

M. J. Taylor

M. J. Taylor is my great grandmother's little brother. That would make him my great great uncle on my paternal side. It took a bit to figure out what M. J. stood for. I found his first name, Morton before too long, but had to dig deep into the records to discover that his middle name was John. Morton John Taylor. Important people are often referred to by their initials, and there is no question that M. J. was important.

M. J. was in the feather business. His company, *M. J. Taylor & Co.*, was an importer and manufacturer of ostrich feathers. It featured complete lines of "French Heads," and "Showy Tips," whatever those were.

M. J. TAYLOR & CO., *Importers and Manufacturers of*
OSTRICH FEATHERS.

Complete Lines of **FRENCH HEADS** in Blacks and Colors.
PLUMES in $\frac{3}{4}$ and Full Lengths.

Complete Lines of **SHOWY TIPS** in Blacks and Colors.
Our Black Goods are particularly Rich and Brilliant.

NO. 84 WOOSTER STREET,
Near Spring Street **NEW YORK.**

Advertisement from Millinery Trade Review, 1889.

His feather business was located in Manhattan, first in the neighborhood that is now known as SoHo, at 84 Wooster St. Later it was located in Greenwich Village, just adjacent to Washington Square Park, at 28 Waverly Place. Finally it moved a little farther north, to E. 18th St., right above Union Square Park in the Chelsea neighborhood. New York newspapers and trade journals of that era were filled with advertisements for *M. J. Taylor & Co.*, considered to be one of the most prominent purveyors of feathers.

But that wasn't the half of it. M. J. owned and operated several ostrich farms, located in Florida, from which he supplied ostrich feathers to his New York manufactories. These farms bred ostriches, incubated their eggs, raised young ostriches, and harvested their feathers. The feathers were cleaned and sorted and then sent to the New York facility. Once there, the feathers were bleached, dyed, joined together, extended, curled, or whatever else was needed to transform them into

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"EVERYTHING in OSTRICH"

**Boas
and
Collarettes**



**Plumes
and
Novelties**

M. J. TAYLOR & CO.
57 WEST 38th STREET
NEW YORK CITY

various kinds of fancy plumery that could then be used as fashion accessories of the times—most notably hats, fans, and decorative neckwear.

What was M. J. Taylor's story, and how did he end up becoming an important and prosperous man in the fashion industry? It was this and the exotic and colorful context of ostrich feathers that drove my curiosity in finding out more about this great great uncle. My curiosity was further fueled by a story about my grandfather's brother—actually my father's namesake—dying as a young man on his uncle, M. J. Taylor's, ostrich farm.

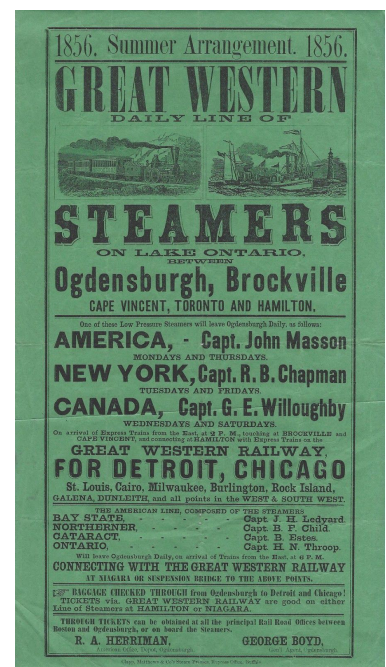
M.J. Taylor's birth family — Canada

Rewind to M. J. Taylor's origins. M.J. and all of his siblings were born in Brockville, Ontario, Canada, right across the St. Lawrence River from St. Lawrence County in Northern New York, from parents who were Irish immigrants. Brockville was settled in 1784, at the conclusion of the American Revolution by British Loyalists, also referred to as United Empire Loyalists. It is estimated that between 15-20% of American colonists stayed loyal to Britain and King George.

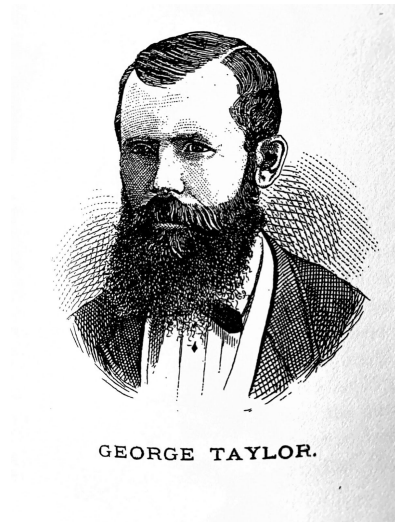
There were many factors that contributed to colonists making the individual choice “to stay or flee, sign oaths of allegiance or resist the oath givers” (Hull, Hoffer, & Allen, 1978). While the great majority of Loyalists remained after the American Revolution, tens of thousands fled the colonies, most typically to Canada, some by choice but others by expulsion. The British government offered land grants to Loyalists if Loyalists would settle in Canada, using this moment not just to reward loyalty, but as a way to increase the population of Canada and incidentally the number of English-speakers there. At this time, Canada was predominantly comprised of native peoples and French speakers (being first colonized by the French). Thus, Brockville was founded by and became home to some of these fleeing Loyalists.

However, that's going back a bit too far, since M. J.'s parents, George Taylor and Sarah Murphy, had not yet arrived in North America during the time immediately following the American Revolution. They most likely arrived in New York in the 1830's, a half century after the initial formation of Brockville, this outpost of British Loyalists. To get to Brockville from New York City, they would have needed to take a steamer up the Atlantic coast, and up the St. Lawrence River.

If George and Sarah arrived in the period from 1832 to 1834 they would have experienced the height of deadly cholera epidemics.



These epidemics originated from immigrants coming from Great Britain. By the end of 1832, the first of these epidemics had claimed as many as 9,000 lives, half of them in the relatively sparsely populated Ontario. Many more people would die from these cholera epidemics. Fear and anti-immigrant sentiments flared and in 1832, the people of Brockville erected a building on an offshore island to quarantine incoming immigrants. We don't know whether George and Sarah arrived separately or together, but one can only imagine the tumult and mistrust surrounding their arrival during this time, as Irish immigrants, to Brockville.



The Taylor family lived in a two-story stone house, on a farm, in Brockville. George was listed as a farmer. The family (like much of the community) was also listed as Wesleyen Methodists, a particular sect that grew out of the Church of England. Wesleyen Methodists were proselytizers and there was a conscious effort to send missionaries to Canada in the 1830s and 1840s, particularly to Ontario, to increase the number of Wesleyen Methodists. Indeed, many Canadian settlers converted from the Church of England to become Wesleyen Methodists. Unlike many Christian faiths that held that children were born pure, this branch of Methodists (among other things) believed that one needed to earn the status of purity in order to achieve personal salvation. This was earned through regular (methodical) practice and by

meeting a high bar for morality including not drinking or gambling, not using profanity in speech, and wearing modest clothing. Wesleyan Methodists also supported social causes as part of their quest for salvation. M.J. came out of a family raised in this way. Becoming a feather purveyor in the fashion industry could not have pleased his parents.

George Taylor & Sarah Murphy						
1818-1888			1820-1884			
Caroline A. (Carrie) Taylor	George Taylor	Catherine Ann Taylor	Sarah J. Taylor	Morton John Taylor	Lillie M. Taylor	May L. Taylor
1840-1908	1846-1926	1851-1889	1854-1872	1858-1910	1861-1866	1868-1869

Like many families of this era, the seven Taylor children were born over a long period of time. In their case, this period spanned 28 years. The oldest child, Carrie (my great grandmother), was 18 years older than M. J. Taylor. Carrie married and moved out of her family's home in 1860, when M. J. would have been just 2 years old. The youngest child, May, was 10 years younger than M. J.. Such a long run of childbearing and childraising! Chances are, there were other children who were born in this 28 year span but did not

survive, about whom we have no information. Of the seven of George and Sarah Taylor's children we know about, only four lived to adulthood—M. J. was the youngest of these four.

All three of M.J.'s older surviving siblings married into known Loyalist families living in Brockville or nearby. Carrie first married into the Olds family, who came to Canada from Massachusetts; George first married into the Bellamy family, who came from Connecticut; and Catherine married into the Cornell family, who came from Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Though the Taylors were not necessarily British Loyalists themselves, by settling in Brockville, they were surrounded by those who were, or were recently descendent of those with this history. Political conservatism was likely prominent in this community (Hull et al, 1978). I have often wondered if my father's conservative world view had its origin in this line of the family.

