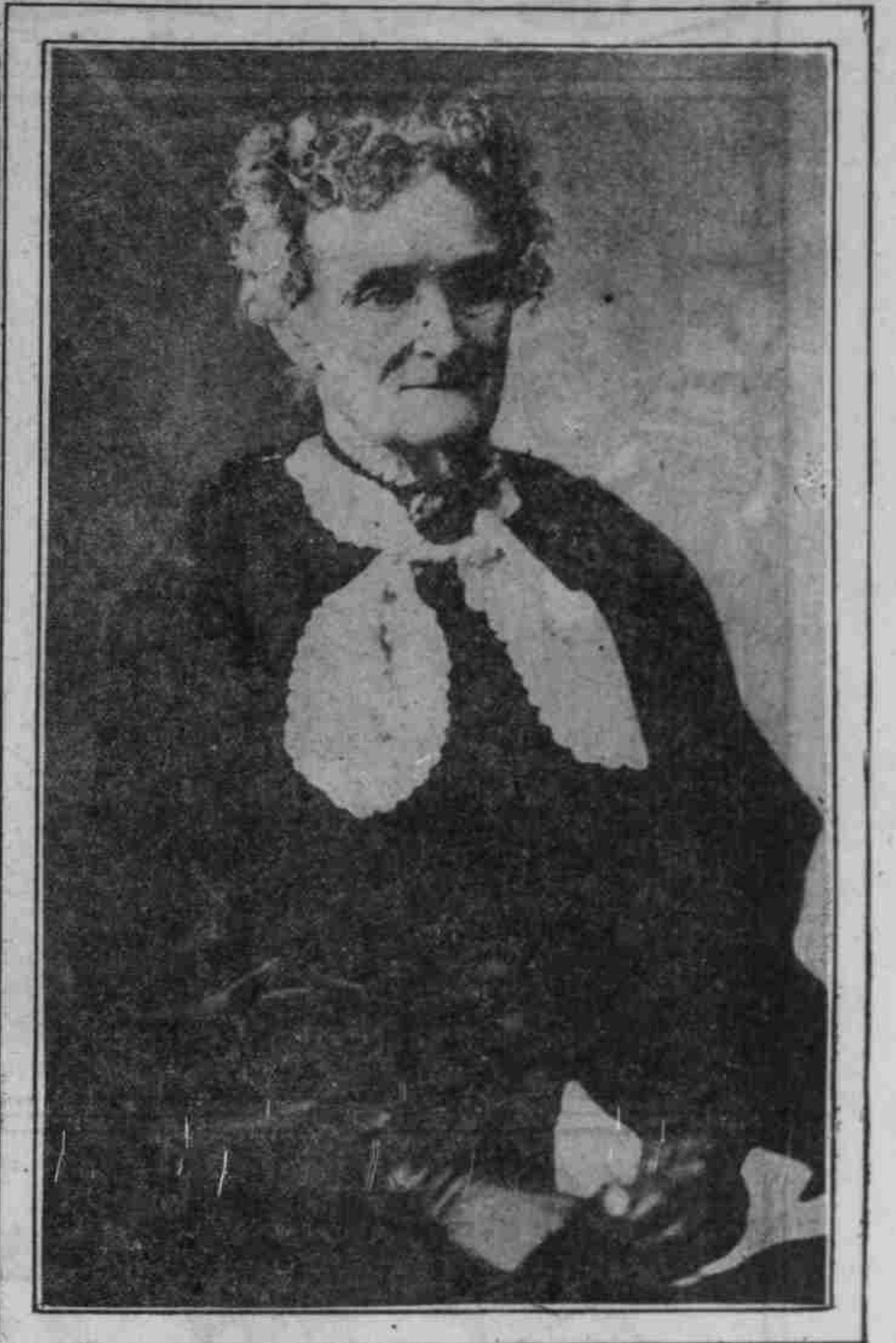
When a U.S. President, in Swimming Had His Clothes "Pinched" by a Lady

John Adams Liked His Daily Dip in the Potomac—A Woman Lobbyist Learned This, and Sat on His Garments Until He Promised the Legislation She Was After—A Remarkable Historic Fact, Here Presented for the First Time by Irving S. Sayford



Mrs. Margaret Eaton (Peggy O'Neill) late in life. President Jackson's advocacy of her in the celebrated national social war caused the disruption of his cabinet.

President Adams, from the famous Brady collection of photographs.

"DON'T you do it! Don't! If you do, Mr. President, I'll scream!"

