

The tale of J.J. Turner

By DAVID HARRISON

When my family and I moved to Port Hope in the spring of 1999, I knew that we were coming to a town where I had family history.

My great-great grandfather, J.J. Turner (after whom Turner House, home of the *Port Hope Evening Guide*, is named) is buried in Union Cemetery. But little did I know, until I began to do some digging, that behind his simple gravestone lies a tale of tragedy, drama, intrigue, and law-breaking. For it would seem that my great-great grandfather was run out of this town! So much for any boasting that I might muster about my Port Hope roots!

The story of J.J. Turner in Port Hope begins simply enough. John James (always referred to as "J.J.") came to Port Hope in 1875 in order to establish a tent and awning business. A few years previously, J.J. and his family had emigrated from England to

Hamilton, and then moved to Port Colborne, where he began a canvas business with a partner named Soper.

Born in London in 1850, J.J. had served for seven years as an apprentice in sail-making, beginning at the age of 12. Coming to Port Hope, he opened his business in a warehouse on the East Pier, and dealt in all kinds of canvas products — awnings, tents, ensigns, sails, horse and wagon

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covers, hammocks, canvas pants and jackets, and canvas for threshing machines. And not only canvas — he capitalized on his waterfront location by renting boats and boathouses.

After running the canvas business for several years, J.J. made the move into the tavern business in 1881 by purchasing property at the corner of Mill and Cobourg Road (now Peter Street), where Turner House now stands. On this property was a barn which had been used for pressing hay. Shortly after purchasing the property, the barn burned in a fire in which, according to newspaper reports, four cows and a hog also perished. Fortunately for J.J., the property was insured. The *Guide* reports that "the origin of the fire is a mystery, but no doubt it was the work of an incendiary." (This wasn't the first time arson had touched J.J. — about four years earlier, in April of 1877, his boathouse burned, and he lost seven boats worth approximately \$500. The *Guide* reported, with remarkable symmetry, that "the fire was, no doubt, the work of an incendiary.")

The insurance settlement on the barn was sufficient to allow J.J. to build a new brick building (Turner House), which was completed in September, 1881. It was described as being "quite an imposing structure, and adds much to the appearance of that quarter." Sometime after the completion of the building, J.J. began a tavern, and named his new building "Turner Hotel."

Like our taverns of today, it could be a lively place. On October 10, 1883, a convict named McCabe, who had escaped from the Kingston penitentiary, arrived in the middle of the afternoon at Turner Hotel. He quite quickly got in an argument with a captain of a tub who was enjoying a break at the tavern. The argument escalated, and, according to testimony later given by J.J., "the captain said he could thrash him, and (the convict) said he could shoot him." McCabe took out a revolver, but J.J. grabbed it and took it away. The convict, unsuccessfully demanding that J.J. return the revolver to him, eventually gave up and asked for a glass of brandy. As he did not have the money to pay for it, J.J. agreed to give him the brandy, but kept his revolver and his overcoat as a deposit.

A little while after the escaped convict had left the premises, J.J. noticed in the paper that three convicts had escaped from Kingston. When the convict returned to the tavern late in the evening, J.J. immediately sent word to the police to come. McCabe once again demanded that he return his revolver. J.J. refused, but did hand over the overcoat. In a rage, the convict walked away "telling what he could do; he could lick any man or shoot any man who was there." When the police arrived, the convict bolted, and then turned a gun on the constable, who fired. According to the report of the incident, "the ball must have struck in a most vital part, for the burglar had no time to fire his revolver. It was found cocked in his hand when picked up dead."

There was not only high drama in J.J.'s life, but also tragedy, which struck in June 1882 when he and his family were returning from a boat ride. As the boat returned into the Port Hope harbour, it ran into a dredge, and his seven-year-old daughter, Henrietta Emma, was

thrown overboard. She could not be saved in time, and drowned. Henrietta is buried, with her parents, in the St. John's section of Union Cemetery.

From the events which unfolded after this tragedy, it seems to have marked an unfortunate turning point in the lives of the Turner family in Port Hope. Strange behaviour began to surface. In February 1884, a report of the Police Court states that J.J. was arraigned for disturbing a meeting of a group called the "Saved Army," presumably a religious gathering. According to the report, "the evidence was clear that the meeting was disturbed by the defendant, laughing in a boisterous manner. The evidence for the defense proved that Mr. Turner was subject to paroxysms of hysterical laughter, and several instances were given where attack was so severe as to entirely incapacitate him." His case was discharged. And it wasn't just J.J. who was in trouble — his wife Jane was also tried for disturbing the meeting. Her case was withdrawn on payment of costs and a promise not to disturb the meeting again.

At about the same time, J.J. sold his canvas business, and concentrated his efforts solely on the tavern and hotel. It would seem that it was not only the selling of liquor by which he made his livelihood, but also the distilling of liquor, an activity which continued to get him in trouble with the law. In November 1884, J.J. was charged with selling the "Curse of Canada" ("he owned the corn," we are told), and on a Sunday, to boot! This was his third offence, and the *Guide* noted approvingly that "it is well that we have such an efficient Chief of Police to look after these whisky dens."

He was arraigned for sentence in the Police Court, and faced either fines and costs of \$107 or spending 50 days in jail. He elected to go to jail, was locked up, but apparently relented after only a few hours and paid up. Facing the prospect of a mandatory prison sentence if convicted for a fourth time, J.J. sold his interests in Turner House, and announced in his intention to leave for the "Old Country."

Thus ends the tale of J.J. Turner and Port Hope, a story which began with an industrious craftsman and small-business owner in 1875, and ended amidst tragedy, alcohol and law-breaking some nine years later. J.J. may have returned briefly to England, but shortly thereafter re-established his canvas business in Peterborough. That business was carried on successfully by the Turner family into the 1950s, and the J.J. Turner Building still stands on George Street in downtown Peterborough. Unless some future spate of research in Peterborough unveils some more secrets hidden from my family lore, it might just be that being run out of Port Hope was enough to set J.J. and his family back in the right direction, away from the lures of the tavern business, and apart from the tragedy of losing their young daughter.