

## Chapter 2

# YOUNG ADULT LIFE AND MARRIAGE

### WAR OF 1812

The United States declared war with Great Britain in 1812, the year William W. Phelps turned twenty years old. The war was allegedly fought over “free trade and sailors’ rights”—that is, for American national pride and sovereignty at sea. However, a desire for western territorial expansion was a major factor leading to the conflict. Western farmers seethed with anger that the British were still aiding and arming the Indian tribes.<sup>1</sup> Frontier New Yorkers, who played an inordinate role in the actual fighting, were not among those eager to go to war. Western New York was no longer subject to the Indian danger that threatened the frontier in Ohio and the western states and territories, where most of the war hawks came from. No evidence exists on how Phelps or his family felt about the War of 1812.

In spite of lacking emotional support for the war, New York State supported the national administration in its military measures. State arsenals, including one in Canandaigua, equipped more than ninety-five thousand New York militiamen, including most young men of appropriate age and qualification. W. W. Phelps was of the right age to be mustered into the militia and serve during the war. Those who should be recruited, according to the New York legislature, were “all the free male white inhabitants and sojourners of the age eighteen years and upwards, . . . excepting all ministers and preachers of the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> Two privates from New York with the name of William Phelps are listed as participants in the war, one of whom could have been W. W. Phelps.<sup>3</sup>

The New York militia was woefully trained and equipped and suffered repeatedly from incompetent leadership. Western New York soldiers protected the frontier between New York and Canada and participated in the disastrous Niagara campaigns of 1812 and 1813. Phelps either joined in these important events or at least was well acquainted with

them. Phelps's near neighbor in Homer Township, Daniel Miller, who was nineteen years older than William, was a local militia officer and the recruiter for Homer. Miller also became the brigadier general for the men from central New York. His brigade fought in the Niagara campaign.<sup>4</sup>

Many years later, in 1823, after Phelps had entered the newspaper business in Cortland, New York, he was accused by a rival newspaper editor, Jesse Searle, of deserting the army in 1813. This could have been nothing more than a cruel rumor to discredit Phelps, but the claim may have been based in truth. Searle reported that in 1813 Phelps had approached him, a doctor, with a request for a "physician's certificate" to allow him (Phelps) to be released from military duty.<sup>5</sup>

The War of 1812 had an immediate effect on the economy of western and central New York, whose residents up to that time had suffered from poverty, relative isolation, and the crudities of the frontier. The war created high prices for provisions that army agents paid for in cash. The boom period lasted until 1818. Then came a depression that ended only with the building of the Erie Canal and connecting canals in the 1820s. During the same time frame, cultural life also developed in the region, with vast improvements in postal service, a local press, popular educational facilities, and district libraries. With the heavier tasks of the frontier completed and with capital accumulating, leisure time now existed for many to cultivate the amenities of life.<sup>6</sup> W. W. Phelps was an active participant in the changes taking place in the frontier civilization.

An important way that Phelps could aid his community was by becoming a weather and topography expert.<sup>7</sup> He perhaps picked up his initial training for this avocation at the Canandaigua Academy. A near neighbor, Asa Loring, in Homer Township, was an expert surveyor,<sup>8</sup> and Phelps could have learned much about the craft from him.

The study of climatology in the United States took enormous strides forward during the War of 1812. The appalling amount of sickness among the soldiers in the regions bordering Canada led Dr. James Tilton, chief medical officer of the United States Army, to order hospital surgeons at military posts throughout the country to keep a weather and topographical record toward preserving health of the troops.<sup>9</sup> Phelps became better acquainted with principles of climatology and topography during the war, perhaps while serving on the Canadian front.

The state of New York was on the forefront in the study of weather information. "The regents of the University of New York in 1825 offered to supply each of the state's private academies with a thermometer and a rain gauge for keeping weather records. Library funds were ordered withheld from schools that chose not to take part. Eventually sixty-two institutions participated, and the results were published in the *Annual Report of the State Board of Regents*."<sup>10</sup> As an educated man and emerging journalist in western New York, W. W. Phelps had considerable access to, if he were not a direct participant in, the growing results of weather research.

## MARRIAGE TO SALLY WATERMAN

William married Sally Waterman in Smyrna, Chenango County, New York, Sally's home community, on April 28, 1815.<sup>11</sup> Her given name at birth was Stella, but she always went by Sally. He was twenty-three years old, and she was not yet eighteen. Perhaps William met Sally in his travels associated with the war and chose to marry her as the conflict came to an end. Smyrna was thirty miles northeast of Homer Village on the major Albany Turnpike.

Sally was born July 24, 1797, in Franklin, Delaware County, New York (southeast of Homer and Smyrna), to David Basset Waterman and Jerusha Case, who both came from Connecticut. Sally was the first of the Waterman children to be born in New York.

