

## NAMED FOR THE TOWN OF WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

### A MINOR PLANET NAMED “WINCHESTER”

Out in space there is a small minor planet orbiting the sun named Winchester. Discovered in 1913, it was named for the town in honor of its discoverer, former resident and minister of the Winchester Unitarian Society, Joel Hastings Metcalf (1866–1925).

Metcalf was not an ordinary minister. Though a dedicated and beloved pastor, he was also an amateur astronomer who watched the skies eagerly and discovered comets and asteroids. Though an amateur, he was known internationally in the field of astronomy not only for his discoveries but also for his skill at making telescopes – the Harvard University Observatory used his sixteen-inch doublet for decades – and his photography, which was astonishing for the time. This clergyman received medals from astronomical societies for his achievements.



His passion for astronomy began in his youth and accompanied him through his education and ministries. For example, after ten years in the ministry (chiefly in Burlington, Vt.), when he attended Oxford University for a year, he reportedly attended about 25 lectures a week but still took the time to study the sky at night using the key he was given to the university observatory.

Back in the United States, he established his own observatory in his back yard in Taunton. According to an unidentified newspaper account found in the Old Colony Historical Society of Taunton and reprinted by Richard Didick, “With a telescope which he himself designed and built, the Rev. Joel H. Metcalf of Taunton, a young Unitarian clergyman, has recently startled the scientific world with photographs he made of Phoebe, one of the satellites of the planet Saturn, breaking all records for astronomical camera work. The smallest telescope to reflect the image of the ninth satellite has been until now the huge 24-inch instrument at the Harvard Observatory at Arequipa, Peru, but the Rev. Dr. Metcalf, with a 12-inch glass of his own make and a little observatory erected in his back yard, has accomplished a feat which for years has been regarded by scientists as impossible.”

Metcalf moved his observatory to Winchester in 1910 at the beginning of his ten-year ministry in this town. A. J. Philpott, writing for the *Boston Globe*, visited Metcalf and wrote, “Seeing him at his home on Crescent Road in Winchester, not far from the little Gothic church in which he preaches Unitarian doctrine each Sunday, you may quickly become conscious that the youthful-

looking, smooth-faced Rev. Joel H. Metcalf is one of the keenest astronomers in this country and that he is respected as such by authorities all the world over.”

Philpott described the observatory, located next to the house. “It looks like a little portable, wooden house built like a tent. But after you enter this little house he pulls a rope and one half the roof rolls back. Then he pulls another rope and the other half rolls back, giving free play to the double telescope that is mounted on the centre of the floor.”

The tubes of two telescopes lay one on top of the other so that both were operated by the same mechanism. One was a 12-inch photographic telescope Metcalf made himself.

According to an article in the *Proceedings of the Academy of Arts and Sciences* from 1935, “When a Winchester photograph revealed anything of interest it was at once brought to Cambridge for verification.” During the summers, his observations of the night sky were conducted in Vermont. At both places he drafted his children into the endeavor

Metcalf is credited with discovering 41 asteroids. Some 4 to 10 (the number varies according to the source) of these discoveries were made in Winchester. Two were named for Metcalf – Joella (discovered in 1911 in Winchester) and Metcalfia (1907).

He discovered comets, too, including 97P/Metcalf-Brewington (1906, rediscovered 1991) and the defunct Comet C/1919 Q2 Metcalf. The comet 23P/Borsen-Metcalf also bears his name due to his rediscovery of the Borsen comet first seen in 1847.

His discoveries were announced in the bulletins of the Harvard Observatory and transmitted around the scientific world, where he became highly respected. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Science, a member of the Astronomical Society of America and of the American Section of the International Astronomical union. He was also chairman of the visiting committee of the Harvard Observatory.

When World War I erupted, Metcalf happened to be abroad, and the local paper carried the story of his party’s flight out of Europe and safe arrival home. Thereafter he had another consuming concern. He returned to France during the last year of the war, volunteering with the Y.M.C.A. and assisting the soldiers, doing all kinds of work in first aid and bringing provisions to the trenches, often under fire.

After the war was over, he returned to Winchester (to a different home than the one on Crescent Road) but went back to Europe in 1920 to assist in rebuilding the churches in Hungary. According to an unidentified Boston newspaper article (reprinted in the journal of the Arunah Hill Natural Science Center Inc.), "Boston's most eminent amateur astronomer, Rev. Joel H. Metcalf, has deserted his astronomical station on the top of the apartment house in which he lives in Winchester and has gone to Hungary on a mission to the one hundred Unitarian churches in Transylvania. He is one of a commission of three appointed by the American Unitarian

Association and has resigned from the pastorate of the Unitarian church of Winchester to fill his mission."

