

NAMING THE TOWN OF WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight¹

Winchester, Massachusetts, was not named, as so many of its New England neighbors were, for the town of the same name in England. Rather, it was named for a man who never set foot in the town, Lt. Colonel William Parsons Winchester.

The name was chosen in December 1849 during the incorporation process which ended on April 30, 1850 when Governor George N. Briggs signed the bill incorporating the new town. Prior to that date, the territory now included in Winchester belonged to other towns and was known by various names.

NAMES PRIOR TO INCORPORATION

WATERFIELD

The area now included in the Town of Winchester was first scouted out for possible settlement five years after Governor John Winthrop and his party on the ship *Arbella* arrived in the New World in 1630 to colonize the Boston area. Soon after settling in Charlestown, the colonists found fault with it for not having enough land or water. A group moved to Shawmut (Boston). Others looked to the north, and the Massachusetts legislature granted Charlestown additional territory extending eight miles northward into the country. Here there was an abundance of water—rivers, ponds, springs, marshes, swamps, and bogs. During the late 1630s, the territory was apportioned among Charlestown settlers and recorded in the Book of Possessions of 1638.

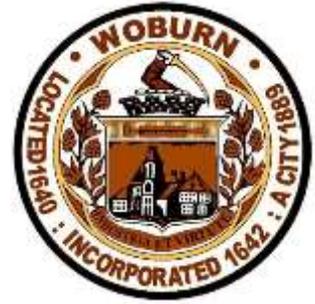
According to Winchester resident George Cooke, who studied the book in the 1880s and made a map of the lots,² the land “was designated by terms denoting some prominent natural feature, such as Waterfield, a section abounding in watercourses and ponds; Rockfield, in which rocks were the prominent features; Mystic fields, those which lay along the Mystic River; Linefield, lying along the Cambridge line, etc.” The settlement that grew up around the first house and grist mill, site of the current Winchester center, was in a Waterfield which stretched from Horn Pond and its tributaries down to the Mystic Pond and also included the Aberjona River to the east. Though Winchester territory also included eastern and western Rockfields, as well as the unsurveyed Commons, most colonists settled in the Waterfield. According to local historian Henry Chapman, the term “Waterfield” survived for a time, specifically in deeds dating into the late seventeenth century. It was not, however, an official town name.



*Early names for the town
on Town Hall tower*

CHARLESTOWN VILLAGE

In 1640, the northern part of Charlestown was designated Charlestown Village. On October 6, 1642 an act was passed incorporating Woburn into a separate town and stating that “Charlestowne Village is called Wooburne.” At that time, Woburn included territory which is now part of Winchester, Wilmington, and Burlington.



SOUTH WOBURN

The incorporation of Woburn divided that new town from Charlestown at the level of Church Street. About two-thirds of Winchester’s territory lay in Woburn. In Colonial times, this settlement came to be known as the South End and later as South Woburn. The territory south of South Woburn remained in Charlestown. In the eighteenth century, the eastern portion of it was annexed to Medford. The western portion was annexed to West Cambridge (Arlington) for a few years before 1850.

BLACK HORSE VILLAGE

For about a century, from the 1740s or earlier to 1835, the Black Horse Tavern operated as a hostelry on Main Street not far from the juncture with Washington Street. It was a favorite stopping place for travelers, including stagecoach passengers. In the 1790s it was on the routes from Boston to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Portland, Maine. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the area was frequently called Black Horse Village.

WOBURN GATES

In 1835 the railroad came to South Woburn. Large gates were installed in the village center at the crossing of the railroad and Main Street. For a time the village was called after this railroad stop, “Woburn Gates.”



WINCHESTER

Columbus almost became the name of the town. In December 1849, the town founders, working on a petition to the legislature to form the new town, needed a name to insert in the petition. A trial ballot drew votes for the names (in ascending order of popularity) Harmony, Linden, Alton, Winthrop, Wyoming, Mystic, Sheffield, South Woburn, Waterville, and Columbus.

A second vote on the three most favored names produced the following votes:

- South Woburn 6
- Waterville 33
- Columbus 35.

Thirty-eight votes were required for a choice. With only three more votes, Columbus would have become the name of the town. But within a week, Columbus was out and Winchester was in.

