



From the Diary of
John Skinner



His travels from Nebraska to
Monmouthshire & Cornwall

July 1st - August 25th 1896



SKINNER
FAMILY HISTORY





John Skinner, c. a. 1891

The Diary of John Skinner

Completed from notes made by him on his trip to England and return in 1896. First arranged and edited by his son, William Skinner and printed in 1959 by his grandson, John L Skinner. This edition 2024 by the Skinner Family History project.

Background to the trip

John Skinner had left his family home at Abernant Farm in Kemeys Inferior, Monmouthshire in 1881. He travelled to Nebraska, USA, and married Minnie Rose Wilson. They settled in Spiker where they ran a general store and post office. In 1896, aged 37, John planned an eight-week trip back home. The purpose was to catch up with family and friends, but primarily to visit poultry farms in Massachusetts, England, and Wales. His intention was to study the quality of the stock and purchase some select birds, which he could take back to Nebraska for breeding.

Who's who in the diary

Minnie	Minnie Skinner (John's wife)
Jim	James Skinner, Abernant Farm (John's brother)
Jim's wife	Rosa Kate Watkins (John's siter-in-law)
Maggie	Margaret Parry, Penrhos Farm (John's sister)
Will	William Parry, Penrhos Farm (husband of Maggie)
Olive	Olive Parry (daughter of Maggie & Will)
Jessie	Jessie Locke (John's sister)
Will Locke	William H. Locke, butcher (husband of Jessie)
Father	John Skinner, formerly of Abernant Farm
Alex & Isabella	John's half-brother and half-sister

Wednesday, July 1st 1896

Omaha, Nebraska

Leave at 6:30 p.m. Cross the river to Council Bluffs and begin to wish I was home with Minnie and the kids. Goodbye Nebraska. Hundreds of acres of grapes and fruit east of the Council Bluffs. Pass through the beautiful country until dark with the corn getting smaller as we leave Nebraska. No one allowed to even wink or sleep. Cranky old man. Wish I had an overcoat. Cold morning, best country yet. Illinois - eat breakfast on the train. Rotten steak, good coffee.

Leave Chicago on the Wabash at 3:00 p.m. A large crowd of Danes on excursion to Denmark. Lots of crying, etc. Michigan in the woods looks very straggling and unthrifty. Some nice valley farmlands. Timber getting much better also. Stacking grain. 7:00 p.m., commenced to rain hard. 11:25 p.m., Detroit, crossed the river away from Niagara Falls at midnight. Am beginning to want sleep, Hamilton is a fine place, grand depot. Large racetrack and stables outside town. Hamilton to the falls, fine fruit farms and grain poor. Hilly country in the Catskills. Very heavy rain. Fine steamboats at Albany, all over the river.

Stop at Troy for 4 ½ hours. Leave on the Fitchburg Railroad. at 11:35 p.m., July 3rd for Boston through the picturesque country - beautiful rivers. Met a man from Mississippi who had 3000 acres. Likes his black workers, raises cotton. Arrived in Boston at 8:00 a.m., July 4th. Eat breakfast, then looked up Rudd & Son Commission House, found it, but could not get to see their poultry plant before Monday. I shall either have to give up some of my visiting or have to stay there too long.



Fitchburg Railroad

Saturday, July 4th, Noon

I'm now at Natick. I thought I would get out of Boston to a quiet little place to stop over for Sunday, but they're having a big celebration here and the noise is deafening. Every small boy carries a gun and they are all shooting whatever they feel like it. It has been cloudy all day, some rain, 65 in the shade. If it continues, I shall buy an overcoat. Sunday morning, 7:30: Have just got up from a good bed. Slept 10 hours and feel worse than any time since I left home. I expect to stay here today and tomorrow and go to New York Monday night and start for England. Heavy rain Saturday night, 62 in the shade Sunday morning. Went to visit I. K. Flech. Found him deaf but had a good time visiting. He only has a few chickens at his home, but has any quantity around Natick, kept by different parties, all looks thrifty and well, no incubator chicks. Both I.K and son are excellent company and make a man feel glad he has met them. Went to south Natick after dinner to see Rudd and Hunter farms but they did not receive visitors on Sunday. I knew this, but thought they would make exceptions in my case, but found they would not.

