

Johnny Appleseed A Pioneer and a Legend 1774 – 1845

Yes, Johnny Appleseed was a real live person. His name was John Chapman. He was born in Leominster, Massachusetts, September 26, 1774. His father was one of the Minutemen at Concord and later served as a Captain in the Revolutionary War.

Records of his boyhood are scanty at best. His mother died while his father was still in service. His father married again after the war and the family moved to East Longmeadow where he spent his boyhood years.

In his early twenties, John Chapman migrated to Western Pennsylvania and first settled in the frontier village of Warren, near Pittsburgh. From there he traveled west into the Ohio Valley country and in the nearly fifty years that followed he lived the life that many folks to this day relate more to legend than history.

John Chapman never married. For want of a more apt description of his work, he was an itinerate missionary and preacher of the Swedenborgian Christian faith and an apple tree nurseryman. He became known for his courage and dedication to his fellowman as well as for the thousands of apple trees he planted. He was a pioneer, as great as the greatest of them.

One day early in the spring of 1801 as Isaac Stedden worked in the clearing near his cabin in Licking County, Ohio, he saw a strange-looking traveler approaching on horseback. Travelers were rare in those days, and, despite the odd appearance and manners of this man, Stedden offered him the scant courtesies of his cabin. He remained only a few days and had little to say of himself or his destination, but while he tarried as a guest he talked chiefly of planting apple trees so that the settlers might have fruit in addition to the wild meat and fish found in the forests and streams. He took from his saddlebags a quantity of apple seeds and planted them about the cabin and then departed. This was one of the first recorded evidences of John Chapman's arrival in the Ohio Valley country. He was a young man in his early twenties at the time.

Five years later another settler, who had cleared away the forest and built a cabin on the banks of the Ohio River, a little above what is now Steubenville, Ohio, saw a strange craft coming down the river. It consisted of two canoes lashed together. A lone man was the "crew". He was oddly and somewhat raggedly dressed, barefoot, and he wore for a head covering, or hat, a tin pan. This, it was found afterwards, served the dual purpose of hat and stew pan in which he cooked his food - —often just cornmeal mush and coffee.

He informed the settler that his name was John Chapman and that the cargo in his canoes consisted of bags of apple seed, which he had gathered from the cider presses in Western Pennsylvania, and that he intended to plant them and grow apple trees for the settlers.

Following the streams and their tributaries he stopped and planted apple seeds wherever he found suitable ground for a nursery. Sometimes the settlers loaned him land plots for his apple tree nurseries. Sometimes he rented the land. He also purchased a number of plots, and owned quite a few acres of land at the time of his death. Usually the leases and purchases were paid in apple trees. He enclosed his nursery plots with fences made of brush. Each year he returned to care for the growing trees and to plant new nurseries. When settlers came he urged them to plant trees and advised them as to what varieties to plant. It is said that his favorite apple was the Rambo. A substantial proof of this is disclosed by the fact that this particular apple was afterwards found on nearly every farm in the region traversed by this pioneer nurseryman.

He kept ahead of the settlements and each year planted apple trees farther west. In this way he covered much of what is now Ohio and far into Indiana. For nearly fifty years he kept steadily at his work and, doubtless, there is no region in the United States where the early settlers planted more fruit trees than were grown in Johnny Appleseed's territory. There are still a few old apple trees alive, which are claimed to have been taken from nurseries planted by "Johnny Appleseed." "The good that men do lives after them."



No single biography of Johnny Appleseed is really complete. Over the years, bits and pieces of his life story have been pulled together by many authors. Probably one of the better and more complete accounts of John Chapman and his work is found in the *Historic Annals of Ohio*, published by the

Ohio Historical Society in 1861. Robert Price's *Johnny Appleseed Man and Myth* published in 1967 is an excellent more recent biography. Little is known of his early life except that he loved nature and that he was markedly unselfish. His half-sister, who survived him, related many beautiful stories of his boyhood days. He loved the undisturbed forest. The sight of flowers on the open prairie was a feast to him. He looked upon all of nature as his friend. He was never known to injure or to kill any living thing except one rattlesnake, and that it is said he always regretted.

