

# THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN



March 1976, Vol. XII, No. 3



“ . . . WESTON END OF THE BRIDGE AND HUNG THERE AT A PRECARIOUS ANGLE.”

*Photographs from H. Bentley Crouch Collection*

*See story on Page 3*

## “BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE ADAMS CHRONICLES” MARCH 18TH BICENTENNIAL LECTURE

On Thursday evening, March 18th at 8 o'clock in the Ball Room of the Josiah Smith Tavern, Mrs. Sumner Babcock of Wellesley will take our members backstage and tell us informally about some of the challenges and problems that confronted her while serving as consultant in the filming of *THE ADAMS CHRONICLES*. Since January 20th this historic 13-week television series has been delighting a multitude of viewers on Channel 2, Station WGBH, every Tuesday evening at 9 and again on Saturdays an hour earlier. Mrs. Babcock's talk therefore is not only timely but also appropriate, coming as it does in the midst of the observance of our nation's Bicentennial.

A resident of Wellesley, she had countless calls from location, usually the former Fox Studio in New York, for verification of facts, fashions, figures, and furniture, for authoritative and urgent advice as to details in the area of costumes, customs, language, properties, and settings. Her many personal visits were long and strenuous, but ever exciting. She was well qualified for such major and basic responsibilities. As a former member of the curatorial staff at Old Sturbridge Village, and director of the Wenham Historical Society, she was a fellow in the Winterthur Museum and Garden Program that culminated in her receiving a master's degree in "American Studies in the Decorative Arts" at the University of Delaware.

The hard decisions that veritably had to be made on the spot and on the spur of the moment because of time schedules will provide us with fascinating glimpses into what took place in the filming of this historic masterpiece. We look forward to a large attendance March 18th and remind our members that early arrivals can choose the best seats!

## IN MEMORIAM

Our Society lost one of its most faithful charter members in the passing on February 17th of Mrs. David M. (Rosamond Bennett) Little after a short illness. We last saw her on the Town Green and at the Josiah Smith Tavern on that recent Sunday afternoon and evening when the Knox Trail Trekkers were hosted overnight. Though the Massachusetts Turnpike destroyed her birthplace, she moved across the street on South Avenue and resided there until her death, active in all historical matters and a steady attendant at our meetings.

We record with sadness the death on February 13th of Arthur C. Havlin, who for thirty-five years was a resident of Weston. On retiring from business 16 years ago, he moved to Osterville. He returned often and regularly to the town to which he had given so much of himself in public service and support. He and his wife, Janet, who survives him and to whom our sincere sympathy is extended, have long been faithful members of our Society.

## WESTON'S BICENTENNIAL CALENDAR OF EVENTS

With directors, officers, and a vast number of our members participating actively in the planning and implementation of Weston's commemoration of our nation's Bicentennial, the wholehearted support by every family of each and all of the below events will be in keeping with the aims and purposes of The Weston Historical Society.

**Thursday March 4: 8 P.M. High School Gymnasium:**

**BICENTENNIAL MUSIC CELEBRATION:—** High School Band, Orchestra, Choruses, Junior High and Elementary School groups. Musical numbers include Sousa's George Washington Bicentennial March, When Johnny Comes Marching Home, Give My Regards To Broadway, and The Yellow Rose of Texas. The audience will join in the singing of our national anthem.

**Thursday March 18: 8 P.M. Josiah Smith Tavern. Bicentennial Lecture:—**

**BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE ADAMS CHRONICLES** by Mrs. Sumner Babcock. Members may invite guests. See story on Page One.

**Friday April 9: 7:30 P.M. Weston Town Hall: a two-part Program:**

**JOHN HOWE, BRITISH SPY:** original sound movie based on his Journal and produced by students of RIVERS SCHOOL.

**AWARD OF PRIZES: Townwide LITERARY AND ART BICENTENNIAL CONTEST.**

**Wednesday May 12: 7 P.M. Parish Hall of St. Peter's Episcopal Church**

**ANNUAL CHARTER ANNIVERSARY DINNER, WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY** members. Our speaker, Dr. Howard B. Jefferson, will tell us of "JOSIAH THOMAS AND THE AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY". Details will appear in our next issue: meanwhile save the date.