Monday, July 6th, 7:30 a.m.

Spent last evening with M. Boyer, Editor of Farm Poultry and found him very agreeable gentleman and a man of brains. I was struck on him the minute I got my eyes on him. Looks like rain, I'm going to Rudds and Hunters now.

2.00 p.m. Just returned from Rudds and consider his place worth going miles to see. He has thousands of chickens old and young and all look thrifty. Not a sick looking chick in the lot. Every building on the place is painted yellow and trimmed white. Cost of water alone \$1500.00. His main house is varnished cherry inside. Everything scrupulously clean from dwelling to chicken houses. Mrs. Rudd Jr, is sole manager of the farm. The old gentleman Rudd is not in very good health. It has been delightfully cool here ever since I came and I am feeling fine. If I continue as I have, I shall be brand new man when I return. Got to Natick 3:00 p.m.

Arrive at Worcester at 4:00 p.m., wait one hour for express to New York. Worcester fine looking town, large railroad centre. Raining hard again. Passed Hartford, New Haven and all large towns. Fine scenery. Any quantity of mills shut down all along the route. Arrive in New York at 10:00 p.m., all tired out.

New York 9:45 a.m. bought my ticket, find lots of Englishmen, start on Aurania at 2:00 p.m. Past Goddess of Liberty on a small island covered with nice grass. Many steamboats on the water here, some belong to farms. 7:00 p.m., just out of sight of land, have stopped four hours for repairs. The ship is beginning to get a lag on, steering awful, raining again.

Wednesday, July 8th, 5:30 a.m.

Just got up. There is quite a swell and delightfully cool on deck quite a contrast to the suffocating heat in the steerage where we sleep. We are now away on the old briney, out of sight of all land. We occasionally see the sail of another vessel. I notice the cabin passengers are the first to get seasick.

Noon, have just eaten dinner. Could not eat breakfast this morning. The sun has come out bright again and the wind is raising. 3:00 p.m., dense fog settled over the water, the ship rolling slightly. I turned in at 9:30 p.m.



RMS Aurania 1895

Thursday, July 9th

Arose at 5:00 a.m. Have just got my sea legs and I imagine there will be no sickness for me this trip. The fog is partially cleared. It has rained considerable during the night. 10:30 a.m., getting warmer. Retire at 9:30 p.m.

Friday, July 10th

Slept later than usual. Am getting so that I feel sleepy and can sleep half the time. A beautiful morning not a cloud in the sky. Nothing further today worthy of note.

Saturday, July 11th

Got up just in time for breakfast. Eat hearty. I am mad to think I brought food with me as I will have to throw it away. Can't eat it and the ships rations are alright. Nice sunny morning. Noon, have just had dinner. Ate well, the wind is raising, sea is rougher than it has yet been. Saw two steamers in the distance today. 7:30 p.m., just passed another ship about half a mile off, getting very rough.

Sunday morning, July 12th

Sea rolling high. Dinner is roast mutton, soup potatoes, plum pudding and fruit. Supper same old thing as before. Sea still high.

Monday Morning, July 13th

Arose at 6:30 a.m. Sea still rolling high and the wind raising. If it continues to blow, we shall have a rough sea before night. Breakfast - stew, butter, bread and coffee. Dinner - beef stew, dumplings, soup, pickles, etc. Saw two ships pass. Supper - tea, oatmeal, bread, butter and marmalade. Retire at 9:00 p.m. Very cool.

Tuesday, July 14th

Arise at 5:30 a.m. Sea the same as usual, too cool to be pleasant. Steamer just passing within a mile. Fishes jumping thick. Dinner - roast mutton, potatoes, soup, plum pudding. Supper - bread, better and marmalade. Retire at 10:00 p.m.

Wednesday, July 15th

Arose at 4:00 a.m. Very cool, sea not so rough. 6:00 a.m. land in sight. 7:00 a.m. breakfast. Coastline of Ireland. Very rough, rocky and barren. Nothing living in sight for several miles. Gets better as we near Queenstown.

Queenstown 12:30 p.m. Beautiful country. Passengers land away for Liverpool. 5:30 p.m. Supper - still very cold, lots of small crafts now in view.

