

Harriet Stewart Miner: Painter of Orchids

by David Patrick

Found in the Clinton County Historical Association's collections is a series of floral paintings made by artist Harriet Stewart Miner. It was recently discovered that Harriet was a distinguished American botanical illustrator of flowers and publisher of the first color book in America about orchids.

Harriet Stewart Miner, who was called Hattie, was born in 1840 in Penn Yan, N.Y. and was the third child of Rev. Ovid Miner and Eliza (Moore) Miner. Ovid was born in Middletown, Vermont, on July 7, 1803. He first worked as a journalist and founded two small newspapers in Poultney and Castleton, Vermont. He then attended the Auburn Theological Seminary in Auburn, N.Y. and graduated in 1834 where he was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church. Ovid married Eliza Moore that same year.

Eliza was the daughter of Champlain resident Noadiah Moore and grand-daughter of Judge Pliny Moore. Noadiah Moore founded the Champlain Agricultural Works which manufactured farm equipment for about 100 years. He was also a major influence in the temperance and abolitionist movements and operated the last leg of the Underground Railroad in Champlain.



Eliza (Moore) Miner.
Courtesy CCHA.

After Rev. Miner was ordained, he practiced in Peru, N.Y. (1834-36), Penn Yan, N.Y. (1837-1844), Syracuse (1846-1849), Hoyleton, Ill. (1856-1864), East Poultney, Vt. (1870-1873) and Syracuse again (1873-1891). He was also a traveling lecturer in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s and gave speeches at temperance and abolitionist meetings. Ovid died in Syracuse in 1891 and was buried there.

Harriet's older brother was Brinkerhoff Noadiah Miner and he enlisted in the 34th NY Infantry in 1861 at Champlain, was captured by the Confederate Army and sent to the notorious Libby Prison where he contracted TB. He died in 1871 of the disease.

Harriet's family was very close to the Nye and McLellan

families of Champlain. Eliza Miner's sister, Laura (Moore) Nye, lived at the Locust Hill estate on Elm Street in Champlain (later called the Savoy Hotel in the 1930s and 1940s; it burned down in February of 2003).

Ovid and Eliza were uncle and aunt to Champlain residents Hugh and Malcolm McLellan. Hugh was a printer and collector of history and also one of the founding members

of the Clinton County Historical Association. His son Woody printed the North Country Notes newsletter starting in 1960. Malcolm McLellan is the great-grandfather of this author. While visiting the Miner family at Syracuse in 1881, their older brother Donald contracted meningitis and died at the age of eight. Hugh McLellan wrote in 1941: *"Syracuse has a very warm spot in my heart, for we had many happy days with Rev. Ovid Miner and his wife, who was a sister of my grandmother – we called her Aunt Miner."*

Harriet Miner was born in 1840 and attended Oberlin College in Ohio in 1860. She was an accomplished painter and teacher of painting and painted portraits and landscapes. Many of her paintings were placed in homes around Syracuse. Her specialty was painting flowers, especially orchids. She became a self-taught botanist and painted flowers in astonishing detail.



Rev. Ovid Miner (left) is shown with Charles McLellan and his sons Hugh (right) and Malcolm (center), October 6, 1886, in Syracuse. Courtesy of a private collection.



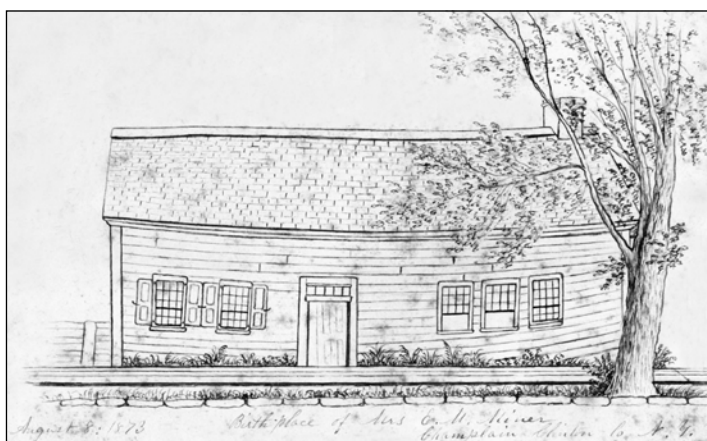
Harriet S. Miner in Ilion, N.Y.
Courtesy CCHA.

