

## WINCHESTER INCORPORATOR WAS ACTIVE ABOLITIONIST

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

On Jan. 1, 1863, when Pres. Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Winchester's church bell rang and the Thompson tannery steam whistle sounded while townspeople rejoiced, as they did again on Feb 9. 1865 when Lincoln signed the Constitutional Amendment prohibiting slavery in the United States.

Many residents of Winchester had signed petitions appealing for this legislation, for Winchester was a highly Republican and anti-slavery (the two terms were synonymous back then) community.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most active and outspoken of the town's Abolitionists was John Augustus Bolles (1809-1878). Admitted to the bar in Boston in 1833, Bolles practiced law in Boston and moved to Winchester in the late 1840s. He was prominently involved in town affairs, becoming one of Winchester's incorporators, the man who signed the first Town Meeting warrant, swore in the first officers, and served several times as moderator.



*John A. Bolles,  
photographed in 1878*

He held state positions as well—Secretary of State of Massachusetts (1843), member of the Board of Education, and Commissioner of Boston Harbor and Back Bay (1852). He was a highly respected citizen.

However, early on, as he became involved in politics and stood as an orator at conventions and political rallies, Bolles emerged as a controversial figure. He was first allied with the Democrats, when that party was standing for American democratic principles in contrast to the old British Whig party. Though popular with Democrats, his speeches routinely irritated Whigs.

In 1840, for example, when the contest for president lay between the Whig William Henry Harrison and the Democrat Martin Van Buren, *The Boston Post* reported that while Bolles was speaking to a Democratic assembly, "Every subject of particular interest, now agitated by the two great political parties, he fairly met and treated candidly" and that he "was frequently applauded during his remarks, and when he concluded, it was amid the cheers of delighted thousands."<sup>3</sup>

But the pro-Whig *Daily Atlas*, which considered Bolles to be insolent and impudent, judged his attacks upon Whigs as "malignant and venomous," and was aghast that he would go so far as to attack the moral characters of such estimable figures as Thomas Handasyd Perkins and to "denounce Gen. Harrison as a Jackass."<sup>4</sup>

But Perkins, though known as a philanthropist, was a slave trader early in his career. Harrison, the war hero, vacillated on the subject of slavery according to what was politically advantageous. Bolles had one stand on slavery, unalterable opposition.

## ABOLITION

Eventually, Bolles left the Democrats in favor of the Free Soil Party, founded in 1848. While serving as president of the Free Soil Convention for Middlesex County in 1851, he defined the party's principle, "to make war upon the hitherto dominant party of the State [the Whigs], which ought to have warred upon slavery, but had thrown over the business to us."<sup>5</sup>

Bolles was also a member of the Boston Vigilance Committee, formed in 1841 to protect and assist fugitive slaves. Among his many court cases was the defense of the African American John P. Coburn. After a fugitive slave known as Shadrach had been captured by U.S. marshals in Boston under the authority of the Fugitive Slave Act, the Boston Vigilance Committee freed Shadrach and helped him to Canada. Coburn, arrested in 1851 on charges of aiding and abetting in freeing Shadrach, was defended by Bolles and acquitted.

## FREEDMEN'S FUTURE

After the war broke out and Bolles enlisted, he was attached to the staff of Gen. John A. Dix (his brother-in-law<sup>6</sup>) as judge advocate from January 1862 through 1865.



*Maj. John A. Bolles  
in 1862*

Since he left Boston to join Dix on Feb. 19 1862, Bolles would have missed Frederick Douglass's appearance in Winchester's Lyceum Hall to speak on "The Black Man's Future in the Southern States."<sup>7</sup> But the future of freed slaves was an issue with which he became involved as Dix's aide.

In 1862 Dix was at Fortress Monroe near Old Point Comfort in Virginia. About 2,000 runaway and abandoned slaves were encamped nearby. The military was not equipped to provide medical care, food, shelter, and protection to so many refugees. That September, Dix asked Secretary of War Edwin Stanton for authorization to make arrangements with the governors of some northern states to grant them temporary asylum.

According to research by historian V. Jacque Voegeli,<sup>8</sup> Dix drafted a letter to nine governors and then narrowed that down to three, of which Massachusetts was his first choice.

It was Bolles who delivered Dix's proposal with Stanton's endorsement to Gov. John A. Andrew. Bolles warned "it is not unlikely that the whole multitude of colored men, women, & children now freed from bondage will either be swept back into slavery" by rebel troops or sent "without preparation or notice to some place removed from the field of war."

Though most, including Douglass, envisioned the blacks' future lying in the South, one of the feared outcomes of emancipation among New Englanders, one which threatened the cause of emancipation itself, was that free blacks would overflow the North and compete with other labor. When news of Dix's proposal broke, Voegeli wrote, Massachusetts Republicans charged that Dix was attempting to saddle their party with the responsibility for promoting black immigration to the North.

Andrew went to Washington to persuade the War Department to reconsider its approval of the Dix's relocation plan. "An entreaty from Major Bolles to Andrew shortly after the governor had left for Washington underscored the importance of the War Department's position," Voegeli reported. "The 'national Government,'" Bolles wrote, "asks Massachusetts, through her Governor, 'Will you, for a while, furnish the needful asylum... so that they shall not be swept back into bondage, nor be sent away in such haste as to subject them to great, if not fatal inconvenience & discomfort?'"

"This appeal and the closing hope that Andrew would prove 'the genuine humanity of Massachusetts, and her loyalty to the National Government' failed to deflect Andrew from his mission in Washington," Voegeli wrote. Stanton having changed his mind, Andrew returned to Boston and rejected Dix's proposal.



Gen. Dix

In 1865 Bolles, brevetted to Brigadier General, was appointed Naval Solicitor General and thereafter resided in Washington but was not forgotten in Winchester and Boston. After his death in 1878, *The Boston Globe* wrote, "He was a man of culture, of refinement and of more than ordinary talent, and was respected for excellent traits of character."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article © 2022 by the author Ellen Knight was first published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on June 13, 2022. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> For more on abolitionist sentiment in Winchester, see <https://www.winchester.us/DocumentCenter/View/4304/Abolition-and-Emancipation?bidId=>.

<sup>3</sup> *The Boston Post* Sept. 24, 1840.

<sup>4</sup> *The Boston Daily Atlas*, Oct. 5, 1840

<sup>5</sup> *The Boston Courier*, Oct. 2, 1851.

<sup>6</sup> Winchester's Dix Street, where the Bolles family lived, owes its names to Bolles' petition for the name, granted by the Board of Selectmen in 1861.

<sup>7</sup> Bolles could have heard the same speech in Boston.

<sup>8</sup> V. Jacque Voegeli, "A Rejected Alternative: Union Policy and the Relocation of Southern 'Contrabands' at the Dawn of Emancipation," *The Journal of Southern History*, Nov. 2003, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Nov., 2003).

<sup>9</sup> *The Boston Globe*, June 3, 1878.