

HON. ABRAHAM H. HOWLAND

NEW BEDFORD'S FIRST MAYOR

By EDMUND WOOD



OLD DARTMOUTH
HISTORICAL SKETCHES

JANUARY, 1931

No. 55

EDMUND WOOD'S ADDRESS

Read to the members of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society
at their annual meeting, January 3, 1931



URING the past year, this Society has lost by death one of its oldest members — Miss Mary Tucker Howland.

She was well qualified to be a member of this Society, as she lived in New Bedford all her life, and both her parents and four grandparents and seven of her eight great grandparents were born and lived within the confines of Old Dartmouth.

She was thoroughly a child of Old Dartmouth, the fruitage of Old Dartmouth stock, with almost no grafting by marriage outside the limits of the Town. She lived a long life here in New Bedford, with few breaks into the outside world. All this life span covered an interesting and diversified period in the history of this community. Her youth saw the last brilliant days of our maritime career, and then the rather melancholy sunset. In these early years, she could scarcely prevent being saturated by the atmosphere of the sea, and daily familiar with the glamour and romance of that far-flung adventurous life. Her uncles, and most of her father's friends were captains of whaleships and captains in the merchant service. Their conversations within the home circle were thrilling and expanding to a young girl. The earth was round, and she knew this early.—There were other peoples, other customs, and indeed other religions.

She read nothing like these modern thrillers, crammed with adventure and blood-thirstiness. There were none, and for her, there was no need. How much more moving and enthralling were the intimate tales of personal adventures, that she heard recounted, and all guaranteed to be true.

And occasionally, too, there came into the house bundles of old South Sea island treasures of Esquimau paddles and Madagascar weapons brought home by one of the ships.

There was no historical museum in those days (*Miserabile dictu*), and these came frequently into the household, interested for the time our young lives, and then were gradually banished to the attic.

In her later years, as Miss Howland sat alone,—for she lived a lonely life after the death of her sister,—it is only natural that her mind drifted back to those early days. The recollections and the

associations were sweet. They brought back the memory of her father, who died when she was only eighteen, and of his prominent activities.

Fortunately, there is now well established the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, founded for the very purpose of perpetuating those memories of the past, which were especially dear to her. A bountiful bequest to this Society would serve as a memorial to her father, Abraham H. Howland, himself a famous captain, both in the whaling and in the merchant service. And the income from so large a sum would help materially in the growth and maintenance of study and research, and of museum collections. This Society feels very kindly toward Miss Howland for her deliberate thought for its welfare, and her munificent gift.

Influenced by the recent death of Miss Howland and her generous gift to this society, I have thought that a brief and personal sketch of her father would be an appropriate subject of the paper to be read at this meeting.

HON. ABRAHAM HATHAWAY HOWLAND, NEW BEDFORD'S FIRST MAYOR

The township of New Bedford was set off from the great parent township of Dartmouth in 1797. Later, New Bedford had set off from its territorial limits the townships of Fairhaven and Acushnet. Even after this great decrease of its area, New Bedford grew so rapidly that its town meetings became unwieldy and not representative, and its budget and expenditures too large to be effectively handled by a board of selectmen. So in 1847, after much deliberation and some acrimonious debate, the municipal form of government was adopted.

We have, therefore, been a city for 83 years. Already the history of those spirited times is growing hazy, and some of the notable worthies are nearly forgotten. Would it not be well for us to occasionally glance back into the very recent past? Much of the notable work of the members of this society has been into the early records of the settlement of this neighborhood, and into the activities of those who founded the town. It has lately been demonstrated that events and pictures, which revive our own earliest memories arouse the liveliest interest. Each succeeding Mercury calendar of Reminiscence gives enjoyment, because it revives and restores a scene, which we just remember but had nearly forgotten. To recall it, gives pleasure.

So, too, the recent publication of the experience of our fellow member, Z. W. Pease, as a reporter and commentator of events during the last 50 years, pleasurably touched upon our own fading impressions, besides the satisfaction that this record would go down into our history so brilliantly transcribed.