The president of the United States was no fool. He knew things about Anne Royall. He knew she would scream if——

So the president of the United States played safe. And it is sure that throughout the ensuing hour, while the unhurrying river swathed him to the chin, John Quincy Adams felt as lonely as ever he had in the senate of the United States; and knew himself to be far more hopelessly a minority against the unbeatable majority of a woman in possession of his personal clothes. She was putting it all over Great Britain in the game of "making words do the work of warships." The former plenipotentiary to the court of the Russias—this representative of "the best element in the politics and society of the United States"—gazed terrifiedly (he who never had been made to acknowledge fear) upon that brief, intervening space of the Potomac, which made himself and his garments so unconterminous; and it was borne in upon him that he did not love this female apostle of yellow journalism who sat possessively upon his dressing-gown and slippers on the White House shore and threatened to scream if he advanced in the shallow water, and who cheerfully promised to keep him there the rest of his life unless he yielded to an interview on the state bank question. Her terms—unconditional surrender—were indeed "such as are inflicted only upon a crushed adversary," and the victimized gentleman from Boston had been, all through a fightful career, uncrushable. He looked upon the lady's self-assertion as ill-bred, and it soothed him not at all that this five-of-the-morning assignation was none of his making. To borrow Mr. Adams' own words spoken against another, her conditions were "peremptory, and their language overbearing." A gentleman of the old school, he was fussed of his modesty; he desired to be restored to the dignity of his status ante bellum. But he had no clothes.

Had it been 100 years later, Anne would go into national annals as retorting serenely, "Nothing on me, Mr. President, not one darn thing. You've got no clothes, I've got no interview—yet. When do we swap?"

What Anne did say, and what John Quincy did do, and how it all came about and fell out, are secret lore dug up and charmingly displayed by Edna M. Colman in a chapter of her forthcoming book, "Tenants of the White House, from Washington to Lincoln."

For upon a sunny morning in the early nineteenth century, the chief magistrate of this country, wholly without benefit of trunks, while swimming in the Potomac river, was held up by the pioneer of American newspaper women, and to save his face and in general his person, chin-deep in his chosen bath-place, he dictated to her the grandaddy of all the presidential interviews for surrender of his clothes

BY EDNA M. COLMAN.

Adams' life up to the time he became president was rich in experience of travel and foreign service, most of which were shared by Mrs. Adams.

As United States senator in Jefferson's times, filling a six-year mission to Russia during Madison's reign; another mission to Paris until the treaty of Ghent was signed—he saw the rise and fall of Napoleon and the exile to Elba.

About 1815 he was sent as minister to the court of St. James, and was recalled to fill the post of secretary of state to Monroe.

In all of his adventures, which were many and varied, none ever confronted him of a more unique or disturbing nature than his treatment, when president, at the hands of Anne Royall, dubbed "Mother of Yellow Journalism," one of the peculiarly picturesque figures in American history. Many titles both derisive and abusive have been heaped upon the memory of this remarkable woman, who was really a century ahead of her day in her conception of what a newspaper should be and in her methods of gathering news.

She started her journalistic career at the age of sixty, alone and impoverished, after a most eventful life of wealth, luxury and adventure. Introducing the personal interview, she gathered her news first-hand, and it is said that during her career as editor and chief reporter of Paul Pry and The Huntress, her two newspapers, she interviewed fully 500 of the most prominent men of the land.

Her dealings with President Adams were characteristic and drastic, and doubtless gave him the worst shock of his orderly, conservative life.

Discovering or surmising that the president held views on the state bank question which he was not making public, Mrs. Royall endeavored for months to gain admittance to the White House and speak with the chief executive. Meeting rebuff upon rebuff, this indomitable old lady set herself to match the movements of the nation's chief. Soon she became aware of his fondness for an early morning swim in the Potomac, and then she bided her time. And one morning while Mr. Adams was enjoying the most perfect combination of weather and water, he was hailed from the point on the shore where he had bidden his clothes in some bushes preparatory to plunging into the stream. To his consternation he, stroking toward the shore, beheld Anne Royall seated upon his gown and slippers—all he had worn from the White House, a few rods away—with her goosequill and ink-bottle beside her, ready for action.

"Come here!" she ordered. Adams knew her, and knowing her, realized his doom. He swam toward her until he was only chin-deep.

It was at this physio-psychological moment Anne decided to threaten to scream.

"What do you want?" asked the bewildered president.

"I'm Anne Royall," snapped the old lady. "I've been trying to see you to get an interview out of you for months on the state bank question. I have hammered at the White House and they wouldn't let me in. So I watched your movements, and this morning I stalked you from the mansion down here. I'm sitting on your clothes—as you see; and you don't get them until I get the interview. Will you give it to me now, or do you want to stay in there the rest of your life?"

