



Religion and Piety in the Journal of Phebe Orvis

Phebe Orvis found herself in a strange circumstance. What Orvis desired most was a husband concerned with the salvation of his soul. What she got was what she most dreaded: a husband who rejected her own spiritual calling. Her struggle to balance her husband's religious zeal with her own beliefs provides us with an alternative view of one of the most important religious movements of the nineteenth century: the Second Great Awakening.

By SUSAN M. OUELLETTE

One early December evening in 1826, Phebe Orvis thoughtfully made her way home from a revival meeting held in her neighborhood in Parishville, a town in western New York State. Vexed, she struggled between her desire to be united with her husband in a mutual bond of Christian faith and her aversion to the particular church he had chosen. Braving the rainy, cold evening alone, Orvis felt resentful of the strange circumstances that gave her what she most desired, a husband concerned with the salvation of his soul, and what she most dreaded, a husband who rejected her own spiritual calling.¹

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Orvis' experience was probably not unusual in the antebellum period, especially in the Northeast. The Second Great Awakening was a social and religious phenomenon of such epic proportions that the geographic areas where it was most concentrated came to be known as "burned over" by the flame of passionate revivalists. Samuel Eastman, Orvis' husband, was typical of many men who heeded the revivalists' message. A farmer with a hundred-acre plot of good land along a well-traveled military post road, Eastman was a member of the growing middle class on the New York frontier.² An officer in the local militia troop, he had status among his peers and with a young wife and baby, he was concerned with the future success of his family.

Although western New York State has been generally understood as one of the more notable "burned over" districts, the flames of religious revivals flared up over much of the northeastern United States. Urban and rural areas alike were affected. Vermont was not immune, as historian Jeffrey Potash has pointed out that awakeners helped to "visibly alter the religious landscape."³ Even before her husband's conversion, Phebe Orvis was not unaware of the religious enthusiasm of her day. As a young unmarried woman in Addison County, Vermont, Orvis attended many events in Bristol and Middlebury that featured religious speakers and topics. In September of 1820, she noted that her Uncle John Brooks attended a "camp meeting" that was organized in nearby Charlotte.⁴

In many ways, Orvis was typical of most American women who heeded the call of awakeners to ignite the revivalist fires. Indeed historians of the period generally agree that women were the majority of the population of new converts during those years.⁵ Attracted to the more emotional message of the revivalist ministers, they internalized a more sympathetic view of themselves as saved individuals rather than tainted daughters of Eve. Many historians also have discovered that women, inspired by the religious renewal of the revival experience, proselytized their husbands and children; they saw this effort as part of their duties as wives and mothers.⁶ Certainly as the ideology of domesticity became more widespread among American, Protestant middle-class families, wives and mothers became the moral centers of the household. Orvis was clearly part of the mainstream cultural narrative of her day.

Yet Orvis was also a product of another aspect of her early life: her status as a legacy Quaker. Historians Rebecca Larson and Barry Levy have both pointed out that the wave of domesticity and its ideal of female moral superiority originated among the Quaker households of the Mid-Atlantic States.⁷ Levy holds that Quakers developed a "form of domesticity as part of their religion." Quaker women were respected as spiritual leaders in their households; Orvis would have internalized this role

early in her life. She clearly prized her faith and held fast to it even when Friends' meetings were not easily accessible.

This essay explores early-nineteenth-century female piety and evangelism through the lens of the Orvis journal. As a young unmarried woman in the small farming community of Bristol, Vermont, she began keeping the journal in 1820. This unassuming little volume contains the daily details of her work, personal experiences, and, very often, her deepest feelings. A keen observer, Orvis chronicled the mundane as well as the unusual happenings of her family, her neighborhood, and beyond Vermont as she voraciously read the newspapers, books, and personal letters that came her way. Of particular interest for this essay are the details of her personal struggle with piety and issues of faith. The journal chronicles two separate phases of her life: the period of early adulthood before marriage and then her life as a married woman on the New York frontier. Throughout the entire period she continued to struggle with her own faith, and eventually her obligation to engender piety in her husband and children. Indeed, her faith was the central reality within which all other obligations, expectations, and values were rooted.

