

# STORIES of New Jersey

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472 Orange Street, Newark, New Jersey

FRANK FORESTER, THE SPORTSMAN'S AUTHOR

In the middle of the last century the quiet Passaic River and the inviting countryside through which it ran attracted to New Jersey a sad young Englishman who founded for the United States a new form of literature—the literature of outdoor life.

He was named Henry William Herbert, a younger son of a noble English family, but he wrote on American sporting life under the pseudonym of "Frank Forester," because he was ashamed to place his real name on what he considered trivial work. He reserved the name Henry William Herbert for romantic novels, poetry and biography. The works of Henry William Herbert lie forgotten today, but those of Frank Forester still hold considerable interest for the fisherman, the hunter and the naturalist.

Drawing upon the background of traditional English enthusiasm for outdoor sport, Herbert brought to the American public a new respect for wild life and the pleasure to be had in field, stream and forest. America was still

too close to its coonskin pioneer days to view the wilderness as an opportunity for manly recreation. The word "sportsman" at that time was applied almost exclusively to gamblers, cockfight enthusiasts, prize-fight fans and others who indulged in not quite respectable diversions. Moreover, the habits of animal life almost unknown, and careless shooting and trapping threatened the extinction of many species of game.

Herbert, however, had been born in 1807 into the landed gentry of England, a class which had hunted as a pastime for generations and had passed laws to insure a plentiful supply of game. His love of outdoor life was instinctive, and under the expert guidance of his father he took part in moorland hunting expeditions as well as fashionable fox-hunting. Herbert stood close to the inheritance of the family Earldom of Carnarvon and as a matter of course prepared



William Henry Herbert  
"Frank Forester"

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himself at Eton and completed his education at Cambridge. While here he incurred the disfavor of his family, who were outraged by his disregard of their social code. When they refused to countenance his behavior, he fled to America.

The New York of 1831 in which Herbert arrived irritated him after the graceful life of England. One of his biographers, W. S. Hunt, has characterized it as

A city that was the lane between the old world and the new, with some of the worst attributes of both. It was half country village with rural crudities . . .

The twenty-four year old exile at first sought to sustain himself by teaching, but he finally turned to making his living by writing. He began with routine journalism, but his income remained small until 1839, when friends persuaded him to write some fictionalized accounts of hunting and fishing trips for the magazine *American Turf Register*. Although the response to this work made it profitable, Herbert continued to consider it beneath his talents and insisted on signing his sports writing "Frank Forester."

His marriage to Sarah Barker, daughter of the mayor of Bangor, Maine, in 1839 opened the way to his first real happiness in what he was now convinced was a hostile land. Her death from tuberculosis, however, revived his bitterness. Homesick for England, friendless in a country which he did not understand and which did not understand him, disappointed that his literary fame rested on such minor works as those of Frank Forester, he took refuge from his unhappiness by fleeing from New York. He induced his father to send him money to build a home and to provide for the education of his son. When the remittance arrived, it carried with it an apology for its small size. His father doubted the stability of the United States under the Democratic administration of James K. Polk and explained that had the Whig, Henry Clay, been elected President, he could have invested a larger sum.

Herbert settled in New Jersey, because in 1845 New Jersey was the only commonwealth which permitted aliens to hold and convey real estate. Like the exile Joseph Bonaparte before him, for whom the law had been passed, Herbert was too proud of his European birth to consider American citizenship. Again like Bonaparte, Herbert always hoped to be recalled to a noble position in Europe.

Instead he spent the last thirteen years of his life from 1845 to 1858 in the gloomy house called "The Cedars," on the banks of the Passaic River between Newark and Belleville. Previously he had hunted, fished and ridden in New Jersey, where the landscape seemed to provide an escape from the coarse city of New York. The sportsman in Herbert momentarily triumphed over the unhappy exile when he wrote of snipe leaving

the salt marshes about the mouths of the Raritan, the Hackensack, and the Passaic . . . gradually ascend the courses of the streams to the great tracts of morass and bog-meadow, which are spread out for leagues, the very Paradise of the Snipe-shooter . . .

The Cedars became a symbol of Herbert's yearning for England and his inability to adjust himself to the American scene. He built the house with the spac-

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iousness of English country homes in mind; it had a great living room with a tremendous fireplace. But the staircase led to an unfinished garret, for Herbert's plan far exceeded his father's modest gift. As in England he had the country at his front door. Green Island, just off the shore in front of the house, was a haven for wild ducks and geese, a favorite shooting place for hunters. From his porch stretched a beautiful scene which Herbert described as "the smooth, silvery Passaic, and the upward slope of the farther side covered with rich orchards."

