

# THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN



March 1975, Vol. XI, No. 3



This is the swamp that led 200 years ago "to the house of one Wheaton, in a remote part of the town." (From the Journal of John Howe, British spy.) Story starts on Page 3.

## DR. RICHARD HOWARD OF ARNOLD ARBORETUM WILL BE FEATURE SPEAKER AT CHARTER ANNIVERSARY DINNER

On Thursday evening April 24th in the commodious hall of St. Peter's Church on the Boston Post Road, Dr. Richard A. Howard who for the past 21 years has been the distinguished director of the Arnold Arboretum, will be the featured speaker at the traditional Charter Anniversary Dinner of the Society. He has selected as the topic of his illustrated lecture "THE HERITAGE THAT THE CASE SISTERS LEFT TO WESTON." Even the oldtimers will learn, we're sure, some new things about the Misses Louisa and Marian Case, our long-time generous benefactors. The story of the Hillcrest Rose, the Hillcrest Gardens School, and the blueberry bushes with their dime-sized diameter berries will be among the many subjects to be covered.

Our guest speaker lives with his family at 137 Wellesley Street and is a member of this Society. He is the author of *999 SURVIVED, SUN, SAND, AND SURVIVAL*, and *DOWN IN THE NORTH*. A graduate of Miami University in Ohio, he subsequently received both his masters and doctor degrees at Harvard. During World War II he served as Captain in the U.S. Airforce, being decorated with the Legion of Merit. Most of all he is recognized as a world authority in the botanical and horticultural world, and we can all look forward eagerly to a most scintillating evening.

Invitations with complete details will be mailed to each member by the first of the coming month, but meanwhile we suggest that you mark on your calendar: **APRIL 24TH: WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL CHARTER ANNIVERSARY DINNER.**

## IN MEMORIAM

In the death of Wilmot Whitney on February 3, 1975 this Society suffered a great loss. Former director and a charter life member, "Whit" will always be remembered and honored as a genial and friendly enthusiast in clean sports and in all phases of cooperative, constructive citizenship.

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## APRIL 19th A HAPPY DAY IN WESTON BICENTENNIAL HISTORY

At 2 p.m., Saturday afternoon, April 19th, Weston's American Legion Post will sponsor the dedication of a plaque that will be unveiled and installed on a boulder that has been placed at the entrance to Lamson Park just west of the Town Hall. It will honor the 103 Weston men who 200 years before, under the leadership of Captain Samuel Lamson assembled when the alarm reached here and joined in driving the British troops back to Boston from Concord and Lexington. Following dedication exercises and an address by Weston's own representative to the General Court, Edward M. Dickson, awards will be presented in the Town Hall to the almost forty divisional winners of prizes in the Bicentennial Arts, Crafts, and History Town-wide contest in which a great many Weston school children and college students are now preparing essays, drawings, paintings, and objects of historical and community significance.

Other features of the day are being developed to make April 19th a memorable and happy occasion for Weston's citizenry as the State and National Bicentennial of the American Revolutionary War is on that day declared to be officially open and underway. Watch the local press for further announcements.

## BAY STATE HISTORICAL LEAGUE NOTICE

The next meeting of the Bay State Historical League to which all members of our Society are welcome will be held on Saturday, April 19th, at Fitchburg. Exhibits, addresses, and panel discussions will be available to the visitors who customarily attend these gatherings for sociability, enlightenment, inspiration, and entertainment. If you would like fuller information, call 899-4515 at any time.

## AN EDITOR'S DILEMMA

Even more than others, the editor of an historical publication faces the fullest burden of responsibility for *BEING SURE* that what's printed is authentic. Equally must he be aware of the human frailty of jumping to, or conversely, accepting faulty conclusions. Constantly he must insist: "How do you *KNOW*—where is your *PROOF*?" History holds no place for guesswork and that's why the dilemma so often appears. Here's a perfect illustration:

Conscientiously following the Journal printed by Roby of Concord, New Hampshire in 1827 which has widely been accepted as authentic for almost a century and a half, we finished writing *THE SPY THAT HID IN WESTON*. Our next step was to assume our editorial role and write a letter to the William L. Clemens Library of Americana at Ann Arbor, asking: "Would you please be kind enough to let me know whether or not in your very precious original set of General Gage's Papers you have any reference to John Howe, British Spy, or otherwise, so that I'll know at least that there was indeed a person of that name who acted in that capacity during the early days of April 1775?"

