

WINCHESTER DEBATES INDUSTRY AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY

One of the major differences between Winchester of the 19th century and Winchester from the mid-20th century on was heavy industry. It lined the Aberjona River and Horn Pond Brook. It created jobs and prosperity for the factory owners. But it also polluted the water, the land, and the air.

Those who wanted to eliminate it eventually succeeded. As a health issue, this was progress for the town. However, mixed in with issues of pure air and water were arguments about the sort of person it was desirable to have in the community.

Two points of view held at the end of the 19th century are represented in an exchange of anonymous articles printed in the *Woburn Journal* in 1890.

It would be a great deal more to the advantage of Winchester to keep the common run of manufactures out of the town and get more neat, clean, cultured and moneyed population into it. We want ours for a resident place, not a manufacturing one. We want people of the professions; business men of Boston; music, art, literary and educational folks; men of brains and "elegant leisure;" retired gentlemen and ladies of note—these are the sort of population we want to fill Winchester up with, and will fill it up with as soon as some of the old fogies and decaying mossbacks who think there's nothing like manufactures and commerce and mechanics and all such low plebeian stuff and nonsense are necessary to the growth and prosperity of a town, die off, which will be pretty soon if prayers count for anything.¹

And in reply -

Lest it should cause a false impression in the minds of your readers, permit me to inform them that the sentiment expressed in that article is not the sentiment of the people of Winchester as a whole.

We know our little town is a charming spot, seeming to be intended by nature as a place of peace and pleasant abode, and it would be a pity to destroy its natural beauty with manufactories and the like.

We extend a hearty welcome to the artist, the musician, the literary and learned, the business man of Boston, and the man of "elegant leisure." We delight to have our town built up with handsome mansions and artistic cottages. We appreciate art, learning, and culture. We are proud to be considered the conservatory, the drawing-room of the "Athens of America." But we extend an equal welcome to any self-respecting person, be he artist or mechanic, who wishes to make his home in our midst and help along the prosperity of the town.

The "old fogy and moss-back," the old settler and conservative, have a right to their opinions and their Jeffersonian principles, and we hope they will gladden our sight for many a year yet.

They have our respect and our gratitude for they are our fathers, and the builders of our town, and they have had their share in making it attractive.

While not at all desirous of manufactories and the like, we are far from despising them. We know they are not necessary for the prosperity of a town providing some manufacturing town is conveniently handy. I would like to know if “manufactures, commerce and mechanics, and all such low, plebeian stuff and nonsense” disappeared from the world what would become of professors, artists, musicians, men of “elegant leisure” and “ladies?” They are the very sap of their existence. Everything the patrician is he owes to this same plebeian stuff and nonsense, It is the great instrument of civilization, In its train comes religion, art and learning. It is the “builder up” of nations. Progress is impossible without it....

“Low plebeian” indeed! Nice expression from one enjoying the advantages of a plebian nation! Why, the very essence of freedom is plebeian... What were our forefathers, the vigorous pioneers of a new country? What were the signers of the Declaration of Independence? ... The very soil is watered with the blood of the plebeian, the hero of the Revolution, the patriot of 1812, and the Rebellion. When our country calls, where, O where is the patrician—the professor, he artist, the business man, and man of elegant leisure?

There is not a stone laid in his architectural residence, nor an angle, line or curve completed, nor a fresco on his aesthetic walls, nor a piece of furniture, nor drapery, nor carpet, nor an article of food on his sumptuous table that has not been touched by the “low plebeian.”

In a sentence then, who and what has placed our Republic the foremost nation on the earth? The low plebeian, the old fogey, the moss-back, with their “manufactures, commerce, mechanics, and all such low, plebian stuff and nonsense.”²

The debate extended beyond the columns of the newspapers, even affecting decisions at Town Meetings, such as those concerning Mystic Valley Parkway and the removal of industry there in there 1890s.

It took many more years for heavy industry to lose its presence in Winchester and end the debate described above. But as diversity among residents increased, conflicting ideas about a desirable population continued.

¹ Unsigned, *Woburn Journal*, April 22, 1890.

² E.M.O., “Plain Talk,” *Woburn Journal*, April 29, 1890.