**Monday May 31: 10:00 A.M. Weston Town Hall. MEMORIAL DAY EXERCISES,**

followed by march with High School Band through business section to Farmers' Burying Ground, Soldiers' Park Memorial Monument, Central and Linwood Cemeteries.

**Saturday June 12: BICENTENNIAL FAMILY DAY:** Morning, afternoon, and evening

townwide program will involve and interest all ages of townspeople from youngest babies to oldest centenarians. Church services, reading of THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, gala parade, picnics, plays, band concert, sports, games, and all sorts of homespun, wholesome fun and fellowship IN THE WESTON TRADITION.



“ . . . LOCOMOTIVES AND THE FIRST FEW CARS WERE A SHAMBLES.”



“ . . . FIFTY PASSENGERS, ALL PILED IN THE LOWER END . . . ”

### THE WRECK OF “THE YANKEE”

On September second 1910, the *YANKEE*, a train bound for New York by way of Springfield, left Boston at noon with six hundred passengers aboard. At 12:30 it raced past Riverside Station, picking up speed for the grades that lay ahead. Less than half a minute later the two locomotives and the first few cars were a shambles, for the train had hit an open interlocking switch and jumped the tracks. Both engines ploughed through five hundred and ten feet of ties, cutting and splintering them into bits, but they still managed to reach the Weston end of the Charles River bridge before coming to a stop with their tenders overturned.

The mail car telescoped the rear of engine number two. The next car was the “smoker” which was filled with people, and it started rolling down towards the river. Suddenly it caught on an abutment at the Weston end of the bridge and hung there at a precarious angle.

Ambulances and physicians hurried to the scene and the Newton chemical engine rushed to extinguish in the locomotives the fires which threatened to spread back into the wooden coaches. Fifty passengers, all piled in the lower end of the smoker, were taken out through the shattered windows. Some of them had to go to the Newton Hospital to be treated for cuts, bruises, and other minor injuries, but the only real casualty was a broken arm! Anyone looking at the shambles might well wonder why a great many people weren’t killed, either from the jolt or from panic in the upended smoking car.

The mail clerk, badly bruised and bleeding, was found sitting on a mail sack, smoking a cigar. When they asked him if he would like to be taken to a doctor, he replied, “As long as I can sit up, I guess I’ll look after this registered mail.” He remained at his post until some authorized clerks arrived from the West Newton post office to relieve him. The mail car incidentally, was shattered beyond repair, and after all the metal worth salvaging had been removed, it was set on fire and burned where it lay.

The surface of the Charles River was strewn with splintered fragments of the wrecked coaches and other floating debris, and many sightseers and souvenir hunters were on hand to collect mementos of the extraordinary accident. A special locomotive was sent out from Boston. Five undamaged coaches and a parlor car were uncoupled from the derailed train so that passengers might proceed to their various destinations.

In spite of all that happened at Riverside, this special train managed to arrive in Springfield only one hour and ten minutes late. As for the mess at Riverside, it took fourteen hours to clean it up and get all four sets of tracks back into normal service.

Brenton H. Dickson

## AND WHO WAS THIS MAN ROBY?

(A sequel to THE SPY THAT HID IN WESTON and "AN EDITOR'S DILEMMA" in our March 1975 issue: Vol. XI, No. 3)

More times than not, diaries and journals in the field of dangerous espionage are tantalizingly vague and purposely noncommittal. Once ensnared in the hazards of such a career, the secret agent or spy must perforce abandon, forsake, and renounce any carelessness that would ever make his methods, moves, and techniques matters of common knowledge or even of suspicion. At the cost of life itself, he must leave no trace or trail to identify his employer as an individual, group, or nation. Nor dare he reveal the motives, be they sincere, sinister, or what, that lie behind every move or word. That's why it's so difficult to defend, prove, or substantiate the authenticity and veracity of

A  
JOURNAL  
kept by  
MR. 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 late war  
Concord, N.H.  
LUTHER ROBY, PRINTER  
1827

Were he still alive at the time of that publication, John Howe would have been 79 years of age. Roby himself was 27,—destined to live to be 83,—when he offered to the public "this pamphlet which has never been published before."

