

THE WHITE HORSEMAN

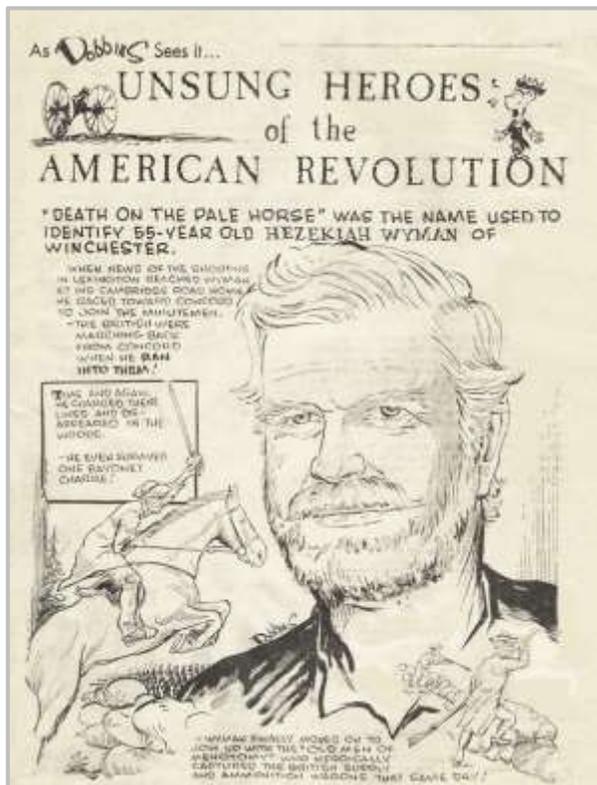
By Ellen Knight¹

On Patriot's Day, Winchester may be left out of the celebrations, but on that day in 1775 the Winchester area was not uninvolved in the conflict. According to legend, it had a remarkable hero.

On the 19th of April in 1775 when news of the British advance came to the Winchester area (then mostly part of Woburn and Medford), a number of men responded. Lt. Caleb Brooks and John Symmes joined the Medford minutemen. Others, including company captains Samuel Belknap and Jonathan Fox, belonged to the Woburn militia that went to Lexington.

Then there was the man who became legendary as the "white horseman."

When the word was spread to gather in Lexington, Hezekiah Wyman, then 55 years of age, mounted his white horse and, with musket in hand, set off from his Cambridge Street home for Lexington. Like other men from Woburn, he was too late for the fighting at Lexington Common but, continuing up the road, met with British soldiers returning from Concord.



Jim Dobbins' tribute to the White Horseman, published in the Boston Traveler

All along the route back to Boston was made the legend of the white horseman who charged again and again against the British, killing and wounding a number of the enemy but always escaping, untouched by the shower of bullets around him. According to one account, "his exploits were well nigh fabulous."²

"When he met the British he began blazing away at them vigorously with his deadly firearm. Mounted on his strong steed, he rode furiously in the direction of the British ranks. His aim was taken at close quarters, and his shots were sent with a constant fatal effect.

"His tall gaunt form, his gray locks floating in the breeze, and the color of his steed distinguished him from the other Americans, and the British gave him the name of 'Death on the Pale Horse.' The utmost endeavors of his enemy to kill him were unavailing. He passed through the whole melee unscathed and unhurt.

“Once a bayonet charge drove the old man and the party with which he was acting to a distance from the foe; but he was out of ammunition and was then compelled to pick up some. But he ere long returned to the charge and this time killed an officer, and after that exploit the report of his piece was frequently heard till the close of the fight.

“His powerful white horse, careering at full speed over the hills, with the dauntless old man on his back, was continually to be seen. The British learned to dread the frequent appearance of this dire rider at unexpected points along the route of their passage, for his aim was true, and the economical principals in which he was trained forbade his wasting powder or ball.

“He lingered at Arlington long enough to aid in a plot laid by Ammi Cutter for taking the British baggage-wagon and their guards.” However, the problem with this part of the story is that the wagons were intercepted by the old men of Monotony [Arlington] on their way to Lexington, but Wyman was firing on the British during their retreat back to Boston.

“The story says that Hezekiah pursued the British even after they had entered Charlestown and that he followed the enemy to their very boats; and then, turning his horse’s head, returned to his home.”

There was apparently an allusion to Wyman in the original manuscript of Longfellow’s famous poem about “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” though the lines were cut before publication.³

*And there in the field, in the midnight gloom,
Stood a white steed cropping the clover bloom
Shaking his bar-entangled mane.*

Wyman’s name appears on a list of those who served or paid for others to serve in Captain Samuel Belknap’s company and is listed for five month’s service at Ticonderoga and three months in Jersey. In March 1777 the town of Woburn voted to pay him 8 pounds, 16 shillings, and 10 pence in part for his service in the war.

Wyman survived the war. So did the white mare. Wyman lived out his days, until the summer of 1779, in his house not far from the corner of Cambridge and Wildwood Streets (site of the current 195 Cambridge Street). The area where he owned a large section of land was formerly called Wyman Plains where generations of descendants succeeded him. Upon Wyman land much of the West Side is now built.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on April 20, 1998. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² The story as printed in the *Boston Pearl* was reprinted in the *Woburn Journal*, July 29, 1887, and has been retold in other places.

³ Charles Bahne, “Working with *The Atlantic Monthly*,” 2010, posted on the “150 Years of ‘Paul Revere’s Ride’” website.