On his return, he moved to Maine and continued his dual career as minister and astronomical discoverer before dying in 1925 on the eve of giving a sermon titled "The End of the World." But it was not the end of his astronomy story.

### **The Metcalf Comet**

Among Metcalf's discoveries was Comet C/1919 Q2 Metcalf, which he discovered in Vermont in August 1919 and was visible until February 3, 1920, after which it suffered a catastrophic breakup.

That might have been the end of that comet's tale except for the 1973 observation by Allan F. Cook that the Omicron Draconids meteor stream was following a similar orbit to the Metcalf comet. This suggested the comet was the parent of the meteor shower. A reported characteristic of this stream has been the production of bright fireballs and rare meteor outbursts.

On July 11, 2008, a fireball more than 150 times brighter than the full moon (at maximum intensity) crossed the sky over Spain, Portugal, and France. Produced by a boulder crashing down through the Earth's atmosphere, it was tracked by the Spanish Fireball Network. Astronomers studied its path and found it similar to the Omicron Draconids. Thus they theorized that the boulder which lighted up the sky was likely a remnant of the comet that came into Metcalf's vision nearly 90 years earlier.



### **THE TOWN OF WINCHESTER B-17 BOMBER**

In 1943, Winchester citizens purchased enough war bonds at a spectacular "Buy A Bomber" auction in the Winchester Theatre to have a bomber named for the town. The goal was to sell \$175,000 worth of bonds. The result was over \$1 million in bond sales. The plane went to Hendricks Field in Florida, which was used during the war as a heavy bomber training school. Over 10,000 pilots and other crew members were trained at Hendricks Field.

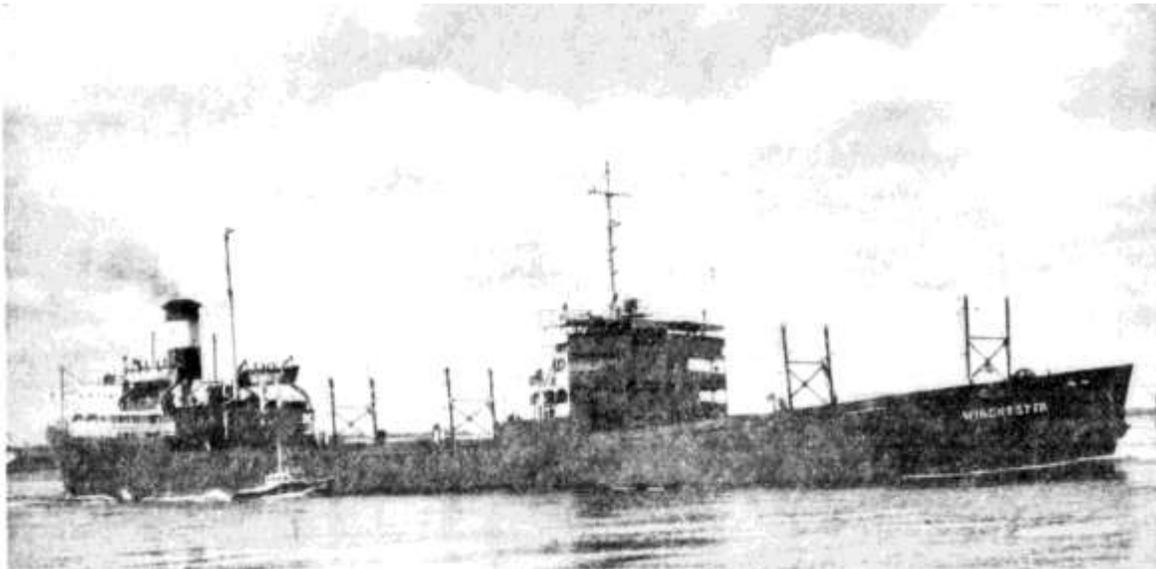
### **THE S.S. WINCHESTER**

Among the more unusual outings taken by Winchester's Board of Selectmen was a visit on March 15, 1948, to inspect the Steamship *Winchester*, built by the U.S. Maritime Commission as a war-

time cargo ship but then purchased, renamed, and put to new use by the Mystic Steamship Division.

