

SAMUEL TWOMBLY & THE AMERICAN DREAM

By Ellen Knight¹

To rise from a humble origin by dint of hard work and good character to a position of prominence, such is the American Dream. And a face of this dream hangs outside the Selectmen's Room in Winchester Town Hall.

The countenance is that of Samuel Walker Twombly, a former selectman, whose story could be a plot for a Horatio Alger novel.



Born in 1822 in Tamworth, N.H., Twombly came from a background known no more in the United States. At age seven and a half, instead of going to school, he was indentured to work on a farm for his entire youth.

"Bound out as a child, after his mother's death, to a farmer in New Hampshire," wrote his friend Samuel J. Elder, "he was one of the few survivors of the hard school in which many an orphan of his generation was trained.

"He never spoke with bitterness of those eight years and his early energy and ambition were proved by his 'buying his time' when he was only 16, so that five years before his majority he was his own man.

"It was not uncommon that at 19 or 20 boys had done sufficient work to clear the apprenticeship papers, but young Twombly must have been a boy who was 'father to the man' to have worked out his freedom at sixteen."²

For two more years he continued to work on farms and in factories. At age eighteen he came to Boston and worked in the baking business. But he worked so hard his health gave out and he was obliged to give it up.

FLORIST

Twombly realized enough money from his share of the business to buy 15 acres of land at the corner of Cambridge and Wildwood Streets where he built a home in 1843, the same year in which he married. He commuted to Boston where he worked as a florist. "He saw prosperity," claimed Elder. "He 'had his courage with him' through it all. He returned to the fight with confidence, after defeats that would have staggered most men." His business prospered.



The Twombly house is sketched on this 1886 map on the right side of Wildwood Street where it intersects with Cambridge Street at the base of the hill. Church Street is in the foreground. Wildwood Cemetery is shown to the right.

Twombly helped advertise his business (later Twombly & Son) by presenting remarkable floral arrangements as gifts for presidential inaugurations, including those for Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, and Roosevelt. In 1888, the display for the inaugural of President Benjamin Harrison reportedly cost not a cent less than \$500. "The design is circular in form and five feet in diameter. It is built upon a heavy wire frame, and two barrels of moss have been used in the construction. On one side is the coat of arms of Massachusetts, made of white carnations, immortelles and heath. The carnations form the background, while red, white and blue immortelles form the Indian motto and scroll work of the seal. On the opposite side of the design is the shield of the State, formed of red and white carnations and hyacinths.

"The body of this magnificent piece of floral architecture is formed of Puritan, Cornelia Cook, Jacquimanot, Marechal Neil, Gabriel Luizet, Marquis de Castellaine, and Catherine Mermet roses with hyacinths scattered here and there. The main idea throughout the design has been the blending of the national colors. Mr. Twombly carried with him letters from prominent men in the state to General Harrison. He also takes with him two immense bouquets of roses, white and red, one for Mrs. Harrison and the other for Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes, wife of the ex-president, who will carry them during the ceremonies on Monday. In the construction of this design, Mr. Twombly has outdone himself."³

"Mrs. President Harrison got Mr. Twombly to stay at the White House and guard the precious treasure of beautiful flowers all day, and he had all he wanted to do to keep the hands of admiring

visitors from utterly destroying it in their eager rush for mementos of the White House and Inaugural. It was the biggest advertisement the Twomblys ever got, not excepting that which the Hayes and Garfield Inaugurals gave them." *The Woburn Journal*

He reportedly promised the Harrisons that he would return with Mrs. Twombly. In 1889, he and his wife were received by Mrs. Harrison at the White House and subsequently he had an interview with the President and an assistant postmaster-general in relation to increased postal accommodations in Winchester. "Mr. Twombly is a man who is always looking out for the interests of his town whether visiting the President of the United States or interviewing Heads of Government Departments, and he generally makes connections. I'm told that Mr. and Mrs. Twombly had a most delightful visit at the White House and elsewhere in Washington during their late trip." *The Woburn Journal*, Nov. 1, 1889.