May we then attempt to go back a little further into the past, back to the dim boundary line of the recollection of some of us who are still living.

Abraham Hathaway Howland was born in New Bedford on March 2, 1802, and died on April 24, 1867, when I was 13 years old. So I knew this uncle, and remember him very well. It is necessary to insert this here, in order to give this paper a degree of verisimilitude, and to show that I am not venturing far beyond my own historical horizon.

As this paper is being read before a learned historical society, I suppose it is necessary to give the briefest outline of the family record. Three Howland brothers came over to help in the founding of the Plymouth settlement. John came in the *Mayflower*; Arthur and Henry must have followed very soon. Henry, from whom nearly all our Howlands were descended, settled in Duxbury. He and his son, Zoeth, appear to have soon become very zealous Quakers. And they suffered because of this, for the records abound with notices of their being severely disciplined. After being several times sentenced to sit in the stocks for being too outspoken in church matters, Zoeth, in 1662, moved down to Dartmouth—it is to be presumed, for more congenial society. And here at Round Hill and its immediate vicinity, he and his descendants dwelt for four generations, and lived fruitful but rather tranquil lives. They were all farmers and all Quakers, much occupied, according to the records, with holding local town offices, and most devoutly attending meeting and worshipping God without much interference.

I shall not burden this paper with the list of all these ancestors in detail, for lo are they not extended at length in the late Captain Franklyn Howland's history of the family. It is recorded that Abraham Howland of the fifth generation in descent, and his wife, Ruth Hicks Howland, both lived and died on the Round Hill farm. But during his life, the new activities of the neighboring town of New Bedford had begun to unsettle the youths on the Dartmouth farm, and never more were the Dartmouth farmer boys to be satisfied to live on in safe contentment as their forefathers.

Abraham's son, Abraham, died in 1784 on board Brig. "*Joseph and Judith*" at a port in the West Indies. Thomas died in 1808 on board Sloop "*Mentor*" off the Virginian Capes, and Weston, the father of our Abraham H. Howland, went to sea early and worked up to be a notable captain. He was engaged mostly in the merchant service. The period of his seafaring life was one of the greatest excitement. It covered the Revolutionary War, the disturbances attending the French Revolution, and our War of 1812. He seems to have had a large share in this excitement. It is recorded that when a young man, he with Cornelius Howland and Cornelius Grinnell were on board a merchant brig, commanded by Capt. Ricketson of New Bedford, captured by a British man-of-war during the Revolution, and taken into the Bermudas. While there, they were placed as the crew on the governor's yacht, a smart Baltimore schooner, which also had been taken

as a prize. These three young Dartmouth boys secretly planned to capture the vessel on one of their yachting excursions, and bring the governor and his suite to the states as prisoners. On the day the affair was to happen, one of the conspirators informed the governor of his danger, and the trio was taken from the yacht and placed in confinement on one of the prison ships.

It doesn't often happen in life that a man has a second chance to do a big thing like that. But years after this in the time of the French Revolution, Captain Weston Howland, being in command of a vessel belonging to his uncle Isaac Howland, sailed to the West Indies in company with a brig belonging to the same owner with cargoes of merchandise to exchange for West Indian products. On the return voyage, they were both captured by a French man-of-war. Prize crews were placed on the vessels, and Captain Weston was requested to pilot them to the nearest French port. Again, he schemed to recapture his vessel, and he plotted with three of his men who were on board. Learning that the prize Master was fond of old Hollands, they brought out a quantity from the cargo. He imbibed too much, and they overpowered the prize crew and headed for New Bedford, where they arrived safely, the other prize following unconscious of their destination.

Captain Weston engaged in the flour and grain business in New Bedford, but he owned and managed most of the vessels which transported his stock. He built his storehouse on Rotch's wharf. He is spoken of as a man of excellent business capacity, and highly respected by the community.