"Let me out and dress," choked the president, "and I'll promise to give you the interview. Have the kindness to go behind those bushes while I make my toilet."

"No, you don't!" said Anne. "You are president of the United States and there are a good many millions of people who want to know, and ought to know, your attitude on this bank question. I'm here to get it. I SAID—if you come out any further I'll scream. And I just saw three fishermen around the bend."

Adams was a statesman and a diplomat; he knew when retreat was the better part of valor. So he stood there to his chin in the placid water and submitted to the rapid battery of questions, until he had given the first interview ever given by a chief executive of the United States. In the ordeal Anne wrung from him what no one of the papers of New York or Philadelphia had been able to get—the administration's ideas regarding the long-drawn and bitterly-fought bank question.

Anne Royall's resourcefulness and energy were always at height when she was in search of news. She fought all of her life for the entire separation of church and state; for the exposure and punishment of corrupt officials; for sound money; the establishment of public schools everywhere, free of religious restrictions; for Freemasonry; justice to the Indians, liberal immigration laws, Sunday mail transportation, internal improvements, territorial expansion, just tariff laws, the abolition of flogging in the navy; for "no nullification," states' rights regarding slavery; and free speech. She was not an infidel. She believed in the divinity of God, and sought to free religious worship of sectarian lines.

On July 2, 1854, she issued her last number of The Huntress, shut down her desk, and died within a few days, dropping like an old wheel-horse, in the harness. Her last editorial is worth note. For with all of the power of language she possessed, she analyzed the Kansas-Nebraska bill, wrote a strong message on the tariff, and among other comments made these:

"We trust to heaven for these things: First, that members may give us means to pay for this paper, perhaps three or four cents a member—a few of them are behindhand in their subscriptions—our printer is a poor man. We have only 31 cents in the world, and for the first time since we resided in this city—31 years—we were unable to pay our last month's rent—six dollars. Had not our landlord been one of the best of men we should have been stript by this time. But we shall get that from our humble friends.

"Second, we pray that Washington may escape the dreadful scourge, the cholera.

"Our third prayer" (these were her last printed words) "is that the union of these states may be eternal."

Chief Justice Cranch, who ordered a ducking stool built at the Washington navy-yard for punishment of Anne Royall.

Anne Royall's life from infancy to the day of her death at the age of 85 was mysterious and adventurous. She was born in Maryland in 1769. Her father, William Newport, reported to be the illegitimate son of Charles II, was an unusually well-educated man, and he gave to his eldest daughter a selected instruction in very early childhood which was superior to that of most pioneer children. During his lifetime his family lived in better surroundings than their neighbors; he was supplied periodically with means from an undisclosed source. But after he died Anne and her mother and sister were in constant flight from the Indians.

Mrs. Newport married again, and shortly afterward became again widowed. With her small son and Anne she wandered, always in flight from Indian raids, until finally she reached Sweet Springs, Va. There they fell in with Captain William Royall, elderly veteran of the French wars and of the American revolution. He was so attracted to the bright little pioneer maid, Anne, that he made her education his task, and in a later year he wedded her in Batecourt County, Va.

After sixteen years of sheltered luxury Anne found herself a widow, and her husband's relations contesting his will which left her practically all of his estate. For ten years this litigation continued, and the case was finally decided against her and she was deprived of all her property, possessed and prospective, the legality of her marriage being the point of revolvement. While the lawsuit was dragging, Mrs. Royall, accompanied by three servants, traveled luxuriously through the south, and gathered material which filled her first book. She wrote it when she was, at last, confronted with the problem of earning her living.

Coming to Washington with the view of applying for a pension, she got as far as Alexandria, when her funds gave out. There an old friend, M. H. Clagett, proprietor of the City hotel—the building still stands, a landmark—took her in and installed her as an honored guest of the house, for the winter. During this hospitality she wrote her book, "Life, History and Manners in the United States; By a Traveler." In this and further works she mercilessly flayed the many communities of her visiting and their citizens for their sins of omission and commission as judged by the measuring-rod of her own rigid standards, and by their differing treatment of her. Ten volumes recount her experiences and observations; and they won for her national reputation as a clever, entertaining, observant, caustic writer.

In the space devoted to Pennsylvania, the university and Philadelphia come in for a bitter scoring. Anne wrote:

"I never left a place with less regret. Not that I was displeased with Philadelphia—I was pleased that I had seen it" (she had traveled thirty hours by "fast stage" from Washington to Baltimore, thence come by boat to the foot of Arch street, and secured lodging with a Mrs. Burns, 14 Arch, who in the ensuing days was called upon more than once to soak off Anne's shoes with hot gin, because Anne was low in funds and her feet swelled and blistered with walking to and from interviews, she being a Spartan). "I was pleased with it for its own sake, and above all I was pleased with an evidence of what human nature is capable of, and the effects of that capacity verified to a degree which ranks Philadelphia among the first-class cities in the world, ancient or modern, in all of its beneficence toward the human race; but in it I found but few of those courtesies which fasten upon the heart of the stranger."