The Clinton County Historical Association owns at least seven floral paintings that were signed by Harriet Miner and possibly others that were not signed (see the paintings at the end of this article). These paintings found their way to Champlain and later came to the museum in the early-1980s by a donation from Woody and Hulda McLellan.

The significance of the CCHA paintings was not realized until recently when a letter by Hugh McLellan was uncovered at Special Collections at the Feinberg Library at Plattsburgh State. In 1954, McLellan wrote to a person in Syracuse who was researching Ovid Miner. In the letter, he mentioned that Harriet had published a book about flowers. McLellan wrote: *"I was 17 years old when he [Ovid] died, and of course remember 'Uncle Miner' as we always called him. We used to visit Aunt Miner, and their daughter, Cousin Hattie, quite often, they would visit us in New York City... As I remember him he was a most lovable person and*



Harriet Miner is shown painting a landscape with a friend in this photograph taken in Syracuse. Courtesy CCHA.



The first home of Noadiah Moore was on Main St. in Champlain east of the old Village Hall (corner of Main and Church Streets). His second home was on Church St. but burned down in 1873. A drawing of his first house was made by Harriet Miner in 1873 where she noted the birth of her mother Eliza: *"Birthplace of Mrs. E.M. Miner Champlain Clinton Co N.Y. August 8 1873."* Courtesy CCHA.

so was his wife...They had three children. I remember only their daughter, who we called "Cousin Hattie". She was an artist, especially of flowers, and only last week I received a catalogue of old books which offered: "MINER, Harriet S. Orchids; Royal Family of Plants. 1885. Folio. Colored plates. \$25.00."

After it was discovered that Harriet Miner had published a book on orchids, an Internet search revealed many images from her 1885 book. The style of these paintings was similar to the paintings at CCHA. It was discovered that Miner's book was the first color plate orchid book published in the United States (it was simultaneously published in England by a different publisher).

Miner's orchid book contained 24 large-format chromolithographs that were printed using a special French lithographic process (the designs were engraved on stone). The scientific name of each flower was given as well as details of its growing location and life history. Miner had access to orchid collections in the Syracuse area, Albany, New York City, Boston, Philadelphia and Cincinnati and spent years preparing her book. The book also contained many poems written by guest authors. The book was sold at the steep price of \$15 and \$30 [\$432-\$864 today] depending on the paper and binding.



A contemporary view of the Pliny Moore house in Champlain (corner of Oak and Elm Streets.) painted by Harriet Miner on a ceramic plate. On the back is written *"Experimet [sic] 1880 H.S.M."* Courtesy CCHA.

Many reviews gave favorable comments about Miner's book. Professor Charles Wesley Bennett, a founding member of Syracuse University's Ranke Library, described Miner's work as *"very striking, the ranking work on the subject."* Another review noted: *"The plates are the finest specimens of art printing ever produced in any country...Evidently the artists and printers were given carte blanche in this volume, for nothing so beautiful was ever before attempted."* The book became a major resource for botanists as well as lovers of flowers.

In July 1887, two years after Miner's book was published, she visited Philadelphia again to paint flowers. A local newspaper wrote of her visit: *"...She is a skillful artist, having already attained an enviable name in her profession, and she is sketching some of the many natural beauties of which Philadelphia can boast, to be reproduced in future paintings. Mrs. Miner will be best remembered as the author of "Orchids," a rare book of art recently published by Lee and Shepherd, Boston, and illustrated by herself. It contains plates and minute descriptions of nearly all the varieties of this eccentric family of plants, painted from nature, while in bloom, and appearing in all their quaint and surpassing beauty. The book has had a wide sale."*

The Oberlin College newspaper *Oberlin Review*, described Miner's book in a short announcement published on June 26, 1888: *"A beautifully illustrated book on orchids has lately come to the college library through Rev. C.C. Creegan, '76 Theo. The author is Miss Harriet Stewart Miner, who was a student at Oberlin in 1860. Miss Miner has made color drawings of about twenty-five handsome species, scatter through thirteen genera, and are finely reproduced in chromo-lithographic plates of quarto size. The text, also by Miss Miner, gives descriptions of the order and the varieties represented, the whole being freely interspersed with choice selections from the poets and best writers upon these wonderful flowers. Lee & Shepherd of Boston, issue the work in a very attractive semi-portfolio style. The work is rather artistic and literary than scientific, still no one will find greater delight in it than the lover and student of flowers."*

Harriet Miner also published a pamphlet that is very rare. It is called *"A Christmas Garland"* which was a compilation of poetry and flower paintings. The poetry was written by her father, Rev. Ovid Miner, and also Prof. Charles W. Bennett (of Syracuse University), John Greenleaf Whittier, and Rev. Dr. Minot J. Savage of Cleveland, Ohio.

