

## ABOLITION & EMANCIPATION

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

Incorporated in 1850, Winchester was a young town when the Civil War broke out. Its citizens were staunchly loyal to the Union. However, measuring the temper of the times leading up to the war is a difficult task.

Records are few. Those that exist do not present a complete picture. Nevertheless, looking for evidence of local sentiment on the issues that led to the war, one may glimpse abolitionist sentiment and activity in South Woburn, the nucleus of the new town, and more so in Winchester itself. But townspeople were not of one mind.



Rev. William  
Tappan Eustis

One of the early ministers of the South Woburn Congregational Church, William T. Eustis, commented that in the 1840s “The abolition controversy was then intense and there was a constant struggle to involve the church and the pulpit. My people, since, would be amazed to know how bitterly I was denounced for pro-slavery sentiment in those early days after my subsequent record.”<sup>2</sup>

A Female Emancipation Society of South Woburn held a levee and sale in the church vestry at the end of December 1846 to obtain money for the Canada Mission, advertising it as “an opportunity for the friend of the slave to contribute to his comfort.”<sup>3</sup>

No other local abolition society is known, but residents did join or support the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. South Woburn was mentioned in “The Liberator” as contributing money to that society and adding names to antislavery petitions. It was also considered for a meeting site in 1843.<sup>4</sup>

More evidence appears in the 1850s and 1860s. Winchester lacked its own newspaper, but beginning in 1854, *The Middlesex Journal* included a column of Winchester news by Edwin A. Wadleigh. Written under the pseudonym Excelsior, his columns mention anti-slavery petitions, lectures, and sermons but also suggest that townspeople were not all of one opinion.

Local feelings were assuredly mixed, but the execution of John Brown in 1859 brought forth a display of public mourning in the town. From 11 o’clock to noon, the bells were tolled. In the evening, a public meeting was held in Lyceum Hall, opened by the Rev. Mr. Eddy of the Baptist Society “with a fervent prayer that the martyrdom of Brown might be sanctified to the cause of truth justice and humanity.”



*Brackett's copy  
of John Brown's  
photograph*

Alfred Norton made the opening speech depicting Brown as a model of true heroism. Others spoke, and copies of Brown's address to the court upon being sentenced to death were sold. In front of the platform was a large placard upon which was written, "He Dies by the Mandate of the Slave Power, Yet Still Lives by Virtue of his Heroic Deeds."<sup>5</sup>

This was apparently the prevailing sentiment, though not the only one. When Winchester artist Edward Brackett went to visit John Brown in jail, Southern officials attempted to prevent it. One of them, he revealed, "handed me a letter, written by a Democratic office-holder in my town of Winchester which read, in effect: 'Look out for Brackett. He is an Abolitionist and a spy.'"<sup>6</sup>

In the presidential election of 1860, the majority of Winchester's voters cast their votes for Lincoln. Most Democrat votes went to Douglas rather than Bell or Breckinridge. Still some votes were cast for the stronger pro-slavery candidates.<sup>7</sup>

About the same time, the majority of Winchester residents rejected a petition in favor of legislation proposed to avert a war by appeasing the Southern states. Put forward by Kentucky senator John J. Crittenden, the Crittenden Compromise would have guaranteed the permanent existence of slavery in the slave states by reestablishing the free-slave demarcation line drawn by the 1820 Missouri Compromise.



*Lyceum Hall in 1860, occupied by various  
stores and the Post Office as well as a  
meeting/lecture hall*

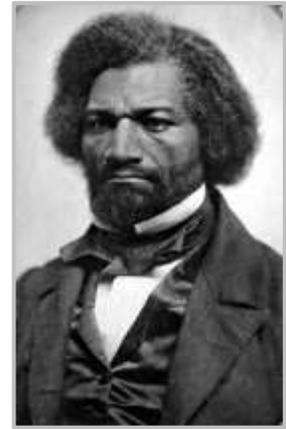
After the petition had been at the Post Office for two weeks, Excelsior wrote, "Judging by the small number of names it has received, I should say that it did not meet with much favor. No Republican I believe has signed it. Nor do I see how they can." Referring to a *Boston Journal* article, he further wrote, "The plan thus proposed is to inaugurate a greater pro-slavery aggression than was ever before attempted at one step in this country by putting a distinct recognition of slave property in the Constitution, and pledging all the powers of the government for its protection.'... These are alone sufficient reasons for its condemnation by every friend of humanity."<sup>8</sup>

### **EMANCIPATION DEBATES, LECTURES, & PETITIONS**

In the late 1850s a Young Men's Literary Association (also known as the Winchester Literary Association) was formed to improve its members in declamation, debating, and general literature. It began a series of lectures and debates and presented annual entertainments. Their lectures were held in Lyceum Hall (built in 1854). One of the lecturers for the 1859-1860 season

was the abolitionist Wendell Phillips. His subject was Pierre Toussaint (a slave originally from what is now Haiti who gained his freedom in New York).