Thursday, July 16th, 5:00 a.m.

Arose at 5:00 a.m. and find Liverpool in sight. We are sailing up the Mersey. Lost grip, found it. Pass custom offices. Leave Liverpool at 8:10 a.m., arrive in Caerleon 1:30 p.m. Find everything suffering for rain. Crops are light. Go to bed at 11:00 p.m. and sleep on the biggest feather bed I ever saw but cannot sleep as well as on a board.

Friday, July 17th

Arose at 6:00 a.m. and find the morning very cool. I find the letter I wrote last night and went to Caerleon to mail, in my pocket now, so I will give it to the postman this morning when he comes. Afternoon - after dinner went to see Grants Indian Games. Found some the best I ever saw, especially one cock and hen, 3rd Newport, 2nd C. Palace. Couldn't get him to price a bird but promised to before I left for America. Went to Abernant after supper and saw Jim, got back at 12:00 midnight Saturday.

Saturday, July 18th, 7:00 a.m.

Have just got up, still very dry. No sight of rain. Went to Newport with Maggie. Deposited my drafts for collection. Met many old friends in Newport Market and on the road. Stayed with Jessie a few hours but Saturday being market day, found her and her husband very busy, am well pleased to find them all so well and prosperous.



Newport Provisions Market

Sunday morning, July 19th

Can't go to church today as my clothes do not look right here, and I expect company also. Jim came over in afternoon and A. Golledge in evening. A.G and I seem to do all the talking. Retired at 10:30 p.m.

Monday, July 20th

Arose at 5:00 a.m. I will try and go to father's today. Start to see father and passed many old places greatly altered. Meet W. Turner on the road. Knew him but he did not know me. Talked sometime with him. Arrived at father's in time for dinner. Found him looking well but getting fleshy. Really looks younger than when I left, only his hair is more grey. (Children Alex and Isabella says he is happier than he has been for many years. Return to Penrhos in the evening.

Tuesday, July 21st

Arise and eat breakfast and will help Will with sheep.

Thursday, July 23rd

Get a letter from home. Start to Aberdare to show. Rain some on the way and arrive at Aberdare at 10:15 a.m. As we enter the ground the first thing to attract our eye is the Dairy building. Not up in quality or entries with our American shows. Chickens look fairly good feather for the season of year. Climate does not fade plumage as much as US.

1st S.G. Cock, good bird. 2nd S. G. Hen, fair. The balance of the class ordinary specimens. Cochin or Brahma. The dark Brahmas take the lead in quality and numbers. I do not admire the shape of the English Brahma. Too much stiff feathering on the Vulture Hook order. Only one Cochin entered, poor quality. P.R. or Wyandotte – 1st White Wyandotte Hen, good bird. 2nd P.R. Cock, very poor bird, too black, bad comb. I can find many farmers in U.S. with better P.Rs. than win prizes here. Minorca - some fair birds in shape etc., but all with enormously large combs, some with double points. The hens life must be a torture to them. Some very nice Hamburgs, the quality ahead of anything I see in U.S. Indian Games are way ahead of U.S. birds in size and shape, not so stilty as the majority of our American birds, but the lacing on the winning birds was anything but good. I saw Mr Grant's birds in Caerleon just before

going to show, and they were simply grand in colour and shape. A way ahead of anything at show. B. or BR. Game - the exhibition games were a grand class with some of the best breeders in England. Langsham's a fair class, not good. Orpington - these birds I am acquainted with, but I am very favourably impressed with the breed as an all-purpose fowl, look like a cross between B. Lansham and B. Jard.

Friday, July 24th

Stayed at home all day. Wrote home and to Liverpool to see about passage. Went to Caerleon in the evening and mailed letters.



Caerleon High Street

Saturday, July 25th

Wake this morning and find it raining nicely. Will and Maggie are both getting ready to go to market. Gone to markets and it still rains hard and it is cold. I have not warmed up since I left Nebraska. Clears at 1:00 p.m. Go to Caerleon and get shaved and find some more old friends. Home to tea and go back to Caerleon and pass the evening with W. Dowle.

Sunday morning, July 26th

I expect to go to Abernant today. Eat dinner and go to Abernant and have a great visit with Jim and his wife. Retire at 11:00 p.m.

