the house, it was rumored that it would meet with much opposition. Two men, one an ex-congressman, expected to oppose it, but the bill passed without a dissenting vote. Thus things went on with a “log-rolling,” for there was nearly a tie in the house and each one was so tenacious of his political principles that I became disgusted with the entire preceeding [sic] and never again became a candidate [sic] for legislative honors.

¶I labored too hard at the milling business, and, finding my health failing, sold to my brother and bought a farm in Clearmont [sic] County, Ohio about two hundred and fifty-five acres, one hundred and fifty in cultivation. My boys were then of great service to me, and I begun to improve in health, but as I was not much of a farmer, I missed my mill very much.

I gave \$800 for a mill about two miles away and began milling again. It had a penstock twenty-six feet high and about four by six feet in size with a wheel three feet long and four feet high and an issue of two and a half or three inches, which was too much water under such a head. I reduced the shoot to about one and a half inches and then started it. It ran like a top, the trailrace being large enough. We went on doing milling good business through all this season, then it had to lay by until the water came next season. When the water came, I put things in order for business and started

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the mill. It ran well, and I got a man to attend it, and went home. The next morning, we were at breakfast when the sawyer came in. "Did you hear the news?" he said. "What news?" "Why! The penstock bursted and threw the mill down. I was sawing away, sitting on the log, when it split one of the posts next to the mill from top to bottom and the water dashed all over me. I thought the world was coming to an end, but it soon quit; not until the mill was thrown down in a pile, however." This put an end to the season's work. When the next season came, we went to work, repairing the mill.

I concluded to tear down the old penstock and build an overshoot wheel about twenty feet high. Here John Millspaugh came and offered to help me. This was about my first acquaintance with him. We made the wheel, rigged and started it. It did so well and so pleased the man living near me that he offered me \$1,000 for it, which I accepted and that ended my milling business.

We went on with our farming until the year 1844, when I traded the farm to Peter Bunton for four hundred and fourteen acres of wild land in Indiana near Boonesville [sic]; I gave him possession and went back to Miami. My oldest son, N. E. Armstrong, John Millspaugh and I started for Boonesville in order to view our land. We arrived at Newburg and went on foot to Boonesville. On making some inquiry, we found a Squire Flutter owned a farm on the same section where our wild land lay. We went to his house, where we made ourselves known as the purchasers of the Bunton property. The Squire was very kind and went with us to see the land, which pleased me so much better than I expected that I began to banter the Squire for his place. He had about one hundred and forty acres, seventy-five of which was under cultivation, with an old brick house upon it. He asked \$1,500 for it and I offered him \$1,200, so we could not come together. When we were about to separate, I told him I would give him two hundred dollars more for his place than for any out of his section. Taking me by the hand, he said he would give it to me for one hundred less than to anyone else, so this brought us together.

I was to return in October, but sickness in my family prevented this, so my oldest son went in my stead and took charge of things.

When the family was able to travel, I bought a large flat-boat, fastened it securely, and went home to prepare for our journey; but before I returned, the water arose and from some [sic] cause the boat sank. As there

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was no time to cry over spilt milk, I bought another, which had to be repaired some. We partitioned off the stern of the boat, and on one side put horses and cows, on the other plows and farming implements. The bow was carpeted for the family's use, beds on either side, stove in the far end, and stairs to go to the top, so we lived perfectly at home.

When we came to the falls, we gave a man three dollars to pilot us over. Very pleasantly we went on to the end of our journey. Then it took us several days to clear the boat of our goods.

We then divided our land among our children, eleven in number, giving to each of the four boys eighty acres and the remainder of the wild land to our two girls that were married. We then repaired the old house and went to cultivating the farm. For fourteen years we lived very pleasantly together, then the children began to scatter, looking west for a more healthy climate, some going to California, some Minnesota, and some to Iowa.

My three sons-in-law, V. K. Phar, John Millspaugh and Thomas Spellman, went to Iowa and in a short time came back for us, saying they had found the garden spot of the west, and there we must spend our last days, that they might be our best days.

So, not being disposed to refuse, we agreed to sell and go with them, feeling that life without our children would be a blank. We sold our farm, left two married sons in Boonesville to attend to other property, and in November, 1857, came to Mount Pleasant and spent the winter with our children. Mr. Phar lived in Salem, ten miles away. He said he had a place fixed out for me, joining his with four acres of land and a good orchard, and as that was just what I wanted, after looking at it and liking it very much, I bought it on the 24th of February, 1858; the very day I was 80 years old, we moved into it.

Thirteen years of my life here among my children have been the happiest I have spent, but for the last few years my failing health has rendered my happiness not quite so complete, yet resting from all worldly care and trouble, I have realized that man's purest pleasure is in the bosom of his family; and as we who have, for nearly three score years, shared every joy and sorrow, feeling the dark lining of Death's shadowy mantle draw closer and closer around us, we wait our summons hence, knowing not which will be the first to go, but, be it as it may, we feel all will be well.

(The end)