As we go to press, the reply of Feb. 10, 1975 reads:

*"In searching through the Gage calendar to our collection and our card catalogue, I can find no reference to correspondence between Gage and John Howe. In preparation for a bulletin on Lexington and Concord, I recently read through the Gage Papers for 1774-1775 and I do not remember finding any reference to intelligence reports or espionage activities of John Howe. I am sorry to have such negative findings to report, but should we ever come across any references to John Howe, we will certainly let you know."*

(Continued on Page 6)



## THE SPY THAT HID IN WESTON

In early April 1775 Thomas Gage faced a great decision. As British governor of Massachusetts and Commander in Chief of British troops in North America, he knew the hour for action had come. So much trouble was brewing he could no longer mark time in Boston. Great stores of supplies and ammunition were daily being assembled at Worcester. Should he strike there before Concord, or after? Though twice as far, the prize was bigger. Last February two of his officers, Brown and DeBerniere, had posed as spies and brought back maps of the countryside. How accurate were they? Had conditions changed? He had to know.

On <sup>Wednesday</sup> April 5th he ordered Col. Smith and young John Howe to go to Worcester disguised as countrymen (gray coats, leather breeches, blue mixed stockings with silk flag handkerchiefs around their necks) to examine roads, bridges, fording possibilities, and the best routes. With a stick in one hand and a small bundle tied with a homespun handkerchief in the other, they walked six miles before breakfasting at a tavern in Watertown.\*

The waitress startled Col. Smith right away by letting him know that she recognized him as a British officer from Boston with a poor disguise. Once outside, Smith told Howe he'd have to go it alone, and turning over the papers Gage had entrusted to him and ten guineas, he wished 22-year-old Howe the best of luck, promising him a commission if he returned safely to Boston. Howe found the four miles to Waltham Plains good. There he told the tavernkeeper that although a gunsmith by trade, he'd gladly do any kind of farmwork. It was suggested to him that he go to Springfield "where they need help badly as they expect the regulars out from Boston shortly." He had faced his first test alone successfully by calling for "New England and Molasses", favorite drink of the Liberty Men. Turning westward, his Journal reports, he found "roads hilly, stony, and crooked for about 3 miles when I came to a hollow with a narrow causeway over it." This we recognize as Stony Brook, the easternmost edge of Weston. He left the road and went below to see where artillery might cross. Finding no such spot he looked up and saw a negro setting traps. Clutching his middle he asked the man where he could find some sweet flag for his stomach ache. The man said "None of it grows here" but gave him some of his own.

As they walked back to the road, Howe noticed "the largest tree I ever saw." The black man identified it as a buttonwood and said: "We're going to cut it down to stop the regulars from crossing with their cannon. We have men at Cambridge and Charlestown as lookouts." He told Howe that up the road by the meetinghouse he'd find, kept by Joel Smith, "a good tavern and a good Liberty man" while another tavern a half mile further was kept by "Captain Isaac Jones, wicked Tory, where a great many British officers go from Boston." This was John Howe's introduction to Weston, April 5, 1775.

Leaving Stony Brook, he came after a mile to the Josiah Smith Tavern where Joel Smith, son of the founder, presided as Innkeeper. Howe asked two teamsters who were tackling their teams if they knew anyone who "wanted to hire." One of them said hotly: "don't know anyone who'd hire an Englishman." "What makes you think I'm English?" asked Howe. "You look like them rascals we see in Boston" was the reply. Here Howe confides in his Journal, "I wished myself at Captain Jones' but to start off then it would not do, so I walked into the house and called for rum and molasses. One of the men followed me and told the landlord he guessed I was an English spy . . . The landlord questioned me closely. . . . I told him I was going to Springfield to work at the gunsmith business . . . but should like to work a few days to get money to bear my expenses . . . The landlord told me he believed Captain Jones would hire: I asked him where he lived; he

