

PATRIOTISM FLEW HIGH WHEN WAR DECLARED

By Ellen Knight¹

In 1917, flags were going up across the town, new flags on new poles and standards. The country was at war. "These are the days when we should show every ounce of red-blooded Americanism that we possess," a Chamber of Commerce publication stated, and the people of Winchester concurred.

The flags were a symbol of their patriotism. Samuel Elder, one of the town's most distinguished residents, was among the first to fly a new flag from a new pole at his home on Myopia Hill. It was pulled to the top by his friend, former U.S. President William Howard Taft, in the presence of a small gathering including Gov. Samuel McCall.



*The Roll of Honor for World War I,
dedicated on Nov. 11, 1918.*



Taft was also present and gave a speech when the Calumet Club (a gentlemen's club) raised its new flag at 15 Dix Street. Various other groups and businesses proudly displayed flags, as did the churches. *The Winchester Star* hung a flag used during the Civil War and printed poems and articles about flag etiquette and history. A high school gymnastics exhibition included rope climbers raising and lowering a flag. A local jeweler advertised flag jewelry.

Winchester was brimming with patriotic fervor. Taft made one more appearance, at a patriotic meeting at Town Hall on May 19, when he reportedly urged "the United States, the greatest country in the world, to make for itself a nation of power and strength to support its ideals among all nations."

But townspeople did not just put on a show of patriotism. They acted. A month before war against Germany was declared, a Committee on Public Safety was formed. Residents pitched in with committee activities. Throughout the war, they bought liberty bonds and gave donations and aid to relief societies. Money was pooled to buy an ambulance to send to France. Much labor was volunteered to the Red Cross, with one unit alone producing 121,961 surgical dressings during the war years.

Residents were immediately advised about coming food shortages and urged to grow their own food. More than 80 acres were loaned or developed by their owners as vegetable gardens.

Winchester was not immune to some war hysteria. A rumor circulated that the widow of Edwin Ginn, philanthropist and founder of the World Peace Foundation, was plotting with the Germans at her Winchester home. Surprised and disturbed, she wrote, "it has been stated that dynamite has been discovered in the cellar; that a wireless outfit has been located here; that war munitions have been manufactured here; that German propaganda have been distributed from the house; that 38 men have been arrested on the place; that the American flag had been torn into pieces at a dinner party; that German diplomats have been entertained here. All of these statements are absolutely false and without any foundation whatsoever.

"These rumors may have arisen from the fact that I have employed men at different times from the interned Germany vessels, none of whom is now in my employ. I am myself a loyal American citizen, born in Pittsburg, Penn., and have lived in Winchester over 23 years. The American flag has been flying on the front of my house until the flag staff was broken in half last Wednesday night's windstorm, and now hangs from the piazza railing until the flagpole can be repaired."² The *Star* called the rumors "absurd," and apparently the town agreed since that was the last heard of them.

No one knew what to expect from entry into a world war. The Home Guard trained on Manchester Field. Fear of explosions led to the prohibition of fireworks, making for a quiet celebration of the 4th of July. Also, guards were stationed at the two dams at the reservoir and at Town Hall for three months.

The water was not threatened but liquor was. Along with other temperance unions, Winchester's urged national prohibition as a war measure, not only for sobriety but also to save grains for food. But the war was over before prohibition was enacted.

A false alarm over illegal wireless activity arose in May, 1917. The day after Congress declared war, the U.S. government banned private radio stations and equipment, fearing it might be misused. That May, residents alerted Winchester police to strange flashes of light in the west side hills. Officers found a man at work with electrical equipment in a tiny shack near the standpipe and arrested him on suspicion of operating a wireless plant.

The suspect turned out to be a Harvard teacher who was conducting a series of violet-ray experiments in connection with the Physics Department at the College and with a permit granted by the Town. When all this was learned, he was let go.

DOING THEIR BIT

Townpeople were encouraged to garden, to conserve, to buy Liberty Bonds, support the Red Cross, and to be prepared for national defense. To help the boys abroad, Winchester proudly contributed an ambulance, though its original plans went awry. The idea was that two

Winchester men, Charles Rogers and Charles Eaton, would drive two Winchester-funded ambulances in France. The vehicles would be attached to the American Ambulance Field Service.



That August, once funds were raised for one ambulance, the boys went to France. However, the construction, equipping, and shipping of the machine were delayed. So the boys enlisted in the French transportation service and drove ammunition and supply trucks at the front for a period. Rogers was obliged to return home on account of poor health, though Eaton continued to serve.

But, by the time the ambulance arrived, Eaton's enlistment time was up. The day he left Paris he was able to take a picture of the Winchester ambulance but not to drive it.