Monday, July 27th

Awake about 4:00 a.m. and get up with one of my old dizzy spells. Have a terrible siege of vomiting and have to go back to bed stay till nearly noon. I then get it and look around a bit and notice that a while some of the trees have made good growth, some and no larger than when I left. I am shivering with cold. It is too cold to be healthy for summer weather. Jim and I have just weighed and he is 11lb heavier than me but has shoes that are at least 2lbs heavier than mine. I have gained 7 or 8lbs since I left home. Will Locke came out today and he and Jim are trying to do some business but failed. I spent the afternoon in reading papers from home and cried with joy to read of Bryan's success.

Tuesday, July 28th

After breakfast I went up to Coed y Caerau and had a view of surrounding country. Got back home at 11:00 a.m. and found father here. Chatted with him for an hour or two. After dinner went to Llantrisant to see John Miles. Found him the same old John and doing well. In fact it seems to have done him better than any of them. Has a fine flock of Shropshire sheep and some nice Hereford cattle, a good looking wife and five children. Was very sociable and friendly and I could scarcely tear myself away. Both talked until we had to gasp for breath.

Wednesday, July 29th

Today has been cloudy and some misty rain. It has been the first chance I have had to talk with Jim as he has been busy with his work and acts as if his very existence depended on working every minute. Told me about Harry's last account of me.

Thursday, July 30th

Rained until noon. Afternoon went and had a chat with father and Gus Welch.

Friday, July 31st

Went to Newport with Jim's wife. Got back at noon. After dinner helped with the oats. Pitched off all afternoon. Blistered my hand but felt better for it. I spent evening with Mr and Mrs Burch.

Saturday, August 1st

Went to Newport today and met many old friends. Saw Harper, House, Davies and others. Had a long chat with John Miles. Started to leave town at 3:00 p.m. but did not start until after 10:00 p.m. Kept meeting one and another, did not get to Abernant until nearly midnight.

Sunday, August 3rd

Spent forenoon at Abernant reading the last World Herald. After dinner went to Pye Corner and saw the Watkins and Hicks. Was earnestly asked if my wife was coloured.

Monday, August 4th

Leave today for Cornwall. From Caerleon to Newport through Severn Tunnel to Bristol. Leave for Taunton. Beautiful, beautiful country. Lovely orchards, larger fields, level land, much greener looking, finer trees. Fine class of sheep and cattle. Arrive at Exeter. Nice town and depot leave at 3:10 p.m. for Launceston. Lovely country. Soil very red, some hilly land, dirt houses and thatched. Soil looking poorer. Arrive at Okehampton. Country commencing to look a little mountainous. Arrive Ashbury. Small pretty place and nice open country to the West, hilly to the East.

Arrive at Launceston last and at 5:15 p.m. Find that both John and James Frayn are from home. So go and engage a bed, eat supper and then proceed to look over the town. It is very ancient place. The most hilly town I ever saw. The old castle is its highest point, the castle grounds are well kept and it is open for visitors. I entered and ascended the castle steps and took a look over the town. Came back to the hotel and found John Frayn and talked chickens till bedtime.



Launceston Castle

Tuesday, August 4th

Arise at 5:30 a.m. and waited for someone to arise and let me out. Waited until 6:00 a.m. and then unlocked the door and sneaked out. The town was nearly all asleep. Very few people stirring. Quite a contrast to the USA. Eat breakfast with John Frayn. Has beautiful pictures framed of his famous winners. Has numerous cups and plates, gold and silver medals in sitting room. Went and seen some of the best Indian Games I ever saw in my life. In his barn the joists are covered with premium cards telling of his winnings at all the principal shows in England. It was here that I saw more Malays than any I ever saw in my life, but I cannot say that I admire them as a practical fowl. Mr Frayn owns what is supposed to be the best cock in the world.

In Indian Games his birds are wonderful in size shape and colour. Saw several cocks in yards to themselves moulting. One bird a beauty and a winner of many cups and I would like to have bought him, but the price named was equal to a King's ransom. I was entertained handsomely by Mr and Mrs Frayn and shook hands and started for James Frayn's after booking price of several of his best females. Got to James Frayn's about 12:00 noon and was driven from station. Proceeded to look at the chickens. One cock in particular attracted my attention. Asked for price was told \$200.00 but would not touch him as he was not for sale at any price.