Eventually the family, consisting of ten children, moved to nearby Chenango County, where William likely met Sally. There they were active participants in the Congregational Church. Later the Watermans moved to Washington County, Ohio, to be near relatives who founded settlements there. Like her husband, Sally Waterman Phelps descended from strong Puritan stock.<sup>12</sup>



*Portrait of Sally Phelps.*

## PRINTING CAREER

After his marriage to Sally, William became a newspaper printer, writer, and editor. A local Cortland County history identified him as "a printer by trade."<sup>13</sup> As a teenager or young adult, he would have served as a printer's apprentice.

Printing, the freedom of press, and the emerging role of newspapers are significant to American history. "Journalism history is the story of man's long struggle to communicate freely with his fellow men—to dig out and interpret news, and to offer intelligent opinion in the marketplace of ideas," observed Edwin Emery, a journalism historian.<sup>14</sup> Most American journalists of the early nineteenth century were partisans of some cause or another. This was certainly the case with W. W. Phelps. All throughout his adult life, Phelps was caught up in partisan printing and newspaper enterprises, first in his home county of Cortland; next as an Anti-Masonic advocate in Trumansburgh and Canandaigua, New York; and eventually in vigorously promoting Mormonism in Independence, Missouri; Kirtland, Ohio; Nauvoo, Illinois; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

Freedom of the press was taken seriously in the early republic, as promised in the Constitution, although many controversial presses were attacked. Most state constitutions included freedom of the press provisions. Most early newspapers by 1800, whether in urban or rural areas, were either Federalist or Republican in nature. Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, respectively representing the Federalists and the Republicans, led the way in developing partisan newspapers. Vicious attacks became the journalistic norm.<sup>15</sup>

The number of new newspapers grew rapidly in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. “[The American press] was growing so fast that it sometimes appeared to be too big for its breeches,” one historian of journalism has observed.<sup>16</sup> Part of this was due to technical progress, such as the invention of new press machines that hastened the printing of newspapers. By the time Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828, the United States had more newspapers and more readers of newspapers than any other country in the world. In 1826 newspaper circulation in America exceeded that of Great Britain by more than three million annually. In 1810, 376 newspapers competed for American readers. This figure passed 900 in 1828. Most of these were weeklies, the kind that W. W. Phelps became accustomed to producing in New York. In many communities, newspapers were the only literature available for the bulk of the citizenry. They served as the main educational device for decades.<sup>17</sup>

Phelps likely apprenticed in Canandaigua at the newspaper office of the *Ontario Repository*, which later came to be known as the *Western Repository*. James D. Bemis opened a bookstore in Canandaigua in 1804, which was about the time that Phelps, as a young student, would have come to Canandaigua. Bemis soon became editor and proprietor of the *Repository* and later started papers and bookstores in Wayne, Livingston, Erie, and Onondaga Counties, winning recognition as “the Father of the Western New York Press.” Bemis trained scores of apprentices in his office and bookstore in Canandaigua.<sup>18</sup> Phelps probably chose Canandaigua to begin his Anti-Masonic newspaper, the *Ontario Phoenix*, in 1828 because of his training there and his acquaintance with the community.

The Federalists dominated the first newspapers in New York. The *Ontario Repository*, published by Bemis in Canandaigua, was one of the more well-known Federalist journals in the state.<sup>19</sup> If Phelps indeed trained under Bemis, his later penchant for politicizing through newspapers came to him naturally.

These early printers were agents of literacy and occasionally of culture. They included some verse and fiction in their papers, reprinted sermons, and carried articles on agriculture. Some of the more successful printers, such as Bemis, operated bookstores and reading rooms where their customers examined new books and glanced at newspapers.<sup>20</sup> Phelps would follow in this pattern, setting up a bookstore and a reading room.

Soon after William and Sally were married in April 1815, a new newspaper, the *Cortland Republican*, was created in Cortland Village. Cortland County deeds record that William and Sally Phelps began living adjacent to William’s family in Homer Township on property they purchased in November 1815.<sup>21</sup> That same year, William started writing

for the *Cortland Republican* and assisting in the printing business. William and Sally's first child, Sabrina, was born in Homer on August 30, 1816.