After he came to western Pennsylvania and to the frontier, his mission in life seemed to be to plant apple trees and teach the Swedenborgian religion. His frequent visits to the settlements were looked forward to with delight and no cabin door was ever closed to him. To the men and women he was news

carrier and oracle. To the children he was friend and playfellow. He taught the boys to make sleds and wagons. To the little girls he brought bits of ribbon and bright calico. He appreciated the loneliness of pioneer life and made it brighter wherever he could. He always carried a leather bag filled with apple seeds and was constantly planting them in open places in the forests, along the roadways, and by the streams. He became known as the “apple seed man”, and later his real name, John Chapman, was the only name by which he was known. The man became a legend almost before he died.

Johnny Appleseed is described as a man of medium height, blue eyes, long, light-brown hair, slender figure, wiry and alert. He wore but little clothing and that, for the most part, was obtained by trading apple trees to the settlers for cast-off garments. Often, while traveling through the forest his only garment was a coffee sack with holes cut in it for his head and arms. He said clothes should not be worn for adornment – only for comfort. He went barefoot most of the time, even in winter. Reports indicate that he was a vegetarian, eating no meat or fish. He believed it was wrong to take life in order to procure food. This likely contributed to his zeal for urging people to plant and grow fruit.

He rarely sought shelter in a house, and when he did so would usually sleep on the floor before the fireplace with his kit for a pillow. Except in very bad weather he preferred to sleep in the open forest or out of doors in the shelter of a shed or other weather breaker.

The latter part of his life he lived with a relative near what is now Mansfield, Ohio. It was while he lived there that the war of 1812 was fought, and some of the active scenes of the war occurred near his home. One incident is related that illustrates well his self-sacrifice and his devotion to friends. Late one evening, word came to the few settlers who had taken their families to the Block House for refuge that the Indians were advancing upon them, that Wallace Reed and Levi Jones, nearby settlers, had been killed. Excitement ran high. The settlers in the Block House were unarmed and the nearest body of troops was at Camp Douglas, some thirty miles away. A consultation was held and it was decided to send a messenger to this camp to ask for assistance; but who would go? Volunteers were asked for. A meek, bareheaded, barefoot man, unarmed, but with a countenance full of determination and devoid of fear, stepped forward and said, “I’ll go.” It was Johnny Appleseed. The road he had to travel was a poorly marked path through the woods, rough and dark. He ran through the forest, stopping at the few cabins on the way and warning the settlers to flee to the Block House. At daybreak he returned with a detachment of troops to guard the settlement, having made the long journey in one night.

For nearly fifty years Johnny Appleseed traversed the forests and prairies of what is now Ohio and Indiana and fringes of other states, planting and caring for his apple trees, teaching farmers apple culture and assisting them in planting and caring

for orchards, and preaching of “good news right fresh from Heaven.” Today, it is a rare thing to find a farm in the country he traversed that does not have at least a few apple trees.

He had several nurseries in Northern Indiana. One day in March of 1845 cattle had broken down the fences around one of them. He started there on foot to put it in repair. The weather was cold and disagreeable – snow was falling. At night he stopped at the home of a friend, Mr. Worth, for shelter. It was, as always, readily granted him. He declined a bed prepared to read and pray. He read the Psalm beginning “Blessed are the pure in heart,” then prayed for blessings upon all men and nations, and for comfort for all those who were crippled and distressed. He prayed for universal happiness and peace, then lay down to sleep. By the morning, he had developed pneumonia and soon thereafter he died as he had lived, at peace with the entire world.

Mr. Worth and his neighbors buried his body in the David Archer graveyard, two and one-half miles north of Fort Wayne. His grave was unmarked for many years but now, fittingly, it is part of a memorial park in tribute to him.

Part of history and part of American folklore, the life and legend of “Johnny Appleseed” is remembered and observed in many different ways throughout the country. And well it should, for John Chapman, best known as Johnny Appleseed, when he ended his fifty year odyssey throughout the mid-western United States, had become a living legend and a personality in American folklore. Like many of those in this deposit of Americana, Johnny Appleseed was a real person who lived in the days of the frontier settlements. Unlike many of his counterparts, however, he actually performed the heroic acts that are the substance of his legend.

During his sojourn John Chapman became known for his courage and dedication to his fellow man as well as for the apple orchards he planted.

Half poet-philosopher, half mystic, perhaps out of phase with the goals and aspirations of his contemporaries, but infinitively attuned to the larger harmony of the Universe, Johnny Appleseed occupies a special place in the long line of dreamers, innovators and statesmen who have contributed to America’s greatness. ~

Adapted by the Ohio Apple Marketing Program from materials of the U. S. Apple Association. Visit an Ohio apple grower to learn how they continue the heritage of Johnny Appleseed.

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