

“Over the Alleghenies and Beyond: The Story of a Table”  
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I miss my family, but it's rather interesting being here in this museum. I especially miss being used for meals, but having people visit every day is better than being alone. Some visitors ignore me, but others are fascinated by my beautiful sheen and the artfulness of my seven castor bobbin legs. I am round when all my leaves are removed, which my curators seem to think is rather unusual for a table of my age, but I am more than two-hundred years old. You may wonder why I have seven legs. Five of them are on one end, and as I am pulled apart, the two on the corners separate from each other, which allows three in a row in the middle to support the leaves.



Before I ended up in the 1887 Henderson House at the Adams County Museum in Brighton, Colorado, in 2004, many people enjoyed their meals on me. The large families opened me up with some or all of my seven leaves and spread their Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners over my surface. I was finely burnished by the ladies in whose homes I lived, especially after their children nicked my legs with their

rambunctious play. One of those ladies even polished my little brass wheels until they shined.

The first place I remember living was Albany, New York, where I served the Van Vechten family. The father was John (1788-1821) who bought me as a wedding gift for his beloved Letitia Sebring (1790-1854). Their children were a lively bunch, playing under and around me, even when their mother tried to contain them. Just 10 years after their marriage, John died suddenly, leaving Letitia with six little ones and another on the way.

Taking me and the rest of the furniture, Letitia had us packed up in a covered wagon and headed south for New York aboard a sailing ship called a sloop. This was the primary means of transporting cargo in the 1820s, so the wagon with all its contents, the animals and people were taken on board, and within a few days we reached the city of New York. There Letitia's widowed

father, Isaac Sebring (1756-1841), met her just days after she birthed her last child. We set off with the seven little ones in tow for the wilds of the Ohio territory. As we traveled, Isaac told his grandchildren about his previous experiences on the way to Ohio, teaching them to recognize the varieties of trees and animals along the way. I could see nothing, being swaddled as I was, but I listened closely to the conversations and learned about the route.

There were many kinds of trees: oak, buckeye, sycamore, tulip, hickory, ash and beech. When they reached Ohio, they saw that many of the trees had been cut down and used to build houses, churches, bridges, even colleges. There were also animals to watch for: rattlesnakes, wolves, panthers and black bears were considered dangerous, while the fish, white-tailed deer and wild turkeys provided fresh meat for the travelers.

As a young man, Isaac had heard all about the Ohio country and wanted to apply to be one of the first pioneers. He believed in the principles of the Ohio Cause: freedom of religion, education for all, and a total exclusion of slavery, ideals fundamental to a just society. Initially Isaac was rejected, so he stayed in Flushing, New York, where he married Jannetje Van Wyck (1766-?), who gave birth to Letitia 14 months after their 1789 marriage. Isaac pined for adventure until after Jannetje's death and Letitia's marriage, when he turned his sights at last to the west. Thankfully, the application process was no longer necessary.

Isaac joined a company of pioneers heading to Ohio. It was 1811, and a number of towns had already been established since the first, Marietta, had been laid out in 1788. The route across the Blue Mountain and Tuscarora Mountain was easier to traverse than it had been for the first pioneers, as each successive group of travelers had worn down the earth to make a clearer trail.

Isaac's group reached the western side of the Alleghenies, Laurel Mountain and the Chestnut Ridge, in a matter of days, even though the first pioneers had taken nearly a month on that route. The company Isaac joined had the good sense to leave in late spring, while the first travelers had left in early December. After much exploration, Isaac finally settled in an area that was to become the town of Gambier, much farther inland than most of the other settlements.

It was there in late 1821 he received the letter from Letitia, telling of John's death and asking her father if she might bring her family to join him. She too was an ardent believer in the Ohio Cause. Isaac immediately responded that he would be on his way to get her as soon as the spring thaw was underway, and good as his word, he arrived in New York in May of 1822, just after the birth of Letitia's last baby, John (1822-1869), named for his dead father.

From New York, we set out for Ohio in late June, as soon as John was six weeks old, heading southwest for Philadelphia along what is now known as the Washington-Rochambeau National Historic Trail. This, Isaac explained, was the road General Washington and the French

commander, General Rochambeau, traveled during the Revolutionary War on their way to Yorktown, Virginia, where they hoped to defeat the English under the command of Lord Cornwallis. While the troops were in Philadelphia, they paraded before Congress, but from there we left the famous trail and picked up the Great Wagon Road. We continued on the Great Wagon Road until we reached the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) over the mountains. When the two trails met, we turned onto the GAP trail and crossed the Alleghenies, arriving at last at Pittsburgh, where the Conestoga wagon was loaded onto a flatboat, and we drifted down the Ohio River to Marietta, which was now a thriving city.