Captain Weston Howland married Abigail Hathaway, who was a notable woman, and outlived him many years. She bore 11 children. The old captain was resolved to have a son named after himself, and also another named after his father. The first baby named Abraham died in infancy, and two boys named Weston had already died when their last child was named Weston. This one lived and was our Weston Howland of Fairhaven. There was no superstition about children's names in this family, and the quality of pertinacity exhibited came down undiminished to his son Abraham.

Captain Weston Howland was a prosperous merchant, and maintained a home in the town of New Bedford, and with his efficient wife Abigail saw that their numerous children received a fairly good education. He lived to be 75 years old. His wife outlived him 26 years, living to the age of 93 years. I remember being taken to call on her by

my mother toward the close of her life. She was a rather dignified but benign personage, sitting so upright in a straight-backed chair in gray silk and black knitted mits. Her house where she died was at the corner of Spring and Eighth Streets.

So much in the way of introduction. We have now come down to the subject of this paper,—Abraham H. Howland, the son of Capt. Weston Howland and Abigail Hathaway, and the seventh in descent from Henry Howland, the come-overer.

He did not hasten his marine career, but took time for a fairly good education, and an office training in the ways of business. And then, he was off on a whaleship, and soon became a master. Then came several voyages in the merchant service. Some of these voyages were undertaken after he had married Hetty Russell, my mother's eldest sister, for I have a huge copper tea kettle that he brought home from Antwerp to his bride. The merchant voyages were fully as adventurous as whaling at this time, for these East Indian ships had to cross the Indian ocean, at that time infested with Madagascan pirates. Our vessels were heavily armed to repel these attacks, which were bloody affairs, and occasionally, the pirates were successful, when all hands were murdered and the ship burned. Oh! how tingling with excitement were those evenings of our boyhood, when Uncle Abraham came strolling down the hill with his cigar to call, as was his custom, and talk business with our father. The boy who first got the spittoon out of its hiding place in the cupboard was privileged to sit next to our great hero on the sofa. And then came the boyish clamor for a pirate story before we would consent to go to bed. Ours was a pretty strict Quaker household, and our reading of exciting books was carefully guarded; but what mother could stop the narration of those thrilling adventures, when it was all a personal experience, and every word of it true?

But there was something in Abraham H. Howland that made him realize that he was able to direct a larger body of men, and to handle more responsible business than that of a ship, so he remained ashore, and at once took an active part in the affairs of his native town. His practical knowledge of the ships made him realize that more and better equipment was needed at home to care for the ships, and to furnish an outlet for the money which was pouring into the pockets of our merchants. In 1839, he was a leading spirit in the formation of the Pacific Insurance company, and in 1840, of the Whaling Insurance company.

In 1844, he was elected to the Massachusetts Legislature, and served three years.

In 1853, he with James B. Congdon joined with some Philadelphia gentlemen in furnishing New Bedford with gas, and the New Bedford Gas Company was formed. In two or three years, they were joined by other citizens, and then Philadelphia interests were bought out, and it became wholly a local institution, managed by local people, and so remained for 77 years until last year. It is worthy of note here that this investment has remained in the family all these years. All the increases of stock have been taken up as the company grew and prospered. Miss Mary Howland finally became the heir of her two brothers and her sister, and it is presumable that that original investment by the father seventy-seven years ago was included in the holding in the company which she sold last year for the equivalent of \$375,000.

Several years ago, I was examining the contents of an old desk of Henry T. Wood, my father, and I found a foolscap paper in his handwriting, which proved to be a subscriber to stock in a corporation to be named the Wamsutta mills, to manufacture cotton, wool, and iron in New Bedford. It was headed by Abraham H. Howland, by Capt. Joseph C. Delano, his brother-in-law; by my father, and several others,—in all nearly \$60,000. This paper was dated early in the year 1846. Submitting this to my mother, I learned that she had heard the whole matter discussed as the plans matured, and that Uncle Abraham took around this paper for subscriptions with the greatest confidence. But he found that his fellow citizens were cautious about going into a new and untried industry. Who knew anything about this business? And had they got any expert to run it? And so the matter dragged on, to be renewed when some qualified expert could be found and identified with the project. But Mr. Howland had proceeded already to get his charter from the Legislature for a company to be called the Wamsutta mills.