PHASE ONE: THE SWEET SINGLE LIFE

Orvis was the daughter of Hicksite Quaker settlers who came to the Vermont frontier in the waning years of the eighteenth century. Land and opportunity in the newly settled frontier of northern New England brought the Orvis family north and west. Their story is much like many of the family legends of the mobile generations in the period immediately following the American Revolution. Her father, Loren Orvis, came to Lincoln, Vermont, from western Connecticut with his brother Philander. The two men purchased land that they eventually divided into two farms.⁸ In 1791, Orvis married Elizabeth Brooks, the daughter of another early Bristol settler, Samuel Brooks, from Lancaster, Massachusetts.⁹ Phebe Orvis was their fourth child and their first daughter, born October 19, 1801. Elizabeth Brooks died January 1, 1802 (probably of "childbed" fever); her two-month-old infant daughter was sent to live with her parents near Bristol village.

Perhaps it was this sad beginning that made Orvis sensitive to spiritual issues. She would have learned the uncertain nature of life from her first days. Perhaps she felt a certain responsibility for her mother's demise. Certainly, she noted her mother's passing every year she kept her journal, sometimes with an extraordinary sense of loss.

Twenty years this morn since my mother left this world. Ah! Where is she? Is not her spirit hovering o'er my head entreating her infant

daughter to reclaim her wandering steps? yet little does she [her daughter] realize it.¹⁰

Raised by her grandparents, Orvis may possibly have been a daily reminder of their loss (and hers). She may also have been the child of their old age and cherished. Certainly Orvis's grandparents figured largely in any choices she made, including her marriage. There is no way to know how the rest of the family treated or remembered Elizabeth Brooks's passing. Her gravesite has been lost, so there is no physical evidence of her "memorial" arrangements and no reference to graveside visits by Orvis, her grandparents, or other members of her family. Her father eventually remarried, to another Quaker woman from the Ferrisburgh Meeting, but more than six years after the death of his first wife.¹¹ Shortly after his remarriage, Loren Orvis sold his hill farm in Lincoln and moved to Ferrisburgh with his new bride. Yet even when her father remarried, Orvis never lived in his home again. She remained in her grandparents' Bristol home and under their control until her marriage.

In other ways, Orvis's self-analysis is not surprising. As the child and grandchild of Friends, she was a "birthright" Quaker and joined the Monkton Meeting when she was four years old. By the time she began to keep the extant journal, she was a regular participant at Sabbath schools and at the regular meetings near her grandparents' home.¹² The Sabbath schools were apparently ubiquitous in northern Addison County and a local tradition holds that each had a library of hundreds of volumes of religious tracts. Her participation in the school sessions undoubtedly fueled her interest in education and learning as well as in her spiritual health. Certainly among Quakers there would have been no censure for her, as a female, to pursue knowledge. Even by this time when Quakers in general began to withdraw from the public and evangelical roles they pursued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they respected the religious and intellectual strivings of women.¹³

Orvis did not lack for inspiration from other like-minded worshippers since there was no dearth of opportunity to attend Friends' meetings in most towns of Addison County. According to the *History of Addison County* the majority of settlers who arrived at the end of the eighteenth century were Quakers; in the opinion of the author: "Those who did not belong with them were the exceptions."¹⁴ In the first decade of settlement after 1790 meetings were informally organized and held in various members' homes. By 1801, four years before Orvis became a full member, the Friends had formally organized their society and applied to the Quarterly Meeting at Easton, New York (their "mother" meeting). Although no money for building a meetinghouse was immediately

forthcoming, a log house was constructed for that purpose in the Bristol area. The informal nature of the early years of the Society of Friends in that region meant that meetings and Sabbath schools were held in Bristol, New Haven Mills, Ferrisburgh, and Lincoln on any given Sunday. Orvis appears to have attended most Sundays, even when there were “few scholars” at the Sabbath school or the weather was inclement.¹⁵

Despite some speculation that regular meeting attendance had more to do with social interaction than religious obligation, Orvis paid serious attention to the texts and the testimony given at the meetings. She often recorded the text, sometimes copying it out in her journal, often with her own commentary attached. Moreover, her journal reveals a level of self-analysis that would have been worthy of a Puritan zealot. Indeed, her self-awareness often ran to self-censure: “Why am I discontented?” she would write in her journal. Then, in answer to herself, she would write: “Wickedness.”¹⁶ Self-examination revealed her shameful lack of piety; her soul was not as pure as she would have it be. Often these observations were in part an acknowledgement of the fragility of life: “So slides time away faster than we prepare for death and Eternity.”¹⁷ Usually, her observations were brief and to the point, but she could at times write eloquently. The image of life passing quickly and the chances for salvation being even more ephemeral connected in her mind to the fast flowing and sometimes dangerous, if beautiful, river near her home:

