

SCHOOL COMMITTEE DENIES RELIGION A FACTOR WHEN POPULAR PRINCIPAL PRESSURED INTO RESIGNING IN 1877

By Ellen Knight¹

Under the heading “Disagreeable Duties,” the School Committee of 1874 cited just one such task, namely dismissing staff. At that time, they named no names, but just three years later, in a report extraordinary for its time in length and detail, it did.

In those years, the School Committee had the authority to hire and fire. In 1871, it welcomed J. Frank Baxter as principal of the Grammar School, commenting that his “reputation as a teacher was already established” and stating after his first year that “the school was never in a more prosperous condition than at present.”²



*Josiah Francis Baxter (1841-1904)
pictured about 20 years after his 1877
resignation from the Winchester
Grammar School*

Baxter, a Plymouth native, was about 30 years old when he arrived in Winchester with a wife and young daughter. He had 11 years of teaching experience behind him and appeared to have a good career ahead of him in Winchester.

After his second year, the Committee declared that “the past year has proved one of pronounced success...and the recent examination elicited proofs of very excellent training.” At the end of the 1875-76 school year, the Committee reported that the Grammar School “maintains the reputation which it has deservedly gained for vigorous and thorough training.” As the school had a staff of only three, Baxter was key to this excellence. He was reappointed every year through 1877.

Further, he was reportedly popular. An unfinished letter by a young lady in the collections of the Winchester Archival Center from 1872 says, “Everyone is delighted with the new teacher Mr. Baxter.”

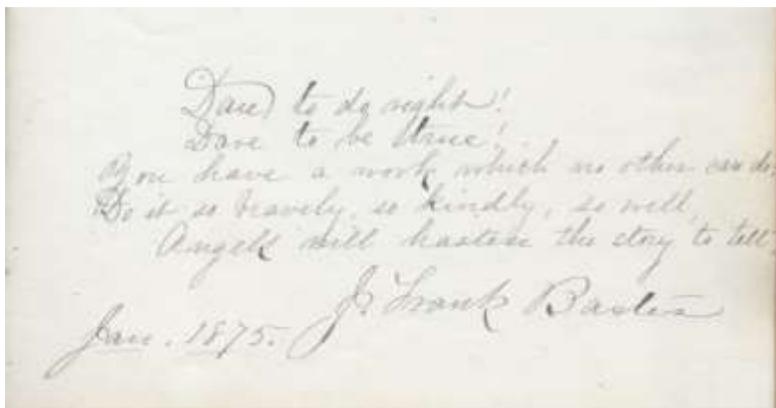
When trouble arose and he lost his position, he wrote that “with many others in town” he believed “that had a vote by the town been taken on the question, I should now be teaching in the school today.” Reportedly a group of former students rallied round with gifts of fruit and flowers.

The School Committee had a different view, stating “with few exceptions, our constituents have approved our action.” It did not hesitate to hire a replacement immediately.

Just what was the problem? According to the School Committee's seven-page official report, it was first that his teaching was suffering from his schedule of outside lectures on Spiritualism and, worse, that at one of these events he was caught out in an apparent case of fraud. Not only reprehensible in itself, since his name was coupled with that of Winchester, this also meant "our town was made to share in the odium."

According to Baxter, the problem was prejudice against his being a Spiritualist. This the Committee denied, saying it knew he was a Spiritualist every year it rehired him and that the issue was his moral character. Neither side ever backed down.

THE SPIRITUALIST



Dare to be Right – Principal J. Frank Baxter wrote this verse by George Lansing Taylor when he signed an autograph album owned by a daughter of Winchester's Edward A. Brackett, a believer in Spiritualism.

In an 1882 lecture, "The Reality of Spiritualism," Baxter said, "Ever since I was seven years of age have I been in communication, more or less, with the spirit world, though not until about twenty did I fully believe and realize it." He went on to describe instances of spirit writing through which he received communications from deceased individuals about whom he would not otherwise have known but later learned to be real.

He joined a circle of like-minded individuals who met and waited for signs. After months of patient waiting, raps were heard. Lights were seen. When singing, they were astonished to hear other voices and a harp. Baxter experienced more spirit writing, but that was not all.

"One evening, while we were singing, and while I was wholly conscious, I was lifted from and floated just above my chair during the time of singing the chorus to the piece. At its close, I was lifted twelve feet to the ceiling, and in a horizontal position back to the ceiling. I was carried a distance of twenty-five feet, and then placed on the farther end of the long table. This was repeated the same evening, amid the astonishment and excitement of all. This was done for eighteen times in nine circles which followed. Many, non-spiritualists as well as spiritualists, witnessed and can testify to it....

"Soon a change came over my mediumship, and, when partially influenced, I would see spirits distinctly. Now, I rarely ever see spirits, but, under their power, see a great many things

subjectively. Thousands — over 10,000 — of names, dates, portraits, pictures, and visions have I seen and described.” The revelation of spirit messages became a regular part of his lectures.

Baxter became known as "the great test medium," since he would customarily give facts such as age, date of death, sex, and cause of death as tests that his messages were indeed from the deceased. Audiences marveled at his abilities.

While still employed as a teacher, Baxter lectured on Spiritualism on the weekends and during the summer. This, the School Committee contended, interfered with his abilities. “The committee became convinced, from reports of scholars, that the school suffered from the physical and nervous exhaustion occasioned by these Sunday efforts.”