On Feb. 11, 1862, "By invitation of some of our prominent citizens, Frederic Douglass delivered his lecture on the 'Black man's future in the Southern States,'" Excelsior reported. "The hall was crowded, and notwithstanding the lecturer occupied nearly two hours, he was listened to with the closest attention, the audience occasionally breaking forth in hearty applause at some of the telling points. No report of mine could do justice to the able, eloquent and convincing arguments of the speaker, which cannot fail to have a good effect upon the minds of the hearers."<sup>9</sup>



*Douglass in 1856*

In February 1862, the Literary Association debated whether power existed under the Federal Constitution to abolish slavery in the rebellious States; and, if it did, would it be bad policy to do it at the present time. The lively discussion was carried over to a second meeting. When a vote was taken, "by a vote of 16 to 9 it was decided that Congress had the power under the Constitution to abolish slavery in the rebellious States; and by a vote of 20 to 7 it was decided to be *good* policy on the part of the Government to do it at the present time."<sup>10</sup>

While that debate was going on, at the Post Office a petition praying Congress to emancipate the slaves in the rebellious states was getting signatures. As anti-slavery sentiment grew throughout the North, many communities petitioned Congress for the abolition of slavery. The petition of citizens of Winchester, Massachusetts, praying for the abolition of slavery, reached the clerk's desk of the House of Representatives on March 14, 1862.

In April, the Literary Association voted unanimously in favor of the question "Are the recommendations of the President in his message to Congress relative to the emancipation of slaves, constitutional or expedient?" Another unanimous affirmative vote followed the October debate on the question "Is the President's recent Proclamation of Emancipation expedient and politic at the present time?"

In September, a petition was in circulation asking the President to issue a proclamation of emancipation. On Sept. 22, 1862, Lincoln issued a preliminary proclamation announcing that emancipation would become effective on Jan. 1, 1863, in those states still in rebellion.

"The birth-day of Freedom, as it may not inaptly be termed, was noticed on Thursday, Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, by the ringing of bells, a merry peal for an hour or more, the blowing of the steam whistle at the tannery of B. F. Thompson & Co., and other demonstrations. The National Flag was displayed from the flag staff in the centre of the town, and a jubilant spirit was manifested by many. The general feeling seemed to be that the 'day of Freedom had dawned at length,' and that 'twas 'God's appointed day.'"<sup>11</sup>

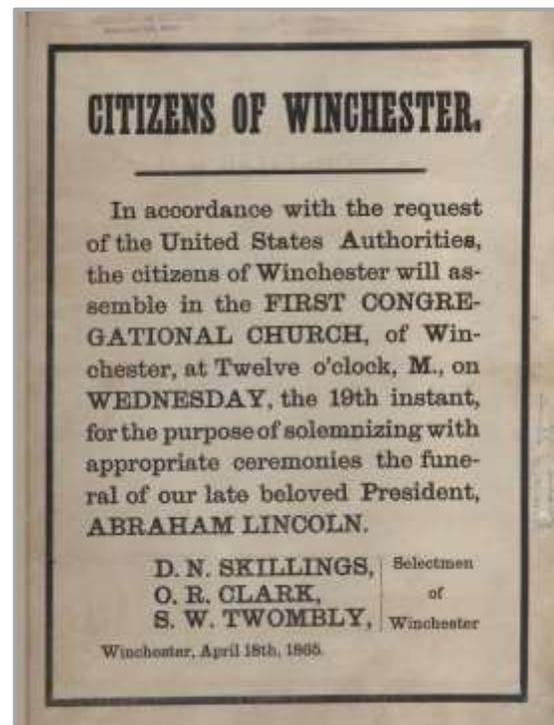
Since the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by the president but was not Congressional legislation and did not preclude slavery across the nation, in January 1864 yet another petition to the Senate and House for the abolition of slavery and for a constitutional amendment to prohibit slavery throughout the country was at the Winchester Post Office for signatures. At a point where it had about 150 signatures,<sup>12</sup> still it was noted that two or three refused to sign it.<sup>13</sup>

A little over a year later, the war was over. "The town bell rung out a merry peal," on Feb. 9, 1865, "in honor of the signing, by President Lincoln, of the Constitutional Amendment prohibiting slavery in the United States. The national flag was displayed from the public flag staff and from many of the buildings in town, and a general feeling of rejoicing pervaded the community."<sup>14</sup>

