

ORRIN & JERUSHA ROBINSON AND THE METHODIST MELEE ON MAIN STREET

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Connecticut's mill towns have long and complicated histories with racism, racial violence, and slavery. Those histories include villains and heroes, homegrown white supremacists and principled resisters. It is important that we remember both.

Two of the resisters were Orrin and Jerusha Robinson of Willimantic, and this is their story. It is the story of how, in 1837, they and the other congregants of the Willimantic Methodist Church faced down a proslavery mob, of how they courageously fought back, of how they defended freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, and of how a middle-aged miller went to jail for his antislavery beliefs and became Connecticut's very own Thoreau.

I found the story of Orrin and Jerusha Robinson and the Methodist Melee on Main Street in an 1895 article in the *Willimantic Journal*, a long-defunct newspaper. The article was one of a series written by Lloyd Baldwin, then an 85-year-old retired carpenter, builder, and contractor, about what Willimantic had been like in the years before the Civil War. Baldwin had moved to Willimantic in 1828 as an apprentice carpenter hired to work on the construction of one of the Thread City's new, big, granite textile mills, the Windham Cotton Manufacturing Company on Bridge Street. He stayed on to build scores of houses, churches, stores, theaters, and mills. Active in community affairs, he knew the vast majority of the city's residents and was friends with most of them. Although himself an ardent Jacksonian Democrat – and thus presumably not inclined towards abolitionism – Baldwin nevertheless respected the integrity of his townsman Orrin Robinson, an antislavery activist. Baldwin's

account of the Methodist Melee on Main Street is what historians call a primary source, a first-hand account of events by someone who lived through them. (You can read the full text of Baldwin's articles about pre-1850 Willimantic, and more about Baldwin himself, [here](#).) A secondary account of the Melee also exists, written by Allen B. Lincoln (1858-1941), a polished 19th-century local historian. Lincoln was too young to have any personal memories of the Melee, but he had heard the story from the old timers, probably including Baldwin himself. In 1892 Lincoln wrote down what he had heard, as part of a long oration on the history of Windham, CT, which he delivered at the town's bicentennial.

As elsewhere in Connecticut in the 1830s, antebellum Willimantic and Windham (Willimantic was an urban borough within the town of Windham) were sharply divided on the issue of slavery. Slavery had a long history in Connecticut. Enslaved Africans were first brought to Connecticut in 1639, only a few years after the earliest English colonists arrived. Of the first two non-Native Americans to settle in Windham, one was a slave owner, John Cates, and the other was his Black slave, Jo. Slavery remained largely intact in Windham and Connecticut until 1784, shortly after the Revolution, when the state legislature provided for the gradual emancipation of enslaved Connecticans, declaring that all enslaved people born after March 1 of that year were to be freed on their 25th birthdays. The process was agonizingly slow, however, and slavery did not completely end in Connecticut until 1848. As a result, most of the state's antebellum Democrats and Whigs (the two major parties) remained ambivalent towards slavery, fearing that challenging it openly might create an irreparable breach between North and South, splinter their national parties, and result in secession or even civil war.

There were also economic reasons for Connecticans to tolerate slavery in the South. Southern slaves planted, tended, and harvested most of the cotton that Willimantic's textile mills manufactured into thread and cloth. Abolition eliminated that cheap labor source, and thus imperil the Connecticut jobs and profits that relied on it. And even those Northern whites who did favor abolishing slavery often shared the insidious prejudice against African Americans that characterized the era. As Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jennifer Frank of the *Hartford Courant* pointed out in their book ***Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery***, white Connecticans were as complicit in American slavery as anyone else in the United States. A lot of them were willing to tolerate slavery, just so long as it remained in the South, safely out of sight. As a group, Northern whites did not have clean hands.