M.J. Taylor's birth family — Migration to New York

Over time, all of the Taylors, including parents George and Sarah, eventually moved to the United States — initially to St. Lawrence county in the communities of Potsdam and Canton, New York. When and why that transition happened is hard to piece together. Oldest sibling Carrie led the way in 1860, moving to Canton, New York with her first husband Silas Olds. Parents George and Sarah followed at some point. It might have been in 1869, as M.J.'s naturalization papers say that he arrived in Potsdam, New York, in the spring of 1869. He would have been just 11 years old then, so it would be natural to assume that he was accompanied by his parents and siblings. That's one scenario.

There are other possible scenarios as well. The years leading up to 1869 were hard ones for George and Sarah. In 1866, their five year old daughter Lillie died. We don't know where she died, but she is buried in Canton. Eighteen months later, in 1868, when Sarah was age 48, she gave birth to May, who died in 1869, a year later. Baby May is also buried in Canton. Then, according to the 1870 US Federal census, 16 year old daughter Sarah J. was living in Canton with big sister Carrie, undoubtedly helping with Carrie's three little children. Sarah subsequently died in 1872 at age 18, and is buried in Canton, sharing a headstone with her littlest siblings. This information might suggest other scenarios, perhaps that Carrie, oldest of the Taylor offspring, took over the raising of her youngest siblings from her aging parents. Whatever the situation was, there must have been plenty of sadness.

I can't locate parents George and Sarah in either the 1870 US Federal Census or the 1871 Canada Census, but by 1880, they show up living in Potsdam, New York. The two remaining siblings, George Jr. and Catherine, both married in Canada, and migrated with their families to St. Lawrence County later in the 1880s.

M.J. Taylor moves to New York City

We know little about when and why M.J. moved to New York City. A good guess as to why may be foretold by his future—that he was ambitious. The first possible record of him in New York City is in 1876 when he would have been 18 years old, working in dry goods as a clerk. This may or may not have been our M. J. Taylor, as it is a decade before he appeared in the NYC City Directory again. That said, while there are plenty of Taylors listed as living in New York, there were no other M. J. Taylors listed during the 1870s-1880s, making it seem less likely that this was just “another M. J.” The first for-sure record of M. J. Taylor in New York City is his marriage to French-born Jeanne Louise Poupon on New Year’s Day, 1883 in Manhattan. He was 25 years old; she was 13 years older than he. Jeanne (also referred to as Jeannie, Jennie, Jane, and J. L.) owned the feather business. She was reputed not only to own the business and the business premises, but she owned three houses in Harlem, valued at \$125K. That was a lot of money in the 1880s! M. J. and Jeanne lived in one of those houses, at 210 W. 124th St, for most of their time together. Jeanne formally admitted M. J., her husband, as a partner to the feather business two years after their marriage, in February 1885. Jeanne’s feather establishment was named, *Madame Poupon*. When Jeanne added M. J. as a business partner, they changed the name to *M. J. Taylor & Co.*

This following passage written by author Sara Donati can help one imagine what it was like in New York City, in 1883, the year M. J. and Jeanne married:

*To really understand Manhattan in 1883 you have to forget the Manhattan you think you know. In 1883 there was no Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty, Flatiron Building, Times Square, or New York Public Library, to name just a few landmarks. Transportation was limited to walking, horse-drawn or steam-driven vehicles, elevated trains, and the growing railroad system. In 1883 gaslight still dominated; electric light had just begun to replace gas streetlights, and very few buildings had made the switch. The telephone was on the horizon, but in 1883 a telegram was the only way to move information quickly from place to place. (Donati, *The Gilded Hour*, 2015, p. 752)*

Running the feather business

Perhaps M. J. had been involved in the business before their marriage; if not he would have been on a steep learning curve in those first years of their marriage. In addition to all of the many business connections one needed to establish and maintain, running a feather manufactory that transformed raw ostrich feathers into fashion accessories involved extensive knowledge of feathers and the various processes used in their transformation.

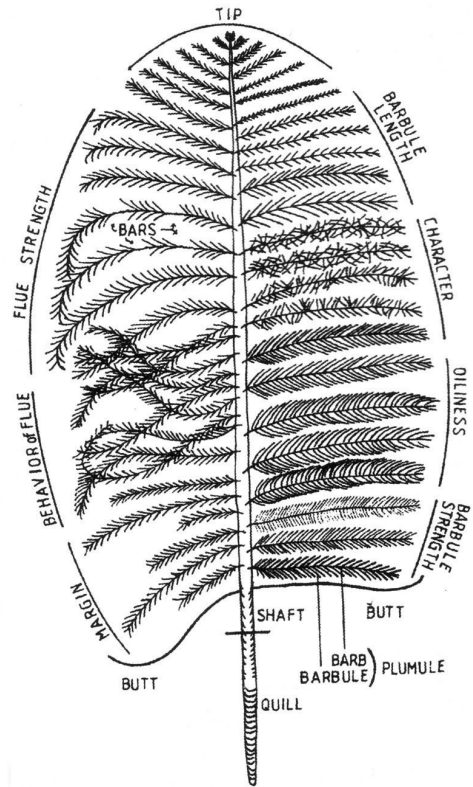
First, there are multiple types of ostrich feathers, depending upon type of ostrich, sex and age of the contributing bird, and the part of the body from which the feather came. The different feather types include, white primes (the most valuable—usually from male birds), bayocks (transition feathers from body to wing, also mostly from male birds), blacks (male body feathers), blondenes (light colored body feathers), femina (female white wing feathers), drabs (adult female or chick body feathers), floss (soft body feathers), spadones (chick wing feathers), and boos (tail feathers)—and each type had numerous subdivisions. Within types, ostrich feathers are further graded by their overall quality as well as degree and type of damage. This includes length, breadth, shape, strength, density, softness, lustre, and more. You get the idea. I have always admired deep expertise; being able to distinguish the variation in type and quality of ostrich feathers certainly required that.

Then there were the different ways of processing feathers. The following excerpts describe just a few of these processes (from Boase, 2018):

["Laying Up"] First they pare the quills back with a sharpened piece of glass to make them more pliable for shaping. Then they 'fortify' the quills with wire before sewing them together—up to seven plies as a time—to give the appearance of a single gorgeously full feather.

"Willowing" an ostrich feather meant lengthening it by tying extensions onto every single flue—one, two, or even three extensions—until the feather had that bouncing, full, air head that would set a hat off so gracefully. Tiny fingers were good at this job. An inspector for the New York Board of Health calculated that one woman and two children might labor for 'a day and a third' on a single ostrich plume—whose preparation required as many as 8,613 knots—just to lengthen it throughout by 1 inch. In 1910, this earned them 3 cents, jointly.

["Curling"] the feathers [required] a knife, scraping delicately down each frond just as you might curl ribbon with scissors. 'A lightness of touch' was thought necessary to be an ostrich curler; a 'gentleness in drawing the knife over the feather particles one by one to produce the curl.' Just one broken fibre would 'damage the whole.' this was considered the most skilled craft of all among ostrich hands, a craft requiring a surprising three-year apprenticeship.



Of the many challenges of the feather business that M. J. and Jeanne faced, labor issues must have been paramount. There were hundreds of feather workers in New York City in the 1880s, who ranged in age from 12 to 50 years old. Beginning in the late 1880s, the relationship between employers and workers erupted. One such episode happened when the largest feather factory, owned by Isidor Cohnfeld, that employed 400 women and girls, reduced the pay of some working in its factory. The pay for working in feather factories teetered on the edge of starvation wages—wages that were inadequate to support a living. Already feather workers worked more than 10 hours per day, six days per week. When wages were reduced, women took on “night work” in addition to their day shifts. This consisted of “piece work” that women did at home in their evenings, increasing the length of their work days to 12-15 hours. Reduction of wages represented a serious threat to the women feather workers. With the help of the then newly-formed *Working Woman’s Society of New York City*, women workers at Cohnfeld Company began organizing. A short strike in response to the reduced wages resulted in a tentative agreement to come to a fair wage scale and immediate reinstatement of the striking workers. The women returned to work.

In response to the initial success of the union, within a couple of months, there were 1,000 members of the new *Ostrich Feather Workers’ Association*, each paying 15 cents per month to belong. The union not only bargained with the feather factory owners on behalf of all of the workers, but supported workers in times of strikes, offered sick pay (something that these employers did not), and even provided loans to individual members.

