THE WARNERS OF CONSTITUTION ISLAND
by Hilma Robinson

One day when Anna Warner was extolling the beauties of New England scenery and its history, her friend Miss Olivia Stokes of New York City asked her to name her native New England. Unhesitatingly Anna replied "Canaan," a village which just escapes by a few miles from being in Massachusetts. When early settlers had purchased tracts of land "six miles square" from the Stockbridge Indians in 1758 at a price of 250 pounds a tract they thought the property was included in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. For years the inhabitants strongly protested its inclusion in New York State. And so it was very natural for Anna to consider this small New York village a part of New England.

Even today Canaan is still a village which happily has been able to retain some of its New England flavor. A few of its old houses are still standing, among them the Jason Warner house where Susan and Anna spent happy childhood summers and which is described in some of their books. Another Warner house is still there. The old tavern of their great-grandfather Warner burned years ago. The original Whiting grist mill was set afire by a party of Tories while Col. Whiting, another great-grandfather, was at the Battle of Saratoga. Today, historic markers point out the Jason Warner house and the spot where stood the grist mill near Whiting's Pond, now renamed Queechy Lake in honor of Susan Warner's book of the same name.

Canaan's earliest settlers had moved westward from eastern Massachusetts and Connecticut in the years preceding the Revolution and prominent among them were the Warner and Whiting families, ancestors of Susan and Anna Warner. When William Warner of Wethersfield, Connecticut, and his wife, Rebecca Lupton of Boston came to Canaan Center in 1764 his paternal family had already been in this country for 277 years — since 1637 when another William Warner arrived in Ipswich, Massachusetts from Ipswich, England on the vessel "Globe." For some years the Warner family continued to live in Ipswich which still boasts of its many 17th and early 18th century houses. Gradually various members moved out of the village to settle in other parts of New England. Down through the years the Warners are described as hard working, independent leaders in their communities. The men fought in the long series of French and Indian Wars, handing down to succeeding generations a strong love for this emerging nation and a staunch willingness to work for it as well as to fight for it.

While Susan and Anna's direct ancestors ultimately settled in Canaan, another branch of the first William Warner's descendents moved northward from Ipswich to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. There perhaps its most prominent member, Jonathan Warner was born in 1726. He became a very wealthy merchant, ship owner and civil magistrate as well as a member of the King's Council. He also married into the wealthy, powerful Wentworth family of New Hampshire, famous as a family of Royal Governors. He acquired a handsome brick mansion built ca. 1716 and this was his home for 54 years. It was occupied by his collateral descendents until 1931 when it was saved by the Warner House Association which was formed to preserve it. In 1960 the house was designated a Registered National Historical Landmark and is now open to the public.

"The New Hampshire Gazette" of May 24, 1814 writing of Jonathan's death says "At the commencement of the American Revolution he was a firm and undeviating vindicator of his country's rights and through the whole course of his valuable life, ardently espoused the same free and patriotic principles which achieved our independence." The great grandfather of Susan and Anna was another William Warner born in 1717. Like his cousin Jonathan he became a leader in his community, the growing village of Canaan. He also was an American, a soldier briefly, for he died in 1776, and the father of seven soldier sons averaging six feet in height. The youngest was Daniel, only 15, "who would not be left behind and, being too young for heavy service took fife in hand and cheered on the rest." In time another of the seven, Jason, married his colonel's daughter, Abigail Whiting, and became the father of Thomas and Henry Warner and the grandfather of Susan and Anna.

Abigail Warner's family had made the long journey from the Massachusetts coast. Her father, William Bradford Whiting, arrived in Canaan in 1765, one year after William Warner. Also an early patriot leader he became a colonel in the New York Militia, fought in the Battle of Saratoga and witnessed the surrender of Burgoyne. After the war he was active in state politics, a state senator for 20 years and a long time leader in the eastern part of the state. Colonel Whiting, named his for his early ancestor, William Bradford of Plymouth, was also a direct descendent of other families of "Mayflower" fame, the Aidsens and Peabodys.

