

# Commencement, and Cowslip, Season

*John Q. Barrett\**

Copyright © 2017 by John Q. Barrett.  
All rights reserved.

Robert H. Jackson's deep ties to Jamestown, New York, the city he came to call his adult hometown, began in 1909. That June, Jackson, age seventeen, graduated as valedictorian from the high school in Frewsburg, New York. He lived—he had grown up—in that small, rural hamlet with his parents and two younger sisters. Frewsburg is located six miles southeast of Jamestown, which drew Jackson to its opportunities.

In Fall 1909, Robert Jackson began to commute from Frewsburg to Jamestown by streetcar. He enrolled as a post-graduate student at Jamestown High School—it was, for him, a second senior year of high school. At JHS, Jackson found some very strong and special teachers (who of course deserve credit for finding him). They took deep interests in cultivating his talents and, in effect, devising tutorial programs for his special studies in literature, history, and economics.

One of Jackson's two crucial, life-launching teachers at Jamestown High School was Miss Mary R. Willard, age 53, who taught English. She lived near the school with her sister Miss Vesta Willard, age 47, who was a teacher at the elementary school.

Robert Jackson soon became the Willard sisters' shared protégé. He became, after school and often long into the evening, a member of their literary reading groups, their music listening groups, and their discussions with each other and many friends in the community. He became a colleague in their environmental activism, including their fundraising to acquire for Jamestown, as a public preserve, a wild and beautiful "100 Acre Lot" on the edge of town. In time, Robert became a regular dinner guest and sometimes an overnight guest in the Willard home, which the sisters nicknamed "Bohemia." To Jackson, then and for the rest of their

---

\* Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York ([www.roberthjackson.org](http://www.roberthjackson.org)). I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on June 2, 2017.

For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which include document images or photographs, visit <http://thejacksonlist.com>. This essay is posted there as a PDF file with "live" hyperlinks.

To subscribe to The Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send "subscribe" to [barrettj@stjohns.edu](mailto:barrettj@stjohns.edu).

---

*COMMENCEMENT, AND COWSLIP, SEASON*

---

lives, the Willard sisters were family—in effect, they were his second and third mothers.

Following Jackson’s June 1910 graduation from Jamestown High School, he did not go to college. Instead, he stayed in Jamestown and became an apprentice to two very talented lawyers, Frank H. Mott and Benjamin S. Dean, who also were politically active, and literary, and friends of the Willards and other Jamestown leaders.

In Fall 1911, following Jackson’s year as a law office apprentice, these mentors persuaded him to go to a law school for a year of classroom learning and book study. He chose Albany Law School because it was located in the New York State capital, because it was a leading and venerable independent law school, because it awarded law degrees after only two years of study, and because it would give him credit for his apprentice year—it admitted Jackson as, in effect, a transfer student into the “senior” class of 1912.

At Albany Law School during 1911-1912, Jackson worked hard and excelled. By springtime, he wrote to the Willards, on the opposite side of New York State, that he soon would be graduating, and then returning to Jamestown for another year of apprenticeship, until he turned twenty-one and would become eligible to take the New York bar examination.

Vesta Willard responded by sending Jackson a notecard printed with a poem:

Congratulations

The world and I to you extend  
Heartfelt Congratulations  
May fortune’s favors have no end  
Exceeding all your expectations<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Card from Vesta Willard to Robert H. Jackson, May 7, 1912, in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 21, Folder 11.

---

COMMENCEMENT, AND COWSLIP, SEASON

---

On the other side of the card, Vesta penned this note:

Tuesday Morning, May 7

[1912]

Dearest Bobbie – So you're going to GRADUATE!  
(See other side)

Probably you'll see Bohemia in about a month and then we'll have a "Halleluyah Windup" which will be merely the beginning of things. Harry [a friend] and I "did" the hundred acre lot last Saturday afternoon, and brought home all the flowers we could carry, and incidentally, a basket of cowslip greens. These we immediately "looked over" and cooked for supper. Marywog [Mary Willard] was too tired to go with us but she enjoyed the greens.

[Another friend] made us a visit Sunday night, but he came too late (8:45) to catch Marywog. She had "turned in." So it was "up to me" until 11 P.M. I rose to the occasion and listened attentively and with a most misleading show of interest.

I'm "holding down" the [school] Study Hall just now but they [the students] are "under control" and I wish this card was longer—I feel talkative.

The fifth chicken on the Easter card [apparently a previous mailing] is merely the shadow of the Good Times coming.

Do try to be good -- Yours – V.W.<sup>2</sup>

So what are cowslip greens? As Vesta Willard knew, they were one of Robert Jackson's very favorite foods. Cowslip, or *Primula Veris* ("truly spring"), is an herb. It is used for healing and cooking. It usually grows, as its Latin name suggests, in the springtime, blooming from April to June. Cowslip is native to Europe and Asia but in the United States it grows wild in fields and meadows. Cowslip flower petals are used in pudding, creams, tea, jam, and wine. The Willards seem to have liked cooked—I assume boiled—cowslip leaves as a supper vegetable. Fresh,

---

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

---

*COMMENCEMENT, AND COWSLIP, SEASON*

---

young cowslip leaves, which have a sweet but bland taste, also can be eaten as a green, or in salads, or—Jackson’s preference—in sandwiches.



In this season of commencements, I hope that you and yours have chances to celebrate the academic accomplishments of people you’ve raised or taught or otherwise love, and to find and eat some favorite foods, and then to keep on celebrating. Indeed, if it’s your style, have a great “Halleluyah Windup”!