

Article

No 3

Subject:  
"Looking back at bay head"

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Looking back at my first  
trip



## LOOKING BACK AT BOYHOOD.

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Some of his earliest recollections,

by

General Oliver Otis Howard.

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## THE FIRST PUBLIC SPEECH.

I was born in Leeds, Maine, the eighth day of November, 1830. During the winter of 1833 -4 I came to a distinct consciousness of myself and of some of my surroundings. My father, mother and grandfather Howard, seem then to have impressed themselves as pictures sketched upon the tablet of memory. Grandfather was tall well proportioned with mild laughing eyes, white thin hair, usually short and crest like, sticking up as when the fingers are thrust through after combing. He often led me about by the hand or trotted me on his knee and told me stories which went to the right spot in my listening heart. His clay pipe was usually in his mouth- and it was my rival - for it kept the child at arms-length.

Father had a keen eye under a shaggy brow, I was rather afraid of him, though I soon received evidence that he was proud of some things which his son could do. He never however, seemed to me very affectionate, but always earnest and interested, more reproofing than praising, more watching and correcting than loving.

He was tall, too, like grandfather, but more slender; had very dark hair, a high forehead and slight, reddish side whiskers.



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Mother was of medium height, had, when I first remember her, rosy cheeks, dark brown hair and her own blue eyes. She laughed and talked and sang and yet usually was serious with me. I guess they all were looking into the future when they gazed into my eyes. What sort of a man will this child be? Pity, is it not, to ask such a question too soon and too often during the tenderest days!

After the snow had come that winter when I was three years old there came two sturdy tradesmen with a pung or boxed-sled, probably drawn by two horses, they proposed to buy and carry off all my father's surplus indian corn. It was so cold in the corn-barn that they moved the corn-sheller, a curious machine, looking like a high red box which was about as broad as long, into our large front hall. Our house was one of these two story, flattish, pyramidal roofed structures which dotted the inhabited parts of Maine fifty years ago. There were four large rooms of nearly equal size in the main, with a large hall-way running from front to rear. Our hall was cut in half by a partition and door. The corn-sheller there by the stairs was as musical as a coffee mill. I enjoyed seeing the men turn the crank and put in the unshelled corn at the top; and then I was trying to catch glimpses, through the cracks of the machine, of the kernels as they were showered into the box receiver at the bottom.

After the work was done, including the measuring and bagging, and all had retired to the south east back room, and all hands had



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After the work was done, including the measuring and bagging, and all had retired to the south east back room, and all hands had



been warmed and refreshed by a blazing wood fire upon the hearth, and by such nice welcome repast as mother happily could offer, public attention was given to me. How I was suffered to sit up so late, I cannot justly establish, but probably excitement and strangers fixed this as a special exception. Grandfather must have suggested that I could make a speech. The strangers exclaimed:

"O! can that child make a speech!"

Father answered:

"Well, my son, mount the bench and show us what you can do."

The bench was a low foot-stand with four firm legs.

With red cheeks and beating heart his boy obeyed the summons. The child never dared question an order from his father.

"There, now, make your bow.- All right, go on."

So I did -

"You'd scarce expect one of my age

"To speak in public on the stage.

"So if I chance to fall below

"Demosthenes and Cicero,

"View me not, with a critic's eye,

"But gently pass my imperfections by!

The cheering, and laughing, and commendation, made me very happy. Soon I went to my bed in the north east room, and was not long in passing to the sweet dreamless oblivion of a child's repose.



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## THE SLEIGH-RIDE ON THE POND.

At some time, this season, when the snow was at its most suitable depth, neither too dry so as to drift, nor so soft as to "slump", my father harnessed his favorite horse to the sleigh, put upon the one seat, always long enough for two persons, his two large and warm buffalo robes. When all things were ready even to the heated block for mother's feet, the upper robe was lifted, mother stepped in over the fending side rail, father holding the reins in his left hand and soothing his restless light gray horse by gentle words, seized his boy with the other hand and passed him to the foot block near which his mother made him sit flat upon the lower robe. Father quickly gained his seat and the buffalo was pulled high up their breasts over the boy's head.

"Sit still, Otis." Away we go; the snow gives but little under the sleigh-runners, and sends forth a crisp, frosty, ringing sound, like squeaking boots in the church aisle at sermon time; and the sweet bells sound to peer me like muffled ones as they try to play for my imprisoned ears. Otis struggled to get his head out for just one minute.

"No, no, my son, its very cold. Sit still and keep your nose warm!" Mother's pleasant tone and the fear of a frozen nose kept me there cozy and safe. Soon we were crossing the great "Andresceggin pond". It is a sizable lake now, no body called it a lake in those days. Still it was large enough, being three or four miles across and some nine miles long. There was a more monotonous sound on the



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ice than on the snow, less crushing of snow by the narrow runners, hollow reverberations from the horse's quick and solid tread, and more steady jingle, jingle by the seemingly muffled bells. I suspect that Otis under the buffalo, warm as toast by the foot-block and protected by the robes from the wind, sitting between his father and mother, with his back against the box-seat did, as such healthy youngsters usually do, heard the crushing runners, the muffled bells and the horse's tread less and less, till his pleasant dreams gradually led him to sounder sleep. I do not know why that ride across the fields and across the pond and along the way to New Sharren, so much affected my memory. It was a great joy with father and mother and the sleigh to go somewhere, away from home. It was an odd experience under the thick robe.

