

WINCHESTER BANDS

By Ellen Knight¹

Outdoor concerts, such as the Concerts on the Common, are one of the pleasures of summer in Winchester. On and off throughout Winchester's history, there have been indoor and outdoor concerts in town, some given by town bands.

WOBURN BANDS

Before Winchester's incorporation, area residents had the opportunity to play with the Woburn Brass Bands. In 1800 a military band was formed that lasted three years, consisting of eight performers--"two clarionets, two hautboys, two French horns, two bassoons."² A second band was organized in 1841. Numbering fifteen, this band included clarinet, piccolo, clarinet, 2 bugles, 2 post horns, 3 trombones, 2 ophicleides, 2 drums, and cymbals. Later a few others also joined the band. The band's leaders were E. C. Kimball, John H. Wright, and Parker L. Converse. The band's first instructor was A. F. Knight, followed by Adam Kurek, "a Pole by birth, an eccentric man, and a musician of great ability."

COL. WINCHESTER'S QUICKSTEP

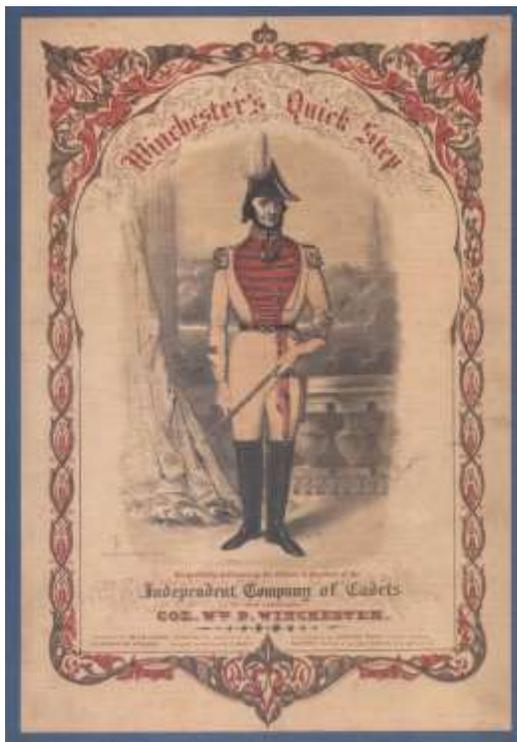
Though it may be a diversion from the subject of Winchester Brass Bands, some space may be given to the afore-mentioned Kurek, since he was the composer of "Col. Winchester's Quickstep," dedicated to the man for whom the town was named.

That musical standards in early America were quite different from those of Europe and of America today is pointed out by some anecdotes about Kurek. When Kurek asked to hear the Woburn band for the first time, they played their best piece in their best style. "Instead of astonishing the Pole as they expected, he was enraged at their 'miserable playing,' fumed and scolded, and called them hard names but finally consented to become their teacher. If, with the full band playing, one of them made a mistake, he would instantly single out the offending one and make him repeat the passage." Afterwards engaged as instructor for the Malden band, he conceived the idea of a monster concert in Woburn town hall. He combined the Malden band of 16, the Woburn 17, plus 6 from the Boston Brigade Band, an eminent pianist, and two lady vocalists of note--42 in all.

"In the course of the evening, Kurek was to play a violin solo, and fearing that the heat would cause the breaking of a string, he had one of the band stationed behind him with a violin tuned and ready. As he expected he had played but a short time when the string snapped. He turned and changed violins, and went on as before. Soon this one gave out. He turned as before, but the string was not replaced, the violin was not ready. He at once began whistling the tune he had been playing, and continued until the violin was ready, when he resumed. At this concert the 'Battle of Prague' was performed. In the piece a passage occurs where the bugles of the enemy

are heard in the distance. One of the bands was concealed, to carry out the illusion, and at the proper time to play the passage. On taking his place, Kurek's last injunction to him was, 'play it right! If you don't, I'll kill you.' The hall was crowded to its utmost capacity, and the whole performance went off well. The bugler in the 'Battle of Prague' played his part right, and Kurek was profuse in his 'Bravos.' His eccentricity finally terminated in insanity and he died in the Worcester lunatic asylum."

Kurek aided the Woburn band also by writing new music for it. "The facility with which he composed and arranged music was remarkable. One time while he was living in Bedford, which he did after leaving Woburn, the Woburn band sent him an order for some music which was promised on a certain day. At the time appointed the band sent a messenger for their music. He found the master in bed, sick but with a board for a table and the band books spread before him, he was writing like mad. He had just taken an emetic, and a spittoon was placed on a chair by the bed, and as the medicine took effect, he would stop for the instant, and then again resume his writing. Though sick enough to be quiet he kept at his work till the music was completed. And, strange as it may seem, it was one of his best pieces." ³



The band allegedly achieved "great proficiency" from Kurek's tutelage. In fact, for a time, it was ranked among the first bands in the state. It was permanently engaged by the city of Boston to play there on all public days and was invited to play in various parts of the state. For some years this band served as the regimental band for Col. Jones' regiment of artillery. The life of the band, however, was short; it dissolved in 1850.

As for "Col. Winchester's Quickstep," its title page states it was "composed by Adam Kurek, introducing the Spanish air of El Abraso de Vergana/Performed by the Brigade Band at their concerts." Published in Boston, it was "Respectfully dedicated by the officers and members of the Independent Company of Cadets to their Commander, Col. William P. Winchester." It is not known if it was ever performed either by Winchester or Woburn bands.