Where did Roby get that Journal,—was Howe still alive and if so, had old age taken its toll,—had Roby ever met or corresponded with him,—why is part of the Journal written in the first person, some parts obviously condensed,—and why do certain parts wind up in the third person? None of these queries are answered in any way, shape, or manner. Publisher Roby merely assures "The Public" that he himself is to reap no financial gain of any kind, but pledges humanely that "the profits resulting from the sale of the same will be appropriated to the benefit of an industrious and enterprising Citizen of New Hampshire, who, a short time since, had the misfortune to be deprived of his sight, by the accidental explosion of a rock, while he was engaged in charging the same." Who was that unfortunate man? Again, Roby did not choose to say.

Both John Howe and Luther Roby have had some distinguished recognition through our most recent half century. Roby printed the Journal in 1827, and exactly one hundred years later it was reproduced in *MAGAZINE OF HISTORY*, Extra Number 132, Tarrytown, N. Y. 1927. A dozen years later, the pamphlet was considered of sufficient interest because of its rarity to be re-issued by the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY in its *PHOTOSTAT AMERICANA*, Second Series, Number 82, Boston 1939.

It's easier for us to authenticate Luther Roby and to verify his integrity than it has been after years of much greater effort to prove who John Howe actually was and that he himself did write the Journal verbatim as Roby printed it. We found in war records for the Albany, N. Y. area that more than a dozen John Howes enlisted in the Continental Army from that region alone in 1775! The possibility of the name being a non de plume or alias cannot lightly be dismissed. Rather it adds zest to the chase of Howe and his Journal. Until the facts are known, we give him the benefit of the doubt, hoping that in a positive manner he some day can be proved to have been a hero in his unusual field. Meanwhile, our study of Luther Roby, the man who published the Journal a century and

a half ago, reveals an apparently honest and good citizen of high ideals, indefatigable energy, and endless good works. As such, he gets a high mark in our Credibility Test. A sixteen page article by Mr. Edward J. Gallagher in the September 1946 issue of HISTORICAL NEW HAMPSHIRE, published by the New Hampshire Historical Society, is entitled: *LUTHER ROBY, EARLY NEW HAMPSHIRE PUBLISHER*. In it we find much of the fascinating information that follows:

Luther Roby was born in the first year of the 19th Century in Amherst, New Hampshire, birthplace of Horace Greeley. He served his apprenticeship under Richard Boylston who was related by marriage to President John Adams and whose wife was a niece of Paul Revere. By the time Roby reached twenty he had proved his craftsmanship by printing a bible, certainly a good step morally! On November 13, 1821 he sent ahead to Concord, the state capitol, a notice to the effect that on the following New Year's Day, he would locate there and publish "The Statesman" every Monday evening "on a royal sheet with new and handsome type, at 2 dollars per annum."

His first editorial asserted: "If a newspaper be prostituted to the service of puffing a few syncophantic dependents, and blasting the character of honest and independent politicians, whether Republican or Federal, the spirit of liberty will rouse the indignation of the people, and consign the editor to perpetual infamy and disgrace." Entering wider fields, Roby sold "The Statesman" to Amos Parker in June 1821 but continued to print it for 18 months. By then he had obtained the right to stereotype plates for printing bibles.

As it does in this modern day, the Holy Bible headed the Best Sellers list and, in lieu of royalties, "rent" was usually paid for the use of stereotypes. Already Roby had been printing Noah Webster spelling books, and both Leavitt's and Poor Richard Almanacs. An item in the Concord *MONITOR* referred to Roby as "owner of the largest stereotype foundry in America." Previously he had claimed that he was "publishing more Bibles and Hymnals than any man in the world." Would a man of such prominence in the religious world stoop to the publication of a "phoney hoax"?

By 1830 a distributorship alliance was formed, wholesale and retail, under the name of Roby, Kimball, and Merrill. Merrill did the selling, and Roby printed the bibles, primers, almanacs, and spelling books. Money then was scarce and we find many instances of barter. As an example, Thomas Groom, the Boston stationer, supplied paper from England for the printing, also calf and sheepskins for the binding, in return for bibles and other books manufactured by Roby. Other prominent customers included Philadelphia's Lippincott and such firms as Harper and Bros. and D. Appleton of New York. Publications were many and notable, ranging from Reverend *Henry Weare's* Sermons (the first Unitarian book issued in the state), to *William Tell*, *Stranger's Grave*, *Daily Food*, *Capt. Mayatt's Novels*, *Naval Battles*, and many other books and pamphlets among which the *Journal of John Howe* interests us most.

