



John Shaw Billings

AN
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
FRAGMENT

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1905

A facsimile copy of the original manuscript

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National Library of Medicine by the grandson of
the author, John Shaw Billings, II, in 1964.**

Scheme of Autobiography.

April 1905

- 1 When I first realized myself, on the hill side on Tristram Burgers' farm looking over Narragansett bay at the white sails in the distance.
- 2 Life in Allen's ville
In the store at Rising Sun.
making boots.
The first study of Latin
- 3 Life at Miami University,
The Library. Early Reading
Robinson Crusoe Deceit & Pathfinders.
- 4 Life in Kentucky - The Bedingers.
- 5 Life as a Medical Student in Cincinnati. Blackman - Graham
Sister Anthony.
- 6 Washington in 1861. Med Exam Rowell
Dr Mrs Green, Union Hotel Hospital
Hammond and Letterman,
Cliffburne Hospital.
West Philadelphia

- 7 With the 5th Corps, Battle of Chancellorsville
Gettysburg.
- 8 In New York, Draft Riots, Davids
Island, Draft Frauds Watertown,
Bedloe Island, Expedition to Isle
a Vache
- 9 Med Inspector Army of the Potomac -
Wilderness - Zoolds Tavern, Cool
Harbor, In front of Petersburg.
- 10 In Washington, Surg Gen's Office
Divisions of Accounts and Property
Invalid Corps.
11. Library and Museum work
- 12 Hygiene & Hospitals, Baemes Hospital
at Soldiers Home, Johns Hopkins
Hospital, /
- 13 National Board of Health
- 14 Building of The Army Museum -
Index Catalogue, Index Medicus.
- 15 Statistical work, Census work,
Sanitary Engineer work,
work on ventilation .

Sanitary Generalship, Baxter &

- 16 Lectures at Columbia
Dept of Hygiene Univ of Penn'a
- 17 New York Public Library
- 18 Carnegie Institution

I first got a realizing sense of my own personality or individuality when, a boy about 8 years old, I was at work on a hillside on the farm of Tristram Burgess near Providence R.I. My father was the manager of this farm, and my business that sunny afternoon was to chop up and dig out by the roots all the Canada Thistles I could find in the pasture. I had read the Bible through - verse by verse, also Robinson Crusoe, Deerslayer, and the Pathfinder, and the Pilgrims Progress - but I had never done any thinking that I can remember. - But on this memorable afternoon I stood on the hillside and looked over Narragansett Bay, and wondered where all the Cat boats and Schooners with their white sails came from, and were going to. Then my thought took this turn - "The only person who can know that is God. He knows everything that has been, and is, and is to be. Then hundreds and thousands of years ago he knew that I should be here to day and that each of those boats would be just where it is, and that I should be thinking of them."

Then as his knowledge must have been perfect it is absolutely necessary that I,

just I am, knowing just what I know, am here
at this moment, looking at these ships, which
also must be each just where they are,
then everything must be arranged and ordered
to be just as it is, and no one can prevent it.
Therefore I am not responsible for where I am
nor for what I do."

I was surprised at this conclusion, and
thought I had made a great discovery,
and resolved to tell my mother about it
when she was worrying about our troubles.

I did tell her about it that night, and
said that there was no use in worrying any
more. She looked at me in a scornful
sort of way and said "Who's been teasing
you about preordination?" "Nobody
taught me," said I. "I found it out by
myself - don't you see it must be so."

My life on the Burgess farm, from about 5 to 10 years of age, was that of an ordinary farmers boy. I ~~carried~~ drove the Milk Cart into Providence about 5 A.M. and left the pens and quarts with the various customers - mostly of the poorer class. I dropped four or five grains of sweet corn in the proper place in the barn in planting time. I helped weed the little Carrots and young beets, rode the horse for the horse raking of the hay crop, went to a country school for three months in the winter, made little clam bakes along the shore with my cousins William Henry and Charles Shaw, and read everything I could lay hands on. I managed to get a dollar for subscription to a little lending library in a book shop, and the first books I took out were Deerlayer, Pathfinder, and Jack o the Mill. I had for my own Robinson Crusoe, Marco Paul in the Forests of Maine, Harry and Lucy, and Plutarchs Lives. and was quite sure that I did not want to be a farmer.

When I was about 10 years old
My father moved to Indiana and established
himself in a little cross roads village
called Allensville, on the road from
Rising Sun to Vevay. Here he kept
a Country Store - was Postmaster, and
had a small shoemaker's shop in which
one man was employed. I learned
something of shoemaking - had some
experience in keeping store, and
incidentally, came across a book - I have
forgotten its title - which had a number
of Latin quotations in it, asked a young
Clergyman (John C Bonham) how I could
learn Latin - and got a Latin Grammar and
reader - a copy of Caesar, and a Latin
Dictionary and set to work.

It was difficult - but with the aid of Mr Bonham
I made good progress. Then I made an agreement
with my father that if he would help me through
College in the least expensive way, all of his
property should go to my sister and that I
must expect nothing more. I then got some
Greek books, a geometry &c and went on to get
myself to pass the entrance examination for the

Sub Freshman class at Miami University,
Ox Bow, Ohio. I succeeded in doing this in
a year - and passed the examination in the fall
of 1852. For the first two years I kept
Bachelor Hall, living on bread, milk, potatoes, eggs
ham etc - such things as I could cook for
myself. The lessons gave me little trouble, most
of my time was spent in reading the books in the
College library. I was omnivorous, read everything
in English as it came. Philosophy, Theology,
Natural Science - History Travels and Fiction.

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