At Marietta, we picked up the Muskingum River and poled our way north to the newly created town of Coshocton. There we left the river and went across country, the horses pulling the wagon while the older children drove the cows behind it. This part of the trip was so much nicer for me than on the trails, where the wheels bounced and jerked over roots and rocks every few minutes. Lying on my back as I was, my legs up in the air, I was so grateful to arrive first at the rivers and then the grasslands, which were much more comfortable to travel on. After several days we arrived at Isaac's cabin, where I was set on my legs and began to see my family once again.

Within two years the surveyors were laying out the town of Gambier, and Isaac began to grumble about the close quarters. Between all the children and the now rapidly growing number of neighbors, he was clearly unhappy. Isaac took to traveling again, searching for wilderness areas which were not yet civilized, but always returning to Gambier to see his family. Eventually he headed for Fishkill, New York, where he had grown up, and there he died and was buried in 1841.

I was not yet part of the Anderson Family; that would come several decades later after Catherine Van Vechten (1818-1902), Letitia's youngest daughter, left me to her niece, Letitia Sebring Elder (1849-1931). I spent many years of my life in Ohio, first in Gambier, then in Cleveland and finally Mount Vernon, where the Andersons farmed. One tract of their farm was originally owned by Catherine; when she willed it to Letitia, the family no longer had to farm leased land.

According to Rebecca Anderson Burnham (1919-2011), the last lady to use me, I was "the first extension table taken over the Allegheny Mountains to Cleveland." Rebecca believed that since I had previously belonged to Catherine and her husband, James Alfred Briggs (1811-1889), it must have been they who took me from New York to Cleveland, but she didn't know the whole story; no one was left alive to tell her.

Now I really must brag a little, since I was once owned by a somewhat famous person.

Uncle Briggs, as he was called by Catherine's family, was responsible for arranging the momentous event in which his good friend, Abraham Lincoln, spoke at Coopers Union in New York, which is what launched the campaign for that esteemed gentleman who became the sixteenth President of the United States of America. Rumor has it that Uncle Briggs was also the creator of William Henry Harrison's 1840 presidential campaign slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too." Uncle Briggs became my owner when Catherine married him. In those days, ladies were not allowed to own possessions, even if they inherited them from their family.

In 1833, Uncle Briggs left his birthplace in Claremont, New York, for Cleveland, Ohio. At twenty-two, he was a young man who dreamed of having a house full of children, but years later he lamented to each of his wives that his dream had not come to fruition. He was thirty-one when he married Margaret Bayard in 1842, but they remained childless. After Margaret died, Uncle Briggs married Catherine, whose only son, Alfred James Briggs (date unknown), died in infancy.

Uncle Briggs is well known in Cleveland history. He was a notary public for Cuyahoga County beginning in 1835, and county auditor from 1842 to 1846. He was also the first attorney of the re-chartered Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati Railroad. During 1848 and 1849, he published and edited the *Daily True Democrat*, a newspaper espousing the ideals of the Free Soil Party, which stood for slavery not being extended into the west. Uncle Briggs helped establish the Cleveland high school system in 1847 and in 1854 became a member of the Cleveland Board of Education. He engaged in many social causes, including libraries, archives and historical societies. He even helped organize the Cleveland Protestant Orphan Asylum, which was his solace for having no children of his own.

In 1857, Uncle Briggs and Catherine moved from Cleveland to Brooklyn, New York, where he became an assessor and a special correspondent to the *Cleveland Leader*, as well as for several other newspapers.

After their marriage, Catherine became known to the Anderson family as Auntie Briggs. Because she outlived Uncle Briggs by thirteen years, she became the owner of his possessions, some of which now reside in Spokane, Washington, with May, the older daughter of Rebecca. In her final years, Auntie Briggs lived at Hilltop Farm, where her niece Letitia, wife of Thomas Madison Anderson (1848-1923), and their children, Alfred (1881-1938), Helen (1884-1942) and Kathryn (1887-1977) cared for her. In fact, Alfred was named Alfred Briggs Anderson after James Alfred Briggs! Catherine was a trial to the family, but she had brought me with her when she moved to the farm from Cleveland after her husband died. She and Uncle Briggs had gone back there after the 1865 assassination of his good friend, President Lincoln. This tragedy

resulted in the end of Uncle Briggs' desire to participate in politics.

