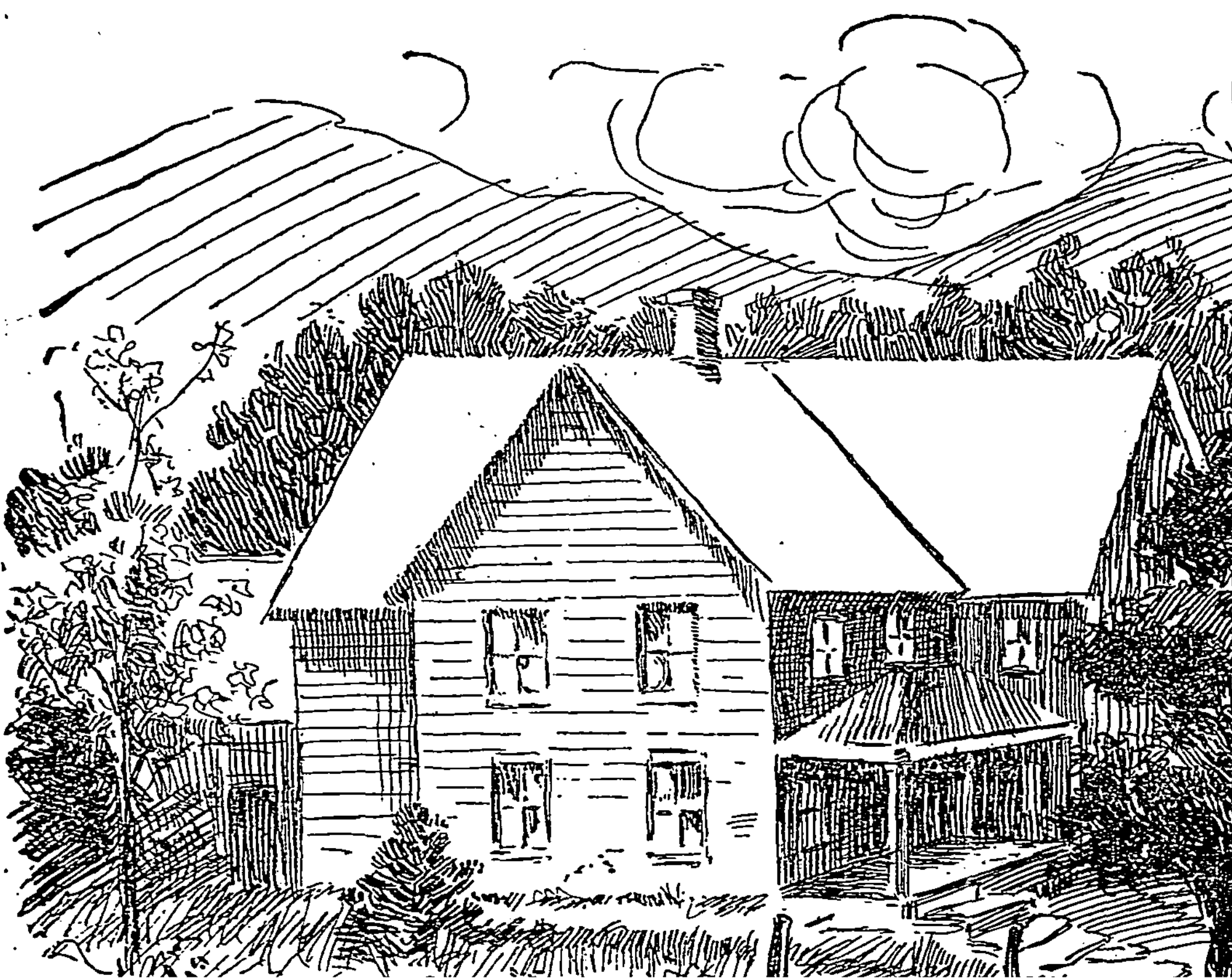


The Last of the Revolutionary Widows



from sketch by J.C. Bayles

House of Mrs. Damon in Plymouth Union, Vt.

Mrs. Esther Sumner Damon the Only Person Now Drawing a Federal Pension for Her Husband's Services to the Colonies--She is, of Course, a Vermonter, and Still Retains All Her Faculties and a Clear Memory.

NEAR the head of Black River Valley, in Windsor County, Vt., ten long miles from the nearest railway station at Ludlow, lies the hamlet of Plymouth Union. The adjective long is applied to miles in this section of the country for the reason that the good people of Central Vermont do not seem to have any clear conception of what a mile is. A Virginia farmer once said to me: "Every place hereabout is a mile and a half or thereabout." In Vermont a mile is "quite a ways," and when the distance is stretched beyond easy computation it becomes five miles or ten miles, as may be.

