

LT. COL. WILLIAM PARSONS WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight¹

Although Winchester, Massachusetts, has been considered a sister city of Winchester, England, the latter was not the source of the name of the New England town. Rather, the Town of Winchester was named for a man who never set foot in the town. When the town founders got the idea of naming the town for a person with the means to reward the town for the honor, William P. Winchester essentially purchased the naming right. Though it was planned that he would make a journey to the town, with appropriate ceremonies, one planned visit was rained out and, before that event could be rescheduled, he died of typhoid fever at age 49.

William Winchester was a descendant of John and Hannah Winchester who arrived in Boston in 1635. Among their many descendants was Edmund Winchester (1772-1839), father of the Colonel. Son of a prosperous Newton farmer, Edmund moved to Boston as a young man and became a merchant, a profession which produced both wealth and social position. He and his brother Amasa formed a partnership, called the E. & A. Winchester Company. Their meat-packing business was said to be the only one of its kind in early New England.



In 1821, with the addition of Edmund's son William, the firm as expanded to become E. A. and W. Winchester of Boston, wholesale merchants and soap manufacturers. (Candles and soap were made from tallow, a by-product of the meat business.)

William Winchester was born Nov. 9, 1801, in Boston. To distinguish himself from another William Winchester in Boston, he adopted the name Parsons by an act of the Legislature in 1823. With his wife Eliza Gill Bradlee and seven children, he lived at 20 Franklin Place in Boston, a large and fashionable residence.

William P. Winchester succeeded his father as head of the firm and, according to a family history by Fanny Winchester Hotchkiss, was well known "for his business ability and public spirit, also for his excellent judgment and great foresight in mercantile affairs. His untiring industry, firmness and self-reliance enabled him for many years to carry out with great success a large and important business, and at his death in 1850 was one of the wealthiest men in Boston, his estate being valued at upwards of half a million dollars, a large fortune for that period."

He was thus able to afford not only a good home in Boston on Franklin Street but also a grand summer home in Watertown, for which he began buying land in 1845 and which was finished in 1850, surrounded by beautiful grounds which extended to the Charles River so that he could sail to his home on his own yacht.

SPORT AND CULTURE

Yachting was a popular new sport for the wealthy merchant class during the early nineteenth century. Winchester purchased his first yacht, Mermaid, in 1836. Three years later he launched the longest, fastest yacht along the North Shore, Northern Light.



This yacht was painted by several artists, including Fitz Hugh Lane. Historian Joseph Garland described it: “A crimson stripe slashed across the gleaming ebony of her topsides, her bends were varnished bright, and Northern Light’s crew of amateurs was uniformed by her convivial owner in white trousers, red shirts, and straw hats encircled by red bands with flowing ends that were stitched with her name in gold.”²

Winchester was also “an accomplished scholar in French, Spanish, and Italian and was also a discriminating judge and a liberal patron of the fine arts, enthusiastically fond of music, to which he gave munificent support,” which is certainly credible considering that his uncle Amasa was one of the founders, trustees, and presidents of Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society.

He bought a proprietorship in the Boston Athenaeum, then a private gentlemen's library. He filled his own home with paintings purchased on his trips to Europe. A very social man, “Unbounded in hospitality, he entertained in magnificent style. He was a warm-hearted, open-handed gentleman, generous and exceedingly popular.”³



The house in Watertown to which Winchester could sail his yacht

THE CORPS OF CADETS

It was the First Corps of Cadets from whom Winchester got his rank, when he was the corps’ commander during the 1840s. Although he is commonly known in town as Colonel Winchester, his actual rank was Lt. Colonel, the same as all corps’ commanders of that era.

The corps originated as the bodyguard to the royal governor of the Province of Massachusetts under the name Independent Company of Cadets, a cadet then not meaning a student in a military college but a gentleman who entered the army without a commission to learn the military profession. The Cadets’ most famous commander was John Hancock, who became commander in 1772. He, however, did not get along with the royal governor, Lt. Gen. Sir Thomas Gage, who dismissed Hancock, outraging the cadets who were used to electing their own officers. In August 1774 they disbanded but reorganized two years later and took part in various campaigns of the Revolution. In 1786 they were reorganized with the name First Corps of Cadets and were accorded the honor of continuing to serve as official bodyguard for the governor.

During Winchester's era the corps was known as the Independent Corps of Cadets and had become an elite social club. Prospective cadets had to be nominated by a member and had to be able to afford to purchase their own uniforms, which they frequently changed to be the most splendidly-clad unit in Boston, and be able to pay dues for the upkeep of the company. Because of the expense, only wealthy young men could afford to join.

Winchester was elected a "fine member" of the corps in Feb. 1831. A fine member participated in all social activities of the corps, was required to have a uniform and was expected to turn out for parade, but was excused from military duties on payment of a fine.

There is little mention of Winchester in the corps records until 1842. That August some Maryland cadets visited, and he entertained them, along with his own corps, at a levee at his house at Franklin Place. Then, when he enlisted as an active member that October, he was immediately and unanimously elected Lt. Colonel.

