

THE BURNHAMS



George Burnham
1790-1877
Great Great Grandfather



Mary Longfellow* Burnham
1799-1869
Great Great Grandmother



Mrs. Cyreno Burnham McLaughlin
1837-1918
Great Great Aunt



Sanford Burnham
1822-1898
Great Great Uncle



Mrs. Caroline Burnham Gallison
1827-1900
Great Great Aunt

*Your Great Great Grandmother was second cousin of the poet Longfellow.
There were four other Great Great Aunts, Mary, Susan, Margaret and Martha.

CHAPTER X

GREAT, GREAT AUNT CYRENE AND HER CATS

One of the most pleasant experiences of Grandfather's youth was his trip to Maine with his mother and his Aunt Cyrene.

By way of introduction, however, we must write a little about your great, great Aunt Cyrene Burnham, for she was always kind to your grandfather and did many nice things for him.

Your great grandmother's maiden name was Harriet Burnham. She had one brother Sanford, and six sisters, Mary, Margaret, Susan, Caroline, Cyrene and Martha. Now when your great grandmother went to Brodhead to live, she persuaded her sister Cyrene, who was two years older and unmarried, to come to Brodhead and start a millinery store. Aunt Cyrene did well at the millinery trade and prospered. She became something of a man hater, but was very fond of your grandfather and also of cats and hereby hangs a tale which, for the completeness of this family picture, Grandfather feels he must write, although it is with much chagrin that he records it.

Bad boys used to tease Aunt Cyrene by throwing into her doorway from time to time some decrepit cat and sometimes when Aunt Cyrene had fed it and nursed it back into a good looking specimen, bad boys would poison the cat. Such occurrences grieved Aunt Cyrene greatly and each cat in turn, she insisted, must be buried properly. Your grandfather became chief sexton and used to take the dead cat in a box over to the river and bury it in accordance with directions.

But one day it was very warm and the Tempter whispered to Grandfather, "Why bury the cat, why not just throw it into the river. The cat probably would not mind and Aunt Cyrene would be none the wiser." But be sure your sin will find you out. It so happened that down the river a man who ate at the same hotel where Aunt Cyrene took her meals was fishing and he saw a strange looking box floating down the river and out of curiosity fished the box out of the water, opened it and - lo and behold - there was one of Miss Burnham's cats all in lace paper with a ribbon about its neck. Now this man - Bill Taylor by name - your grandfather never liked him very well after this episode - thought this a great joke and without any regard for your grandfather's quietness of mind or your grandfather's future as sexton for Miss Burnham's cats, in great glee sprung it on your great, great aunt at dinner that night.

The next morning your grandfather's aunt sent word that she wished to see him. No, dearies, I am not going to repeat what she said. Grandfather tried hard to forget it and even if he had remembered, he would not have the heart to tell you. In the course of time, however, he was partially forgiven, but in his capacity of sexton was never again fully trusted. Thereafter, all cat funerals were conducted in your great great aunt's back yard, with your great great aunt in the combined role of chief mourner and supervisor of ceremonies. She did, however, trust your grandfather one summer to feed her cats while she went to Maine for a visit. She enjoined your grandfather to write her a weekly report on the condition of all the cats. All this your grandfather did so well that there was no mortality among the cats that summer and his letters so

amused your great great aunt's relatives in Maine that they sent her cloth cats of all kinds until she had her rooms filled with quite a remarkable collection.

Aunt Cyrene very frequently took your grandfather to task for what she, a maiden lady quite mature in years, thought a boy ought not to do. On one of these counts she was right - namely, that boys ought not to catch on bobs. In the winter there was much snow and farmers drove to town with "bob sleighs", i.e. with a wagon box set low on two large sleds, one at the front and the other near the rear, and since these sleds bobbed up and down over the rough roads, they were called "bobs".