Plymouth Union can scarcely be called a village. It is one of those apparently accidental clustering of dwellings at a cross roads which may have had a reason for being at some period in the remote past, but has none that is discoverable at the moment except the fact that the houses are already there. There is a tradition that it once had local industries in a saw mill and a tannery. This may be true, but if so neither could now live on the light second growth of the surrounding slopes. Here the mountains draw very close together, making an extremely narrow valley which would be picturesque if there was any point from which it might be viewed. What the little population lives on is a question difficult to answer. Fortunately, it costs very little to live there. I am told that a majority of the population are in one way or another supported by civil war pensions. A tidal wave of patriotism must have swept through this section of Vermont in the early sixties.

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It appears to be the habit of the people of Plymouth Union to live to venerable age. Old people are more numerous than young people. This is probably explained by the fact that young men and women naturally drift away in search of better opportunities of profitable employment than are found there, leaving behind those too old to migrate or whose local attachments are too strong to be lightly severed. In such a leisurely and restful environment, where no one needs to hurry or worry, there is no good reason why life should not be prolonged indefinitely. One who can survive a Vermont Winter should have no difficulty in living the remainder of the year. Hence it is that of the Green Mountain Boys who flocked to the Federal

standard during the civil war so many hale and hearty veteran pensioners remain.

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The most interesting inhabitant of Plymouth Union is "Aunt Esther" Damon, the last on the roll of Federal pensioners as a widow of a soldier of the Revolution. This fact alone would make her an object of National interest, but it is emphasized by the fact that she is a remarkable woman, especially when allowance is made for adverse conditions which have made her life a hard struggle from her earliest recollection. Only when her vital spark is flickering in the socket have the conditions been reached which promise a measure of relief from the tension of bitter poverty. Possessing all her faculties, with a clear memory and keen perceptions, she deems herself happy and finds great cause for thankfulness in what for most people would be a barren old age devoid of everything calculated to make old age tolerable.

The life history of "Aunt Esther" is not one which lends itself to romance. She was born in Plymouth Township, not far from her present home, on the first day of August, 1814. She was one of a family of eight or nine, born to a heritage of poverty. Her father is remembered as a "stirring" man, who began life with nothing, married prematurely, and worked hard to provide for his family. In cutting timber to build them a house he was killed by the fall of a tree. His widow was left without resources and found it impossible to hold her family together. One by one they were "bound out" to service, and were never reunited. At a tender age Esther was thus put to work, and remembers this period chiefly as one of neglect and ill-treatment.

Time may have modified, but has not obliterated, the memory of the wrongs of her youth. She grew up a willful, headstrong, undisciplined girl, difficult to manage, no doubt, but with a strong character and right instincts. There is a tradition that she was "wild," but in a community still dominated by the Puritan spirit and peculiarly intolerant of everything savoring of individuality of thought or action, the term would mean less than it might elsewhere. It is probable she resented the severe and unsympathetic guidance which may have been offered her, and decided to conquer the difficulties of life in her own way.

By one kind of work or another, mostly

domestic service, she made shift to live, and finally drifted to Tyson, which then had a charcoal blast furnace and was something of a centre of activity. At a grotesquely misnamed hamlet called Frog City she is said to have taught a district school for one or two terms. Her own education had been very limited, and teaching could not have offered her a successful career. By thus doing whatever came in her way, she managed to support herself until she was twenty-one years old, when she married.

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Her choice of a husband was not well considered. Noah Damon, whom she wedded after a brief courtship, was a widower seventy-five or seventy-six years old, with adult children and a record of good service as a soldier of the Revolution in sundry Massachusetts commands. He is traditionally remembered as an easygoing, honest, improvident man, and not inclined to be industrious. It is said that Esther Sumner was misled as to his ability and willingness to support her, and thought he had some property, whereas he had none. Perhaps he was an optimist by temperament. Their marriage was celebrated on the 6th of September, 1835.

The young wife soon discovered that, for her, the marriage relation meant not only supporting herself by continued hard work for small wages, but supporting her husband as well. He was quite willing to entertain her with stories of the war, but these did not seem to compensate for the added burden she had unwittingly assumed. She insisted that Damon's children should make some provision for him. This led to misunderstandings and family quarrels, and they finally took the old man to a farm in New Hampshire, to which the young wife refused to go.

No separation other than that described was sought or desired. Damon never ceased to crave his wife's companionship; she, in turn, while unwilling to be a dependent upon the Damon family, spared enough from her meagre earnings to keep him clothed, and in other ways to provide for his comfort. In some way Damon got money to make a trip to Boston to visit some friends, and from this outing, he never returned. He died on the journey, which was probably too much for his falling strength, but whether in going to or coming from Boston is not clear.