By great good fortune, Hon. Joseph Grinnell, our representative in Washington, was there called upon at just this time by Thomas Bennett to raise capital to build a cotton mill in Georgia, where Bennett had considerable experience. Mr. Grinnell promptly brought the whole proposal to New Bedford. With this experienced man to build the project about, he attempted to form a company, and Mr. Howland willingly gave over his charter. They struggled hard to raise

a capital of \$300,000.00, but decided to go ahead with only \$160,000.00, and could only buy 10,000 spindles to start with.

The whaling business was almost at its zenith of prosperity. There was plenty of money here, and still our people had confidence in only one industry, and refused to be courted by any other, however beguiling.

It is noteworthy that Mr. Howland, having found people who would give New Bedford what he believed New Bedford needed, a cotton mill, he cheerfully yielded his charter, but did not take any stock in Mr. Grinnell's company. They did not play together very well.

I am pleased now to put upon record for the first time the real story of the beginnings of the famous Wamsutta Mills—on paper.

Mr. Howland was decidedly democratic in all his tastes and associations. His voyages both in the whaling and merchant service identified him in sympathy with the captains as against the owners. Even later, when he became an owner himself, he was popular with his captains and crews. Having himself shared in all the severity and hardship of the seaman's life, he was probably very fair in his dealing with them. There are plenty of reasons for stating that this was not always the case.

This democratic disposition was, as often happens, combined with a marked sternness of countenance and utterance. Throughout his whole life, in his political career and in his own household, he was always the autocratic captain of the quarter deck, and he was generally obeyed with alacrity.

He early identified himself with the Fire Department, and is generally given the credit of having built up that organization, established a much-wanted discipline, and given it a remarkable *Esprit de Corps*. Those were the days of the hand engines, eleven of them at that time, each with a numerous company, who "ran with the old machine," and manned the long double tiers of brakes. And in addition to the members of the regular Engine Companies, it was the custom for all the vigorous young citizens to be identified with the activities and the success of some one company, and to run with that machine. The rivalry was so intense as to lead at times to open warfare. Every boy had his favorite machines for which he shouted, and if the church bells rang out the alarm of fire when we were on the way to school, we at least knew the boys who would be absent or tardy at that session.

We boys ran with old number ten, and blew loudly for its superior prowess; and when the steam pumps gradually supplanted the hand pumps, we ran with the Cornelius Howland Number 4, then as now located at the corner of Sixth and Bedford. Abraham H. Howland, Jr., our big cousin, was the fireman of that company, and through his favor, we got within the ropes, and as much in the way as possible.

The political power of this great fire organization and its adherents was enormous, and when later Mr. Howland suddenly decided to run for Mayor, he was easily victorious. It is noteworthy that both father and son passed directly from Chief of the Fire Department to the office of Mayor in 1847 and in 1875.

Political excitement was a normal incident most of the time. The Whigs and Democrats were fighting constantly, and feeling ran high. Mr. Howland was a leader, autocratic and domineering. He seems to have always had the support of the mechanics class, and this was the more numerous—the army of workers on and about the fleet of outfitting ships, coopers, riggers, caulkers, sail makers, ship chandlers, etc. He was generally opposed by the old merchants—what he called the Hill Crowd, who had before Mr. Howland's time run the town about as they wished.

When it was decided after many years of debate to change the town into a city, it was all arranged that James B. Congdon, the most useful all-around servant of the community—bank man, orator, poet, treasurer—who had been the chairman of the selectmen for many years, deserved the new office of mayor. Mr. Congdon had done most of the work in preparing all the arguments and figures necessary to carry the measure, as well as the charter and ordinances; and the Hill Crowd thought it would be the graceful thing to hand him the office with little opposition.

A short time before the election, it suddenly occurred to Abraham H. that he would rather like that office himself, and lo! the boys were off with alacrity and enthusiasm. "Old Abe has decided he wants that job himself, and it's our job to give it to him." And he was elected hands down.