But the labor troubles continued, greatly exacerbated by the fact that the owners of the different feather factories began coordinating their efforts, conspiring to keep union members from working in the feather trade. Women union workers began to experience unfair treatment, were given fewer and less desirable shifts. Some lost their jobs and were replaced with non-union workers. When a worker who had been laid off, for example, by the Cohnfeld Company, went to seek work at a different factory, she was told that having worked at Cohnfeld meant they would not hire her. And while some of the factories signed on to the proposed fair wage scale, many did not; even some of those that did, failed to standby the agreement.

In late January 1889, seven feather factories, including *M. J. Taylor & Co.*, locked out their feather workers. This began what would become an 8-week battle, with factory owners refusing to the union’s terms (of a fair wage and ending discrimination of union members) and the feather workers picketing, refusing to work on the employers’ terms. A New York Tribune article reports that *M. J. Taylor & Co.* called for the arrest of three striking “*young girls*” doing picket duty. These women were discharged when the arresting officer attested to their quiet and orderly demonstration.

Taking place a decade earlier than the formation of the *International Ladies Garment Workers Union* (ILGWU), this organizing of feather workers was led by the young, courageous Ida M. Van Etten when she was just 21 years old. Ida Van Etten fought tirelessly

to increase wages, reduce working hours, enforce existing factory laws for the protection of women and children, and secure equal pay for equal work for men and women. Reading the transcripts of the negotiations between the *Working Woman's Society of New York City* and the lawyers for the feather magnates gives a sense of what a smart, articulate, and unflappable ally Ida was for women workers.

Within days of the strike's beginning, one can see advertisements in newspapers posted by *M. J. Taylor & Co.*, undoubtedly seeking workers to replace those they had locked out.

Ostrich Feathers — Fifty intelligent girls to learn; good pay while learning. M. J. Taylor & Co., 84 Wooster St.

Ostrich Feathers — Preparers, sewers, and curlers wanted; steady employment, highest prices. M. J. Taylor & Co., 84 Wooster St.

In late March, the strike ended. An article in *The Sun*, 22 March 1889, read,

The Girls Give Up the Fight. The Feather Workers Strike Ends and They All Resume Work. It is eight weeks since the girls were locked out of the factories because they refused to accept lower wages than their schedule of prices set forth, and which the employers had accepted, and also because they refused to allow non-union girls to receive the most remunerative portion of the work. In all the eight weeks there have not been deserters from the ranks, no complaints or regrets or murmurs: everyone was loyal to the union until the end, and the strike was ended by the union. Isidor Cohnfeld of the Cohnfeld Company, ...said yesterday that he had re-employed all of his old hands who had been on strike, requiring them to sign this notice: To the Central Board of the Feather Workers' Branch of the Working Women's Society, 28 Lafayette place: Please take notice that I hereby resign my membership in the union.

Other manufacturers who locked out their employees because Cohnfelds' went out on strike, reemployed them yesterday. They signed similar notices.



The Strike of the Feather Workers in New York City. 1889

As shared in the reflections of Louis A. Green, an NYC feather factory owner who was interviewed nearly thirty years later about the feather workers' strike in 1889, the strike enabled the feather magnates to increase their profitability in addition to quashing the new union.

"This was opportune for the manufacturers who were experiencing a very dull season, and the strike gave them the opportunity to shut down their factories, and decrease production. The strike was a miserable failure and the girls were glad to get back to their old employment." (The Illustrated Millner, Vol. 18, April 1917)

Whether this was a case of hindsight and sour grapes or not, it shows the enduring antipathy of this factory owner to the efforts of workers to organize.

From one marriage to the next

Though the feather business carried on, apparently M. J. and Jeanne's marriage did not. In February 1896, after 13 years of marriage, M. J. and Jeanne separated and M. J. filed for an annulment of the marriage on the charge of bigamy. As reported in the papers:

“Mr. Taylor received information that his wife had been married in Philadelphia years ago. He went there and made a search of the records and discovered not only that it was true, but that her first husband was still alive.”

Apparently, Jeanne made no appearance in the case and a decree was rendered against her, officially dissolving the marriage in December 1898. Given that it was uncontested, M. J. didn't wait and married a woman named Marie Elizabeth Jenney in July 1898. I have been unable to find much about her except that she may have been born in Rhode Island to a French mother and English father, and she was married once before. One wonders if Jeanne's previous marriage was a surprise to M. J.—Jeanne identified herself as divorced in the 1880 US Federal Census—or an easy way to end his marriage to Jeanne. While M. J. alleged that he did not know that Jeanne had been married before, perhaps this was an agreed upon strategy—Jeanne was raised Catholic and annulment might have been preferable to divorce. That said, newspaper headlines with the word “bigamy” produced the sensation that we might imagine.

Both before and after M. J. and Jeanne's separation, their feather business faltered, something not helped by M. J. and Jeanne engaging in a couple of years of contentious litigation over property. In January 1897, a New York Times headline read, *“Business Parts Husband and Wife.”* Another in The Sun read, *“Sues His Wife As Partner. Mr. Taylor Not Satisfied with the Conduct of the Business He Married Into.”* Creditors filed suit, the company was put into receivership, and M. J. sued Jeanne, demanding a dissolution of the feather business and an accounting. In February 1897, the business as it was constituted was dissolved and the Sheriff auctioned off remaining inventory to pay off creditors. M. J. posted a notice in the New York Times that he had begun a new firm under the new name of *Taylor & Company* and was no longer liable for debts related to the former *M. J. Taylor & Company*. Subsequently, in April 1897, M. J. sued for the business property at 28 Waverly Place.

Though two years after their marriage, Jeanne brought M. J. into the business as a partner, it seems clear that she remained the legal principal in the business. Creditors' suits were filed against Jeanne. Similarly, M. J.'s own suits assigned blame to Jeanne as principal.

The mystery of Jeanne Louise Poupon

What led to a woman in the 19th century being able to start and run a successful feather business? We know nothing for sure about Jeanne's parentage, though we know she was born in France and there is some evidence that she might have come from the region of Bourgogne (yes, the location where Poupon mustard originated!). Did she come from a wealthy family, that provided her with the resources to start the feather business? Or was

she a shrewd business woman whose efforts in the feather business created the wealth? Or maybe it was a case of both? All we know for sure is that at the time of her marriage to M. J. Taylor, 38 year old Jeanne was a wealthy woman. There appears to be no question that like her husband M. J., Jeanne was ambitious.

At first, I wondered whether Jeanne's first husband contributed to the start of the business. We know that in 1869, just a year after her immigration from France, at age 24, Jeanne was married in Philadelphia, to a man named Ignatz C. Schultz, himself an immigrant. I can find no indication that either Ignatz or Jeanne operated a feather business while they were in Philadelphia. We now know that Jeanne and Ignatz didn't divorce, but just separated. They would have separated sometime after their marriage on 28 October 1869 and before 1872, when Jeanne appears living alone in New York City.

It is tempting to assume that even if she didn't bring the money from France, that Jeanne brought at least the expertise needed for the feather trade with her from France—because France was then considered ground zero of ostrich feather fashion. But on her certificate of naturalization, Jeanne indicates that she immigrated to the United States in 1868 at the age of 23. It's hard to imagine that a young woman would have had the extensive expertise and resources to be able to start and run a successful business in New York City. And yet when Jeanne was just 27 years old, there is evidence that her feather business was underway.

Starting in 1872 and continuing every year for more than the next decade, Jeanne is listed in the NYC City Directory as, "*Jane L. Poupon, feathers, 84 Wooster.*" There is no doubt that this is Jeanne, living alone and running the *Madame Poupon* business for ten years, out of this address. It is the same address where Jeanne Louise Poupon is listed as living in the 1880 US Federal Census. And 84 Wooster is also the first location at which *M. J. Taylor & Co.* operated in 1885.¹ Whether Jeanne had to scramble for the financial resources or whether she had family money, it must have taken extraordinary perseverance, confidence, and fortitude to start and run a business in New York City as a young woman in those times.