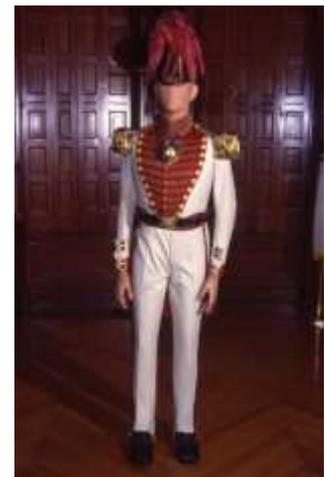
Winchester commanded the Cadets from October 1842 to August 1844. As an indication of how pressing his military duties were, he took a grand tour of Europe in 1843, during the second half of his command years. But he did the corps a social service in Europe. According to his diary, he was twice presented to King Louis Philippe. On the first occasion, "I was in a new Cadet uniform and introduced as Lieut. Col. Winchester, 'Commander of the Body Guard of the Governor of Massachusetts.' The King asked me what Corps I commanded, and I replied as above--he then said 'it was a post of great honor.' I said, in reply, 'I appreciate it as such, Your Majesty.'"

On the second occasion, a grand reception at the Palace, he wrote, "The Duke of Nemours asked me, as follows--'What uniform is it, sir, that you wear?' I replied, 'The uniform of the Independent Corps of Cadets, of Boston, the Body Guard of the Governor of Massachusetts,' he immediately replied--'It is a splendid uniform, sir.' I bowed to the Duke for the compliment, thanking His Highness for his good opinion of it and retired much gratified."⁴

The corps, of whom there were about 65 to 70 then, apparently liked Winchester. His men presented him with a silver pitcher and salver on the eve of his departure for his European trip and commissioned a piece of music, *Winchester's Quick Step*, which was "respectfully dedicated" to him and performed in an 1843 parade and again on his return from Europe in July 1844.



Winchester in uniform painted by William Worcester Churchill and the uniform itself at the First Corps of Cadets Museum





The nature of the corps has changed since Winchester's time. The cadets served in the Civil War and both world wars. In the twentieth century the corps became part of the National Guard. It was reorganized and redesignated many more times. It served as infantry, engineers, anti-aircraft artillery, cavalry, armor, and signal.

Since 1996 when the corps consolidated with the military police, it has been designated as Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 211th Military Police Battalion (First Corps of Cadets). There are now about 600 active cadets. After 9/11, members of the corps were assigned to guard Logan Airport, reservoirs, and power plants for six months. Most recently over 400 were mobilized for service in Operation Enduring Freedom and have been deployed to Afghanistan.

IMAGES & REMEMBRANCES

Though Col. Winchester himself never came to the town, his son Thomas Bradlee Winchester presented the community with an oil portrait and a marble bust, as well as a silver punch bowl, originally a gift to the Colonel from friends for use on his yacht.

Asked to furnish a photograph of the Colonel for the new Town Hall, in 1891 the Winchester family presented the town with a marble bust, sculpted by John Crookshanks King, and pedestal. In presenting this gift, Thomas B. Winchester wrote, "We



improve this occasion to say what, perhaps, is unnecessary, that Colonel Winchester's family has always gratefully appreciated the honor of having the town named after him. To be thus associated with a community distinguished for its culture, its refinement, its patriotism, and all that makes good citizenship, must always be cause for pardonable gratification and pride to us and our descendants."¹⁵ The bust was placed in the reading room of library, which then occupied the wing of Town Hall now containing the Winchester Room, and currently is situated



outside that room. A plaster copy is located in the current library building.

In 1900, the Winchester family gave another likeness of the Colonel to the town, an oil portrait. Newspaper and library reports of that year identify the artist as "Hoyt," presumably Albert Gallatin Hoyt (1809-1856) who settled in Boston in 1839, painted many portraits, and was the first president of the Boston Art Club. The Winchester portrait, painted in 1851, was about a half century old when presented to the library. Before being hung it was "put in good order," by Edmund Garrett, designer of Winchester's Town Seal. "The work was done from memory, to a large degree, and the family considered it an excellent likeness."⁶ A photograph of Col. Winchester, kept in the Archival Center, bears this out.



In 2000, the Winchester Historical Society observed the Colonel's 200th Birthday with two events, a walking tour of Mount Auburn cemetery, where the Winchester family tomb is located, and a program at Town Hall, attended by residents and a few Winchester descendants. The punch bowl was brought out for the occasion and the *Quickstep* was performed on an electronic keyboard for the retelling of the story of Lt. Col. William Winchester and how his name was given to the town.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on April 15, 1994, Nov. 14, 2001, and Nov. 13, 2002, and incorporates new research and photographs by Peter G. Engeldrum. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Joseph E. Garland, *Boston's North Shore*. Little Brown & Co., 1978.

³ Fanny Winchester Hotchkiss, *Winchester Notes*, Tuttle, Morehouse& Taylor Co., 1912.

⁴ Typescript copies of pages of Winchester's diary in the First Corps of Cadets' archives.

⁵ Quoted in the 1891 Annual Report.

⁶ *The Winchester Press*, Jan. 4, 1901.