Soon afterward, the war was over. On April 11, "Immediately after the receipt of the news in the morning [the surrender at Appomattox] the flags were thrown to the breeze and the bells rung out their merry peals, aided now and then by the discordant notes of the steam-whistle attached to Thompson's tannery. This was kept up almost continuously during the day.... Fireworks were displayed from the common and some other points during the evening. The front of Lyceum building was tastefully decorated with bunting and together with many of the residences of the citizens was brilliantly illuminated."<sup>15</sup>

Four days later, the "the drapery of sorrow" replaced the bunting on the Lyceum Building. "Like a thunderclap on a calm summer day, when all around is fair and bright, came the news to our ears of the dreadful deed which had been committed, showing more clearly than ever the barbarism of slavery and the depths to which its abettors and supporters will go to accomplish their hellish designs." The once jubilant flags were lowered to half-mast and the church bell tolled "to show, in a slight manner, our deep grief."<sup>16</sup>

In June, 1865, John Parker, who reportedly had been a slave for 38 years before escaping during the war, gave an address at the Congregational Church. "His remarks and illustrations went to show the barbarism of slavery, which is too well known to be repeated here."<sup>17</sup>



The end of slavery in America came with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on Dec. 18, 1865. Thereafter the subject was virtually absent from *The Middlesex Journal* until early 1867 when a local ladies' auxiliary society was formed to aid in the education of the Freedmen. "It is propose to defray the expense of a teacher at the South who shall aid in this important work," the education of the Freedmen. "No one should be indifferent or refuse to aid so excellent an undertaking, which seeks to throw light into the darkened mind—to elevate the

human race without distinction of color to the broad platform of equality and justice.”<sup>18</sup> Entertainments were staged to raise the necessary funding. In April, the first letters were received from the teacher employed in Charlestown, South Carolina.

For a year, the Society supported a teacher in the South but in February 1868 decided it was inexpedient to continue (without more generous support) and so dissolved. “It reflects no credit upon our town that the fact should go forth, that an organization having so excellent and praiseworthy an object should cease to exist for want of proper nourishment and support; that so unsectarian a work should fail to enlist the sympathies and receive the generous encouragement of a town professing to have so much at heart the interest of the freedmen.”<sup>19</sup>

In the first few decades following the Civil War, a few black people, including freed slaves, made their way to Winchester. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a community developed in the area of Harvard and Irving Streets, introducing townspeople to people with whom many had sympathized but never before had known.

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2019 is a revision of articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 22, 2013 and Feb. 11 2019. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from W. T. Eustis to Rev. George Cooke, Springfield, Jan. 15, 1887. What his “subsequent record” was is not known.

<sup>3</sup> The advertisement was reproduced in *The Winchester Record*, Vol. I, No. 4, p. 308.

<sup>4</sup> *The Liberator* of Dec. 30, 1942 lists South Woburn as one of 33 towns contributing names for the anti-slavery petitions of the Latimer Committee. The May 13, 1842 issue includes South Woburn on a list of towns contributing money to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. In the Feb. 24, 1843 issue, South Woburn was on a schedule for Anti-Slavery Society meetings, but it was later announced that the venue for that meeting had been changed to Stoneham.

<sup>5</sup> Excelsior [Edwin A. Wadleigh], *The Middlesex Journal*, Dec. 10, 1859.

<sup>6</sup> See “The Abolitionist and the Sculptor” at this same site.

<sup>7</sup> The vote was Lincoln 190, Douglas 93, Bell 78, and Breckenridge 4. Bell’s running mate was Edward Everett, who built a home in Winchester in 1859.

<sup>8</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 9, 1861.

<sup>9</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 15, 1862.

<sup>10</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 22, 1862.

<sup>11</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Jan. 3, 1863.

<sup>12</sup> It is unknown whether anyone or only voters could sign the petitions. The population of Winchester was 1,937 in 1860 and 1,968 in 1860. In 1865, there were 590 legal and naturalized voters.

<sup>13</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 26, 1864.

<sup>14</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 11, 1865.

<sup>15</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, April 15, 1865.

<sup>16</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, April 22, 1865.

<sup>17</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, June 10, 1865.

<sup>18</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 9, 1867. Excelsior gave the group several names—Winchester Society for Educational Purposes, New England Freedmen’s Union Commission, Freeman’s Aid Society, and the Society for Aiding Free Schools at the South.

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<sup>19</sup> Excelsior, *The Middlesex Journal*, Feb. 8, 1868. Wadleigh felt that since the Society was associated with the Unitarian Church it suffered lack of support due to a sectarian attitude among other church-goers. One reader challenged his charge of bigotry as offensive and untrue, noting that other religious societies have their own benevolent objects to sustain and should not be called hard names for not considering another's cause an obligation. Excelsior continued to blame a sectarian spirit for the failure of the Society's fund-raising efforts.