



**winchester  
historical  
society**

# **Black Horse Bulletin**

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Ellen Knight, Editor

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## ***COL. WINCHESTER'S 200TH BIRTHDAY***

**By Ellen Knight**

The 200th Anniversary of the birth of Lt. Col. William Parsons Winchester, for whom the town was named, was celebrated in November with an illustrated talk, poetry, music, punch, and cake.

William Winchester, a descendant of John and Hannah Winchester who arrived in Boston in 1635, was the son of Edmund Winchester (1772-1839), a wealthy merchant, the founder and senior partner of the firm of E. A. and W. Winchester of Boston, wholesale merchants and soap manufacturers. William Winchester, born Nov. 9, 1801 in Boston, succeeded his father as head of that firm.

A successful businessman, Winchester was, at his death in 1850, one of the wealthiest men in Boston, his estate being valued at upwards of half a million dollars. He was thus able to afford not only a good home in Boston on Franklin Street but also a grand summer home in Watertown, built about 1848-49 and surrounded by beautiful grounds which extended to the Charles River so that he could sail to his home on his own yacht.

Winchester owned two yachts, beginning with *Mermaid*, which he bought in 1836. Then, three years later, he launched the longest, fastest yacht along the North Shore, *Northern Light*. It was painted by several artists, including Fitz Hugh Lane.

Col. Winchester got his military title from Boston's Independent (or First) Corps of Cadets. A cadet then was a gentleman who entered the army without a commission to learn the military profession. The corps then served as the governor's bodyguard, and it was an elite social club whose prospective members had to be nominated and be able to afford to purchase their own uniforms and pay dues for the upkeep of the company. In 1831, Winchester was elected a "fine member," meaning he participated in all social activities of the corps and paraded in uniform but was excused from military duties on payment of a fine. In October, he enlisted as an active member and was immediately and unanimously elected Lt.

Colonel, the rank of all the corps' commanders, for a two-year term. As an indication of how pressing his military duties were, he took a grand tour of Europe during the second half of his command years.

### ***Col. Winchester (continued from page 1)***

Col. Winchester was reputedly a very social man, warm-hearted, cultured, generous, and exceedingly popular. He was evidently popular with his cadets, whom he entertained at his house and on his yacht and who commissioned *Winchester's Quickstep* in his honor.

Winchester, being a wealthy man, was a logical candidate when the town founders got the idea of naming the town for a person with the means to reward the town for the honor. But, though he accepted the honor and gave \$3,000 to the town, he never set foot in it. A scheduled visit was rained out. While another was being planned, the Colonel died of typhoid fever at age 49.

But the Historical Society was pleased to welcome a great-great-grandson, Robert Bacon, his wife Nancy, and three daughters, Victoria, Suzanne, and Kimberly, who were able to join the party honoring their celebrated ancestor.

### ***Memorabilia***

Thanks to the First Corps of Cadets Museum's curator, Craig Brown, and the Bacon family, the archives' collection on Col. Winchester has grown to include corps histories, copies of the quickstep, and new views of the colonel himself.

The First Corps of Cadets Museum, 227 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, itself has the portrait of Winchester, his uniform, sword, Watertown house photograph, and two silver pieces presented to him by the corps on the occasion of his European tour.

### ***Winchester's Quickstep***

Copies of the sheet music, a facsimile edition with a brief history of the corps on its reverse side, produced by the Cadets Museum, were distributed at the party. Copies are still available--free--to members. Contact Gail Sjo if interested in obtaining a copy.

### ***The Mystic River & Lakes***

A boater's delight, a fisherman's retreat, a commercial power source, even the inspiration for a novel, the Mystic River, along with the Mystic Lakes, was the subject of an illustrated lecture in October presented by local historian Richard A. Duffy.

The Mystic, Duffy said, has been a "misunderstood" river, particularly with regard to its tidal nature and effects on the lake. Until 1910 the Mystic was a tidal, salt-water river along its entire length. This, however, did not make the lakes tidal or the meadow above the lakes salty (as can be read in some sources). After a dam was built in Medford center in 1910, the section of river from there to Winchester ceased to be tidal. More of the river became fresh water after the 1966 construction of the Amelia Earhart dam near Wellington Circle.

What did cause flooding of the meadow above the lake was the damming of the river for the benefit of mills which depended on water power. "For about 250 years," Duffy said, "the people of Medford and Arlington depended on tide power for the manufacture of goods." He explained the operation of tide mills and showed on maps the location of various mills and mill ponds created to power the mills.

Duffy corrected the misconception found in some Winchester sources that one particular photo of an old mill shows a colonial Winchester grist mill. In fact, he said, it was an 1852 Arlington mill, a baby-carriage factory. That mill gained fame, not only as a commercial site, but also as inspiration for an 1882 novel, *Tinkham Brothers Tide Mill* by J. T. Trowbridge, based on a conflict between the mill owners and boaters and recently republished in a facsimile edition, edited by Duffy.

Duffy also spoke about the shipyards along the river which had mills nearby powered by artificially created mill ponds, the ice business, and recreational use of the river and lakes.