I finally succeeded in buying a pair but must not tell my wife what I paid for them. The cock is a winner of several prizes. (These people know how to entertain a man handsomely.) James Frayn adopts the same plan as his brother viz – has his birds growing around in the fields away from the house and the older fowls. In some cases a hatch from a favourite hen has a field all to themselves. It is wonderful to look around the sitting room and see the pictures on the wall and the cups and the medals in a glass case it tells the quality of stock.

Leave for Helston at 5:00 p.m. A little rough at first, then pass into a lovely country. After leaving Wadebridge, see some rough country covered with scrub oat, etc., some good, some poor. Pass Bodmin to the left, very tall monument on common. After leaving Par, the sea comes into view and looks quite refreshing after my day's work and travel. The railroad runs some distance along the water. I arrive at Helston about 10:00 p.m. find a hotel and eat supper and go to bed. For supper I was bought a joint of cold roast beef, carving knife and a fork and a coffee pot of newly made coffee, to which I did ample justice, retired at 11:30 p.m.

Wednesday, August 5th

Arise and come downstairs but cannot get out nor awake anyone. I make a good deal of noise, but it is no use. Hotel people in these little Cornish towns are the sleepest lot I ever saw. Went out to see S. R. Harris. Had not had breakfast at 9:00 a.m. He has a beautiful place, fine flowers, etc. After breakfast Mr. Harris proceeded to show his birds. One great winner in a yard next to the house was first to see and he is simply grand. The richest golden, most even colour on surface I ever saw. Under colour not equal to our best US specimens.

Next, went to the main poultry house where several more fine birds were penned, each in a pen to themselves. That is the way the show birds are kept. Description of one bird answers nearly all, sides of pens made to keep birds off to protect foot feathers. Three young cockerels being fitted for show in shaded outside run, next to the young stock on a separate place, where I saw a growing lot of Cochins the equal of which I never saw anywhere. Any lover of Cochins can see more good ones at Mr. Harris's than at any show in the world, I firmly believe. Has shipped to A.P.Y., Sharp & Co., and Geo McCormick.

Mr. Sharp, he told me, was never startled by a large price, but always bought the best that could be bought. Was never treated better than I was by Mr. Harris and his efficient manager Miss Marshall. Mrs Harris also has some beautiful Partridge C and what he has done with Buff, she has done with Part. Viz swept all wherever shown. Miss Marshall has just commenced with D. Dorkys and has some good ones. After looking over Harris, Mr. Harris drove me to the yard of H. Boaden to see his famous Wyandottes. We looked over the birds and then eat dinner after passing a pleasant time with Mr B and family. We returned to Helston and took the train for Exeter at 5:00 p.m. arrived at Exeter at 10:15 a.m. and eat supper and went to bed.



Helston, Cornwall

Thursday, August 6th

Leave Exeter at 7:45 a.m. for Ringwood, Hampshire. Arrive Ringwood at 11:30 a.m. and found S. Leonards Poultry Farm is out in the country. Cannot get a conveyance, so walk out four miles, looked over the place and could not help but think that the whole concern was the work of a madman. There is piles of money spent on buildings and yards, etc., and I could not see a single choice specimen out of the 3,000 there. Returned to Ringwood and left at 4:00 p.m. for Emsworth. Arrived there at 6:30 p.m. and visited the home of H. Reeves. Could not be shown the stock until next morning, so after trying in vain in Emsworth for a place to sleep, I returned to Havant at 10:00 p.m. and determined to return to Newport, Mons next morning.

Friday, August 7th

Arrived at Newport about 1:00 p.m. eat dinner and came out to Penrhos. Golledge and Dowle came out from Caerleon to spend the evening, agreed to go to Grants 3:30 p.m. Saturday.

Saturday, August 8th

Went to Newport today and as usual met many old friends and began to feel a little weak hearted in wishing good-bye as I have a ticket bought to return Saturday 15th. Leave here on the 14th. Came out to Caerleon at 2:30 p.m., met Golledge and went up to Grants birds, while there and before seeing birds, it commenced raining terrible. We talked until the rain ceased. I then bought four birds and returned to Penrhos and eat supper. After supper went to Usk-View to visit Mrs. Parry with Maggie. Returned at 12 midnight.