By June, the *Star* informed its readers, there were 500 ambulances in the American Ambulance Field Service and other young men of Winchester had volunteered to drive them. What happened to Winchester's ambulance is unknown; however, whoever drove it, the vehicle doubtless provided much needed service.

PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN

All across town, people were in this war and none more so than the men and women who left it to serve on foreign soil in the armed services and support groups such as the Red Cross and YMCA.³ Some of their letters home show that, whatever fears and horrors the war held, they were ever confident in and proud of their country.

Mahlon Dennett of the 2nd Massachusetts Regiment wrote a letter on July 10, 1918 in which he described a perilous night advance towards Chateau-Thierry. Traveling toward the front in the midst of "big shells that shake the ground when they land and rip up a house in half" and "the constant flash of the big guns in the sky," they arrived at a place where "shells go 'whizzing by' far overhead to 'strafe' the big heavies hid behind the lines, and smaller shells burst on the road and maybe a few near us." But he was proud to be part of it.



"I landed in France with the first fifty thousand. I belong to the first complete division to land in France. My battery is considered the best in the regiment and was picked by the French to go with them 'somewhere' and help straighten out part of their line. We fought in the first real battle where Americans held a sector alone.

“Isn’t it something to be proud of, to be with the first fifty thousand and to be in the first battle that Americans fought alone? I sounded the alarm for three gas attacks in that battle and worked serving the guns also. Well, I’ve learned a lot out of this war. I’ve learned discipline; I appreciate luxuries, food and home. I’ve learned what Liberty is, and to appreciate it.”⁴

Two weeks later, Dennett was struck by a bursting shell and fatally wounded. He was buried in the American Cemetery, Belleau Woods, France.

Whitelaw Wright, who survived the war, though blinded in one eye, wrote from a desolate area of France on Feb. 22, 1918, “We are now at the Front doing what we can in this great struggle that is going on and we are all doing our ‘bit’ to help humanity and to ‘keep the old Flag without a stain or blemish’ and keep her in the right place, which is above all others.”

If the men had any illusions about war, they were stripped away upon entering mutilated France. Yet the conviction that American troops would end the horror carried them through.

On Feb. 9, 1918, George Barbaro wrote from France, “Many a time, as I have looked into the sad faces of the women passing through our camp, invariably wearing a little white cap, the insignia of mourning in this country, I have been forced to realize how thankful we Americans should really feel, and how proud, too, now that the good old U.S.A. has gone into this thing with the purpose of ending it once and for all, thus removing the possibility of anything like it ever happening to God’s country and our own mothers and sisters. And this seems to be the spirit of all our men.”⁵

A “PURELY AMERICAN” VICTORY



Marine Ole Mortensen experienced the triumph of victory. “It’s all over now, but honestly I never expected to be living at this stage of the game,” he wrote on Nov. 29, 1918. When they arrived in France that August, he wrote, they expected they would train for a month of two and gradually work up to the front.

“This is what really happened. From Brest [France], we were piled into box cars, jammed so that we had to take turns at sitting and standing. We rode for two days and three nights, canned tomatoes, ‘Monkey Meat’ and bread being our rations three times a days and once or twice we stopped for hot coffee. We finally landed in the outskirts of the Metz Sector and to our surprise we hiked all night, joining our several companies in the early morning somewhere behind the battle line. The next day was spent in preparation for the coming battle.... At midnight Uncle Sam’s big naval guns started thundering their messages to Kaiser Bill’s forces. This is where the Boche learned something about an American barrage and American efficiency....

“At the dawn of the day we started over. We expected a lot of resistance, but I guess Heinie thought hell had broken loose when our barrage opened up.... It all proved to be a walkaway. We were on this front nine days. From there we went to Champagne, where we fought under the French. Here we took the famous Mont Blanc in the Argonne Woods, a regular beehive of machine guns. We were here for ten days.... Then the last and final drive, also purely American. We routed Heinie out of France and they are still running

“This last barrage was terrible. We covered 29 Kilos in two days, chased the Heinies in motor trucks and made them so thankful that they who escaped celebrated even more than we did when the armistice was signed.”

“We got a wonderful welcome in Belgium.... Now the only thing that worries us is when we are going home.”⁶

The reception, when they got home, was joyful. On July 4, 1919, the town held a great “Welcome Home” parade. As at the beginning, flags were flying. They lined the 3.5-mile parade route, and the Roll of Honor was draped with a wreath of flags and bunting. The whole parade and its route were ablaze with the national colors.



Servicemen on parade after taking part in the Great War

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Apr. 19, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 13, 1917.

³ The current Roll of Honor for WWI veterans includes 764 names and 18 stars.

⁴ Quoted in *Winchester's War Records*, 1925, p. 73.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, March 15, 1918.

⁶ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 17, 1919.