\*The contents of Howe's original Journal were kindly made available to us by the Massachusetts Historical Society, so let us follow each exciting event as it took place during the next seven terrifying and hazardous days. Salient quotations in Howe's own words will brighten the narrative as we proceed —Ed.

said a half a mile above, and kept a tavern at the sign of the golden ball. This seemed to pacify the teamsters. I went on to Capt. Jones'; here I handed him a letter from General Gage. After perusing it he took me by the hand and invited me upstairs." There Howe reported what had happened in the first 14 miles that day. Jones said if he stayed at his tavern it would be mobbed, so after a good dinner, he had his hired man take him to a friend's house that stood until the early 1920's at 221 Ash Street. It was owned by a Nathaniel Wheaton, housewright, who in those parlous times may or may not have been a Tory as far as anyone knew. Certainly he wanted to keep on good terms with everyone, especially a customer such as Jones was. Howe reports being "led into a chamber with a table furnished with a bottle of brandy, candles, paper, etc. Now I went to work to copy from my head on a journal."

This was the only night on his treacherous journey when Howe slept well and undisturbed. The next morning, <sup>Thursday</sup> April 6th, he was aroused by "the good hired man (who) informed me that the news of the conversation at Watertown between Col. Smith and a black woman had reached Capt. Jones by the teamsters you saw at J. Smith's tavern. They insisted there were British spies in the house and by 11 o'clock 30 men had collected. Capt. Jones gave them leave to search the house. . . . then they went into the kitchen and asked the black woman . . . . she answered they sent them to Jericho swamp . . . about two miles from Jones' tavern."\* So late at night, searching the swamp appealed much less to the Vigilantes than the bottle of spirits Captain Jones laid before them, and the night closed with everybody happy!

Admonished by the hired man "lie low until dusk", Howe spent the day indoors writing down "the number of militia, arms, and ammunition sent to me from Mr. Jones. After dinner, Mr. Wheaton introduced his two (10 and 13-year-old:—Ed) daughters to me, stating I was a British officer in disguise. We sat and played cards until tea time. After tea, the ladies retired and I lie down being still very tired and expected company that evening. About 8 the hired man called for me and said he was going with me to Marlborough but . . . we would not go by Capt. Jones' for they were lying in wait for me there; so I bid Mr. Wheaton and his family good bye, and off we set on the back road (today's Wellesley Street-Chestnut Street-Highland Street-Love Lane:—Ed) coming out above Capt. Jones' one mile on the Worcester Road. Here I found the roads good to Sudbury River . . . 20 miles from Boston . . . examined for a fording place providing the bridge should be moved . . . we found one fordable in Framingham, a town opposite from here. We proceeded for Esq. Barnes' in Marlborough . . . found the roads bad . . . traveled all night . . . arrived at the house of Esq. Barnes at 2 on the morning of the 7th <sup>Friday</sup> . . . squire put his head out the window . . . struck up a light and let us in, I gave him my letter from General Gage, my guide likewise . . . from Capt. Jones. . . he took me by the hand . . . promised to assist . . . set on table a bottle of brandy and some victuals . . . I asked him if he had heard of the affair . . . at Watertown and Weston . . . it was not believed. Here my guide left . . . Esq. said I'd better . . . rest . . . went to bed about 4 . . . slept till 9 then Esq. waked me . . . had been to tavern . . . reported there were 2 men . . . spies examining bridge near house where woman up with sick child saw them . . . told me remain there all day, make out plan of road so far as I had come . . . would go back to tavern to see if any stir . . . would let me know so could be conveyed to swamp . . . furnished with victuals, drink, pen, ink, and paper and the Esq. . . . to the tavern."

At about 4 that afternoon Barnes reported all quiet. Staying indoors till 8, Howe started to Worcester on Barnes' horse. Riding through snowfall at night, he surmounted a long hill just before sunrise <sup>Saturday the 8th</sup> and reached the home of a man whose name he omits. The letters he carried from Gage and Barnes gave him the green light. He rested through the daylight hours while getting data on the militia, ammunition stores, etc. After dark his host escorted him to where the stores were, showing him two wells into which flour and ammunition could be thrown. Howe found his host quite confident that the countryside wouldn't make much resistance if attacked. Taking sharp issue, he declared "If General Gage sent 5,000 troops with a train of artillery, they would never one of them get back alive."