May 22, 1822: took an agreeable walk to the river. . . . Oh how changed many of the places where I have read and sang hours, my voice reaching with the rolling waves are now no more, they have plunged the stream while I view the place of past scenes. I think the comparison may be applied to mankind. sometimes the current moves easy and beautiful but soon it rushes with impetuosity, renders the Sublimity strikingly majestic, trees torn from their native soil, are tossed to and fro, rising and plunging with the furious torrent. So is man. Sometimes his circumstances are flattering, his mind is easy, he slides sweetly along the stream of life. But alas! soon some sudden and unseen affliction hovers around him and tosses him upon the billows of despair unless his hope is rested upon the rock of salvation where he is safe [from] all harm. but if his afflictions are placed upon the fading of this world. perhaps a little property, perhaps a dear friend or relative, perhaps the partner of his joys, the companion of his bosom is torn from him. then he thinks his cup is full his burthen is greater than he can bear. thus he is afflicted, he strives to regain his former security of pleasure but the stream of time swiftly carries him down unless some kind assistance comes to his relief.

Her need to remain focused on the Divine Truth and avoid worldly concerns of property and even of earthly love sprinkle the passages of

her journal. And yet these were not the only problems confronting her. From the beginning of the journal in 1820, Orvis was also concerned with fending off unwanted suitors, falling in love with an unsuitable man, and then being carried off by her family (to keep her from that man) to the wilds of western New York. Finally, after much soul-searching Orvis agreed to marry the man her father and grandparents approved: Samuel Eastman, Jr. In early 1823, the second phase of her life began: housewife and then mother.

PHASE TWO: TRANSITION TO EVANGELIST

Orvis' marriage drastically changed her life. First, she left behind the settled and comforting environs of Lincoln, Bristol, and Vergennes and found herself living in a raw cabin on the western frontier of New York State. Second, she was now wife to a man she barely knew and with whom she would be expected to build a life. Eastman had not been her first choice and although he had pursued her, his rough ways and irreligious manner confused and sometimes frightened her. On her wedding day she wrote:

February 5th, 1823 Pleasant. what a dreadful day is this. Miss Prime waited upon me today and this eve. and Mr. Henry Byington [was] Mr. Eastman's waiter to the marriage ceremony performed by Esq. Pier (he presented me with the dollar). Farewell to a sweet single life, I can no more enjoy you. Packed my goods ready to depart. What a change to relinquish parents and friends all for one of the other sex. Surprising and unpleasant.

Yet, she determined to make the best of her situation. The first few weeks after moving into the cabin, she spent washing and putting things to right. Her entries contain many references to being disgusted with herself and with their isolated condition. Then, she wrote:

April 20, 1823, Oh what a wicked creature I am, neglect my maker as I do. Lord forbid that I should continue to live in sloth, may I not renounce the things of an earthly nature, and seek superior bliss? God grant that we may live no longer in such a stupid Backslidden condition but may we both run the race that is set before us with alacrity, till we arrive on Canaan's happy shore.

From this point on, Orvis begins to regain her self-reflective style. For the next few years, she was unable to attend a regular meeting. It is not clear whether there were no Quaker meetings in the area or she could not convince her husband to attend. In May 1824, her first child was born and, with it, a renewed evangelical impulse:

May 7th, 1824, Rainy. Oh my god what a day is this and how hast though [sic] supported me through it. At half past ten A.M. didst

.....

thou make me the Mother of a lovely son weighing seven pounds four oz. thanks to my God it will never be a mother. since it has been thy will to restore me to my bosom friend with this little pledge of love instead of taking me from him, wilt thou grant us wisdom to bring it up in thy fear, teach him to remember his Creator in the days of his youth.

From this point on, Orvis engaged in a battle with her husband over his soul. He was not inclined to piety; his Sundays were spent fishing, hunting, or, as Orvis described, to pass the day “dull and stupid.” It is not clear what tactics she used to convince him of the error of his ways, but it is apparent that she would not participate in his wanton visiting and more than once refused to cook whatever he brought home from a Sunday’s hunt or fishing campaign. In addition, Eastman continued to participate in Saturday drinking with his brothers under the guise of militia training. Horrified, she wrote: “I can do nothing as long as this man of sense is drowned in Liquor. Oh Lord wilt thou not put an end to his love of ardent spirits and quicken him with thine holy fire?”¹⁸ As their young son began to grow, Orvis worried that he would adopt Eastman’s impious and irreligious bearing.

