

# TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

## **"TURNPIKE TALES" #17**

*(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)*

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

### **"Phinny" Williams – Legendary Local Figure - Part 1**

In the early history of the Madison-Bouckville area, perhaps no one had a more unusual life than that of Phineas Williams. The manner in which he lived, his unique fishing abilities, and his encounter with the law made him a person that residents of the area discussed for many years following his death in 1911.

Phineas Williams was born in Connecticut on March 19, 1804 as accurately as can be determined. As a young child, he had little if any formal education. When he was about seven years old he entered the employ of Col. John Berry, founder of the Village of Madison. At some time between the years 1809 and 1811 Phineas came to Madison as a drover boy for a herd of cattle the Colonel was bringing to his new settlement. Phinny was considered to be simple-minded, but all who met him agreed that he was an expert fisherman.

By arrangement, Phinny was taken in by Dr. Preston's wife in Sangerfield, N.Y. and raised by her until he was 12 years old. Sangerfield is located about seven miles east of Madison. At age twelve Phinny bound himself out to Dr. G. Cleveland of Waterville on the promise that he would do stable chores and other farm work for his room and board.

The doctor soon found out that he had made a bad bargain.

On one particular day, during the hottest part of the summer, Dr. Cleveland returned home from seeing his patients and sought out Phinny to take care of his perspiring and dusty horses. He drove the team to the barn and called for Phinny. When he received no answer, he shouted loudly and then proceeded to cross the meadow to a clump of spruce trees and looked down to a bend in the brook below. There sat Phinny with a homemade fishing pole, calling to the fish, "Come fishy, Phinny won't hurt you." The doctor was enraged. Phinny was so startled that he yanked up his fishing pole; the leaded fishing line swung through the air, and hooked the good doctor in the nose. Phinny's association with Dr. Cleveland ended at that point and Phinny happily returned to Madison.

Little is detailed of the life of Phineas Williams during the next decade. Local tales have it that he did odd jobs around Madison and Solsville, stayed in barns or cellars and found food by fishing in Madison Lake and the Oriskany Creek. Besides his catch of fish, Phinny also gathered roots, berries, and nuts when they were in season. The remainder of his food supply came from the handouts of kindly neighbors.

In 1840, Isaac Curtis became the proprietor of the Madison House. (1840-1861) Phinny did chores for Mr. Curtis, such as stable work, and spent the remainder of his time fishing in Madison Lake or the Oriskany Creek. He also helped butcher hogs in the fall. Mr. Curtis' wife often took pity on Phinny and fed him. Following butchering time, lard was made and Phinny would beg for the "leavings" in the pan. As soon as he received the pan, he would sit down and eat until all was gone.

While working at the Madison House for Isaac Curtis, Phinny had an experience with a member of the famous Loomis Gang. During one evening, Wash Loomis came into the hotel and asked to be put up for the night. At this time the Loomis family had achieved a high level of notoriety and Wash was known as a "slippery character." Isaac Curtis assigned a room to Loomis, who immediately retired for the night.

Early the next morning Mr. Curtis was in conversation with another acquaintance, when Wash came downstairs in his stocking feet and appeared to be thoroughly angry. "You run a hell of a place," he said to Mr. Curtis.

"Why, what's wrong with my hotel, Wash?" Curtis asked.

"Can't a man stop here without having his clothing stolen?" Wash raised one leg and exhibited a bootless foot. "While I was asleep last night, someone entered my room and stole my boots."

"Nonsense," the hotel keeper said. "No one entered your room."

Before the argument could continue, the back door opened and Phineas Williams entered carrying a pair of boots under his arm. He walked straight up to Loomis and handed him the boots. "I was listenin' and heard what you said," Phineas remarked slowly, "and I say you lie! I was out in the barn sleeping in the hay last night when you sneaked in. You woke me up. When I see it was you, I kept still and watched. I see you take off your boots and hide 'em in the hay. You didn't think there was anybody around, but I see'd you."

Wash's face flushed angrily as he quickly drew on his boots. Then he took a step toward Phineas with his fists clenched as if he was going to strike Phinny. "You damned old ...," he began, and then stopped suddenly as he met Phineas's eyes. Phinny was a formidable foe! Wash choked back whatever he had been about to say and flinging a note down on the bar, quickly left the hotel.

So, Phineas Williams, although called a "simple" man, outwitted Wash Loomis.

## **ANOTHER PHINNY STORY -**

Mose Hillsburg, a young jewelry peddler from Syracuse, stopped at the Madison Hotel one day and was greatly perplexed to think that among his large assortment of spectacles he had none that Phinny Williams could read with. (Phinny could never read) After testing his eyes with glasses of different powers for a long time, Mose happened to notice that the newspaper that Phinny was holding was upside-down.

He packed his goods in disgust, and every one of the by-standers “smiled audibly.”

As we can see, Phinny led an unusual life. We will continue the life of Phineas Williams in Part II and explore his jail time and final years.

I have referenced information in articles written by George W. Walter and also materials from area newspapers. The articles from Mr. Walter have been modified in light of more recent historical findings on Phinny Williams. The use of these sources however, has made the story of Phineas Williams much more complete.