Noah Damon's service as a Revolutionary soldier is shown by the records in the Bureau of Pensions to have been as follows: Six days, from April 19, 1775, in Capt. Tucker's company; twenty-five

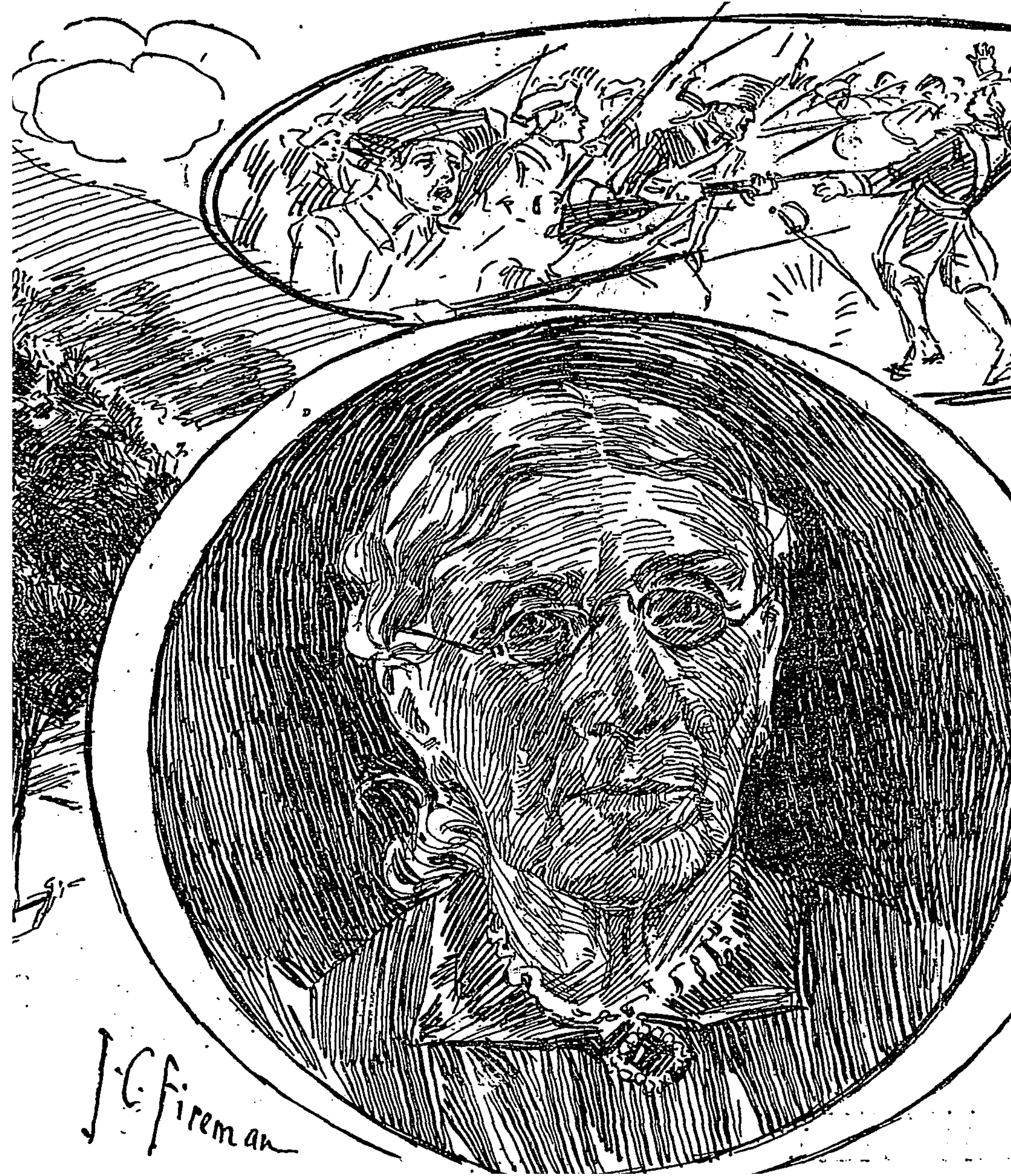
days, from April 17, 1777, in Capt. Seth Sumner's company, Col. Benjamin Gill's regiment; two months five days, from May 15, 1777, in Capt. Moses French's company, Col. Jonathan Titcomb's regiment; two months twenty-two days, from Dec. 10, 1777, in Capt. Thomas White's company, Col. Edward Proctor's regiment; two months twenty-five days, from April 9, 1778, in Capt. Benjamin Lapham's company, Col. Jonathan Reed's regiment; one month seven days, from July 26, 1778, in Capt. Nathaniel Clapp's company, Col. Benjamin Howe's regiment; nine days, from Feb. 5, 1779, in Capt. Abner Crane's company, Colonel not stated; one month one day, from Aug. 14, 1779, in Capt. Joseph Richard's company, Col. Gill's regiment, and eight months, from May 11, 1780, in Capt. Caleb Champney's company.