\*To throw them off the scent, the girl pointed in just the opposite direction! —Ed.



*Saturday*  
That night at 9, Howe mounted his horse and returned to Barnes' house through bitter cold, fearing imminent capture and vowing to give up spying if he ever reached Boston, 50 miles away. Next morning, *Sunday April 9th*, Barnes served him a hot sling with his breakfast while giving him an up to date count of all the militia and stores from Worcester to Weston. From a garret window he pointed the best way he could get to Concord that evening across lots, swamps, and roads. Howe prepared to leave at dark, putting his papers into a bundle on the table as they finished a bottle of brandy. Interrupted by a knock at the front door, Barnes whispered for him to flee if he didn't come right back. Howe heard a voice declare "We've come to search for spies" and Barnes answer "I'm willing". He hoisted the window, leaped onto the snow-covered shed and fell flat on his back into the garden below. Picking up bundle and hat, he hurried into the swamp where he paused, and looking back, saw lights dodging at every window.

Fearing his tracks would give him away, he pushed along four miles to a house where he explained to the black man and his wife that he had to get to Concord fast as he expected the regulars from Boston in a few weeks and needed to start making guns at once. The woman hoped he'd make a lot because regulars had already been seen around Esquire Barnes' house the past few days. Howe asked her if Barnes was a Tory and when she nodded, he said he hoped they'd catch and hang him! The man took him to the Concord River post haste, borrowed a friend's canoe, and on reaching the other side, agreed for a half dollar more to take him another mile by a shortcut where they could buy some rum and get some sleep. After sunrise, *Monday the 10th*, the guide returned home and the landlord, named Weatherby, accompanied Howe to Concord where he introduced him to Major Buttrick and others as a trained gunsmith. This was welcome news. They hired a shop for him and brought some guns to repair. He worked with such neatness and despatch that they fell right in with his desire to go to his home in Pownalborough for his tools. One man, though, wanted to test him and when Howe gave the name of "Wood", asked him if he knew a "Col. Wood" there. Inwardly quaking, Howe said, offhand, "He's a distant relative." Asked if Col. Wood was a Liberty man, Howe said "Doubtful" whereupon the old man said "You tell him Major Parmenter of Sudbury says 'if you turn Tory he'll seek your life.'" After dinner Howe walked around with the men through the storehouse to examine guns while he snidely inventoried their flour and supplies, and noted where the doors and gates were and how operated. Joining in a final toast of brandy and water, he set off for his tools in Pownalborough!

Halfway to Lexington he stopped at a small house where he fell to ribbing an old man with "Who at your age do you think you're going to shoot with that gun you're polishing?" The man grinned and said "A flock of redcoats soon coming out from Boston will make great targets. I'll fight 'em open field or any ways! I'm 77 and haven't been killed yet!" Importuned by his wife to buy some cake and beer, Howe settled down for a social chat. When they learned his business and his errand, they refused to take any money from him and as a further dividend, he learned that a mile toward Lexington lived a detestable Tory named Gove (just the man he wanted to see)! An hour after sunset he reached Gove's house and was ushered into a private room where he learned that the mob that stormed Barnes' house last night in Marlborough had been outfitted with tar and feathers. Gove provided writing materials for him to bring his Journal up to date, but at 10 o'clock took him to an outhouse to sleep so he wouldn't be discovered if Liberty men got suspicious and searched the house. At daybreak *Tuesday the 11th*, Gove took him back and he waited in the comfortable house all day while Gove made a run around Concord to make sure all was quiet. At 8 that evening, they each mounted a horse and rode without incident to Charlestown where they parted at midnight, Gove returning to Lincoln leading Howe's horse while Howe gleefully crossed over to Boston by ferry and fell into his own bed at 2 A.M.; exactly one long and hectic week after he and Col. Smith had left on their mission of peril.