Only weeks after M. J. and Jeanne's marriage annulment was finalized, there was a dramatic turn of events. Jeanne, who had moved out of their home in Harlem, and was now living in the St. Nicholas Hotel, died of pneumonia on 3 December 1898 at age 53. Newspapers ran headlines saying things like, "*Husband Gets Money: Divorced Wife Bequeathed Him a Fortune; Her Will Unchanged*" and "*Inherits Former Wife's Estate: Annulment of Marriage Made No Difference in Mrs. Taylor's Will.*" M. J.'s attorney was quoted as saying,

"Notwithstanding the fact that the marriage was annuled [so recently], Mrs. Taylor had no intention of changing the bequests to Mr. Taylor, and she so declared some time

¹ Note that after marrying M. J. Taylor, Jeanne began listing herself in the NYC City Directory as "*Jennie L. Taylor,*" until they separated in 1896. Then she appears as "*Jane L. Taylor.*" I will make no jokes about nom de plumes.

before her death. She was an eccentric woman and had been in litigation with Mr. Taylor over property in which they had been partners. Practically all that remains of the large estate she once possessed is about \$16,000."

That, of course, would not have included the amount of the estate that M. J. Taylor regained through the negotiated annulment and subsequent legal suits he filed against Jeanne.

And so, Jeanne Louise Poupon, this ambitious and entrepreneurial woman, met her end. It is hard to know the truth, and I'm sure it is complicated. But somehow, I think Jeanne Louise Poupon got the raw end of the deal.



Starting the Ostrich Farms

Ostrich farming may well have headed off complete extinction of these giant, flightless, birds who produced such highly desirable feathers. For centuries, ostriches have been hunted for their beautiful feathers. There is plenty of evidence of these feathers playing a part in the cultural past of ancient Rome and Egypt as well as appearing in Renaissance artwork and adorning the heads of European royalty. Of the nine known species of ostriches, seven have been hunted to extinction. By the second half of the 19th century, the world's only remaining ostriches could be found in Africa—their future there was undoubtedly endangered as well due to over-hunting.

Efforts to domesticate ostriches saw some success in the 1860's, particularly given the invention of the first effective ostrich egg incubator. Once ostrich farming took hold, the supply of the world's ostrich feathers increased dramatically. But still ostrich feathers came almost exclusively from Africa—because that's where the World's ostriches were. Feathers harvested in Africa were sent to London, the world's main ostrich feather market. From there feather brokers selected and purchased feathers, and resold them to feather manufacturers.

For Americans in the feather trade, this was an expensive pathway involving middle men, excessive shipping costs, and steep tariffs (as much as 15-25%) paid to the American

government for importing raw feathers. This situation drove the feeling of urgency to find a way to farm ostriches in the United States. Over the course of the 1880s, there were several businessmen who succeeded in shipping ostriches to the United States. Perhaps the most well known of these early endeavors was led by Edwin Cawston in the mid to late 1880s. His efforts were initially focused in Southern California, but he proceeded to expand to farms in Arizona, Texas, and Florida.

Between the time when M. J. and Jeanne separated (1896) and when Jeanne died (end of 1898), M. J. was actively working to get involved in ostrich farming efforts. Initially he partnered with a man named A. Y. Pearson, a wealthy theatrical manager and producer of plays, in New York City, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. One could imagine that A. Y. and M. J.'s relationship might have begun around the procurement of ostrich feathers for theatrical productions. The two of them joined forces, and presumably capital, in pursuit of starting an ostrich farm, establishing a joint business firm in 1898. All of this would have been happening right when M. J. and Jeanne were in litigation over their joint property; I wonder the degree to which that impacted these plans either positively or negatively. The following excerpts from newspaper articles and brochures provide a glimpse of how their early efforts unfolded, showing fairly rapid acquisition of birds, though their partnership dissolved before the full implementation of the plan.

In 1898 the Arizona Ostrich Company [owned by Edwin Cawston] sold its entire troop of over 300 ostriches to Messrs. A. Y. Pearson and M. J. Taylor. [Additionally] these gentlemen purchased 300 ostriches from the Fullerton, California farm, which birds they brought to Arizona. (United States Department of Agriculture Report, 1906)

8 Nov 1898. A. Y. Pearson of Los Angeles arrived in Jacksonville [Florida] Saturday and will be followed by a carload of ostriches. Mr. Pearson is looking for a suitable location and may be indeed planning to settle near Jacksonville. (The Ocala Evening Star)

In the same year [1898], Mr. A. Y. Pearson and Mr. M. J. Taylor established the Florida Ostrich Farm at Jacksonville.... In the spring of 1899 [their] firm dissolved, Mr. Taylor retaining the Florida farm... Mr. Pearson took the California interests of the firm, and in November 1899, he purchased a large tract of land ten miles west of Phoenix, Arizona. (National Association of Audobon Societies, 1903)

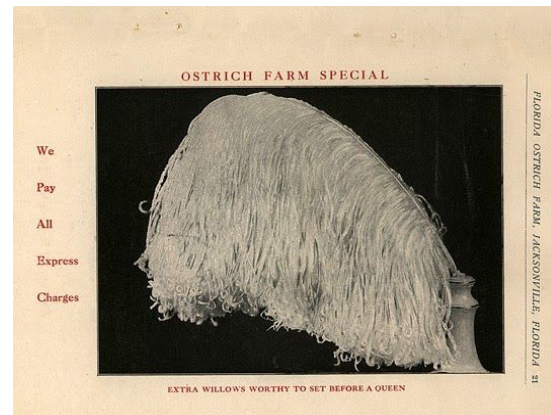
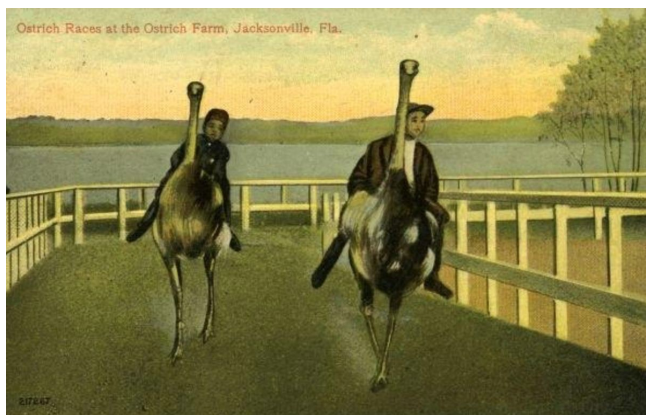
14 Nov 1899. A. Y. Pearson, formerly lessee of the Burbank Theater, has obtained control of the Fullerton ostrich farm. (San Bernardino County Sun)



Florida Ostrich Farm. Year unknown.

Over time, M.J. Taylor went on to expand the number of ostrich farm sites from the Florida Ostrich Farm located in Jacksonville, Florida to include at least two more sites in Florida, Palm Beach and Sarasota, as well as in Jersey City, NJ. I also found an article that said M. J. Taylor and his partner had decided against opening up a branch in Cuba.

In addition to the breeding of ostriches and the harvesting of their feathers, M. J. capitalized on the public's curiosity about ostriches and established The Florida Ostrich Farm as a tourist destination. He charged admission to visit the farm and worked to create a buzz about his ostriches, naming some, and then taking them on the fair circuit. People lined up to have their pictures taken atop ostriches, observe the ostrich hatchlings, picnic on the grounds, and watch ostrich races. Most well known was the ostrich named "Oliver W." who raced, pulling its jockey in a little cart. And don't forget the gift shop where a person could buy ostrich feathers, feather boas, feather fans and all manner of souvenirs. One can still find numerous postcards and other swag for sale, 100 years later, as vintage objects on EBay and other places, as well as brochures providing educational information about ostriches, with prices for ostrich products. The only other ostrich farm that rivaled The Florida Ostrich Farm as a tourist destination was the Cawston Ostrich Farm in South Pasadena, California.