The mayor, once inaugurated, loved the power and the opportunity to initiate improvements. He liked the job, and from time to time intimated as much to his loyal supporters; so he served five years without any break, and at each election polled an increasing majority.

The Hon. George B. Richmond, well-known to many of us as a skillful politician, often told me that I should have known my uncle longer and I would have been a better politician. And he declared, "All I know about politics I learned from Old Abe." That was pretty exalted praise coming from the Hon. George B. Richmond.

All the records of the time and later seem to agree that Mr. Howland made a most excellent mayor. The city was almost booming, and growing very rapidly. This sudden growth overtook a pretty crude condition. Every sort of municipal problem confronted him—miserable streets, no lights, no water, no police but a night watch, and always many sailors just returned with plenty of money, for a ship came in almost every day. The richest and the smartest merchants of the city were on his board of aldermen and common council. It took a man of great resource and a knowledge of human nature who was able to control a naturally autocratic bearing and domineering disposition.

And then there were the national campaigns, which were bitterly fought. My father told the story, and it was corroborated to me by Mr. Richmond, that after one such campaign, in which Mr. Howland's organization had carried this city and surrounding country by a great majority, some of the National party leaders assembled in Boston, sent for Mr. Howland to come up. They complimented him on his wonderful organization and glorious victory, and then asked him what he wanted. Mr. Howland was ready with his answer, that he wished to be appointed collector of the port of Boston. This request quite staggered the leaders who were distributing the spoils, and they remonstrated; that was quite impossible,—Boston had leading merchants, too, who had done work in the campaign, and they would resent the appointment of a New Bedford man. "All right," said Mr. Howland, "I will take that or nothing," and he came home to sulk in his tent. Stories differ as to how he was appeased—some of them are quite glittering.

It was at this time in his life that Mr. Howland formed quite an intimate friendship with Daniel Webster, which continued during their lives. When the latter came down here to argue a case in our court, he stayed in the Howland mansion. There is a story which has come down in our family in this connection. A great dinner was being tendered to Webster in New York city, and the eminent invited guests had arrived, when the chairman asked Mr. Webster whom would he

like to have sit next to him at the dinner. The distinguished guest looked about him at the gentlemen assembling, and spying Mr. Howland he said, "I want Captain Howland. I had rather have Captain Howland of New Bedford sit alongside of me than any man here."

Old Abe, the Democratic leader, and man of the people had always plumed himself because he preferred to live down on Third street or Acushnet avenue below South street. It is a large and comfortable house still standing. What was the surprise of the family, his friends and also his enemies, when at about this time, he suddenly purchased what was considered the next to the finest house in the city, and up in the very midst of the Hill Crowd,—the stone house still standing on County street at the foot of Hawthorn.

This house had been built in 1833 by William R. Rodman, and is considered by many to be a Russell Warren house, and the cost known to be about \$75,000.00. The owner had met his death very suddenly by a distressing accident. The family moved after from New Bedford, and wished to sell the house; and after being empty for some time, it was sold to Mr. Howland. The price paid was said to be less than \$25,000.00; and here he lived eleven years, and his family more than forty.

I have shown that Mr. Howland was a public spirited citizen, eager to build up the city, and improve its institutions. And he had, above all things, vision. He had a steadfast confidence in the future, but nothing else so shows his insight and profound sagacity as his closing enterprise. He early sniffed the changing currents of the world's demand. New Bedford had only one real industry. It was still dependent on the whaling industry. What would happen were it to fail? This subject towards the end constantly occupied his thought and activity.

Petroleum had been discovered in Pennsylvania. It was too inflammable for use; it resisted all known methods of refining, and most all of New Bedford was shouting that it could never be used as an illuminant. Mr. Howland attacked this problem in a thoroughly modern scientific manner. He bought the old Joseph Ricketson oil factory, and began to experiment. He sent experts and his elder son down to Pennsylvania to investigate the latest that had been learned.