Roby's first wife, Nancy Curtis, died in 1827 and late in the following year he married Mary Ann Kimball. He was the father of ten children, two by his first wife. He loved his family, seldom traveled, and his office and plant were always a short walk from home. For eight years he headed the Concord Fire Department with "more than 400 men and boys manning nine hand engines." As late as 1880 an interviewer mentioned how much he prized among his greatest possessions, his fireman's hat and trumpet. He recalled then that in 1848, Concord had 1804 voters and his salary was five dollars a year!

From earliest youth, he had been enamored of geology. When concentration on the printing profession began to impair his health, he was forced to take exercise in the open air. During long walks, he was particularly fond of Rattlesnake Hill where his geological explorations revealed the merits of what became the granite quarries of Concord. With his son, he put in the first blast and made the first opening. Before that time, James O. Lyford's History tells us, "all the granite had been taken from boulders." (See how this ties into Luther Roby's promise "To the Public" to give the profits of *Howe's Journal* to the relief of an unfortunate dynamiter who had been blinded by "the explosion of a rock.").

Operating as LUTHER ROBY AND SON, large contracts were taken, the first being for the Merchants Bank in Boston, close to the scene of the Boston Massacre. The original 1834 quarry was close to a spring in the rear of the New Hampshire State Prison.

Roby located his stoneyard back of his printing house not far from East Concord's Federal Bridge. He served a term in the state legislature in 1837, another in 1849, and during his first the state discontinued the employment of convicts at the old state prison as stone cutters. It was not until 1932 (95 years later) that a stone plant again became one of the New Hampshire prison industries.

Still another field captured Roby's enthusiasm. In 1839 he was the leading spirit in inaugurating the Sewall's Falls Locks and Canal Company, an undertaking that was quickly abandoned, though, when the Boston, Concord, and Montreal railroad came through. His hopes for the ultimate development of Sewall's Falls waterpower culminated partially in the building of the Concord Electric Company's generating plant.

"Who Was Luther Roby"? Well, now we have seen what an active and diversified man he was. First and always a local printer at heart, he was a publisher of national prominence, and a man of such energies and enthusiasms as to have made a name for himself as quarryman, stonecutter, state legislator, fire chief, canal builder, and a pioneer in waterpower development. While he was still alive in the '80's, the Concord MONITOR saluted him as "One of the most enterprising and energetic business men of Concord . . . and to this day his cheerful face and aged form are familiar to Concord citizens . . . his interest in local affairs puts to shame some of younger years and more vigorous strength." And in his "History of Amherst", Mr. D. F. Secomb declared that "Mr. Roby was an active man in everything he undertook. He possessed a gift of language seldom equalled."

In the early days of his career, Roby himself had editorialized:

"The people cannot long be deceived, nor their opinions controlled by praise lavished upon base or weak men."

Was he the sort of man, then, who would forego all profit for himself in order to aid an unfortunate fellowman, and at the same time knowingly and deliberately publish a travesty on truth?

Readers are urged to keep ever alert for clues that still might point to factual and fuller disclosure of who "John Howe" really was. Was the name itself openly an alias, as part of the disguised role he was so expertly and ingeniously playing? In the world of the military, one might naturally expect to be frustrated and thwarted, but there's still a possibility that should not be overlooked in our dogged research. Some confirmation of his postwar smuggling activities might be uncovered in old letters or records. His maneuvers in the realm of camouflage as described by one of those he artfully had deceived and outwitted might provide clues of substantial value.

Whenever, wherever, and however information is ever obtained, let the discoverer bring it into broad daylight. If a few pieces can be made to fit in just one corner or segment, the much desired brand of "AUTHENTICITY" might, after all, be applied to the "intriguing" life of "JOHN HOWE, A BRITISH SPY."

Harold G. Travis



Annual Dues: \$5.00 per person, \$8 per family

Life Memberships \$200

Gift Memberships are suggested

Contributions to the Society are always welcome.

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and mailed to P.O. Box 343, Weston, Mass. 02193

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