

NEWSPAPER EDITOR WAS WINCHESTER'S FIRST FLYER

By Ellen Knight¹

The first person from Winchester licensed to fly an airship was up in the air during the same decade that the Wright Brothers made their pioneering flights. But he was not nor ever became an airplane pilot. Rather he was an aeronaut, one who flew balloons.

This singular person in Winchester history was Jay Bayard Benton (1870-1918), a resident of Summit Avenue. By profession he was a newspaperman, a reporter and city editor for the *Boston Transcript* and briefly for the *Boston Journal*.

There was, Benton explained to *Transcript* readers, a difference between being a balloonist and an aeronaut. A single trip in a balloon could make a person a balloonist. And who wouldn't want that? "Every person who looks up in the air," he wrote, "feels his heart beat quicker, and his nerves tingle with excitement. It must be glorious to float along like that, forever, forever!"

But, he went on to explain in two long newspaper columns, there is a lot of drudgery and hard work, especially in packing up that balloon to get it home. Those balloonists eager to go through all that to start over again, he wrote, "they are surely worthy to be called aeronauts con amore."²



Benton was an avid aeronaut. In 1909 he was the thirty-third man in all America and the fourth member of the Aero Club of New England to receive a license as an international aeronautic pilot. In 1912, Benton was elected president of The Aero Club, which had been formed in 1907 and owned a balloon called *The Boston*.

Once there was an Aero Club, there was competition. One competition in particular created some excitement in Winchester. A trophy was offered by the *Boston Herald* for the balloon landing nearest Boston Common after starting no less than 40 miles away. The second was offered by the Fitchburg Board of Trade for the pilot who started from Fitchburg and took the Herald trophy.

The closest landing to Boston had been in Lexington, when, on October 6, 1909, H. Helm Clayton of Canton, a meteorologist, went up with two passengers, one being Benton. "Where would you like to land?" he asked them. "Winchester would satisfy me," Benton replied. "I'll do it," Clayton answered.³ And he did.

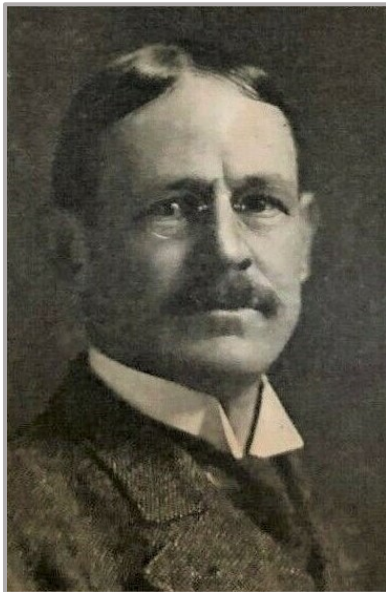
As reported by *The Winchester Star*,⁴ "The sight of a huge, light brown balloon sailing majestically over the town stirred the residents of Winchester on Wednesday afternoon, and when, just after

the centre was passed, it was seen that the occupants of the balloon intended to make a landing in the open fields at the Highlands, excitement arose to fever heat.”

The flight took two hours and five minutes. The highest elevation reached was 3,600 feet near Concord.

“In Winchester the balloon was first seen shortly after 4 o’clock, coming slowly over the town from the south west.... The first landmark of the town to be discerned from the basket was the High school, which loomed up when they were many miles away. The Mystic Lakes followed, and Mr. Benton describes the picture of the town as seen from the balloon in glowing terms.”

“The landing was in a vacant field on Cross Street, [near the new soccer fields], the big bag coming down to a perfect stop and making a sight not soon to be forgotten by the crowd which flocked to see it.”



H. Helm Clayton

Benton praised Clayton’s skills to the skies. “It was purely a triumph of knowledge of atmospheric conditions. ... His complete knowledge of air currents enabled him ... to maintain his course without deviation.”

Clayton had beaten the previous record by four miles. Two weeks later, the trio essayed the same flight but landed in Woburn. However, since no one bested the Winchester flight, Clayton won both trophies.

By the end of the month, Benton had his own license. He had more adventures, such as his first solo flight from Lowell to Newbury. A life-saving crew on Plum Island which caught sight of the balloon nearing the ocean hurried into their boat expecting to have to rescue him from the sea. Their preparations were needless, since a rapid descent landed him about a mile from the shore. During a solo flight from Lowell to Salem he passed through two snow storms 3000 feet in the air and was hurled over the surface of a meadow in South Salem by a high ground current of wind.

He competed in the only known collegiate balloon race, held in 1911. The competitors were Benton’s alma mater Dartmouth (which formed an aero club in Dec. 1910), Pennsylvania, and Williams. Benton volunteered his services and the use of the Boston to the Dartmouth Aero Club. He also covered all expenses.

Making the flight with Benton was the inexperienced club president John Pearson, who wrote up the story.⁵ Pearson described a journey, which, while it did have stretches of tranquil flying, seemed to go from one scary moment to another as the balloon responded rapidly to every

atmospheric change, the whole brought to an abrupt end with a landing in a pasture where a breeze dragged the silk bag along a barbed-wire fence.

But Benton had his triumphs. In 1912, with a companion pilot, he flew the balloon from Pittsfield, Massachusetts to Pittston, Maine, a distance of 220 miles, establishing a new record for the longest balloon flight in New England and receiving an award for maintaining equilibrium.

“The sight of the waiting crowds, the cheers, the clicks of the camera, the sniff of the escaping gas, the innate desire of the average individual to throw out his chest and say ‘Don’t you wish you were I?’ – all these might unite to send a man up on the balloon for the first trip.

“But does he go again?” Benton asked. He himself did, repeatedly, while shunning airplanes. “The spherical balloon,” Pearson quoted him saying, “is the only safe instrument for those wishing sensible but exciting air rivalry and amusement.”

Notes

¹ This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight was first published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 2, 2023. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Jay B. Benton, “Aeronautic Drudgery,” *The Boston Transcript*, Oct. 9, 1909.

³ “Winchester Twenty Miles Away,” *The Boston Transcript*, Oct. 7, 1909.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 8, 1909. Quotations about the Winchester flight were drawn from both the *Winchester Star* and the *Transcript*.

⁵ John Pearson, “The First (and Only) College Balloon Race,” *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, February 1952.