

Famous New Yorker Annie Edson Taylor

In the early twentieth century, American women strove to prove their equality to men. By going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, Annie Edson Taylor proved that women were just as willing as men to risk their lives for fame.

The daughter of an Auburn flour mill owner, Annie Edson was born on October 24, 1838. She attended the Collegiate Institute in Charlottesville, then resumed her education at the State Normal School for teachers in Albany after her husband, David Taylor, died in the Civil War. She became an instructor in dancing and “physical culture.” Teaching across the country supplemented an inheritance, and for a time Annie lived comfortably. As her inheritance gradually ran out, Annie Taylor worried about supporting herself in her old age.

In 1900, at age 62, Taylor opened a dance school in Bay City, Michigan. When that failed, she taught music in Sault St. Marie. Soon she was almost out of options and money. Determined not to become a cleaning woman, she saw an alternative in a newspaper story about the big crowds visiting Niagara Falls.

For generations, American daredevils sought fame by risking their lives at Niagara Falls. Some used barrels to cross the treacherous Whirlpool Rapids. The first barrel crossing took place in 1886; the first by a woman, sharing a barrel with a man, happened that same year. After those firsts, interest subsided until the Falls became a major attraction for visitors to the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. On September 6, Martha Wagenfuhrer became the first woman to cross the rapids solo. One day later, Maud Willard died of suffocation attempting the same feat. Local authorities now discouraged barrel stunts, but a Bay City newspaper soon announced that a woman would top Wagenfuhrer by becoming the first person of either sex to ride a barrel over the Horseshoe Falls itself. Taylor’s identity was kept secret until October, when her manager, Frank M. Russell introduced her as a veteran explorer and mountain climber.

Taylor’s barrel was made of Kentucky oak and weighted at the bottom by a 200-pound anvil, so it wouldn’t be swept off course. Twice over Russell postponed Taylor’s attempt due to high winds. He tested the barrel by sending a cat safely over the falls. On October 24, her 63rd birthday, Annie finally got her turn. After it was filled with air and sealed, her barrel made its way down the falls as thousands watched. When the barrel was brought to shore 35 minutes later, Taylor had a slight cut on her scalp but walked away under her own power. She had conquered Niagara Falls.



Photo courtesy of The Niagara Falls (Ontario) Public Library



Auburn is a city in Cayuga County, located at the north end of Owasco Lake in Central New York. Owasco is one of the Finger Lakes.

Taylor’s stunt thrilled many and scandalized others, but fame didn’t result in fortune for Annie Taylor. One of her managers stole her barrel and passed off a younger, prettier woman as Taylor. Taylor herself posed for pictures alongside a replica barrel at a souvenir stand and made a silent movie about her feat but made little money from her ventures. She died in a county infirmary for the poor on April 29, 1921. Annie Edson Taylor’s story showed that celebrity didn’t guarantee financial success, but her place in the history of American daredevils can never be taken away.

For more information about Niagara Falls visit the Niagara Falls State Park website at www.niagarafallsstatepark.com. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.