

THE JOURNAL OF WARNER THOMSON,
1853 – 1854.

The Museum is fortunate to possess an extensive document collection. For this article I have chosen a journal kept by a young farmer at Summit Point in Jefferson County, Virginia, between January of 1853 and March 20th of the following year.

A gift from Mr. and Mrs. Parks Tilly of Katy, Texas, Mr. Tilly described how he discovered the journal: “I found an old farmhouse that was about to be torn down. The house was in Fulton County, Georgia, on the northwest side of Atlanta. We were surveying the property, for what, I believe, was to become an industrial park. It was a large piece of property, containing good farm land and was bordered by the Chattahoochee River.” Mr. Tilly took the fragile journal home and eventually, with the help of his wife, transcribed it. In the course of doing so, Parks and Brenda Tilly gained considerable respect and affection for this hard-working nineteenth-century Virginia farmer.

In 1853, Warner A. Thomson is 38 years of age, married to Josephine aged 22. There is a mention of “my first wife” in his journal and she, apparently, is still alive. From his first marriage Warner has two sons, John and William, while he and Josephine have a one year old baby, Scott. Without being maudlin, he talks of his children with tenderness: holding Scott in front of him as he rides his horse, and sending John, for the first time on his own, to the local grist mill. A visit to Shannondale Springs to watch a balloon ascension is an exciting event, the cost of admission carefully noted. The extended family is a large one; Josephine’s father, a colorful old gentleman, marries for the third time and Warner muses upon the fact that the new bride is half the age of the groom. A mystery lies over this lady, for within a month she is dead. No information is given, other than the fact that she is suddenly taken ill and that two doctors are in attendance.

Warner is a great admirer of Franklin and several pages at the beginning of the journal contain quotations from “Poor Richard’s Almanac”. He is an educated man, familiar with the classics and a keen observer of the world around him. News of the outbreak of the Crimean War in Europe is followed with interest by local farmers; will it affect the price of wheat? President Franklin Pierce is inaugurated and his promises to the nation are noted – heaven help him if he falls short! A brief flirtation with the idea of growing cranberries is unsuccessful. Ordered from a Mr. Sullivan Bates (the “Cranberry Man”) of Bellingham, Massachusetts, Summit Point soil apparently lacks the wholesome properties of northern bogs and no more is heard of the enterprise. Complicated mathematical equations are scattered throughout the journal – how much will so many acres yield when planted with so much seed. How long will food last the family and field hands and how can he economize? Debts are paid off after long and laborious effort: money is a constant worry. To add to the family income, Warner clerk’s at local auctions and also applies for the position of schoolmaster in District Number 10: he is successful and manages to somehow squeeze these teaching duties into his busy life.

A humane and sensible man, Warner appears to own three slaves although they are never referred to as such. He will not hire them out unless it is a “good place”, gives them holidays, and loans a wagon for two of them to visit relatives. During busy times, Warner and his sons work with the slaves in the fields and he even delivers a slave baby, the doctor not having arrived in time. One entry refers to the hanging in Charlestown of James Roper’s slave, George, who was convicted of attempting to murder Samuel Howell Brown. George was defended by Andrew Hunter, but found guilty of the crime and executed on Friday, May 20th. Warner allows “Dennis” and “Edward” to attend the hanging.

One wonders about Warner and Josephine’s marriage. Josephine is young, and there is record of her frequent visits to relatives in Berlin, Maryland. Despite these difficulties, the marriage survives. From the 1860 census, we know that Josephine has borne her husband a total of five children. However, in January, 1854, tragedy almost intervenes. Josephine is delivered of a daughter, mother and baby are doing well, but then, a few days later the dreaded signs of puerperal fever appear. The two older boys have contracted measles, the baby Scott catches it and becomes desperately ill. It is not difficult to visualize the horror of it all, recorded in graphic detail by the distracted father. Warner’s journal entries become briefer and briefer until finally his entry of February 18th consists of two short words, faintly written in pencil – “had enough”. After more than a month, Josephine finally recovers her health after devoted nursing by her husband. Did this ordeal strengthen their marriage? Let us hope that it did.

How Warner Thomson’s journal found its way to Fulton County, Georgia, is a mystery. In 1854 the Civil War still lies in the future, its casualties will be among the living as well as the dead. Families uprooted themselves and moved away from the land of their birth to seek a better life. Perhaps Warner and Josephine Thomson were among those numbers.