

Northfield Pioneer: Charles Wheaton

By Hayes Scriven

Editor's note: Few in Northfield know the story of Charles Wheaton, pioneer newspaperman and friend of city founder, John W. North. Hayes Scriven's portrait touches on the legacy of a man credited as having "rescued" the fledgling community of Northfield from financial ruin.

Charles Augustus Wheaton was born in 1809 near Amenia, N.Y. His parents soon moved to Pompey Hill, N.Y., where Charles attended Pompey Academy. At the age of 25, while working as a hardware store clerk, Wheaton married his first wife, Ellen Douglas Birdseye, a neighbor. Blessed with 12 children, the Wheatons also prospered in business in Pompey and later in Syracuse where he built the \$100,000 Wheaton Block. Unfortunately within a short time the magnificent building burned down. Wheaton's misfortunes continued when he heavily invested in the Blue Ridge Mountain Railroad in South Carolina only to lose nearly everything in the ill-fated project.

During the 1850s, the Wheatons were most known for their anti-slavery involvement including the use of their house as a stop on the Underground Railroad. When asked about Wheaton's job, one of his servants stated, "I'm not sure, but I think he is the President of the Underground Railroad!" This is echoed in the diary of his wife, Ellen, when they were warned that their house might be mobbed: "Charles went to work and deliberately prepared his weapons. I tremble and fear for my husband, whose ardent, fearless temper I know so well."

Misfortune continued as Ellen died suddenly on Dec. 17, 1858. According to an article published in the Syracuse *The Post-Standard* (2002):

Charles woke during the night to discover his wife having a seizure. She never regained consciousness. Doctors called to the house said Ellen suffered "a rush of blood upon the heart and consequent Venus congestions of the brain."

Early Northfield Days (subhead)

Faced with Ellen's sudden death and his recent financial troubles, Wheaton did not know what to do. So he took the advice offered by friends, John and Ann North, and moved from New York to Northfield in 1860. A year prior, Wheaton had purchased all of the North's assets; rescuing him from financial ruin and in essence saving the emerging community of Northfield, which North founded.

Wheaton's Minnesota business career started in 1860 when he owned and managed North's former grist and flour mill. Wheaton enlarged the flour mill by adding another run of stones and continued to produce custom flour under the name, "Choice Family Flour!" He later sold the flour mill to Jesse Ames and Sons who further enlarged the mill and were able to produce 75 barrels of flour a day. Ames later built the new flour mill on the west side of the Cannon River. The mill, now owned by the Malt-O-Meal Cereal Company, still stands today.

A year after coming to Northfield, Wheaton married Martha Archibald, of the Archibald milling family from Dundas. Their first house was the entire second floor of the American House; a hotel built by John W. North, which ironically never housed any guests. Martha and Charles had five children. In 1866 Wheaton and Charles Goodsell, a local merchant, pledged land to what would become Carleton College and the American House was its first building. By 1868 Wheaton built a mansion at 405 Washington St.

As a Newspaper Editor (subhead)

In 1872 Wheaton took over the *Northfield Standard*, which later became the *Rice County Journal*, now the *Northfield News*. The *Rice County Journal* was an eight-column paper, which Wheaton edited with the same flair and passion that he lived his life. With the attempted bank raid by the James-Younger Gang in 1876, Wheaton was thrust into the national spotlight for his write-ups of the event. Wheaton also broke typical newspaper standards and published the attempted raid on the front page, which was usually reserved for national stories.

In addition, he continued his story on the raid onto the second and third page of the paper, which was not standard practice then. He continued to follow the capture of the Younger brothers in the following months, chronicling the posse reports and also criticizing the St. Paul papers for their lack of coverage of the event and even calling out the city of St. Paul for comments that were made regarding that the Younger brothers should be held in St. Paul for trial instead of Faribault.

Wheaton particularly enjoyed critiquing local church sermons in his newspaper column. For nearly a decade he commented nearly weekly—no one was safe from his scrutinizing typesetter. Here are two excerpts from his review a Free Methodist Camp sermon (published July 3, 1879):

We got there before preaching time, but the time was occupied in praying and singing as a useful preliminary to preaching. The meeting tent is a large one, and comfortable seated for all such as are endowed with a good spinal column. By this remark we mean, the seats were not upholstered, nor had they any back supports. In short the seats were undressed plank, soft side up.

We had a good seat next to Mike Swerdfiger, and we mingled our voices in song with the rest of them. Mind you, the Free Methodists don't sing any of your new fangled songs, nor do they tolerate "whistle boxes," or box whistles as brother Cusick called them. We suppose he meant organs. The human voice unaided by any gimcrack instrument is what (and all) they want to praise the Lord with.

Wheaton's Death (subhead)

Wheaton passed away in March 1882 at the age of 72. On March 17, the day of his funeral, all of the banks and many businesses in Northfield were closed out of respect for their editor and friend. His obituary stated, "His influence was always thrown in favor of temperance and those

measures which tended to the moral and material welfare of the community.” In a tribute John W. North wrote, “Our friendship was such that we could differ in opinion, on any subject, and still be friends.” Martha Wheaton would outlive Charles by 30 years; passing away in 1912.

Work Cited

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