The founder of the *Cortland Republican* was James Percival, who also kept books for sale and advertised juvenile books called "readers" and arithmetic and spelling books. Percival started up the *Cortland Republican* to advocate Jeffersonian republicanism and to promote the cause of Cortland Village in its emerging rivalry with Homer Village within the county.<sup>22</sup> At this stage of his career, Phelps was on the political side of the Republicans (which was also known as the Democratic-Republicans and simply as the Democratic Party in the 1830s). A local historian noted that Phelps wrote for the Democratic-Republicans.<sup>23</sup>

In July 1818 Sally gave birth to a stillborn son. At the same time, her father was deathly ill in Washington County, Ohio. Perhaps these two harsh realities motivated William and Sally to cast their fortunes, at least temporarily, along the Ohio River in Washington County. Their next child, Mehitabel, was born there July 3, 1819.<sup>24</sup> Sally's father, David Waterman, in his forty-fifth year, died just a month and a half later.<sup>25</sup>

Sally's uncle Sherman Waterman was one of the founders of Washington County and Watertown Township. Numerous other Watermans lived in the vicinity.<sup>26</sup> Sally's next youngest sibling, Flavius Waterman, lived throughout his adult life in Watertown, Washington County. William and Sally Phelps did not live long in Ohio, probably only from late 1818 until late 1819 or early 1820. William may have gained employment as a printer assistant, a schoolteacher, and a farm laborer with the Waterman family; a business partner with his brother-in-law Flavius; or a combination of these.

As recorded in the 1820 census, William and Sally Phelps were living again in Homer, New York, in mid-1820. William was designated as being in "agriculture," as were both parents. He was likely working on his father's farm at the time of the census taking.

## EDITOR AND STORE OWNER

During the early 1820s, Cortland began to rival Homer in size and prosperity. By the 1830s, Cortland would become even more prominent. When William and Sally Phelps returned to Cortland County in 1820, a war of words was at its peak between Homer and Cortland. The two newspapers, the *Cortland Republican* in Cortland and the *Cortland Repository* in Homer, were major players in the struggle.

W. W. Phelps decided to enter the fray. Perhaps he had even decided to do so while still living in Ohio. He became the editor of a new paper, the *Western Courier*, in Homer Village.<sup>27</sup> A local history indicated that dissension arose in the Republican Party following the election of 1820 and that the *Western Courier* came about as a result. The first issue appeared in October 1820. Two young businessmen, Elijah J. Roberts and D. G. Hull, provided the financial backing for the enterprise. Within a year the newspaper moved to Cortland. Then ensued a persistent and bitter battle between the *Cortland Republican* and the *Western Courier* over Republican politics. Within a few weeks, Phelps's rival, the *Republican*, ceased publication.<sup>28</sup> In this manner Phelps cut his teeth as a politically

partisan newspaper editor. He likely was cutthroat in attacking his adversaries. Most newspapermen were fiercely partisan in that period.

An example of this is Phelps's rivalry with Dr. Jesse Searle, editor of the *Cortland Repository*. As mentioned above, in 1823 Searle accused Phelps of deserting the army during the War of 1812 ten years earlier. He also referred to Phelps as a "fifer," a reference that the latter was assigned to play a high-pitched flute to accompany the marching of his military regiment. Because a "fifer" would not have been considered a full-fledged soldier, Searle was demeaning Phelps.<sup>29</sup>

Little of the *Western Courier* has survived, but occasional reactions to it and toward Phelps appear in still-extant newspaper copies. Phelps set up a bookstore at his office. He had opponents, perhaps politically motivated, in Cortland. "On the night of the 29th ult. [September 1825] the store of Mr. W. W. Phelps, in Cortland Village, was burnt, together with its contents. It is supposed to have been the work of an incendiary, who plundered the store of a part of its most valuable goods, previous to setting it on fire."<sup>30</sup> Phelps suffered a serious financial setback and ultimately had to cease editing the *Courier*. The newspaper was sold and took the name *Cortland Journal*.<sup>31</sup>

To improve his degraded financial situation, Phelps wrote a novel in late 1825 and early 1826 entitled *The New York Yankee, or Tales of the First Settlers on the Tioughnioga*.<sup>32</sup> The *Cortland Observer* of March 22, 1826, referred to the prospective novel: "From the title of the work, we suspect the scene must be laid in this vicinity. Tioughnioga is the Indian name for the stream that passes through this, and the southern towns, and empties into the Susquehannah: — and doubtless the exploits of our fathers, in effecting a settlement, their contests with the Indians and wild beasts, their privations and sufferings, &c., &c. will form some of the most prominent and glowing scenes in this native production."<sup>33</sup> Sadly, no extant copies of the manuscript or printed copies of this book (if it even were published) can be found.

William and Sally had three more children in Cortland County, making a total of five (four living)—four girls (three living) and one boy—at this point in their lives. The first of these, Jerusha, born in Homer (the township) on November 1, 1821, sadly died in infancy on January 13, 1822. William Waterman was born in Homer on January 23, 1823, and Sarah in Cortland on July 19, 1825. William and Sally and their young family moved into a house/office they purchased for \$1,400 on the main street in Cortland Village in the spring of 1824.<sup>34</sup>

In 1827 W. W. Phelps suddenly found an opportunity that would get him back into the newspaper and printing businesses and at the same time rescue his family from poverty. A fascinating religious, political, and social movement called Anti-Masonry quickly emerged in New York State. Phelps leaped into this movement with vigor.