He seems to have come to the conclusion that nothing could be done yet with the oil, full as it was with the naptha and the gasoline. But as this oil came up from the coal lands,—would it not be possible

to take the richer gas coals, and distill from them an oil which would be rich and eminently safe. The New Bedford Oil company was formed, comprising his two brothers and his two brothers-in-law. My mother's land at the foot of South street was all taken and put into the project. Quite an extensive plant was constructed, and work was begun. But they had a succession of disastrous fires, and progress was slow. They finally experimented with refining petroleum. But they were pioneers in a new field, and vast—vast as the Standard Oil company,—and suddenly the main spring ran down, the powerful heart of the enterprise ceased to beat, and Abraham H. Howland was dead.

There is another story connected with the purchase of this house, more personal and a family matter. My father, Henry T. Wood, lived in the Reuben Russell house at the foot of Grinnell street, looking out over the river with a beautiful sandy beach in the foreground—a very different neighborhood from what it is at present. In the settlement of the estate, it suddenly became necessary for him to move in 1854; and he secured an option on the lot of land on the corner of Madison and Orchard streets, where Andrew G. Pierce, Jr., now lives, intending to immediately build a house there, next our uncle, Captain Henry Taber, who lived in the house now occupied by Charles O. Dexter.

When Uncle Abraham heard of this intention, he came rushing down with promptness to remonstrate. Surely my father would not think of moving up on the hill, to live in the very midst of the old merchants, whom he always opposed. He would immediately be led into extravagances of living, into a desire for luxuries; and had he thought of the pernicious effect upon his young and growing family? They would be growing up subject to pernicious influences, associating with young men of expensive habits, and their sound inborn Quakerism might even be contaminated by those wicked Unitarians. He must give up the plan, and take or build a house at the foot of the hill.

His strong personal opposition prevailed, the option was given up, and my father purchased the large Seth Russell house at Washington Square. This he repaired at considerable expense, and moved in in the fall of 1854, and one month after, I was born in it. This gave Uncle Abraham much satisfaction. He even insisted that I should be named after his youngest son, Edmund Howland, who had just died in his young boyhood.

When the news came about a year later that Uncle Abraham had bought the Rodman house, at the top of the hill, it was immediately necessary to have this inconsistent behavior explained. Uncle Abraham protested that he could not help it. The real estate people pestered him with their importunity, and finally in a moment of weakness, he made an offer for the house, so ridiculously low that he was sure it would not be accepted, but it was taken up, and now he supposed he would have to live there, although it was contrary to all his convictions.

And so the five little Wood boys grew up to manhood at the foot of the hill, free from contaminating influences. It really made very little difference where we lived, as five boys were successively sent off to boarding school for four years, four boys were in order sent off to college for four years, and three boys were sent two years to German universities. Here then it might be said they were opposed to pernicious influences as great as those which they might have met had they lived on the hill.

And now I am suddenly aware that my time is nearly up, and I have not written at all the paper that I started out to write. A description of Mr. Howland's administration of the city affairs for five years is interesting. I have read the five inaugural addresses as well as several of those delivered by his successors, and I have delved into many matters, which came up at that time for settlement.

The condition of New Bedford as compared with its present condition is interesting,—the tax rate then and the tax rate now, the total appropriation for all purposes at the beginning of the year, the appropriation for schools, the number of school houses compared with those at present,—the crudeness of the city,—its dark unpaved streets, with so much mud alternating with dust, and the numerous contentions with the city government which included many of the most prominent men of the city, and some his constant opposers in every new matter brought up.

I wanted to write a paper on the theory of municipal government, and how it worked out for the old town; but instead, I have been led along into descriptions of the life of the times, and the men who were active in business affairs, and of the gossip discussed at the breakfast tables. Perhaps to some of you, what I have written is more interesting than what I intended to write. But what I have written, I have written. Indeed, the very title of my paper is misleading. Perhaps, I should have written the title last,—Abraham Hathaway Howland—the man—the man who became New Bedford's first Mayor.