Not too much is known about the women in the Warner-Whiting families but they must have had the same courage and strength as other pioneer women, traveling over rough trails in wagons or ox-carts to make a home in a wilderness. Anna describes her great-grandmother Rebecca Warner as a "woman of extreme energy and executive force." On one occasion she not only provided a pillow for a tarring and feathering party for a Tory sheep but sent out her best one by her youngest son. Another family story relates that some un-friendly Indians were seen lurking near the house of their great-grandmother, Amy Lothrop Whiting, while the male settlers were away. Mrs. Whiting, who was making soap at the time, carried the hot soap up to the second floor and, as an Indian approached the house, poured a dipperful of the hot liquid on his bare back. The Indians left.

Thomas and Henry Warner were born in Canaan, the former in 1784 and Henry in 1785. They grew up on the farm, getting what education they could in nearby schools. Their farmer father, Jason, also a legislator, was often away from home. Neither boy wanted to remain on the farm, but other opportunities were limited. Finally their father successfully concluded arrangements for their admission to Union College in Schenectady. This experience opened up a whole new world to these two farm boys and perhaps more importantly, exposed them to the influence of Dr. Eliphalet Nott. As his president for 82 years Dr. Nott made Union College one of the four best known colleges in the country, ranking with Princeton, Yale and Harvard. Clergyman, educator, inventor and zealous promoter of some questionable projects, Dr. Nott was a widely known and very controversial figure. To him the end often justified the means. There would seem to be indications in their later lives that this philosophy was not lost on Thomas and Henry Warner.

After college Thomas went into the ministry and Henry turned to law. He went to New York City to get his training by working in a law office. A serious and hard worker he prospered in time and built up an excellent law practice, often traveling back and forth to Albany. All of this occurred before the days of the railroad when the Hudson River was the main avenue of transportation.

Through friends Henry met Anna Bartlett, described as a charming and beautiful girl. She came from a very different financial and social background but, like Henry, from pioneer New England stock. Her father, Isaac Bartlett, was a direct descendent of Robert Bartlett of Plymouth who sailed from England on the "Anne." Her mother was Susan Marsh, whose forebears from England had settled in Salem. The marriage of Isaac Bartlett and Susan Marsh took place on August 9, 1789 in Providence, Rhode Island, home of the bride. Their two children were Samuel Lothrop Bartlett and Anna Marsh Bartlett. Mr. Bartlett died when these children were very young and in 1795 his widow married Cornelius J. Bogert, a man of considerable means who became very fond of his step-children and gave them every advantage. Part of Anna Bartlett's early
lives was spent in Newport, Rhode Island. Later her step-father and mother owned a handsome house and large farm in Jamaica, Long Island, then a lovely and fashionable village.

Anna Barrell and Henry Warner were married in 1817. They lived in New York City where their five children were born. Only two of these children survived, Susan, born in 1819 and Anna, born 1827. In 1829 Mrs. Warner died when she was only thirty-six. In this crisis Henry's maiden sister came to live with him and to care for the two little girls. Their maternal grandmother, Mrs. Bogert, was a frequent and welcome guest and her name was Susan often visited her, traveling to her home in their elegant coach. We believe Mrs. Bogert died about 1845 and Mr. Bogert earlier.

Susan's diary, which she started at an early age, plus other corresponding diary material gives a picture of the Warners' life in New York in the 1830's. In 1835 the family was living in a handsome town house on St. Mark's Place. Their property was a block deep and included a carriage house, green house and gardens. The house with its double parlors was richly furnished and servants were no problem. Susan had private tutors and was a talented pianist and artist. Their close neighbors were members of the Livingstone and Delancey families as well as James Fenimore Cooper.

All too suddenly this comfortable, even luxurious life came to an end in 1837. Mr. Warner lost money in the financial panic of that year. In addition, he was already deeply involved in the purchase of Constitution Island opposite West Point where he planned to build a summer home for himself as well as an elaborate hotel. Only recently were the preliminary designs for this hotel, drawn by Alexander Jackson Davis discovered in the Metropolitan Museum and the New York Historical Society. All these transactions had started when Henry and his family visited Thomas who had been chaplain and professor at West Point since 1828. As a result of unwise investments, involved financial dealings and poor management, the lives of Henry Warner and his children were drastically changed. One legal complication after another followed for years and Henry never regained his successful law practice. The handsome town house with much of its elegant furniture was lost to them and sacrificed to pay debts. Gone too were all the comforts and luxuries to which they had become accustomed.