Harriet Miner was ill the last four years of her life and died of pneumonia on February 23, 1895, at the age of 55. Her obituary gave details about her painting, her orchid book and her life:

"Harriet Stuart Miner, daughter of Mrs. Eliza M. and the late Rev. Ovid Miner, whose death occurred at her home in the Eleventh ward Saturday evening, was widely known in central New York as an artist and a student. The work of her pen and brush adorn many of the cultivated homes of the city. She

was a native of New England but the greater part of her life has been spent in Syracuse. As a botanist and a painter she had become very familiar with all the interesting natural features of the county and the sublime hills of old Onondaga had not many more enthusiastic admirers. Her forte as an artist was flower painting, and in this she did much faithful and notable work. Her beautiful treatise on orchids published by Cassell & Co., about five years ago, has been accepted as authority in some of the best schools of the United States, both as to text and drawings. The author spent many years in preparing the work and had access to all the noted orchid collections in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Albany and Cincinnati. The task was also charmed by the privilege of personal association with some of the distinguished scholars of the age, including Phillips Brooks [author of the Christmas carol 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'] and James Freeman Clarke. Miss Miner suffered severely during the last four years, but she never lost her enthusiasm nor skill." [Syracuse Daily Standard, 1895]

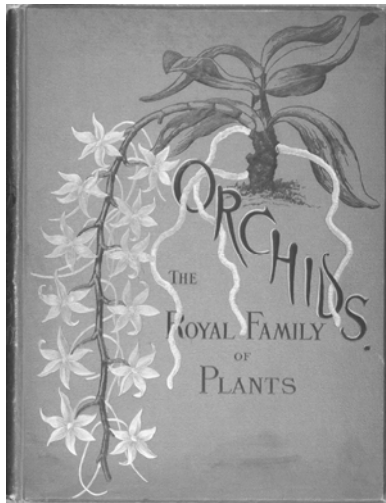
Three weeks after Harriet's death, her mother Eliza was taken to Champlain but died of a stroke. Hugh McLellan wrote in 1954: *"After Harriette's death on February 23, 1895, my grandmother (Aunt Miner's sister [Laura Nye]) went to Syracuse, closed up things there and brought Aunt Miner to Champlain. As they entered grandmother's home [the former Savoy Hotel], Aunt Miner had a stroke, and died almost immediately. She is buried in the cemetery here."* Eliza's death occurred on March 16 and she was buried in Glenwood Cemetery next to her father, Noadiah Moore. The rest of her family, including Harriet, are buried in Syracuse at the Oakwood Cemetery. Eliza's name is on her father's stone as well as her family's stone.

Today, Harriet Miner's flower paintings are as timely now as they were when published in 1885. Her book *"Orchids; Royal Family of Plants"* is found in libraries around the world and online. Her CCHA paintings are shown on the next page as well as on the web.

Author Bio

David Patrick is a descendent of Judge Pliny Moore of Champlain through his oldest child, Noadiah. David has written extensively about the Moore, Nye and McLellan families of Champlain and the history of the village and town of Champlain. Research material courtesy Special Collections, Feinberg Library, State University of New York, College at Plattsburgh as well as internet sources. Images from the collection of the Clinton County Historical Association and a private collection.

Harriet Stewart Miner



Courtesy archive.org.



Courtesy archive.org.



Courtesy CCHA.



Courtesy CCHA.



Courtesy CCHA.

Harriet Miner's orchid book is found at: "<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/111457#page/2/mode/1up>"

Color images of Harriet Miner's unpublished paintings at CCHA as well as additional information is found at www.moorsfieldpress.com at the page for "Harriet Stewart Miner."