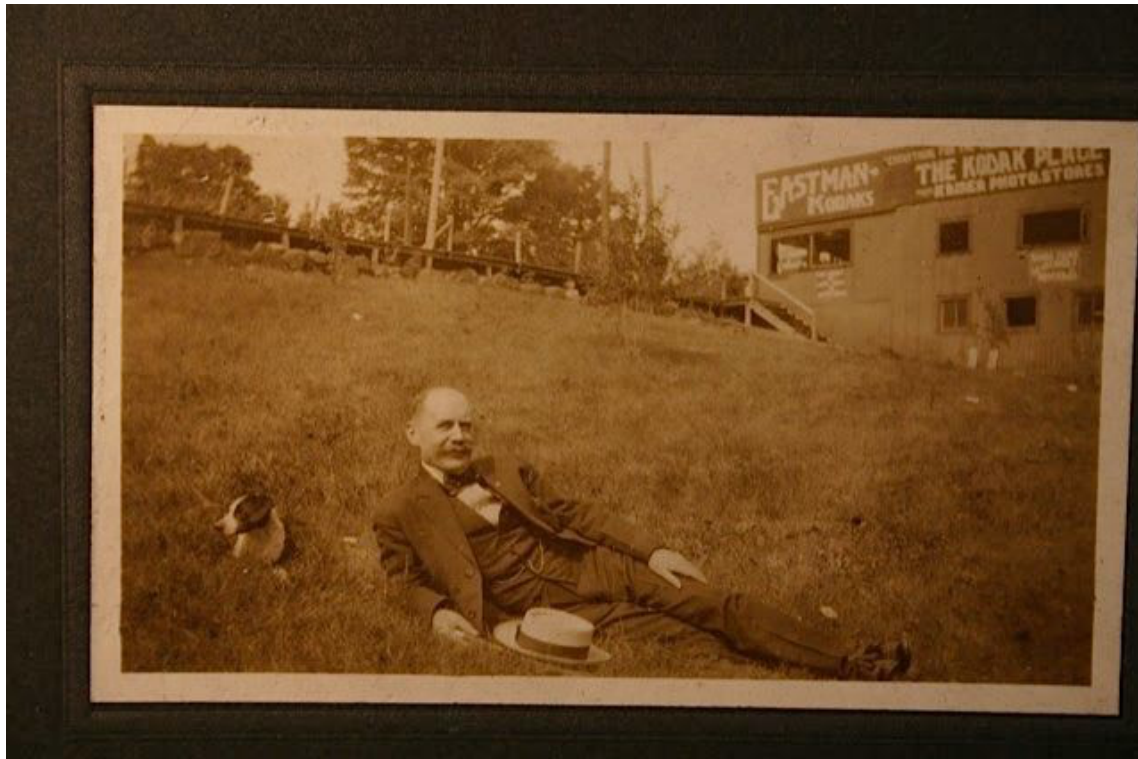
Images from souvenirs photos, brochures, and postcards of the Florida Ostrich Farm

M. J.'s place in the community

With his wealth came entry into certain social circles. One of particular note was his membership in The Lake Placid Club in the Adirondack region of upstate New York. The Lake Placid Club was started as a recreation and social club in 1895 by none other than Melvil Dewey. This is the same Dewey who established the Dewey Decimal system; he served as New York State Librarian. Dewey was an appalling racist, even by the standards of the times, and created policies at the club that excluded Jews and other marginalized groups. From a letter communicating policy that went out to all members of The Lake Placid Club:

"No one will be received as a member or guest against whom there is physical, moral, social or race objection, or who would be unwelcome to even a small minority ... This invariable rule is rigidly enforced. It is found impracticable to make exceptions for Jews or others excluded, even though of unusual personal qualifications."

This letter went out around the same time that the below photo of M. J. Taylor was taken. While there was a petition to remove Dewey from his public office of State Librarian because of his personal connection to The Lake Placid Club, no such effort was made to remove Dewey from his role in the club by its members.



*M. J. Taylor in 1903 at the Lake Placid Club, upstate New York in the Adirondack Mountains.
His nephews called him "Uncle Mort."*

M.J. Taylor's connection to his birth family — Ongoing bonds

Thinking back to M. J. and his birth family, I found myself wondering what connections he maintained. Recall that he came from a religious family, with Irish immigrant parents, living in a small town near the border with Canada. Now as a successful feather magnate, did M. J. connect with his family? Did he visit his parents? Did he interact with his siblings? Don't forget that his siblings that survived to adulthood were 7, 12, and 18 years older than him.

Searching in newspapers, I can find some evidence that M. J. maintained a connection with his parents:

—On 21 July 1883, the year that M. J. married Jeanne Louise Poupon, there is a notice in the paper, about M. J.'s mother visiting New York City:

"Mrs. George Taylor is visiting her two sons in New York [City], where they have an extensive wholesale jobbing trade in ostrich feathers." (Canton Commercial Advertiser)

The two sons would have been M. J. and his older brother George Jr.. George was 12 years older than M. J., and lived in New York City with his wife, Kate. Did George move to New York City in order to join M. J.'s business? Or did he already live there?

—On 5 December 1884, there is a notice of M. J.'s mother's death and how his father returned to New York with one of his sons (could have been M. J. or possibly brother George, Jr.).

Mrs. Geo. Taylor died at her residence on Main Street, Friday morning, after a protracted illness. Funeral services were held in the Methodist church Sunday morning at the usual hour of Sabbath services, after which the remains were taken to the Canton cemetery for burial. Mr. Taylor went to New York [City] with his son, leaving the house vacant for the present. (Canton Commercial Advertiser)

—On 5 April 1887, there is a notice about M. J.'s father, George Taylor's house burning down. Note that the house was owned by Jeanne:

A house on upper Main St., formerly known as the Sayles house, was destroyed by fire this forenoon. The place now belongs to Mrs. M. J. Taylor and was insured in the Home Insurance company for \$500. The loss is total. Apparently, the fire was caused by a defective chimney. (The Ogdensburg Journal)

—On 8 April 1887, another notice in the paper has a bit more information, though it errantly states that M. J. owned the house, not Jeanne:

The Taylor Place Burned. About noon on Tuesday the house on upper Main Street, owned by M. J. Taylor, of New York, was discovered to be on fire, The firemen responded promptly, but the house was entirely destroyed. Loss, \$1,300; insurance, \$500. The cause of the fire is unknown, but it is supposed to have taken from a defective chimney, and the fire up stairs was well under way before it was discovered The real loser of the property is probably Mr. George Taylor. M. J. Taylor, his son, had purchased the place for his parents, and given them a life lease, retaining the deed himself. After the death of Mrs. Taylor, the father retained the place, collecting the rent for his own use. The insurance of course went to the son. Mr. Taylor has telegraphed his son about the fire,

and until a reply is received nothing further can be done or known. Adjacent property and the barn on the place were saved with difficulty. (Canton Commercial Advertiser)

—On 7 July 1887, a follow-up notice in the paper said:

Mrs. M. J. Taylor is in town, and will try to dispose of the vacant lot on Upper Main street from which a house was burned last spring. (St. Lawrence Herald)

This is further evidence that Jeanne owned the property, and also that she was a capable business woman.

In addition, there is significant evidence that M. J. remained connected to his siblings—or perhaps more precisely, connected directly to four of his nephews. This includes his nephew Frank M. Olds, and nephew Carleton H. Barber, two sons of his oldest sister, Carrie Taylor Olds Barber (my great grandmother). It also includes Morton S. Cornell and Frank B. Cornell, two sons of his sister Catharine Ann Taylor Cornell. Following is a discussion of each, in the chronological order of their interactions with M. J..

M. J.'s sister, Catharine Ann Taylor, married to James Bruce Cornell, was 7 years older than M. J.. When she was 37 years old, she died, leaving four sons, spanning ages 14 to 2, to live with their widowed father. After Catharine's death, it appears that her two oldest sons, Morton Sandfield Cornell and Frank Burton Cornell (aged 14 and 12), were sent to New York City to live with M. J. and Jeanne. They both went to school while living in New York City. The younger brother, Frank Burton Cornell, returned to upstate New York for a year after attending school, to work in a local grocery. Older brother Morton Sandfield Taylor ended up marrying at age 19 in Nyack, New York, and spent his entire adult life living in Brooklyn, where he worked as Division Superintendent of the Street Railway. He was the lucky one. In his case, this experience likely enabled him to move out of St. Lawrence county to a more prosperous future in New York City. The other three nephews did not fare as well.

Frank M. Olds (b: 1867; d: 1892) was Carrie Taylor Olds' son, by her first marriage with Silas Olds. In his obituary, Frank was said to be "*a quiet, reticent man, active in church.*" He was a bookkeeper and as a young man, lived with M. J. in New York City. I wonder whether he was a bookkeeper for *M. J. Taylor & Co.*? Frank died in 1892 of diabetes, while living with M. J., at the age of just 25 years, on the 26th of November, two days after Thanksgiving. This was before insulin was used to manage the disease; the main treatment was calorie restriction and exercise. I keep wondering whether an enormous carb-heavy Thanksgiving meal led to his sudden death. Frank's body was transported by train back to Canton, NY and the funeral was held at the home of his mother, Carrie Taylor Olds Barber and her second husband, Lyman Barber. Imagine when M.J. Taylor had to contact his sister, Carrie, to tell her that her son who had come to live with him had died.

