

## STRIKE SPARKED RIOTS IN WINCHESTER IN AUGUST 1935

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

At the end of July and into early August in 1935 there was a lot of excitement in Winchester. Crowds of people gathered daily around the Beggs & Cobb Tannery where about 450 workers were on strike. Riots broke out, police fired tear-gas bombs to disperse the crowds, and strike-breakers had to be held captive inside the factory for their own safety. The whole affair was not only a local sensation but also one followed daily in the *Boston Globe*.<sup>2</sup>

The strike was called on Monday, July 29. An official union statement on the workers' grievances was not immediately made public, but it was reported in the *Winchester Star* that "rumors have been rampant." The *Globe* reported that after the walkout, the workers assembled on Main and Swanton streets. Four union workers carried placards, and one policeman was on duty. There was no disturbance, and the workers went to a meeting in Woburn.



*The Beggs & Cobb Tannery, formerly located at Swanton and Main Streets,  
viewed from upriver on a peaceful day*

On Tuesday, things were reportedly peaceful at the factory. That changed on Wednesday when 11 strike-breakers were called in to finish a number of hides in the vats which were in danger of spoiling and causing an estimated loss of \$100,000 to the company.

According to the *Star*, the union men and their pickets were peaceful enough, but there was trouble from sympathizers and "young hoodlums." When the strike-breakers arrived, some sympathizers tried to wreck one of the machines and threw rocks at the men, one of whom was struck but not seriously injured.

Chief of Police William Rogers ordered all available officers to the site. One man was arrested and charged with disturbing the peace and malicious damage to property. Thereafter, there was no trouble until the end of the day.

## FIRST RIOT

Throughout the day, crowds gathered around the tannery. Cars filled with curious onlookers waiting for something to happen were parked along Main Street from Hemingway Street to Clark Street. The majority reportedly appeared to be in sympathy with the strikers.

Then came the time for the strike-breakers to leave the plant. According to the *Globe*, Rogers had arranged for a signal when the men were to depart. But no signal was given, and the gates suddenly opened. A crowd of about 1,500 converged near the three automobiles taking the workers home.

There was no trouble, the *Star* reported, until one man picked up a stone to hurl at the automobiles. Under Rogers' orders, the police released tear-gas bombs. The crowd broke up, but as the three cars sped down Main Street, the *Globe* reported, they went through a barrage of stones which broke all the windows.

It was claimed that three men and a boy, age 5, were injured by the gas and would prefer charges against the police. The man who hurled the stone was arrested and faced the same charges as the man arrested that morning.

Thursday's *Globe* stated, "Floods of tear gas let loose by police and a barrage of stones hurled by strike sympathizers ... marked the worst outbreak of labor trouble ever seen in the Woburn-Winchester tanning district."

## SECOND DAY OF RIOTS

The strike-breakers returned on Thursday in three cars, each with armed guards on the running boards, and were allowed into the factory "without so much as a boo or a cat-call." Peaceful picketing continued. Union leaders cautioned the picketers to refrain from violence, which they did, any trouble coming from the crowd which reportedly grew to about 3,000.



When the strike-breakers were ready to leave, the crowd reportedly jammed the street outside the front gates, so Rogers tried to use a side gate to get the workers out safely. However, a small crowd surged toward the cars and drew the attention of the main crowd which raced down the street toward the cars. Rogers fired one tear-gas bomb at the smaller crowd. When those people stopped, the cars drove on safely.

That day, August 1, negotiations were begun by the State Board of Arbitration and Conciliation. The union had 37 charges, including the stepping up of production and increase in the working week by four hours without an increase in pay. Another charge was that a young woman

employee was laid off because she refused to date one of her bosses. Many other charges, as admitted by the union, were minor.

Meanwhile, meetings between the union and factory leaders were delayed because two of the latter were on a yachting trip.

### THIRD DAY OF RIOTS

On Friday, the rioting continued. When the strike-breakers arrived, there was a riot which ended with injuries and arrests. Later in the day a vehicle leaving the plant with two unidentified men was the target for a barrage of stones. A tear-gas bomb was fired, but most of the smoke blew back in the officers' faces.

"In the afternoon," the *Globe* reported, "more than a hundred baseball bats were handed out among the pickets with the admonition 'No violence now boys.'" Apparently, the bats were not put to use except to make a striking Associated Press photograph.



*The call was for a strike in late July and early August 1935, while workers at the Beggs & Cobb Tannery waited for management to play ball after receiving their list of grievances.*

The continuing danger to the strike-breakers and private police with them led to their being confined inside the factory from Friday until Monday morning. This arrangement was reportedly agreed to by those men, Winchester police, selectmen, and union officials as being the best

means to end the riots, a situation, the *Globe* said, “believed without parallel in the history of Massachusetts labor troubles.”

Police patrolled the streets all night long. In the morning, the pickets, which guarded the building, allowed food through the blockade for the men imprisoned in the factory.

Meanwhile, the attorney general conferred with parties involved and with the Board of Arbitration and Conciliation and issued a statement of hope for an early settlement if the strikers would return to work to save the endangered hides.

A strike settlement conference was scheduled for Monday. The strikers voted that some men would return on Monday and work on the endangered hides as long as the negotiations made progress.

Union leaders still objected to the tactics used by police, particularly the “unwarranted” use of tear gas, but on Sunday the *Globe* reported, “Hope Increases at Winchester,” after tension eased and the picket lines and the police force at the tannery were reduced over the weekend.

### THE STRIKE ENDS

On Monday, the strike ended. Sixteen union men replaced the strike-breakers, and the latter were given a police escort to the Medford line without incident. The tannery employees voted unanimously to return to work on terms agreed upon by union leaders, company representatives, and the State Board of Arbitration and Conciliation.

Twenty points of dispute were immediately settled and others left for arbitration with the state Board or a committee of employers and employees. The workers won two important demands, additional pay for the overtime and the re-employment of the young woman discharged without proper cause.



On Tuesday, Aug. 6, the workers of Beggs & Cobb went back to work. Sidney Beggs (back from his yachting trip for the Monday meeting) was quoted in the *Star* as saying, “the company has not made any money for years and the plant has been kept in operation without interruption largely for the benefit of the 500 or more employees.” It was further reported that “the statement that the shop would close if further labor troubles exist was characterized as no idle threat by another member of the firm.”

The eventual closing of Beggs & Cobb was announced in 1957. Almost two years later, a great fire destroyed the tannery buildings, providing another spectacular episode in Winchester’s history.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 13, 2011. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> The *Boston Globe* printed articles from Aug. 1 through Aug. 7.