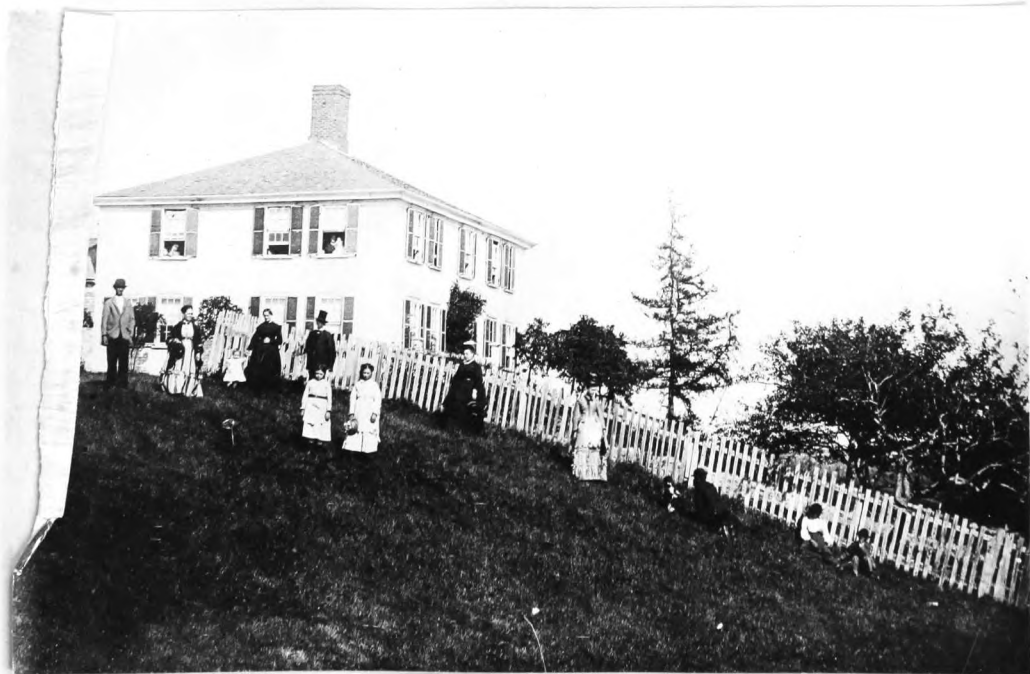
In the afternoon when the farmers started for home, the boys considered it great fun to jump on and get a ride - sometimes with and sometimes, I regret to say, without the permission of the farmer. The idea was to ride out until you met a farmer coming back and then to catch a ride back with him. The sport was somewhat hazardous, for in catching a bob when it was in motion, you might slip on the ice and get a bad fall. As a matter of fact, the first time your grandfather - then a very small boy - tried to catch a bob, he slipped and he was confined to the house for a week. All this Aunt Cyrene usually remembered to refer to in her talks on the danger of catching bobs.

Then, again, if you caught the bob successfully, perhaps the farmer would suddenly whip his horses into a run, and if you jumped, you probably got a bad fall, and if you did not, perhaps got carried way out into the country and had a long cold walk back. All this is preliminary to recording that Aunt Cyrene frequently gave your grandfather much good counsel and advice.

Aunt Cyrene was fluent of speech and adept at expression and perhaps you may think this cast an unpleasant shadow over your grandfather's boyhood. But not so, for Grandfather soon learned that if he sat quietly and made no reply, Aunt Cyrene would soon become convinced that her good counsel had been accepted and, as a further token of her love, would order ice cream or candy and they would have a grand time together.

In later life, when Grandfather taught school, this training proved of great value, for every parent thinks himself thoroughly competent to tell the teacher how the school should be run, and your grandfather was able to listen to advice and denunciations with a good-natured silence that was disconcerting to those who came to complain. Although they did not end by giving him ice cream, yet it was fun to show how little one might be ruffled by whatever anyone might say.

Great Great Grandfather Parlin's Home, Skowhogan, Maine



Great Great Grandfather Burnham's Home - Machias, Maine