*Wednesday the 12th*

Turning out at sunrise, he tossed away his Yankee dress, donned his British uniform, and almost immediately encountered Col. Smith on King Street. When Smith said "We heard you broke your neck jumping out of Squire Barnes' window in Marlborough", Howe made no reply. Reaching General Gage's headquarters, Howe handed him his reports. The General passed them to his adjutant without looking at them and, handing Howe a guinea, said: "Take that, John and get some liquor: you're not half drunk enough for officers' company!" "After all I've been through, he treats me like that" must have been in the spy's mind, but he lost no time in carrying out the order. When he reappeared at 11, the General said "John, we have examined your journal—you're well deserving the name of a good soldier, and a lucky and expert spy!" (Not a word about a commission or the expected bonus!) Gage asked: "How large an army will it take to go to Worcester, destroy the stores there, and return safe?" Swiftly Howe told him "If you should march 10,000 regulars and a train of artillery to Worcester which is 50 miles from this place, the roads very crooked, stony, and hilly, and the inhabitants generally determined to be free or die, not one of them will get back alive." At this point when Smith opined "Howe has been scared by the old women", Major Pitcairn quipped "But not by any black woman!"

Finally Gage asked about Concord 18 miles away and was candidly told "500 *mounted* men might get to Concord in the night, destroy the stores and return safe, but to go with 1,000 *on foot* to destroy the stores, the country would be so alarmed that the greater part of them would get killed or taken." "Well, what do you think of our Tories", Gage asked, and Howe bluntly called them "generally cowards" and no dependence could, he felt, be placed in any of them. The General unctuously dismissed him with thanks, commending him on "very good judgment for a beardless lad of 22."

Only in choosing Concord instead of Worcester did Gates a few days later heed the young man's advice. Disregarding the prediction that 1,000 footmen couldn't make it, he sent only 800. Ignoring the opinion that 500 mounted men could do the job at night, he was negligent. By the following September Howe had had enough, joined the Liberty men at Albany, New York, and enlisted in the light dragoons for the duration. Profiting post-war from his early training in the art of deception, he became a successful and wealthy smuggler who despite plenty of aggressive artfulness, never stooped to supply liquor to the Indians with whom he extensively traded. We intend to tell that colorful story at a later date.

Harold G. Travis

## AN EDITOR'S DILEMMA

(Continued from Page 2)

Thus at the "Zero Hour" we take stock. 1st: John Howe is not mentioned in Allen French's "General Gage's Informers", — 2nd: His name does not appear in General Gage's Papers, — 3rd: For years historians have accepted as authentic "The *JOURNAL* kept by *John Howe* while he was employed as a *BRITISH SPY* during the Revolutionary War; Also while he was engaged in the *SMUGGLING BUSINESS* during the last war," and 4th, Since it was first published in 1827 it has twice been reprinted as authoritative.

We resolve the dilemma—"To print now or wait and wait and wait"—by deciding to run *THE SPY THAT HID IN WESTON* now while dutifully acknowledging that we and our readers are aware of the above and that, to our knowledge, no one yet has located the original Journal written in Howe's own hand. We assent to such assertions as "Nobody of Gage's stature would *admit* to spying", or, "The tradition of the spying profession involves secrecy forever.", but we still persist: "*How do you KNOW?*" Such skepticism continues even though as a person, we are prone to believe, despite the fact that nowhere in his meticulous diary does he admit it, that Weston's Samuel Phillips Savage not only moderated and participated in the Boston Tea Party, but actually organized and led it!

So while we and our sleuths everlastingly hunt through records and rosters, here is the story as the printed "JOURNAL" tells it. When and if we find proof that John Howe existed all right, that he did spy as reported, and that the *JOURNAL* as printed was in truth his own, we'll publish the news in the first succeeding issue. And, if in a later time, someone finds it, please for history's sweet sake, make that fact known so that libraries everywhere may close this *Chapter of Doubt* with the triumphant notation: "*CASE PROVED AND CLOSED.*"

—The Editor



## ARE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY ON THIS LIST OF MEMBERS ?

IF NOT, WE ASK FOR YOUR SUPPORT. AS A SPECIAL BICENTENNIAL OFFER YOUR ANNUAL DUES, PAID NOW, WILL EXTEND YOUR MEMBERSHIP TO AUGUST 31, 1976.

*Mr and Mrs George F. Amaten*

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