“There has always been a spice of mystery about the circumstances attending the choice of this name of our town,” wrote Henry Chapman in his *History of Winchester*. After all, the Col. Winchester whose name was proposed to be given to the town had not a single thing to do with the town.

The official report of the names committee only hints at the answer in saying, “Circumstances have occurred (of a character which renders it improper for us to do more than allude to them) which ... are both personal and pecuniary, and promise to be of material importance to the welfare and convenience of the new town and its citizens.”

Frederick O. Prince certainly knew the answer, for it was his suggestion. Apparently it was his design to get some money for the new town. According to an 1885 newspaper report, “Mr. Prince began to look around to find a person of wealth who would give a substantial present in the event of the new town being named after the said person. A few men were looked up, and among them was Peter C. Brooks, but he was evidently not as anxious for the honor as is his descendant of the present day.... When Mr. Winchester was asked to allow the use of his name, he readily consented.”



As the story in Chapman’s history goes, during the week when the names committee was supposed to compile a list of names, Prince told the committee that he was sure that Col. William P. Winchester of Watertown (whose wealth was valued at a half million dollars in 1850) might give the town a handsome sum of money if his family name were honored as the name of the new town.

The next action was that Prince was added to the names committee. From that point, though the committee did produce a new list of names (Appleton, Winthrop, Avon, Channing, Waterville, and Winchester), there really was no other name under consideration but Winchester. In fact, there was no more voting on the names. The committee that would present the petition to the state was instructed to choose one of the six names and insert it in the petition. Of course, it was Winchester.

An amusing part of the story told by Prince more than 30 years later was that when the Board of Selectmen wanted to inform the colonel of their decision, the chairman asked Prince to draft a letter. The next day, Winchester, encountering Prince in Boston and admitting to an ignorance of the custom on such an occasion, asked Prince to draft a reply. The story has also been told with Prince writing the letter for Winchester first and the selectmen’s reply second. Either way, Prince was placed in the position of acknowledging his own letter.

THE WINCHESTER FUND

What became of the promise of a cash reward for naming the town Winchester? In May 1850, by which time the town had been incorporated, the colonel presented the town with \$3,000. It has been suggested that he might have given more upon actually visiting the town, but while ceremonies were being planned for Colonel Winchester to visit the town, he died suddenly of typhoid fever in August 1850 and never visited the town.

Col. Winchester intended his gift to be "appropriated to the erection of a Town Hall or any other proper object of municipal expenditure." But in 1850, the estimate to purchase a site and build a hall totaled \$7,200--well in excess of the Colonel's gift. Having voted to appropriate \$4,000 to build new schools that year, the town shied away from building a town hall.

Instead, the Cemetery Committee was given control of the fund to purchase and landscape a cemetery. Then, during the 1880s, when the idea of erecting a town hall came to life again, thoughts of the money donated by the town eponym also revived. In 1884 the town directed the Cemetery Committee to pay the unspent balance back into the treasury. With interest payments, the fund totaled \$3,836 by the end of 1886, the year the town acquired a site for the Town Hall.

This time the fund was much more insufficient than in 1850, for Town Hall cost in excess of \$72,000. The Winchester Fund, over \$4,000 by 1888, was spent for the tower clock and bell (\$1,700), auditorium clock (\$90),³ and frescoing and decorating (\$2,000). A balance of \$367 remained and has been gathering interest since 1889. Used only on rare occasions, the fund still exists, now more than double its original size.



The Winchester Fund has had a varied past and, though now a small sum in terms of a \$45 million budget, its remains one of the more historically influential parts of the town's treasury--the part that gave the town its name when it was almost Columbus.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Oct. 10, 1994 and Oct. 11, 1999. This article supersedes all previous articles.

² George Cooke, "Waterfield," *Winchester Record*. A revised copy of his map has been printed in Henry Smith Chapman, *History of Winchester Massachusetts*, revised edition, Winchester, 1975.

³ After the original auditorium Howard clock was stolen during the 20th century, it was replaced in 1991 by a similar marble clock (costing about \$2,000), funded not through the Winchester Fund but by private donations from the Winchester Historical Society and others.