Thomas, who might have been of some help, did nothing as far as we know. Furthermore, he left the Military Academy in 1838 and sailed for France the following year during one of Henry's many periods of crisis. Thomas had strongly urged Henry to buy Constitution Island, suggested alterations for the existing small house and even talked of building a small lodge for himself. There is no mention of any conflict between the two brothers and Henry was well aware of Thomas's plans to go to France. In her biography of Susan, Anna records that her uncle was to be a tutor and personal chaplain in the household of Colonel Herman Thorn in Paris. Self-styled 'Colonel' Thorn was a tremendously wealthy American from a Dutchess County family who lived in princely style in the French capital. He is reputed to have been demanding and autocratic. Thomas is described as impetuous and excitable. It would not take long for such strong willed personalities to clash and Thomas left or was discharged by April 1840. Thomas had also planned to start a private school for wealthy American boys in Paris. Although he obtained many letters of recommendation for his prospectus for the school from bishops, clergy, men, authors (including James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving) and businessmen, there seems to be no record of its having been started. In fact records about Thomas' life abroad are very sketchy. We do not know whether his wife, Elizabeth McDougal, accompanied him to Paris. Thomas died penniless in Paris in 1848 during a cholera epidemic after having been sent to Clichy Prison for debt. He was buried in a mass grave in the Cemetery of Pere la Chaise. Such a tragic ending must have been a sad blow to Henry and Aunt Fanny.

Constitution Island became the only property saved and this was mortgaged. From 1835 on the old Revolutionary War house with the wing Henry added became the family's only home for the rest of their lives—a total of 79 years of Warner occupancy. Henry, Aunt Fanny and the two girls, now 17 and 10, found themselves living in almost the same primitive surroundings as their very early ancestors and poorly equipped to cope with the many other trials they were destined to face. Nevertheless what the drastic changes meant to Henry and what it cost him in self-esteem. Even though Henry lost his law practice as well as his role as bread winner he always retained the respect and deep affection of his sister and children.

Aunt Fanny, 15 years younger than her brother, served Henry and her nieces with devoted care and in turn was greatly loved and appreciated by them. Fanny Warner was only 27 when she came at Henry's request to take over the management of his home and his two young daughters. Anna describes her aunt as "a strong, determined woman, of a nervous, energetic, high spirited, fearless and self-contained; devoted as anyone could be." We are not told of any plans Fanny may have had for her own life or what sacrifices she may have made. She simply moved in at the time of Mrs. Warner's death and remained with the family for the rest of her life. It was a long life too, for she lived to be 83 years old and died in 1883 within months of Susan's death. Aunt Fanny was described in her later years as a gracious, tacitful and mentally alert old lady, who, unfortunately, was confined to a wheelchair for some years.

The natural beauty of the Island and its role in the Revolutionary War had then little appeal to these two city bred girls. To Susan—a sensitive, high-strung, often imperious adolescent the exile was frightening and incomprehensible. Anna's youth saved her from some of the harsher realities. Now Susan had to assume the responsibility of teaching Anna in their isolated home. Later in her biography of Susan, Anna writes, "Our own life was changing much faster than we knew... Our affairs were on a steady progress downhill. From waiter and coachman and cook to the skill of our own hands (chiefly) was a broad step; ears and saw and hatchet succeeded our frisky black ponies; while from dainty silks and laces we came down to calicoes, fashioned by our own fingers; and from new ben- nets with every turn of the season, to whatever headgear we could get. All this mattered very little to me, but to my sister in the bloom of her young womanhood, it must have been very hard."

