Huck Finn
Born in New York

Boy Soldiers on the Front Lines
Muslims in New York City
Fatal Plane Crash Saves Many
The House That Westinghouse Built
Hunting for Communists in the Classroom
Mark Twain and Elmira

BY MARK WOODHOUSE

American author and humorist Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain) was a citizen of the world, but his life and art were nurtured at his summer home in Elmira, New York.

For most people, the pen name Mark Twain conjures up visions of the American heartland: steamboats on the Mississippi River, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and the idyllic fictional village of St. Petersburg, based on Samuel Clemens’s boyhood home, Hannibal, Missouri.

Clemens, however, was a citizen of the world. He traveled widely, and many places can lay claim to him by virtue of his having visited, lived, and worked in them. People are often surprised to learn, then, that his art and life are
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Olivia Langdon Clemens

Samuel Clemens’s name for Quarry Farm, which overlooked the Chemung River, was “Rest and Be Thankful.”

The Courtship of Olivia
Clemens’s connection with Elmira began when, as a young reporter from the West, he was commissioned in 1867 by a California newspaper to accompany and report on a group of travelers to Europe and the Holy Land on board the steamship Quaker City. One of the travelers with whom Clemens struck up an acquaintance was Charles Langdon of Elmira.

As legend has it, while anchored in the Bay of Smyrna, Langdon showed Clemens a picture of his sister, Olivia, and Clemens immediately fell in love. How true you find this story to be depends on the degree of the romantic in you, but at least there is evidence that Clemens was made aware of Olivia while on the voyage and that his interest in her was piqued. In the months after the journey, at a lecture by Charles Dickens in New York City, Clemens met Olivia Langdon and her parents for the first time. Shortly after this, he took the Langdons up on their invitation to visit Elmira. By this time he was most certainly in love, and he began his courtship of Olivia.

Olivia’s father, Jervis Langdon, was a prominent Elmira businessman who had made his fortune primarily in lumber and coal. A member of the Congregationalist Park Church that had formed from a split with the Presbyterians over the question of slavery, Jervis had also been active in the Underground Railroad and had served as a founding member of the board of trustees of Elmira Female College, the first college to grant degrees to women equal to those awarded to men at the time. Into this upper-class and progressive society came Sam Clemens, the self-educated, rough-hewn Westerner who, in relatively short order, was asking for the hand of Jervis’s daughter.

For his part, Clemens was in demand as a lecturer, and his book based on the Quaker City voyage, The Innocents Abroad, was about to make
Samuel Clemens looks out the window of the octagonal study that Susan Crane built for him up the hill from Quarry Farm.

Beginning in 1870 and continuing until 1889, their summer months were spent in Elmira, where they stayed with Olivia’s adopted sister, Susan Crane, and her husband, Theodore, at their home, Quarry Farm.

Olivia Clemens with daughters (left to right) Susy, Jean, and Clara.
Many books at the farm were found to contain marginalia by Clemens. These annotations, and the books themselves, speak to his wide-ranging interests and intellectual curiosity.

Huckleberry Finn and other books of mine, for they were written here."

In addition, Clemens’s first piece for the Atlantic Monthly in November 1874, entitled “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It,” recounts an evening on the porch during which Auntie Cord, the cook at Quarry Farm and an ex-slave, tells the story of the painful separation from her children and serendipitous reunion with her son. This was the most overt appearance of Quarry Farm in Mark Twain’s work, but other references to Clemens’s time and work there are abundant in his letters and notebooks.

One notable letter to William Dean Howells in 1877 tells of John Lewis, a black man who owned land near Quarry Farm. Lewis figures as the hero in a harrowing incident in which a runaway horse and buggy bearing Charles Langdon’s wife, their daughter Julia, and a nursemaid speeds down the steep East Hill and is stopped by Lewis, who blocks the road with his own wagon and grabs the bridle of the runaway, at great risk to his own life. Clemens’s vivid depiction of the incident shows the warm regard he had for Lewis.

The relationships revealed in both of these episodes are useful as part of the complicated conversation regarding Clemens’s attitude toward race. Evidence from the farm has also contributed to a more complete picture of Clemens’s other complexities as a man and as an artist. Some of this material was only discovered and made available to scholars in 1982, after the generous gift of Quarry Farm to scholars in 1982, after the generous gift of Quarry Farm to Elmira College by Jervis Langdon Jr.

Discoveries in Elmira

For instance, many books at the farm were found to contain marginalia by Clemens. These annotations, and the books themselves, speak to his wide-ranging interests and intellectual curiosity. The casual reader, exposed only to the carefully contrived public persona of Mark Twain as a self-taught, simple humorist, might not be prepared for his insightful remarks in such titles as Carlyle’s French Revolution and William Edward Hartpole Lecky’s History of European Morals. Similarly, those who have noted Mark Twain’s casually intimate conversational style on the lecture platform might be fascinated by Livy’s copy of the poems of Robert Browning, which Clemens marked extensively with stress marks and stage directions for the readings he gave in Elmira homes, revealing his meticulous attention to preparation and presentation.

Another unusual artifact is the “Sermon in Stones,” a stone split into three slices. On the flat surfaces, Clemens wrote a verse in response to a friendly argument with Mrs. Thomas Beecher over the question of life after death. Mrs. Beecher, the wife of a...
Dr. Ida Langdon, niece of Sam and Olivia Clemens, speaks at the dedication of Mark Twain’s study, which was moved from Quarry Farm to the campus of Elmira College in 1952.