EARLY WINCHESTER BANDS

Winchester had its own band about the time it incorporated in 1850. Its early members numbered about nine and were first headquartered at the Black Horse Tavern.

The town was evidently pleased with idea of band concerts. The first improvement to be made to the lot of land set aside for a town common was a bandstand. Built in 1873, it was the site of

an Independence Day concert. Almost immediately, however, the bandstand became a source of concern, even mockery. "What has become of our band?" queried a resident in October that year in the local newspaper. "The stand erected on the common at a great expense has not been used."⁴ The band was re-organized a couple of times and over the next ten years did perform on the Common, at irregular intervals, until one Fourth of July when the bandstand went up in flames. The Common Committee, faced with the decision to rebuild the bandstand or not, opted instead to erect a fountain.

A new band, with twelve members, was formed in 1888. This band performed its Fourth of July program at Bacon's Field. The band had occasional other performances, such as the "Rousing Rally for Harrison and Protection" in Lyceum Hall in November 1888 and at least two Grand Concert & Entertainments in Town Hall. This band also did not last.

With the turn of the twentieth century, the town got a new bandstand. During the 1890s, the Town, City of Boston, and Metropolitan Parks Commission cooperated on a project to clean out the area south of the Center, site of industry and a six-acre swamp, and dedicate it to public uses. The project resulted in the Mystic Valley Parkway, Manchester Field, and Ginn Field.

By 1902, however, the grading and grassing of Manchester Field had been done and the field opened with a playground, track, playfield, and canoe landing. With public and private money, Winchester fitted out the park with piped-in drinking water, a flagpole, playground equipment, and other park amenities. One amenity which the MPC provided for the field was a grandstand. The MPC built it in 1907 and arranged Saturday afternoon concerts until about 1920.



In March 1895, while the parkway project was underway, a resident wrote to the local paper, "Now that the Park is an assured thing, it will be desirable to have a good band in town."⁵ In fact, another new band did form in 1895, with 22 members. The band gave its first concert on Washington's Birthday, with a guest whistler and solo singer. However, this was not the band which eventually performed at Manchester Field, since the MPC turned to the Woburn Brass Band for that. Their first concert was in 1907.

The Winchester Park Board reported in 1908 that “the grand stand built a year ago as an experiment has proven an unqualified success.”⁶ A year later, it wrote, “The Band Concerts provided by the Metropolitan Park Board have been well patronized and much enjoyed not only by citizens of the Town by those of the Metropolitan District. The music rendered has been of a high standard.”

The concerts had what might now be thought an idyllic setting, next to a tree-lined river up which residents could canoe or walk by to its new park. Residents and out-of-towners both could use the new parkway for a pleasure trip to the concerts.

The bandstand stood on Manchester Field until the river and parkway were moved next to the railroad and the current Manchester Field was created. Though the track and playfield were relocated there, the band stand was not. Only the second bandstand that Winchester had had, it was its last.

SUMMER BAND

The 20th century saw the return of a community band in 1967 when Recreation Director Don Spinney created one. Starting with a group of 17 resident musicians, under the direction of Frederick J Murray, the band swelled over the years with residents of other communities creating a band of 75 to 110 members.

At the final concert of the year, “Traditionally the concert end[ed] on a patriotic note with ‘American Patrol,’ John Philip Sousa’s rousing ‘The Stars and Stripes Forever,’ and ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’ Militiamen from surrounding communities march down the back lawn of the library, to the edge of the duck pond, muskets shouldered, while the bands plays. ‘American Patrol.’ Then as the band begins the quiet strains that mark the opening of the solemn ‘1812 Overture,’ the militia men load their muskets with powder and shot.

“As the music swell in volume, the bells in the Town Hall begin to ring out, courtesy of some band member’s spouse or sibling. Then, as the music reaches the point where the battle begins, the militiamen fire their muskets and cannons, creating a remarkable effect in the acoustic hollow between the Town Hall and the Library.

“The militiamen continue their barrage through the performances of ‘The Stars and stripes forever.’ As that pieces finishes, the crowd rises for the playing of ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’ Afterwards the crowd reluctantly disperses. Summer band is over – until next year.”⁷

Summer Sights And Sounds



THE FIRST SUMMER CONCERT PRESENTED by the Winchester Community Band on Thursday evening, July 2, drew listeners to the edges of Mill Pond behind the Public Library. The second concert will be performed this evening at 8 p.m. (Ryerson photo)

The band gave summer concerts at Mill Pond until, under new leadership, it dissolved in the 1980s. Since 1986, the Recreation Department has offered a series of outdoor concerts in place of the old band concerts. Formerly held behind the library at Mill Pond, they became the Concerts on the Common.

Photo of the Community Band during 1970 in The Winchester Star

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on July 17, 1992. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² George Cooke, "All about Woburn-Woburn Bands," *Winchester Press*, Nov. 22, 1901.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Middlesex Journal*, Oct 7, 1873

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, March 2, 1895.

⁶ Park Board, Annual Report, 1908.

⁷ "Musicians Start Summer Band," *The Winchester Star Centennial Edition*, Sept. 26, 1980, p. 115.