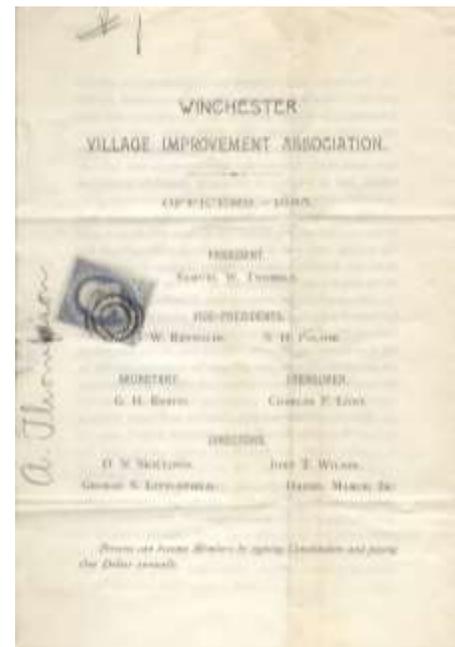
With all of these presidents, Twombly shared membership in the Republican Party. "He was one of the original Free Soilers who voted for all the candidates of that party and was present at the Buffalo convention in 1848 when the Republican party was born. He had been a staunch Republican ever since."⁴

AGENT OF CHANGE

When Twombly arrived here, "Winchester, outside the village, was a farming town," Elder wrote, "The changes that he witnessed if they had come at once would have seemed like a fantasy or a dream. They were no dream to him. He was abreast of them throughout. There was no public improvement he did not favor. There was no repining talk with him of the old days. His eyes were always to the rising and not the setting sun."

Keenly interested in town improvements, he was a member and a president of the Village Improvement Association, "the apple of his eye," and a member of the Committee on the Common.⁵ "The Common was his pet," his obituary stated, "and for yeas he carefully watched over it and tended to it."⁶

"He personally set out all the trees on the Winchester Common, wrote Elder. "He, more than any other one man, secured the widening of Church Street to its present width after a three years' fight, and helped materially to secure the town vote by which the triangle at Main and Washington street was left open." When Wildwood Street was laid out, he donated a strip of land five feet wide for its entire length and set out maple trees along it. He gave to the town the little plot at Wildwood and Willow Streets.



A Village Improvement Association leaflet printed during the six years that Twombly was president

Despite his lack of formal education, Twombly was chosen for several public offices in which he served faithfully. "He was an example of the ancient virtues of punctuality and of persistence," wrote Elder. "A member of the Massachusetts Legislature in '71, in 1900 and 1901, he never missed a session. An incorporator of the Winchester Savings Bank, he attended every meeting of the corporation. Selectman of the Town for eight years, Assessor for five years, he missed but one meeting of either Board. Serving on the Board of Cemetery Commissioners for fifteen years, his energy was unflagging and his service conspicuous."

Profiling a series of prominent Town Meeting orators, N. A. Richardson characterized him as "no orator with eloquent words and flowery embellishments. Plain common sense and clear knowledge of what he says and means, give him influence and prominence."⁷

Reporting his death in 1910, *The Winchester Star* referred to Twombly as "Winchester's grand old citizen."



PORTRAIT



"A smile not a frown marks his countenance," remarked Richardson, who knew his kind and generous heart. As such a person has the artist Hermann Dudley Murphy presented him for future generations to see. Murphy, a charter member of the Winchester Art Association, gave the portrait to the library (where the Association was formed) in 1932.

Following renovations at the library, the portrait took up residence in Town Hall outside the Selectmen's Meeting Room. Although Elder remarked, "taking him for all in all, the present generation will not see his like again," all generations may see in this portrait the visage of one who in bettering his own condition in life improved the world around him.



The Twombly house about 1980

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on May 9, 1997. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, May 13, 1910.

³ *Boston Globe* quoted in *The Woburn Journal*.

⁴ Obituary.

⁵ From an undated *Woburn Journal* clipping.

⁶ Obituary, *The Winchester Star*, April 29, 1910.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 24, 1896.