Carlton H. Barber (b: 1877; d: 1901) was Carrie Taylor Olds Barber's son, by her second marriage, with Lyman Barber. He is my grandfather's brother, and my father's namesake. In 1897, he graduated from the prestigious Eastman Business College in Poughkeepsie, NY, where he specialized in telegraphy. We have a copy of the \$800 bill he paid for tuition, and have wondered whether it was M. J. Taylor who paid the tuition, as Lyman and Carrie (his parents) would have been unlikely to have that kind of cash. After trying his hand at being a telegraph operator for a couple of years, Carlton moved down to Jacksonville, FL to work as the manager of the Florida Ostrich Farm—early in 1900. A little less than two years later, M. J. Taylor would again need to contact his sister Carrie to tell her that another of her sons was deathly ill, with malarial fever. He died at M. J. Taylor's home in Fairfield, Florida, on the 27th of November, one day after the anniversary of Frank Olds' death. His obituary, published in the Canton Commercial Advertiser on Wednesday December 4th, 1901, reads as follows:

Carlton H. Barber Died—at Jacksonville, Florida, Wednesday evening, November 27th, 1901, aged 24 years. The death of Carl Barber was learned with great sorrow by his very large circle of Canton friends who had learned to love and admire him for his kindly disposition and amiable qualities. He was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Barber, of this town and was born on the old Barber homestead about two and one half miles west of this village in the Conkey district. The writer remembers him well as a romping, whole-souled boy in the old gray country school house, where he was as in after years a model of industry and thoughtfulness. When his parents moved to [Canton] village he accompanied them here, and later went into one of the local telegraph offices and become conversant with telegraphy. After this he was located as operator at Massena and other points. Two or three years ago he went to Jacksonville where his uncle, M. J. Taylor, has an ostrich farm, and took charge of the farm. Since there he applied himself very carefully to his duties, and while in the performance of these was stricken with the fatal fever which resulted in his death. His mother hurried south on learning of his illness and was with him during his last days. The remains arrived here Saturday night and the funeral was conducted from the Barber residence Sunday. Interment in Fairview. He is survived by a mother and one brother, Ross, a student in St. Lawrence University. (Ross is Roscoe Barber, my grandfather.) On these the blow falls with more than ordinary force as it is little more than a year ago that Lyman Barber, Carl's father, fell from the scaffolding of a house in this village and was killed by the fall.

Before Carlton H. died, the following piece appeared in the Canton Commercial Advertiser on Wednesday August 22, 1900.

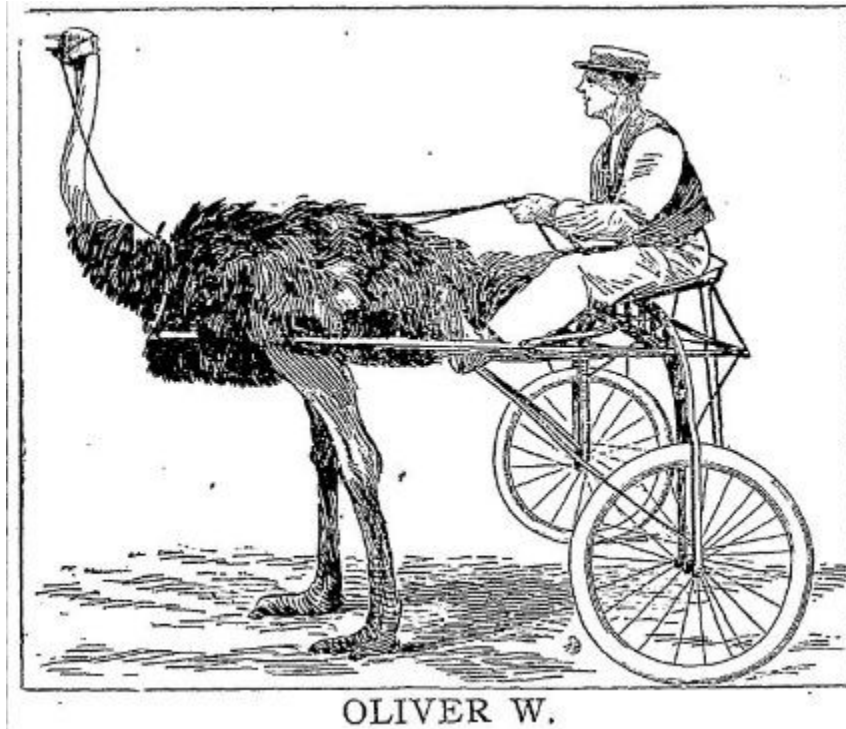
Many have read with interest the accounts of the exhibit at Saratoga and other resorts of ostriches from a Jacksonville ostrich farm. Carl Barber, son of Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Barber, of this village, has been employed on this Jacksonville farm for several months, working with his uncle, Mr. M. J. Taylor of New York. Mr. Barber has had charge of a portion of the Northern trip.



Carlton H. Barber giving family members a tour of the Florida Ostrich Farm

And a year later, in the Ogdensburg Daily Journal, on September 4, 1901, the Ogdensburg Fair is described, which likely involved Carlton H. Barber:

One of the good attractions on the grounds is the miniature ostrich farm from Jacksonville, Fla. It is in charge of H.F. Fitts, and consists of six ostriches, including Oliver W., the pacer; Cyclone, the runner; Oom Paul, the king of the flock, and his mate, Johanna. Oom Paul and Johanna were the first ostriches ever brought to this country. They are 45 and 40 years old respectively. The biggest bird in the farm weighs 440 pounds. Many people visited the enclosure yesterday and all felt well paid. During the afternoon Oliver W. was driven a half mile to wagon, raced by a runner. It was the most novel exhibition ever seen on the track. The big bird made the circuit in fast time, and although he showed a disposition to falter at times, his driver kept him to his task and finished his performance amid much applause. Oliver W., and Cyclone will each give exhibitions at the fair today, the latter with a man astride him.



Frank Burton Cornell (b: 1878; d: 1903) was M. J.'s sister Catharine Taylor Cornell's second son. As mentioned above, he had lived with M. J. for some years after his mother died, beginning when he was 12. Like his cousin Carlton H. Barber, and barely a year and a half later, Frank Burton Cornell succumbed to death as a consequence of his work on the Florida Ostrich Farm. He also was just 25 years old.

A notice of the incubator accident, from the St. Lawrence Herald in early May, 1903

Mr. Frank B. Cornell, formerly of Potsdam, son of J B Cornell, narrowly escaped death last week at his ostrich farm near Jacksonville, Florida. While he was watching some incubators a lamp exploded. A negro employee, hearing the explosion, risked his life by rushing into the building and dragging Mr. Cornell out with his clotting all on fire. He promptly extinguished the flames by rolling him in sand. [Mr. Cornell] was badly burned... About \$6,000 worth of ostrich eggs were destroyed.

But Frank ended up losing his life several weeks later.

From Frank Burton Cornell's obituary published in early June, 1903:

Mr. Frank Burton Cornell, son of J. B. Cornell, of Potsdam, died Tuesday morning at his house in Jacksonville, FL, at the age of 25 years, 8 months. Mr. Cornell was seriously burned about a month ago by an explosion of a lamp in one of the

incubators on his ostrich farm. The burns were nearly healed, and his recovery fully expected, when complications arose and the end came suddenly.

Mr. Cornell was born and spent his boyhood in Potsdam. After his mother's death, at the age of twelve, he went to New York to live with his uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. M. J. Taylor, and attended a city school until the age of sixteen. Coming back to Potsdam he took a position with Lewis Bixby but after a year and a half returned to New York where he engaged with Robert Hill, wholesale and retail grocer, with whom he remained four years, traveling in the interest of the business most of the time.

He then went to Florida, engaging in the ostrich business in connection with his uncle....