In April of 1825, regular Quaker meetings began to be held at the schoolhouse in Parishville near Orvis’ home. These were often informal and dependent on a traveling minister from England named Wilkinson. The meetings persisted intermittently through the summer, but by fall, Wilkinson had moved on. Orvis was sorely disappointed.

December 11, 1825, Stormy A.M. Pleasant P.M. one poor traveler called. I had the pleasure of giving him a meal which is highly gratifying to my feelings, to impart a trifle to the poor but still there is an aching void that lies continually in my breast. His parents are careless about the things that be his and bring their everlasting peace. no example worthy [of] his imitation and, can I bear to see the little innocent thus live? Oh God forbid. wilt thou give us a praying spirit, family religion, a pious heart and may it ere long be our meat and our drink to do the will of our Father.

Her frustration with an unrepentant husband continued to mount over the next year. The birth of her second child, a daughter, born somewhat prematurely (she called it untimely, but was not specific), seems to have deepened her frustration, fears, and resolve. An epidemic of colds that appear to have been accompanied by a severe bronchial infection, which swept through the community at the end of 1826, proved to be her husband’s salvation, but not the one that Orvis expected.

When he first became ill, neither she nor Eastman was overly concerned. On the third and fourth days of his illness he insisted that she keep to her plan of going out to another neighbor’s home for a quilting

bee. Over the next few days his health declined and finally after more than a week of illness, the doctor was called. The doctor was not optimistic. This seems to have truly frightened Eastman; it certainly did Orvis. They must have discussed those fears, although Orvis did not explicitly record those conversations. However, it is clear that he made a promise (presumably to both his wife and his God) to mend his ways if he recovered. When he did get well, Eastman acted to fulfill his sickbed promise. As soon as he was physically able, Eastman and Orvis attended the Baptist meeting nearby. In the weeks following, Eastman turned over a new leaf, much to his wife's relief.

November 26th, 1826, . . . Mr E attended conference this eve. I hope the Lord has seen fit to awaken his mind in some measure. He for the first time attempted family prayer. Oh Lord may he Persevere and never omit it again in life. I thank my God that he has heard the prayer of my heart and thus far answered it. Oh that I was more engaged in his cause.

Eastman's newfound religious enthusiasm delighted his wife, but also became a problem for her as well. He was attracted to the Baptist meeting, which was experiencing a revival at the time. The minister made several visits to their home and there may have been some friction over the question of becoming members of the church. Orvis found herself in a terrible quandary:

December 8th, 1826 Very wet and muddy indeed. Mr E & myself walked and carried my Babe to the other district, attended meeting. Heard eleven give their relations to the Church, viz; Mrs. Huldah Chase, Parker & Daniel Rose, Mrs. Elizabeth Capil [Capel], Henry Capil [Capel], Lorenzo Hoyt, Lucinda Brownell, Betsey Newton, Josepher Brownell, Patience Simonds, Martha Welch. Returned home after sunset. Went to Mr. Lee's and brought home my little boy. I was by this time very tired indeed with a violent headache. It seemed as though I could not sit up when Mrs. Lee came and insisted on my spending the evening at their house with Mr & Mrs Flower [the Baptist minister and his wife]. I told her I felt as though I could not go; however, I did. My visit was not agreeable, for it was all twitting and ridiculing the Church to which I belonged. I was accused of having a Baptist heart and a Congregational head by my husband. Another says "Samuel will bring her over to be a Baptist." Another says "what are you going to do with your children? They have not been sprinkled, etc." In the frame of mind I was then in and not being able to sit up, disappointed of an agreeable religious visit, (it being Rainy, tarried late), it seemed as if my heart would burst. I waited for my Babe to awaken as long as I could and left her for her Pa'a to bring home when the rain ceased. As soon as I came into the road I burst into tears and prayers until I reached home, that if I was in an error respecting doctrine, that God would direct me in the right way. When

I went from home I felt in my mind if I was alone as to sentiment of that Church and all the object of my visiting this evening was thinking possibly sooner or later I might be united with my husband in a peace. possibly some light might be thrown in my darkened mind. But alas I am much farther from it than ever. I feel as if I had not a friend in the world, my nearest friend against me. But, oh, my God, may I not judge but may God forgive them for they know not what they do. I do not think they meant to injure my feelings but to make me dislike every order but theirs. But their lack of charity drove me from it more than my Bible.