It was hard for the legal and financial problems followed for years, even after the Warners moved to the Island. In the spring of 1849 certain men managed to acquire the mortgage on some city lots which Mr. Warner still held and immediately foreclosed. They bought the property for less than the mortgage and sued Mr. Warner for the bond. In order to pay the debt there was a sheriff's sale on the Island. It was all very legal but undoubtedly a very traumatic experience for the hard-pressed family. Susan's beloved piano had to be sacrificed as well as many other treasures. Anna writes, "Books had to be separated, other things sorted out... all that we might lawfully keep was set aside... We watched our little 'Sir Joshua' (portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds) as long as we could see it." Poignantly Anna continues, "Our little Revolutionary (and revolutionized) front room was swept and dusted, stray bits of furniture were gathered in and I ran out for a handful of flowers to make myself feel at home."

Their Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington escaped from being included in the sheriff's sales only because it was not in the house. It was then in the possession of Judge Blatchford, a family friend who had taken it as security for a loan. Sometime after the publication of Susan's successful novel, "The Wide, Wide World" he graciously returned the portrait to Susan in gratitude for his pleasure in reading her book. This portrait, one of Stuart's best, is in the Cadet Library at West Point, the gift of Anna Warner. Legal technicalities prevented her from carrying out her wish to will it directly to the Corps of Cadets so it was bequeathed to the Superintendent of the Military Academy, whoever he might be, at the time of Anna's death, and to be so placed that the cadets could see it daily and be reminded of all that Washington had done for his country.
THE CONSTITUTION ISLAND
ASSOCIATION

BOX 41  WEST POINT, NEW YORK 10996

April 27, 1974

Registrar
Union College
Schenectady, NY

Dear Sir:—

I am writing to ask whether your administrative office or Library has any records concerning Thomas and Henry W. Warner who were graduated from Union College in 1808 and 1809 respectively.

Thomas Warner became a minister and from 1828 until 1838 was Chaplain and Professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point. In 1839 he went to Paris to become chaplain and tutor in the household of Herman Thorn, a very wealthy American. We believe he died in Paris about 1848 during a cholera epidemic.

His brother Henry Warner purchased Constitution Island in 1836 and two years later he, his sister Frances and his daughters Susan and Anna left New York and made their home in the house on the Island. Susan Warner became well known in the mid Nineteenth Century as the author of "The Wide, Wide World" and a number of other books popular at that time. Anna Warner also wrote, primarily for children and also co-authored several books with her sister. In 1908 Anna Warner, then the last of her family, and Mrs. Russell Sage gave the Island to the United States Government with the proviso that Anna could continue to live in the house. The Constitution Island Association was formed after her death in 1915 to care for the furnishings, manuscripts and library which were in the house. The house and the Island are now part of the USMA Reservation but the Association owns the family possessions and with the co-operation of the Military Academy conducts guided tours of the house and part of the Island during the summer months.

The Association is assembling biographical material about the family. We have no information about Thomas Warner's activities between his graduation and his appointment as Chaplain at the Military Academy, and we shall be very grateful for any information which you may be able to supply.

Very truly yours,

Charles D. Richardson
Secretary
The Constitution Island Association
May 3, 1974

Mr. Charles Robinson  
Constitution Island Association  
West Point, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Robinson:

As you can see our records on the Warner brothers are limited also. In fact the sheet on Thomas Warner is all that we have on him. Henry Warner's file does contain copies of old newspaper stories about the island, but you probably already have those.

I sincerely hope that this information helps in some way. Possibly it will provide an idea or two about other places to try. Sorry it couldn't have been more.

Good luck with your search.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

William G. Kuchta  
Assistant Director,  
Alumni Relations

encl: 2
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Very truly yours,

Charles Robinson
THOMAS T. WARNER

was a native of Columbia County, N. Y.; was graduated at Union College on 1808; was Tutor there in 1811-12; was admitted to the ministry by Bishop Brownell (Union 1804) of Connecticut in 1821; and immediately accepted a call as Rector of the Danish Episcopal Church on the Island of Santa Cruz. Here he married and remained several years. In 1828, he was appointed by President Adams, Chaplain and Professor of Moral Philosophy at West Point, which station he held for about ten years, and then went to Europe. He officiated occasionally in the English language in Paris, for some time previous to his death, which occurred in that city in 1849, at the age of about sixty-one.

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William B. Sprague
Robert Carter & Brothers New York 1859