I was lucky to find a portion of a letter that Frank Burton Cornell wrote, published by his father in the Potsdam newspaper on Wednesday February 27, 1901 (before either he or his cousin Carlton had died) which tells of his life and excitement of working at the Florida Ostrich Farm:

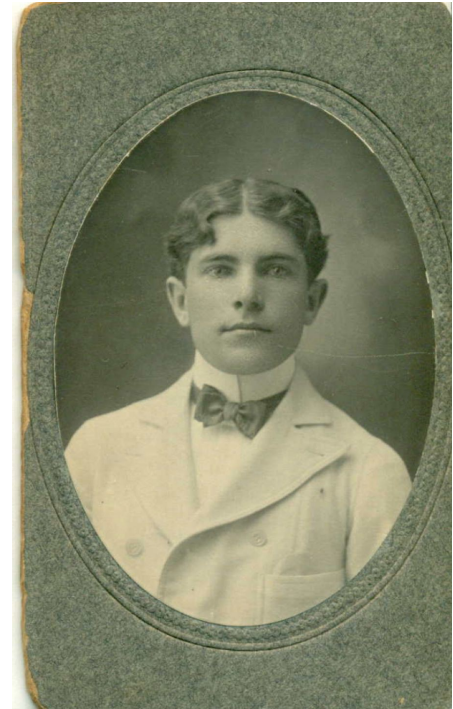
*A Florida Ostrich Farm: Peculiar and Interesting Industry in the Sunny South
TWO POTSDAM MEN Who are Making Fortunes by Striking Something New*

Two former Potsdam men, Mort Taylor an old-time resident, and his nephew Frank B. Cornell, son of J. B. Cornell of this village, have struck the right thing way down in Florida. They are farming it, but instead of raising cows and selling milk and butter they raise ostriches and sell feathers. They have two farms, one at Jacksonville and one at Palm Beach. A recent letter from Mr. Cornell to his father gives many interesting points about the business. We copy a portion of the letter as follows:

We have in all two hundred ostriches on our farm in Jacksonville. The farm covers about twenty acres all fenced in with a fourteen foot fence. We keep six incubators running all the time and are hatching little ostriches nearly every day. We also have a large collection of different birds such as Chinese Pheasants, Sand Hill Cranes, Phelloan Ducks, Mandarin Ducks, Amherst Pheasants, Silver Pheasants, Florida deer, others, monkeys, alligators, eagles, sea cow, sharks and all kinds of bantam hens. These things we keep as pets. We raise them all and find a big market for them. These pheasants bring \$100 per pair. Our main enterprise however is ostriches which we are raising for their feathers. Each ostrich produces about \$150 worth of feathers every eight months. Of course starting such a business as this people wanted to see it and such crowds of people used to come out that it became a nuisance answering questions. So we built a little office and charged 25 cents admission. As soon as we did that they came by the hundreds and our admission

now amounts to nearly \$100 per day. That was last winter when I first went in the business.

As soon as the winter travel was over and business began to drop off we thought we would take some ostriches up north. So I went to Saratoga with 35 ostriches and as you know was there all summer. Uncle took 35 more to Bass Point, near Boston. When the season closed up there we found the adventure had made ten thousand dollars. Some days we took in \$400 in admission alone. We have a salesman on each farm where we sell (at a good profit) all kinds of ostrich goods such as fans, boas, plumes, tips and everything made from an ostrich feather. Next summer Geo. Hitchcock will have charge of the Saratoga farm, uncle Mort at Bass Point and I will open another at Atlantic City, N.J., and will be there until Aug. 26, when I will take "Oliver W." our racing ostrich to Buffalo for one week at "The Pan American." From there I go to Toronto to the big fair there for 14 days, then to the fair at Montreal, and will be at all the large fairs in Canada. I then go to the fairs out west as far as St. Louis. We get \$100 per day for showing "Oliver W." and get all expenses paid. Uncle Mort is now on the big farm in Jacksonville and I have the branch farm down here at Palm Beach where I was last winter and will be here until April 10th.



Frank Burton Cornell

Well, I think I have explained quite fully the business I am in and I guess you don't wonder at my going out of the grocery business. The grocery business is all right, but there are too many people in it. What you want to get into now days is something new and I have struck it. Lots of people told me, besides you, not to go into it, but stick to the "sure" thing or I would be sorry for it, etc., and those same people are writing to me now to give them or some of their friends a job. Well this is a great country. So you have had sleighing since November. Well, I haven't had my light overcoat on since I left New York a year ago. Down here is just like summer all the time. About 100 yards from my farm here there is an orange grove and every morning I go in and pick enough oranges and bananas to last all day. I keep three men on the farm taking care of and explaining the birds to the people while I sell tickets and sell the goods. In a certain way it's a show as well as a business. I go in bathing in the ocean every day as the ocean is only about a quarter of a mile from the hotel where I board, and the first thing I do when I get up is to take a plunge in the surf before breakfast.

From a notice describing Frank Burton Cornell's funeral published in 5 June 1903:

The funeral of Frank Burton Cornell was largely attended last Friday afternoon at the Baptist church [in Potsdam], preceeded by a prayer at the home of his father, J. B. Cornell, where the remains were taken. The flowers were very fine, many having been brought from Florida and New York. His three brothers, two with their wives were present...Others from out of town were Mr. and Mrs. Morton Taylor, and Miss Bellinger, of New York; Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Cornell; Mrs. Lyman Barber and son, of Canton; and Mr. and Mrs. Frank Cornell of Norwood. The grief stricken widow and her mother Mrs. Davies, left the next morning.

What a deeply sad event Frank Burton Cornell's funeral must have been, and it was likely triggering for many, given that it followed from Carlton H. Barber's death, also at the Florida Ostrich Farm. Two young men at the beginnings of their lives. How must have M. J. Taylor felt?

The new century

There are two things that are true about the first decade of the 20th century:

1) that the feather industry was in decline; and 2) that despite this decline, M. J. and second wife Marie continued to live extravagantly.

First, about the feather industry: While a movement to protect birds has its origins in the 1880s to 1890s, initiated by women environmentalists, by the turn of the century this movement had intensified. It was estimated that at this time five million birds were slaughtered every year to meet the demands of modern millinery. Women's hats were not only adorned with all manner of plumery, but they sported bird heads and beaks, birds' eggs, and even whole bird carcasses, reinforced with wire to take on life-like poses. Birds like the snowy egret, with highly desirable plumage, had been nearly hunted to extinction. The Audobon Society popularized a feather-free hat called the Adobonnet, trimmed entirely with silk ribbons and artificial flowers, and the cry to "*keep feathers on birds not hats*" grew stronger.

The ostrich feather industry mounted a campaign, contrasting the use of farmed feathers with those requiring the slaughter of birds. However attention was being drawn to what it meant to "pluck" an ostrich's feathers. While ostrich farmers claimed that there was no cruelty involved with removal of feathers (they were clipped not pulled out), in fact the process required putting a hood on the terrified bird and having two men hold the strong, kicking bird still while a third clipped its feathers.

There were other factors contributing to the decline of feather use on hats. Not only was a large hat required to support feathers, but the feathers themselves increased the size of hats, sometimes resulting in hats more than a foot high. The growing ubiquity of the automobile made these big hats impractical, giving way to more tightly fitted hat styles. The final blow to feathered hats came with the somber mood that accompanied World War 1; fashion in general, including hats, became more somber as well.

Perhaps serving as a prophetic moment, the mascot of the Florida Ostrich Farm met his end, as reported on 13 September 1902 in The Asheville Gazette:

"There is sorrow among the attendants at [the] ostrich farm, ... 'Oliver W.,' the famous racing ostrich, ... is no more. Oliver W. was hitched to a light buggy down in Jacksonville a couple of days ago. The huge bird had no trouble in handling the vehicle, but he got tangled up in some of the harness and kicked himself to death." (The Asheville Gazette)

The decline in the feather trade notwithstanding, there is lots of evidence that M. J. Taylor and his second wife Marie continued to live a lavish lifestyle in the first decade of the 20th century. In these years, they are listed as living at multiple addresses in Manhattan (addresses include 55 West 33rd St, 2 West 8th Ave, 195 2nd Avenue, and West 122nd St.) It is hard to tell whether these apartments were owned or rented, but you can see, for example, that in the 1905 M. J. and Marie had a live-in servant from the West Indies.

While it is not evident whether they operated multiple households in New York City at once, it is clear that they spent time in their different homes in multiple states. This included their home outside of Jacksonville, Florida, in Fairfield, that they lived in while working at the ostrich farm, as well as a home in New Rochelle, New York where they spent weekends, a cottage on the Jersey Shore, and a cottage at the Ruisseumont, in Lake Placid, New York, in the Adirondacks.

There are notices from time to time referring to M. J. and Marie's entertaining friends at these various homes, for example this article in the New Rochelle Pioneer in 1906:

Mrs. Taylor's Week End Reception

...On Friday last, Mrs. Taylor gave a pink piazza party at their home on Badeau place in honor of Miss Troumonger, which was the opening event of a weekend party. The decorations were beautiful and unique, carrying out the pink and white effect, with flowing streamers caught up and festooned with large bows and a profusion of pink rose buds.

The young ladies were daintily attired in pink and white, looking like so many rose buds, and they enjoyed games and music. A dainty supper was served and at each place was a

pretty hand painted fan. The principal attraction was a large cake which contained a handsome gold signet ring and the fortunate young lady proved to be Miss Helene Pike.