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Mrs. Adams. She was a patron of Anne Royall and a subscriber to her publications. Mrs. Adams presented "the public nuisance" with a silk shawl.

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Anne Royall revolutionized the press of her day. She was the pioneer of both "modern" and "yellow" journalism. Her compatriots in the newspaper world of the Capital city were such brilliant stars as Francis Preston Blair, Amos Kendal, John Rives, Duff Green, Joseph Gales and William Seaton. Her methods annoyed and irritated them, but she waked them from their sleepy mortality statistics, prosy editorials and third-hand political opinions to a realization that they were not filling the requirements of the reading public at a time when a four-cornered election had thrown John Quincy Adams into the presidency through the house of representatives; when old Andrew Jackson was waging his Peggy O'Neill social war on his cabinet and on society in general . . . and when all of the political and economic elements of the young republic were forcing its emergence from swaddling-clothes into the growth of a nation by the most painful and eruptive means.

A whirlwind of invective, a firebrand of indignation, a torrent of abuse, Anne Royall was keen on the scent of every bit of news . . . she kept prodding at the big issues with her nagging, stinging little sheet, hitting alike friend and foe . . . where her beloved land and its safety were involved. In the course of her remarkable career she met and talked with every man who held the presidency from Washington to Lincoln, and as author and editor she interviewed every man and woman of consequence in the United States.

She called down upon her head unlimited abuse for her friendship for and defense of Mrs. Margaret Eaton (Peggy O'Neill). To her attitude in this famous case was attributed the bitterness of the clergy toward Anne and the fact that several of them were instrumental in bringing about her arrest and trial on three counts—as "a public nuisance," as "a common brawler," and as "a common scold." This trial, a great farce, was the first of its kind to be held in an Anglo-Saxon court in nearly 300 years. Senators of the United States and the librarian of congress were among the witnesses called.

* * *

The learned judges unearthed an ancient British common-law statute which appeared to fit the case; but even after the jury of Bladensburg men had brought in the verdict "Guilty," the court had not the courage to introduce the prescribed ducking-stool punishment in the capital. But she must be punished! So she was fined ten dollars (two hard-up newspapermen raised the sum) and required to give peace bond in $200 for one year. During the course of the trial a ducking-stool was constructed at the Washington navy yard by order of Chief Justice Cranch of the supreme court of the District of Columbia—so certain was he of her conviction and the approaching necessity for its use. Hosts of folks were disappointed upon learning they were not to see Anne "dipped."

How much Anne did not love her enemies may be judged by this printed comment of hers at the time:

"Judge Cranch has a face with a good deal of the pumpkin in it. Judge Thurston is about the same age, but if possible harder-featured. He is laughter-proof. He looks like if he had set upon the rack all of his life and lived on crab-apples. The other sweet morsel of a judge who looks as though he is always sitting for his portrait has a face that resembles a country road after a passage of a troop of hogs."

And when the jury gave its verdict Anne turned to the United States marshal and said:

"The next time I'm tired, please summon twelve tomcats instead of Bladensburg men."

Not even death humored Anne Royall; poverty was her undertaker.

IN A SHOP WINDOW.

BY MARGARET E. SANGSTER.

He was such a little puppy, in the window of a shop,
And his wistful eyes looked at me, and they begged me please to stop
And buy him—for a widow's awful lonely, and folk pass
And they make strange, ugly faces and rap sharply on the glass!

He was such a cunning beggar, and his paws were soft and wide,
And he had a way of standing with his head held on one side,
And his mouth just slightly open, and he almost seemed to cry:
"Take me from this horrid window, 'cause I'm ready, most, to die!"

He got tangled in my heart strongs, made me want to break away
From the lease I signed so gladly—was it only yesterday?
Said that dogs were not admitted
* * *
He was not a dog, not yet!
Only just a tiny puppy—and his nose was black and wet.

Did you ever speak unkindly of the friend you hold most dear?
Did you ever call out crossly, so that by-standers could hear?
Did you ever pull a curtain to shut out the smiling day?
That's how I felt—but more so—as I turned and walked away!

THY NAME.

Thy name comes whispering softly
All through my days
And I love to hear it sing
In a thousand different ways.
It slips in between the word
Even when I pray
Like a [illegible]
[illegible] gray.
—FLORENCE EVELYN SPENCE.