## NOTES

1. Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 101–2.

2. An Act to Authorise the Raising of Troops for the Defence of This State (passed in Albany, New York, on October 24, 1814).
3. Microfilm reel no. 000,882,682, Family History Library, Salt Lake City. I have also studied these same War of 1812 records in the National Archives in Washington, DC.
4. H. P. Smith, ed., *History of Cortland County* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1885), 238.
5. I am indebted to Dale Broadhurst for his extensive research into early New York newspapers. He located the source for Searle's accusation in the *Cortland Repository* (Homer, NY), December 17, 1823.
6. Alexander C. Flick, ed., *History of the State of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 5:167–72.
7. Decades later as a Latter-day Saint leader, Phelps made astute geographical observations and conducted explorations. The provisional State of Deseret appointed him surveyor general and chief engineer. Beginning in 1850, the Smithsonian, an arm of the United States government, deputized Phelps as a "weather observer" and equipped him with a thermometer, wind vane, and rain gauge and required him to send his findings to Washington, DC. James Rodger Fleming, *Meteorology in America, 1800–1870* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), xxi, 180–81.
8. Smith, *History of Cortland County*, 246.
9. David M. Ludlum, "The Life and Times of U.S. Weather," *American Heritage* 37 (June–July 1986): 31; Fleming, *Meteorology in America, 1800–1870*, 13–14.
10. Ludlum, "Life and Times of U.S. Weather," 31. See Fleming, *Meteorology in America, 1800–1870*, 15–16.
11. As cited in Sally (Stella) Waterman, ancestral file AFN:4LZJ-8X, Family History Library, Salt Lake City.
12. Edgar Francis Waterman and Donald Lines Jacobus, *The Waterman Family: Descendants of Robert Waterman* (New Haven, CT: Edgar F. Waterman, 1939). Material on David Basset Waterman and Jerusha Case and their family is found on pp. 496–98.
13. Smith, *History of Cortland County*, 189.
14. Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of Journalism*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), v.
15. Emery, *The Press and America*, 125–64; George Henry Payne, *History of Journalism in the United States* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941), 153–63; James Melvin Lee, *History of American Journalism* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1923), 115–31.
16. Emery, *The Press and America*, 172.
17. Emery, *The Press and America*, 173, 193–94.
18. Charles F. Milliken, *A History of Ontario County, New York and Its People* (New York: Lewis Historical, 1911), 188–89; David M. Ellis et al., *A Short History of New York State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 202.
19. Ellis, *Short History of New York State*, 202.
20. Ellis, *Short History of New York State*, 202.
21. This information was located in the Cortland County Historical Society, Cortland, New York.
22. Smith, *History of Cortland County*, 71–73, 120–22.
23. Smith, *History of Cortland County*, 189.
24. Some Phelps genealogical records have Mehitabel born in Wooster, Wayne County, Ohio, thus causing confusion about her place of birth. But since Sally Waterman Phelps's Waterman relatives lived in Wooster Township in Washington County, I have concluded that Mehitabel was born in Washington County.

25. Waterman and Jacobus, *Waterman Family*, 448.
26. *History of Washington County, Ohio* (Marietta, OH: H. Z. Williams & Bro., 1881), 87–88, 621–23.
27. After William's death in 1872, Sally Phelps wrote that William was the founding editor of the *Western Courier*. Her statement is recorded in Oliver Seymour Phelps and Andrew T. Servin, *The Phelps Family of America, and Their English Ancestors* (Pittsfield, MA: Eagle Publishing, 1899), 1:650.
28. Smith, *History of Cortland County*, 122–23; Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690–1820* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1947), 1:569, 583.
29. *Cortland Repository*, December 17, 1823. Evidence shows that W. W. Phelps indeed played the flute and the fife. Phelps in Kirtland, Ohio, wrote his wife in Liberty, Missouri, on December 18, 1835, to be careful with his flageolet or fife, to not allow anyone to play with it, and to keep it safe in their family chest. See WWPL, December 15, 1835, 569.
30. *Ithaca Journal* (New York), October 4, 1825. The *Boston Independent Chronicle*, on October 8, 1825, also reported this fire and estimated the uninsured cost to be \$3,000, a considerable amount at that time.
31. Smith, *History of Cortland County*, 123; Child, *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Cortland*, 66–67.
32. *Le Roy Gazette* (New York), May 23, 1826.
33. "Native Genius," *Cortland Observer* (New York), March 22, 1826, 3.
34. A copy of the mortgage deed is found on microfilm reel no. 0,843,771: "Cortland County Mortgages, 1808–1841," no. 336, Family History Library, Salt Lake City. The deed was signed by both W. W. Phelps and Sally Phelps on April 30, 1824.