Still, there were some residents of antebellum Connecticut who openly challenged slavery — some because they feared competition from slave labor if it ever came north, some out of principle, and some because they empathized with the people who had been forced into bondage. Who was who is hard to tell. But among those in Willimantic who took a stand against slavery were the city's Methodists, who had only recently organized a congregation and, in 1836, built a new church on Main Street. According to Baldwin, in the spring of 1837, the Methodists invited "an abolition lecturer by the name of Phelps" to come speak at the new church. Not everyone in town was happy about it. Allen Lincoln identified the

speaker as Aaron Phelps. He may have meant Amos Phelps (1805-47), a Farmington, Connecticut native and graduate of Yale Divinity School. Upon graduation, Phelps had become pastor to congregations in Hopkinton and Boston, Massachusetts. In 1834 he left the pulpit to become an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society, and in 1837 — the same year as the Melee — General Agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. (The Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society would not be founded until the next year, 1838.) Phelps was politically moderate, and in 1840 would break with William Lloyd Garrison, whose more strident abolitionism Phelps thought went too far. According to Lincoln, it was Willimantic's Methodist minister, Rev. Moses White, who had invited Phelps to speak to his Willimantic congregation on three different days.

The situation soon became violent. On the first day that Phelps spoke, all was quiet, but on the second, an angry mob gathered outside the Methodist Church in noisy protest, and threw stones through the glass windows. On the third day, an even larger mob assembled in advance at the nearby Congregational Church and then marched *en masse* to the Methodist Church, bent on violence. No sooner had Phelps commenced speaking, than the mob — Baldwin called them “young hotheads, encouraged no doubt by older ones who should have known better” — entered the church and attempted to shut things down. The mob's leader, Charles Schofield, Lincoln wrote, strode to the front of the Church, demanded that Phelps cease speaking, and threatened violence if he didn't. But to Schofield's surprise, the Methodists fought back. According to Baldwin, a “rough and tumble scrimmage” broke out between the two sides that soon spilled out onto Main Street.

Lincoln provided more details about what happened, but not all of them were accurate, so we should take them with a bit of skepticism. According to Lincoln, “young Orrin Robinson, tall and strong,” stepped out of the congregation, grabbed Schofield by the arm, and marched him out of the Church. Robinson, however, was 46 at the time, hardly young — not as young as the “young hotheads,” anyway — and may not have been especially tall or strong, either. Baldwin wrote that it was the congregation as a whole that resisted.

Try to imagine the scene. Tough, angry, young men, possibly armed with clubs and maybe even guns, loud and shouting, shoving open the doors of the church, threatening the speaker and the congregation. The congregation, unarmed, surprised, likely mostly made up of middle-aged and older men and women, as well as children — church people — seemingly no match for the young toughs. The thugs probably expected the Methodists to back down. That they didn't is amazing. It is not easy to imagine these older, peaceable people, including Robinson, courageously standing up to the mob. It seems almost incredible. But they did.

Someone notified the Deputy Sheriff, who Baldwin said was James Webb and Lincoln said was Edward Clark, who hurriedly arrived with at least one constable — and likely more — to break up the fight. After restoring order, the Deputy chewed out the combatants and —

probably to ensure that the two sides didn't start fighting again after he left – arrested and fined 15 or 20 of the leaders on both sides.

All but one of those arrested sheepishly paid their fines and went home. However, standing on principle, Robinson, in Baldwin's words a "strong abolitionist," refused, announcing that he would go to jail instead. Try to picture the scene, the angry, middle-aged miller, incredulous that the authorities would arrest and fine him because he had defended his and Phelps's right to free speech, free religion, and free assembly under the Constitution. We find ourselves wanting more details about Robinson and what he was thinking. But even close to two centuries later, we can feel his righteous anger and rising passion.