On that day 70 years ago, board members, along with other current and former Town officials including town counsel, the chairmen of the Finance Committee and Water & Sewer Board, and superintendent of schools, plus the editor of *The Winchester Star* were met at Lewis Wharf by Frederick B Craven, Winchester resident and manager of Mystic Steamship's Marine Division.

On the company tug *Trojan*, they journeyed up the Mystic River to the steamship at anchor waiting for the tide in order to proceed to its dock in Everett. At the S.S. *Winchester*, they were greeted by Captain E. H. Gross, conducted on a complete inspection tour of the ship, and treated to a substantial lunch in the captain's quarters. When the ship pulled up anchor, it proceeded to its dock, passing by the Navy Yard and through the Mystic River drawbridge. At the enormous coal wharf, the party watched huge steam shovels unloading a cargo of coal before returning on the *Trojan* to Lewis Wharf.



*The S.S. Winchester pictured in a newspaper photo of 1948  
when town officials paid her a visit*

The Mystic Steamship Company, whose roots go back to the Boston Tow Boat Company founded in 1854, operated coal carrying colliers which transported coal to and from east coast ports such as New York City, Baltimore, and Newport News, Virginia. In 1940, the company became the Mystic Steamship Division of Eastern Gas and Fuel Associates. In 1942, the company was officially dissolved, though the name continued to be used by Eastern Gas

After World War II, the company acquired several colliers known as Liberty ships. These were a class of cargo ship built in the United States during the war, adapted from a British concept for its simple, low-cost construction. "They were called the ugly ducklings of the ocean," Winchester's Richard Parkhurst, former chairman of the Boston Port Authority, said. Built to

standardized patterns, “they could be turned out *en masse*. They were really the thing that had to be done and had to be used and were used hard, hard, all during the war. They were supplemented by the Victory ship.”

Some Liberty ships were built as tankers and some as colliers. After the war, the government sold off many of them. Mystic Steamship operated some of them into the 1960s.

According to *The Winchester Star*, Craven played a leading part in designing the steamship. Commissioned on May 24, 1945, and christened by Craven’s daughter Christine in New Orleans, the S. S. *Winchester* was rechristened after the Mystic Steamship Division purchased it (probably in 1947).

The S.S. *Winchester* formed part of a fleet including similar steamships named for Boston, Malden, Melrose, Newton, Reading, Arlington, Concord, Everett, and Lexington, plus other vessels. The *Winchester* and its sister ships annually carried over 6 million tons of coal from the loading dock in Norfolk, Virginia, to coke plants and coal docks along the Eastern seaboard. Formerly, the S. S. *Winchester* also made several trips to Italy.

## **F. B. CRAVEN**

The honor of having a steamship named for the town was doubtless due to Craven. A resident of Winchester for 33 years prior to his death in 1962, Craven was well known around town as a member of Town Meeting and the Finance Committee, as vice chairman of the Winchester Civilian Defense Committee during World War II, and as someone actively involved with Winchester Hospital, Winchester Community Chest, and the Winchester Country Club.

Craven was vice president of the Boston Tow Boat Co. and for 25 years marine manager of the Mystic Steamship Division of the Eastern Gas and Fuel Association. He designed the first diesel-electric tugs in the port of Boston, the S. S. *Luna* and *Venus*, owned by the Mystic Steamship Company.

However, the man who greeted town officials at Lewis Wharf was not just a fellow townsman and company executive but also a veteran. Part of a prominent Navy family, Craven (1894-1962) graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1916. During World War I, he served on submarines and at the end had command of one. He left the Navy with the rank of lieutenant commander in 1920. From 1937 to 1943, Craven was national Commander General of the Naval Order of the United States, vice president and director of the Boston Port and Seaman’s Aid Society, a director of the Naval Academy Alumni Association of Boston, and president of the Boston Marine Society.

## **CHRISTMAS MESSAGES**

One odd story about the S. S. *Winchester* can be found in the pages of the *News Tribune* from Fort Pierce, Florida, of January 11, 1952. While driving down the beach between Fort Pierce and

Jensen Beach in their jeep, a couple from Indrio found a gallon glass jar high up on the beach. Inside were nine stamped and addressed letters, a note, and two dollar bills. The note in the bottle asked the finder to mail the letters since the writer would not be home for Christmas. The two dollars were added so that the finder could “buy yourself a drink on me.” At the bottom of the note were the words “S. S. *Winchester*.”

That the ship was indeed the town’s namesake owned by the Mystic Steamship Division was established by the return addresses on some of the letters.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 22, 2015, and Mar 7, 2018. This article supersedes all previous articles.