At Hilltop Farm, I was the center of attention for a good many years. Letitia, her daughters Helen and Kathryn, and later her daughter-in-law Isabel Cunningham (1882-1953), Rebecca's mother, used me—often in my fully extended form, which could seat eighteen—to feed family members, as well as the seasonal threshers and silo fillers. It was a joy to be appreciated by the hired hands and neighbors who came in from the fields for a hearty mid-day meal before going back out to work in the hot sun.

After Letitia died, Helen and Isabel ran the farm with Rebecca's help. Kathryn had already married and moved away; after Helen died, Isabel's son Richard Gray Anderson (1914-1982), and his wife Amy E. Brewster (1914-2008), took over the farm. I didn't stay at the farm; Amy had brought her own family table, so Rebecca and Isabel took me to Mount Vernon, where they had an apartment. In 1947 Rebecca married John Simpson Burnham (1920-2006), and we all moved to a house on East Gambier Street. Isabel went to live in the nursing home where she died in 1953, and Rebecca's family moved to Upper Fredricktown Road. We lived there for two years until Rebecca and John moved their family to Denver, Colorado, in 1955. We lived there for more than three decades while John and Rebecca raised their three children around me.

I was always the center of attention in the formal dining room, whether feeding a crowd of friends at Thanksgiving or just the family of five on Sundays. Rebecca used the same dainty dishes her mother and grandmother had used, and I reminisced frequently about members of the family who had gone before. Every summer there was a party and I was graced with a beautiful crystal punch bowl and many delicate crystal cups. I wore the thick brown folding pads which protected my surface and a fancy white lace tablecloth.

When I wasn't being used for food, I was the surface on which Rebecca and May, the older daughter, cut out fabric for their many sewing projects, and both May and her brother, Thomas Van Vechten Burnham (1948-2018), used me as a desk for their homework. I was even the counting table once when Rebecca was treasurer for a fundraiser; I remember May playing with the silver dollars and fifty-cent pieces before they were turned over to the bank. Once I was a sorting table for a book Rebecca was assembling, with Rebecca, John, Tom, and May walking around and around me, collating the pages from the many piles of mimeographed sheets into individual handbooks.

Later on, I was mostly used to hold the mail and newspapers. Rebecca's husband had gone away and only she and Ellen (1952-2001), the youngest daughter, remained. For a while a roommate lived with them, but before long it was just Rebecca and Ellen, and I was rarely used for food. I was sort of sad about that, but Rebecca often gently caressed my surface when she

walked by. She must have been reminiscing too, as the big house felt lonely most of the time.

After many years, John began to come around again, and eventually the three of them moved from Denver to Brighton, where I was placed in a new dining area at the end of a long living room. There was only room for my two of leaves in that house, but it was a joy to be used again for Sunday dinners and occasional visits from the now-grown children. May had married and brought her husband and son to visit several times, and in between, Rebecca's best friend from childhood, who had also moved from Ohio to Denver, came to share meals.

After Ellen died, Rebecca and John moved to an apartment where I was blamed for John's broken hip. He was standing up from his place when he fell backwards and slid underneath me. When he went to the nursing home from the hospital, Rebecca moved into a small cottage where there was no room for me. I was taken to a storage unit for a time before I traveled to the museum in a pick-up truck. After John died, Rebecca moved to Spokane, Washington, to live with May. She and May came to visit me in the museum a couple times, but I haven't seen them in many years. I heard the museum director tell someone that Rebecca had died and May is now my owner.

I also heard them say that the museum wants to put an end to the permanent loan program so they can sell or dispose of the furniture they don't have room for anymore. I hope I'm not one of those pieces. I miss my family, but at least I get visited by the people who come to tour, and I have the important job of holding the brochures for the house where I live. It's fun to listen to people puzzle aloud about why I have seven legs. If only I could tell them my whole story, especially the part in which the family used to think I was made of walnut, but when Thomas Anderson refinished me in 1903, he discovered I was solid cherry!



## Resources

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