His home and the wild life of America provided Herbert with compensations for the normal society of men and women which he denied himself. On these he poured out the love that he might have shared with human beings. The powerful emotion that fires his nature descriptions revealed to Americans new beauties in heretofore prosaic scenes. For Herbert the autumn woods became lovely places where

the hues of the innumerable maples, in their various stages of decay, purple and crimson, and bright gorgeous scarlet, were contrasted with the rich chrome yellow of the birch and poplars, the serene red leaves of the gigantic oaks, and with the ever verdant plumage of the crows.

His outdoor writing, however, extended beyond mere poetic revelation. He tamed the wild approach to wild life with accurate descriptions of the living habits of fish, game, horse and dog. In an article, *The Smelt of the Passaic River*, he followed the pattern of description and classification of fish that James J. Audubon had established for the birds of North America. Like Audubon, whose friend he was, Herbert possessed the gift of illustrating his books which enriched the public's appreciation of his work. He made his contribution to natural lore authoritative by supplementing his observations with extensive research. In *The Quail* he not only describes the bird but also recommends methods of gunning, the best time of day for the sport, and the proper role of the dog.

Herbert's arrogant attitude and his habit of affecting the trappings of a hunter on his walks through Newark streets made him an object of ridicule. Despite his irrational behavior, his sporting writing, which was helping to create a new type of sportsman, were models of systematic presentation. The title and subtitle of his handbook for sportsmen reveals the enormous scope of his interest. *The Complete Manual for Young Sportsmen* was subtitled

with directions for handling the gun, the rifle and the rod; the art of shooting on the wing; the breaking, management and hunting of the dog; the varieties and habits of game; river, lake and sea fishing; etc., etc., etc., prepared for the instruction and use of the youth of America.

Herbert's combination of colorful writing and exact information on natural subjects won him a far greater fame than did the dull novels in which he still maintained his hope for true recognition. His example of the gentlemanly sportsman and his ire at wanton destruction of wild life brought many requests from all over the country for him to take the lead in preventing the total annihilation of game. He responded with a charge that the quail-shooting laws of the time were based on a deficient knowledge of the living habits of the bird, and he urged revision of the game laws. Moreover, his monographs on the wood-

cock and the snipe, if they did not immediately succeed in changing the laws, at least brought to the public's attention the need for such change. As an illustration of what might be accomplished by individuals, Herbert imported quail from the South and restocked a hunting area in New York where native broods had been destroyed by severe cold.

In 1857, after almost two decades of journalistic writing on outdoor life, Herbert published his masterpiece, *The Horse and Horsemanship in North America*. This two-volume treatise on the history, breeding and training of horses lifted him to the rank of a great scholar of nature. A contemporary reviewer exclaimed: "It seemed the author must have made horses the one . . . study of his life." Even today *Horse and Horsemanship* occupies a high place in equine literature.

Upon this success followed quickly Herbert's second marriage. The long years of living as a recluse in a foreign land seemed about to yield to a happy domestic life. But the melancholy had rooted itself too deeply in Herbert's soul and personality. He quarreled with his wife, she left him, and finally demanded her freedom. The emotional shock of the wreck of his short-lived marriage twisted Herbert's sadness and disillusion into sheer madness.

With the deliberation of an insane man, he invited several friends to attend a banquet at the Stevens House in New York exactly three months after his wedding day. The letters were worded so fantastically that only a former student, Philip Anthon, appeared for the grim occasion. During the course of the evening, Herbert excused himself and went into the next room. A shot rang out. Anthon ran to Herbert, who lay dead by his own hand.

Shortly before his suicide Herbert poured out for the last time all the unhappiness he had known in America. With evident self-pity he complained that "no counsellor, no friend, no country have been mine for six and twenty years, every hope broken down." Eighteen years after his death, the Newark Herbert Association carried out his wish to be buried in nearby Mt. Pleasant Cemetery. Over his grave they placed the very small, very plain headstone which he had requested, with the inscription composed by Herbert himself--"Henry William Herbert, of England, aged 51 years; Infelicissimus."

At the unveiling ceremonies old acquaintances spoke feelingly of the man whom they had come to honor. The unsuccessful novelist, exile from his homeland, warrior against the crudity of America, "Henry William Herbert, of England" lay indeed beneath the pathetically worded headstone. But Frank Forester of America, creator of beauty in the American scene, lived.

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