#### THE FIRST REMEMBERED FALL.

It was a great repression to keep me there in the darkness, but on the whole I was contented, especially, happy when just at night fall we arrived at a tavern and mother led me through a dark hall into the common effice room, where there was a large hot stove. We were there warming ourselves, when, boy like, I left my mother, by some sudden impulse, and darted by a door ajar, into as I supposed the dark hall. No, no! it was the adjoining door. Down the cellar stairs I rolled over and over to the pitchy bottom! My nose was bruised and bleeding, but, still being well bundled up, I was not much hurt, no bones broken, yet the blood and the blackness of



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of the unlighted cellar frightened the youngster so much that he screamed and howled loud enough at least to reveal his unpleasant situation. A tall stranger bore me aloft on his shoulder and conveyed me to my peer conscious smitten mother. The campher and the towels were quickly applied, x x x when father, his horse having been well cared for, appeared and saw the blood:

"Why, Eliza, what does this mean! Why didn't you take better care of him?" I cannot recall the words. But, though I reverence my good father, long ago have I learned that such words at such times had better not be said. It is not well to jar the tender shoots of love. In an instant father spoke kind words to her and me, but the child ever remembered the sharp reproof and the mother's hot tears and trembling lips.

#### FROM BRIGHT JOY TO DEEP SORROW.

We rode on to Banger, the journey from New Sharon is forgotten I recall my entrance to a beautiful parlor. There was a rectangular piano and upon it a large rose-wood box. The lady present applied a key to the side and wound it as you would a clock. Then she put it back as it began to discourse the sweetest music my ears had ever heard. It was but a common music-box of large size, but it entranced my young soul and remains associated with an early and exquisite pleasure.

But my few moments of intense delight were soon followed by an experience of quite a different character. There was a sweet little girl, and surely no budding rose was sweeter than that pretty



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child of three years. We played together as children play, wandering from room to room, ascending the stairway and hiding and seeking in closets and corners. Two bairns were never gayer. She suddenly ran through a door-way in the chamber over the parlor and her fingers lingered by the door-post when with the glad shout of a young shepherd who pens in his last obstinate lamb, Otis pushed the door, shutting it hard. The door caught a tiny finger of the of the sweet child and nearly cut it asunder! She screamed with instant fright and Otis cried aloud. Quickly there appeared on the scene of pain and grief an arbiter. It was a young man on crutches. He had one leg akimbo, stiff and rectangular, for he was a cripple. He quickly took in the situation. My heart was nearly broken already, but he scolded me till the iron of his wrath entered into my poor soul to sear it with scars that are still there. It was not of course a case for harshness, but for thoughtful sympathy and gentle admonition. Rough framing is apt to damage or spoil the tender vine.

#### THE FIRST INDIAN BATTLE.

It was my privilege, when my grandfather was at home, to sleep with him. I then called him grandpa. One night about this time, certainly before I was four, grandpa was dreaming. I was suddenly awakened by an unusual noise. As I opened my eyes I caught a glimpse of grandpa sitting up in the bed and striking out with both hands to the right and left, while he gave a sort of smothered shout.



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I sprang up and caught his arm and cried lustily, "grandpa! grandpa! what are you doing?" My cries and pulling startled him out of his trance, when he told me that he dreamed that he was driving an ex-cart, that the back-board was out, and that some wild Indians were trying to force themselves into the cart. He had, as he thought, in his hand a huge iron bar and was swinging it effectively killing the merceless intruders. He might have killed me had he chanced to hit my head with only his own powerful arm. His strange appearance, with his knit woollen steeple like night cap, and his strange voice and actions that night made upon me a pheneminal impression. It was like that of a veritable battle.

#### A CLEAN COLLAR - A CLEAN HEART.

My mother, who was habitually serious with me, and I think there must have been some special need, desired me to keep my broad collars reasonably clean. I wore them shining white when I went to school some three quarters of a mile to the south of us, or when I had the unspeakable delight of visiting Clark and Ellen Weedman, half way to the school, or Melven and Lucy Howard on the next farm to the north. One day the little fellow was well dressed and dispatched to a child's party at Melven's, and his mother casually remarked as a safeguard:

"Otis you must keep your cellar neat and clean, you know mother will have to punish you if you do not."

You say such a rule is too hard, but I have an idea that it is like



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the divine. "Thou shalt keep these my laws and commandments, else I will punish thee." Or do not soil thy heart - else God will punish thee.

Well the child went, there were several children, Lucy, Melvin, Merilda, Howard and probably Charles Lane. We played as boys play. The edge of the upper fence rail is the very choicest path for a boy. To step from rolling stone to rolling stone on the wall-top had the delicious sensations of danger. To climb trees was, as always, a favorite pastime even if it rent little breeches into shreds. Well, this day we found an apple tree so bent over by the wind, like an old man whom a rheumatic stroke has half overturned and left inclined. It had lived and stiffened into hardness in its new position. Up and down the round trunk we ran. At last by some unexpected push or jostle, Otis slipped off the highest reach, perhaps three or four feet from the ground. His face was bruised and his nose bled profusely. Uncle Barney and Aunt Howard ran to the rescue. Basins of fresh water were at the back door of the house. Otis was bathed and soothed while he continued to cry lustily. In the midst of his loud lament with clothes torn and soiled and that white collar all bloody, Uncle Barney suggested that he was'nt much hurt, and that he must'nt cry so.

"Oh," he exclaimed, "tis'nt my nose,- 'tis my cellar!" Ma said sh'd whip me if I got it dirty."

But this time mother was too grieved at the wounds, as she was in



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