Further, according to statute, it was the teachers’ duty “to exert their best endeavors to impress on the minds of children and youth committed to their care and instruction” various moral principles including “a sacred regard for truth.” Given some of the press reports of his activities, the Committee questioned Baxter’s ability to do this.

As part of a lengthy defense which Baxter published in *The Banner of Light*, a weekly spiritualist journal, he offered an October 1876 letter from the chairman as evidence that the School Committee was prejudiced. The letter did indeed express the opinion that Spiritualism was antithetical to Christianity, which the chairman viewed as the foundation of the moral code for the schools.

The Committee held to the opinion that it could not proscribe a man for his opinions. But, they said, reports in the press about his lectures put Baxter “in a very lamentable position in the eyes of the great majority of the people of this town” and arrayed him publicly “in opposition to that morality which he was required to teach.”

Baxter did not reply and did not give up his Spiritualist lectures. Following a further letter in February, Baxter reportedly replied that he disagreed that his school work was suffering, but he acquiesced to the Committee’s demand that he give up his Sunday lectures. The Committee was happy with this and reappointed him for the next school year.

THE SCANDAL

On August 19, 1877, Baxter spoke at a camp meeting at Lake Pleasant, Mass., a large Spiritualist gathering place. At this particular meeting, he passed on a spirit message from Abe Bunter, a black man renowned for having a skull so thick he could split a plank of wood with his head. As Baxter wrote, “I was impressed to say, ‘Abe Bunter is here and he’ll smash a plank for a quarter.’” After he asked if anyone knew such a person, a man from the audience said he did and, what’s more, said, “He is alive.”³

Sceptics latched onto this incident as evidence that mediums were frauds, that they memorized their information from obituaries, for two years previously, because of a grave illness, an obituary for Abe had been printed. But Abe had recovered.

Baxter claimed to be puzzled over what happened. He never changed his story about getting a message, though he accepted that Abe was indeed alive. He supposed that the message may have been due to “a lying spirit.” He firmly denied any attempt at fraud.

The story was picked up by a number of newspapers and, of course, the School Committee, parents, and students read it. Because Baxter was identified as a teacher in Winchester, “not only the welfare of the school was at stake, but the reputation of the Committee and the good name of the town itself.”

The Committee did not dismiss Baxter willy-nilly but “deemed it incumbent on them to investigate the charge.”

THE CONFRONTATION

On August 30, Baxter met with the Committee, which hoped to hear that the newspapers had exaggerated the facts. “It soon became painfully evident that the material fact was as charged,” the Committee wrote in its *Annual Report*. Baxter also admitted that in a lecture the previous winter he had related the story of being transported through the air. He told the Committee that the levitation was an illustration of mesmerism not Spiritualism. The Committee viewed this as a deception since he had asked his audience, “If that was not Spiritualism, what was it?”

The Committee adjourned for a day so it could read Baxter’s statement, which was published in the *Woburn and Middlesex Journal*. “Upon my honor,” he declared in it, “I have not been guilty of any fraud.”



George S. Littlefield, a member of the 1877 School Committee

But, reading on, the Committee saw that he claimed he gave up lecturing during the spring “since I found teaching and lecturing were more than I could physically endure.” Nothing was mentioned about the Committee asking him to give up lecturing.

The Committee thought the statement made matters worse and questioned whether Baxter could discharge his duty to lead the way in “the sacred regard for truth.” Because the Lake Pleasant incident was widely known, “in the judgment of the Committee Mr. Baxter’s usefulness as a teacher had become so seriously impaired that it was our duty to terminate his connection with the school of which he had been the master.”

Desiring to treat him kindly, the Committee allowed him to resign. It was only because Baxter went public that everyone knew his resignation was not voluntary. Baxter defended himself in print and decried his unjust treatment. "They could not doubt my integrity," he wrote of the Committee, "but they despised my Spiritualism."

Baxter contended that the Chairman asked him to renounce his Spiritualism (not just the lectures). The Committee responded that they and the people of the town had known for years he was a Spiritualist and if they meant to cashier him for that reason they would not have waited until two days before the beginning of the new term.

In his defense printed in the *Banner of Light*, Baxter said that in the Grammar School, "We have a Swedenborgian, an Orthodox, and a Spiritualist teacher. Neither has the right to teach his views in the school-room." He wrote a strong statement about the need for the public schools to be wholly secular.

The School Committee would not have disagreed. However, it was not Baxter's teaching in the classroom that was in question. The problem was his lectures and conduct outside the school becoming the subject of public notoriety. In some minds, the Abe Bunter incident left a stain on his reputation.

AFTER WINCHESTER

The Baxters left Winchester and settled in Chelsea. Frank Baxter did not teach school again but continued to lecture on Spiritualism. There was a later scandal about his being caught with an envelope full of obituaries, but he maintained a loyal following ready to refute any accusations. Testimonials to his character and defenses of his abilities far outnumbered the derisory articles, but the question of his credibility was debated in the press long after he was dismissed by the Winchester School Committee.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Sep. 23, 2015. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Quotations from the School Committee are from their Annual Reports.

³ *Woburn and Middlesex Journal*, Sept. 1, 1877.