Damon was probably born in 1753, and entered the service as a minute man when about sixteen years of age. He was nearly twenty-two when his last recorded service was completed. His period of intermittent enlistment covered a period of nearly five years and seven months. The irregular troops of the Continental Army were assembled and disbanded as occasion required, which explains his frequent changes of assignment to companies and regiments. Tradition has it that he was a brave man and a good soldier.

Esther Sumner's marriage to him at the venerable age of seventy-five or six is believed by those with whom her relations during recent years have been most intimate to have been due more to impulse than to considerations of sound judgment. It is not impossible that the real reason might be found in a blighted romance, and that she listened to the old man's suit to pique one whose infidelity she resented. All this was long ago, and it is not likely the venerable woman would care to tell all she may remember of that period.

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As a young woman she was of a highly emotional temperament, and more than once developed symptoms of religious mania which were only restrained by the hard and practical conditions of her every-day life. At one time she considered herself gifted with prophetic power and practiced "trance preaching." She has been a woman of strong and normal religious convictions for more than seventy years, and her intimate friends recognize that according to her light she has tried to be consistent to her professions. She derives pleasure from recognizing in what she long considered the gravest mistake of her life, her marriage,



J.C. Fireman

Mrs. Esther Sumner Damon.



Miss Sumner as a school-marin.

horse. Two horses are known as "span."

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It is the habit of the neighborhood to recognize the rig, whether the passengers are distinguished or not, and speculations as to where it is going or coming from, and what explains its presence in the road, furnishes the material for about all the local gossip there is. Now that Mrs. Damon cannot sit by the window, her bed is so placed as to command its view, and to deprive her of it would be a heart-breaking cruelty.

Mrs. Damon has been confined to her bed for more than half a year, and during that time, when fatal pneumonia was resisted with great difficulty by the combined efforts of a faithful physician and a devoted nurse, she has lost to a great extent the use of her limbs. Like most old people she suffers from defective circulation. Her gnarled and misshapen hands tell of rheumatism and chalky deposits in the joints. Her heart action is irregular, and is perhaps the gravest of her symptoms. As the season advances and warm weather returns she can probably be assisted to a chair on her little front porch, but it must be confessed that no chair suitable for her occupation is included in the furniture of her house.

With the exception of a slight deafness Mrs. Damon retains her faculties remarkably. She is perfectly consecutive, observant, and gracious in manner. In speech she avoids the mannerisms of the locality, and her language is much above that of her environment. It is grammatical, and her words are well chosen. I am told she has a sense of humor and enjoys a contest of wits, from which she rarely comes off second best.

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From the first of April her pension is to be \$24 per month, but she will not receive the first installment of this increase until the quarterly payment in July. It will not be sufficient to provide the comforts and luxuries which a very old person needs, especially in Winter, when firewood is a large and constant item of expense; but to the old woman who has so long lived upon a third of that amount it seems affluence. So likely was she to disburse her income in gifts and benefactions to persons she deemed more in need than herself that a guardian of her person and estate was appointed by the court to be the treasurer and almoner of her pension money. For this purpose an estimable lady living near by, Mrs. Julia Taylor, was selected, and her appointment gives assurance that whatever funds are made available for Mrs. Damon's support will be wisely and lovingly administered.

J. C. BAYLES.

but money is a scarce commodity in Plymouth Union, and a dollar looms large under all conditions.

Curiously enough, Aunt Esther Damon is the one person in the village with a current reputation for liberality. Her friends describe her as characterized by an open-handed generosity which verges on indiscretion. She has always been ready to help others. She has assisted in the support of the church and its work, and has given what she could ill spare for the support of the causes it fostered.

In an isolated Vermont village the point of view is sharply circumscribed by a near horizon, and the parable of the widow's mite is somehow curiously confused with that of the prodigal son. That a woman as poor as Mrs. Damon could merit a reputation for open-handed liberality was a phenomenon which seemed to possess some of the elements of a paradox. In the last analysis it may appear different.

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Mrs. Snow, with whom Mrs. Damon made her home, died in December, 1903. Through the generosity of relatives Mrs. Damon was assured of a life tenure of the house. It is not very much of a house, but is comfortable except in Winter, and suits her purposes extremely well. The room she occupies has a window which is locally described as "slightly"—meaning that it commands a view of the near-by cross roads and permits one who sits at it to see whatever is going on. An occasional "team" goes by—a team in Vermont meaning a vehicle drawn by one