And there were notices referring to M. J. and Marie's travel:

Mr. and Mrs. Morton J. Taylor, who have just returned from Europe, where they enjoyed a most delightful auto trip through England... (1906, The New Rochelle Pioneer)



*Photos of M. J. Taylor's wife's travel trunk, courtesy of the Knieriem family.
Passed on to them via M. J. Taylor's nephew, Morton Sandfield Cornell.*

While there were still advertisements for *M. J. Taylor & Co.*, there is, evidence of M. J. perhaps trying to branch out from the feather business and diversify his assets. Beginning in 1903, you can spot regular advertisements posted by M. J. Taylor, renting cottages at the Llanymor Hotel, in the coastal town of Belmar, New Jersey. It appears that they might have bought the hotel in this vacation spot on the Jersey Shore.

in



*Llanymor Hotel
Belmar New Jersey*

And on 31 Dec 1908 there was a notice published in the newspaper:

M. J. Taylor of Taylor's Sunny Africa Company, sends New Year's greetings to the members of the theatrical profession.

This may well have been M. J. working his networks. Before he got into ostrich farming he imported feathers from Africa. Perhaps he was using these connections to import some other item. Whatever Taylor's Sunny Africa Company was, I can find very little about it. Recall also that theaters were major feather customers, needing feathers for their costumery, including feathered headdresses, feather fans, etc. This shout out to the theater community may well have been an attempt to prime the pump, letting them know of his new business.

The final mystery

M. J. Taylor just sort of faded away. In 1910, M. J. was living on West 122nd St. in Manhattan with wife, Marie, according to the U.S. Federal Census, recorded on 15 April 1910. And then, on 29 Nov 1910, there's an ever so brief notice of his passing in the New York Tribune:

Morton J. Taylor, aged fifty-three years. Funeral at the Funeral Church. 243 West 23rd St.

That's it. No obituary. No account of his accomplishments. For an important man, who regularly made news, it's surprisingly brief. Something just feels off about it. Several bits of evidence that make me wonder.

First, I found Morton J. Taylor's last will and testament that leaves everything to his loving wife, Marie Elizabeth. The will seems to be signed on 23 December 1910. Why would it have been signed three weeks after his death?

Second, I found a Morton Taylor listed as an inmate in Sanford Hall, a private mental health asylum in Queens, also in 1910, recorded on 28 April 1910, a couple of weeks after the Census report showing him living in Manhattan. This may not have been the same Morton Taylor, and there are a few details that are a little off. But it might have been.



The Sanford Hall mental institution for the wealthy in Queens.

The Sanford Hall mental institution was a private institution for the wealthy, located in Queens. It cost between \$25 to \$50 per week for a private room. Sanford Hall was in the news periodically as people who had been committed by their families against their will would sometimes escape and run away. In general, it is hard to find information about these institutions, their inmates, and what became of them. Many of these institutions buried inmates in unmarked graves for which there are no longer records. Sometime in 1910, Sanford Hall apparently sold the property and dispersed its inmates. So if that was our Morton Taylor, his might not have been a long stay.

Third, and perhaps what gives me the most pause, is that M. J. died on November 28th, very close to the dates that two of his nephews died: Frank M. Olds (November 26th) and Carlton H. Barber (November 27th). Could M. J.'s death have been a suicide?

The demise of the feather trade was no joke. The slump was well in effect in 1910; by 1914, the feather market completely crashed.

“Many American ostrich farms, feather manufacturers, and buyers declared bankruptcy or had permanently or temporarily folded their operations by the late winter of 1914. Ostrich farms in the West and Southwest were reported to have deliberately sabotaged their birds’ health, or even to have released them into the wilds of Arizona.” (Stein, 2008; p. 141)

In South Africa: “There were Boer farmers who committed suicide rather than suffer the humiliation of losing their farms, while the fabulous “feather mansions” in Oudtshoorn were auctioned off for little more than the price of their doors and windows.” (Stein, 2007; p. 807)

Which is why, when I found something fishy about the timing of the will (as if M. J.’s death caught his family by surprise); when I saw a Morton Taylor listed as an inmate in a mental health asylum in Queens; and when I noticed the similarity of his death date to the anniversary of the deaths of two of his nephews, I wondered if Morton John Taylor’s life had caught up with him. The shame of being a failed businessman, the need to sell off his properties and give up his wealthy lifestyle, the indelible sadness and likely feelings of guilt of having had to send home the bodies of three nephews to his sisters —had all of that pushed M. J. over the edge?

We will likely never know the truth, about the circumstances of M. J. Taylor’s death nor of his psychological state in 1910. We also don’t know where M. J. is buried.

After 1910, ads and trade journal mentions of *M. J. Taylor & Co.* still appear for a few more years. The company appears to run itself out by the crash.

It’s difficult to find much about Marie Taylor except that perhaps she is living in Buffalo, New York. I cannot find notice of her death, nor can I find her grave.

Thinking of M. J. Taylor and his life

So many things come to mind in reflecting on M. J. Taylor and his life, through my 21st century lens.

This son of Irish immigrants came from a family who on its face was not particularly entrepreneurial or financially successful. (Though the effort to move one’s family across the ocean is not to be underestimated!) What were the ingredients that led to M. J.’s ambitions and his ability to accumulate wealth? My father, Carl H. Barber (named after Carlton H. Barber), always said “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” This certainly rings true for how M. J. operated, bootstrapping his financial ascent through his connections with Jeanne Louise Poupon, A. Y. Pearson, and doubtless many others. It’s not that he didn’t come to

know things, rather that he learned what he needed to know as he went. There were no youtube videos that explained about ostrich farming! All indications are that M. J. was a man of confidence and competence, who knew how to connect with people who would help him advance. Some might have even called him shrewd.

Did M. J.'s wealth result in his happiness and fulfillment? It's certainly impossible to know. Learning about the circus-like character of The Florida Ostrich Farm, with racing ostriches bearing silly names, certainly has a playful feel, and one wonders if M. J. had a sense of humor. (Let's forget about animal welfare for one minute.) I expect that visitors to the farm and the various fairs at which the ostriches appeared gained some pleasure out of the spectacle. Did that bring happiness to M. J.? Or did satisfaction come mainly from its profitability? Unlike most people in that day and age (including in particular those feather workers and ostrich tenders who worked for him), M. J. had the privilege of leisure time, of traveling for pleasure, and of owning and spending time in resort locations in the Adirondacks, on the Jersey Shore, and in sunny Florida. He also had the opportunity to connect in meaningful ways with several of his nephews. So perhaps he was happy and fulfilled. The possibility that the tragic end of three of his nephew's lives, permanently impacted his happiness is real, and something that is hard not to wonder.

Was he kind? M. J. appears to have been generous with his family, offering a home for two of his motherless nephews and a way out of small town life for them and others. He (and Jeanne) provided a home for his parents in Potsdam. However, to those outside of his family, the indications are otherwise. Paying near-starvation wages to his feather workers, his union-busting activities, his membership at the discriminatory Lake Placid Club, and possibly the messy business with the annulment of his marriage with first wife, Jeanne, and subsequent litigation to win much of her and their shared property all add up to someone who felt entitled and whose generosity was limited. And here is where I will talk about the ostriches. Forgetting the indignities of having one's feathers sheared off—and descriptions of the process indicate that it was a far more combative experience than being shorn as a sheep—the ostriches were made to do so many ridiculous things and to ride in train cars around the United States and across Canada. Not kind.

As for the women in M. J.'s life, I am interested that Jeanne bought the house for M. J.'s parents and appeared to remain the principal of the feather business, even after M. J. joined her as a partner. That she was a wealthy woman when they met but her fortune mostly depleted by the time she died bothers me, particularly as his fate was the opposite—a dry goods worker when they met and a wealthy man when she died. It is certainly possible that he was a brilliant businessman, who breathed success into the business once called Madame Poupon's. Or perhaps he pushed aside a woman who against all odds had successfully launched and run her own business in a man's world, and usurped her role. The truth likely lies somewhere in between. But whatever the case, the optics are not good.

As for living a long life, M. J. did not. His parents, George and Sarah, both lived longer than he did by 10-15 years. His only brother, George Jr., lived nearly 30 years longer than him. Heck, even Oliver W. and Cyclone almost outlived M. J.. Though Jeanne died 13 years before M. J., their age difference was such that they both died at age 53. I can't help but think that there might be some justice in that.

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