Sunday, August 9th

Arose and eat breakfast and then went to Abernant. After dinner John Miles and wife came to see us and we had a great visit, talking over old times.

Monday, August 10th

Went to Kemeys to see Mr. Morhaver and family. Found him in bed sick. Unto death Mrs. M. looks very much older found and very crooked in the back but working as hard as ever. The others looked about the same as ever. After dinner I helped Jim thrash and had a long talk with Billy Bunrous in the evening. Retired at about 10: p.m.

Wednesday, August 12th

Go to Newport again today. After spending the forenoon with father, go to Jessie's after dinner and talked trotting horse with Will Locke until 5:00 p.m., then take train for Caerleon and go out to Grants to get my fowls and returned to Penrhos, Maggie and Will are at Cardiff exhibition today.

Thursday, August 13th

Go to station to see if birds have come from Frayn. Find them and take them to Penrhos. Spend most of the day in preparing fowls for journey and wishing friends good-bye. W. Locke and Jessie, father, and Jim and wife came to Penrhos and we had a family reunion. A. Golledge and W. Dowle walked out from town at 10:00 p.m. to shake hands.

Friday, August 14th

Arose and fed my birds and eat breakfast. Little Olive came to see me several times and says, "kiss me good-bye uncle". They all seemed to stand and watch me all the time until time to go. I had to go to Newport to catch the fast mail to Liverpool. Will Parry drove me to town. I came back past Penrhos, and there was Maggie and all the children watching for my train. I wave a handkerchief and they all respond. Little Olive and Harry Locke most vigorous of all. I watch them until I am blinded with tears. I arrive in Liverpool about 3:15 p.m. I expect to go abroad tomorrow. I retired at 9:30 p.m.

Saturday, August 15th

Arise and eat breakfast, then go and pass inspector and go on board at 12:00 noon. Boat started at 5:00 p.m. This is a wonderful ship. Much larger and smoother going then Aurania. Had no dinner, but eat dinner and supper combined at 5:15 p.m. just after starting. Retired at 9:30 p.m.



Liverpool port

Sunday, August 16th

Arose at 5:00 a.m. and find we are at Queenstown. Eat breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and find that the Damson jam had broken and was all through my grip. Cleaned it as well as I could. Passengers arrive on tender from Queenstown and we then proceed on our journey at about 9:00 a.m. Plum pudding for dinner, then go to bed at 8:00 p.m. Arise at 12:00 a.m and go on deck as there are many sick in the steerage. Go back at 2:00 a.m. and stay until six.

Monday, August 17th

Day passed without anything worthy of note. Some are sick and the sea is rather rough with the spray flying over.

Tuesday, August 18th

Beautiful weather all day.

Wednesday, August 19th

Foggy in the morning. Raining by 10:00 a.m. Cleared at 4:00 p.m. Many fishing smacks in sight.

Thursday, August 20th

Beautiful morning, sea smooth, just a little ripple. Rougher from noon till night.

Friday, August 21st

The prettiest morning of the whole trip. Sea like glass. Crew are getting up the baggage out of hold, ready for boat to land, but no land yet insight. 11:15 a.m. land insight. Arrived at Sandy Hook at 1:15 p.m. Come into dock at 4:00 p.m. Spent the evening on deck watching the boats in the harbour. Worth the whole trip to a western man. The 1st and 2nd cabin passengers land Friday evening, steerage passengers are held until Saturday, then we have to pass quarantine, etc. which takes until Saturday night.

Footnote

John Skinner was an English national, bringing in live birds, probably without all the health papers. He was delayed several hours before he finally talked the immigration and animal industry people into letting him bring his special chickens into the states. ✓

John Skinner was back with his Cornish Indian game chickens in Spiker, Nebraska on August 25th. They all survived the trip and served as the basis for his nationally acclaimed flock. John's birds were dark Cornish, developed in Cornwall, England from stock bought from India about 1840 by the English traders. John Skinner had a very keen eye for poultry and was many years ahead of his time.



Cornish Indian Game Chickens Vintage Lithograph 1899