Eastman was now immersed both literally and figuratively in the affairs of the Baptist church. The church at the “corners” was obviously experiencing a full-on revival; week after week large numbers (sometimes as many as two dozen) were baptized. The interested Baptist members waited expectantly for Orvis to step forward. She failed to do so. One week her sister-in-law visited and insisted upon accompanying her to the meeting. Once at the church, Orvis found that the men had conspired to convince her to be immersed that week. She flatly refused. Now, she prayed for her and her husband to come to some kind of compromise. She wrote about the sadness she felt in going her own way and yet could not bring herself to give in to her husband’s demand that she follow him into the Baptist church membership.

Over the next three years, Orvis’ journal chronicles their mutual struggles. Eastman wavered between devout observance of the Baptist meetings and going back to his earlier “mis-use” of the Sabbath. Orvis desperately resisted the pressure to join the Baptists and tried to find a way to continue in her own religious path. In 1829, several families of Friends (DeLong and Harkness) moved to her area and they, in turn, were visited by Quakers from the Friends’ meeting at Peru, New York. She was able to join in their informal meetings and to borrow religious tracts to read at home, but she remained emotionally torn between her love of her own faith, her desire for a religious communion with her husband, and her dislike of the Baptist doctrine and worship.

By the end of 1830, Orvis had given birth to her fifth child and her journal became sporadic and then ends. The story concludes somewhat unsatisfactorily with the pernicious division in the Eastman-Orvis household unresolved. It is possible that in the end, Orvis finally capitulated, since she and her husband are buried together in the Baptist cemetery in Parishville, New York. However, it is just as likely that she rejected formal membership in the church throughout her life and her burial next to her husband was a charitable act by the Baptists.

Against the backdrop of the “burned over district,” Orvis’ personal struggles offer another view of the Second Great Awakening and the

evangelical work of middle-class American women in their homes. Not everyone was attracted to the revivals, which in northern Vermont and New York seem to have been mainly centered in the Baptist and Congregational churches. Some of the older sects of “plain folk” did not imbibe the new spirit as easily as others, or at least in the same way, and the awakening may have divided as many homes and families as it united in the new republic.

NOTES

¹Phebe Orvis Eastman Journal, Saint Lawrence Historical Society, Library Archive, Canton, New York (hereinafter OEJ), entry December 8, 1826.

²Samuel Eastman, Jr. exhibits many of the characteristics of the emerging middle class in the antebellum Northeast. He owned his farm outright, served as an officer in the local militia, and eventually joined the local temperance society. He was literate, married an educated woman, and, as this essay demonstrates, joined the ranks of the evangelical Christian movement known as the Second Great Awakening. For a more detailed discussion of the development of the middle class see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³For a general discussion of the Second Great Awakening see Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); for a more particular look at Vermont see P. Jeffrey Potash, *Vermont's Burned Over District* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991).

⁴OEJ, entry September 9, 1820.

⁵See Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁶Ibid. See also Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151–74, reprinted in Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21–41.

⁷See Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); See also Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family* (Oxford: University Press, 1988).

⁸Scott A. Bartley, *Vermont Families in 1791*, Volume 1 (Camden, Me: Picton Press, 1992), 13.

⁹H.P. Smith, *History of Addison County, Vermont, with illustrations and biographical sketches of some of its prominent men and pioneers* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason & Co., 1886), 38.

¹⁰OEJ entry, January 1, 1822.

¹¹Marriage of Loren Orvis and Lillis Brown, October 9, 1807, Friends Meeting Record Book, held at Ferrisburgh Town Clerk's Office, Ferrisburgh, Vermont, 54.

¹²Phebe Orvis membership record, Friends Meeting Record Book, 49.

¹³See Larson, *Daughters of Light*.

¹⁴Smith, *History of Addison County, Vermont*, 32.

¹⁵OEJ entry, July 23, 1820.

¹⁶OEJ entry, November 7, 1820.

¹⁷OEJ entry, November 21, 1820.

¹⁸OEJ entry, March 13, 1824.