So Robinson and "Constable Hosmer" – who Lincoln said was William Hosmer, but also might have been Stephen Hosmer, a prosperous farmer with extensive fields at the base of Hosmer Mountain, on the edge of the city, or Stephen's son, John, a respected Main Street merchant – set off on foot, according to Lincoln, for Brooklyn, CT, the Windham County seat and site of the county jail (the same jail, it turns out, that four years earlier had held another Connecticut hero, Prudence Crandall). Apparently, Hosmer was reluctant to drag the stubborn old Methodist to jail – Willimantic was still a small community, barely more than a village, and the two families, Robinsons and Hosmers, would have known each other. So, as Baldwin wrote, "making an excuse that he had forgotten his papers, ... [Hosmer] left Robinson in the road, supposing that would end it." But Robinson had his gumption up, and still on foot he continued on towards Brooklyn on his own. Lincoln said he did so "cheerfully." Perhaps "resoloutely" would be a better adverb. Hosmer returned to Willimantic, picked up any paperwork that he may have left behind, and headed back towards Brooklyn, presumably on horseback. He overtook Robinson, still on his way to the county seat, accompanied him the rest of the way to Brooklyn, and "committed him to jail." Try to picture Robinson, perhaps sputtering and angry, perhaps "cheerful" as Lincoln said, taking himself to jail, now fighting not just a proslavery mob, but his own government. But still not backing down.

Thus Orrin Robinson of Willimantic, Connecticut, dedicated abolitionist, middle-aged miller, and devout Methodist, refused to pay a fine for the "crime" of defending an abolitionist speaker's right to speak – and his own and his fellow abolitionists' right to assemble and practice their religion and their politics the way they saw fit – against an angry proslavery mob. He also refused to take advantage of Hosmer's implied offer to let him go home and forget the whole thing. Instead, he voluntarily went to jail, committing an act of antislavery civil disobedience more than a decade before Henry David Thoreau's more celebrated night in Concord jail for the similar offense of refusing to pay his poll tax because it supported a war – the Mexican-American War of the 1840s – that Thoreau believed was fought to acquire new land for slavery. Robinson did it first.

We don't know what happened to Robinson next — how long he stayed in jail, whether he finally backed down and paid his fine, how his neighbors greeted him when he finally got

back to Willimantic. Sometimes, the historical record leaves out a lot of important stuff.

As for Phelps, according to Lincoln, he escaped Willimantic unharmed. In all the confusion, “Aunt ‘Rushy Robinson” (Orrin’s wife Jerusha) tossed her cloak over him and quietly led him to safety in their home.

Why did Orrin and Jerusha Robinson become antislavery activists? Why was Orrin willing to go to jail for his beliefs? Why did they and their fellow congregants stand up to an ugly mob? The historical record is silent about all of that.

What we do know is that Orrin and Jerusha Robinson were ordinary folk and respected members of their community. The Robinson family had lived in Windham, CT for generations. Jerusha’s maiden name was Jerusha Lyman Abel, and the Lyman family had roots that ran back deep into colonial times. Lincoln referred to Jerusha affectionately as “Aunt ‘Rushy,” and another Willimantic resident — a journalist and merchant named William L. Weaver — once referred to Orrin as “Uncle Orrin,” although in neither case were they blood relatives. They weren’t young. Orrin Robinson had been born in 1791, when George Washington was President, the son of Nathaniel and Charlotte (Sheldon) Robinson. So many Nathaniel Robinsons, Isaac Robinsons, and Charlotte Robinsons lived in Windham over the years — all related to each other — that it is easy to confuse them. Orrin’s father had passed away by the time of the Melee, but Orrin’s brother Nathaniel owned a prosperous farm on Jackson Street, just outside of Willimantic. Orrin was not as wealthy as his brother — a miller, operating a sawmill along the Willimantic River, one of the smaller, preindustrial mills that had flourished in the days before the big textile factories, and which in 1837 were starting to shut down. The sawmill would be torn down in 1864 (the year Orrin died) to make way for a massive, new cotton mill. In 1850, according to the Federal Census, the Orrin Robinson household included both Orrin and Jerusha, their 24-year-old son Charles H. (identified as Henry in the 1860 Federal Census), and Jerusha’s elderly mother, Mary Abel. Their daughter Charlotte — named after Orrin’s mother — had already passed away in 1847 at the age of 24. Money was probably tight. Although the 1850 census indicated that Jerusha was unemployed, in 1860 she was working as a dressmaker, despite being 66 years old. Their son was a laborer. They lived across the street from the sawmill, near the river.

Although not among Willimantic’s elite, Orrin and Jerusha Robinson were respected as hard-working, steady, and honest. Baldwin wrote, “In 1832 Samuel Gray sold to Orrin Robinson the lot on the north side of Main Street east of the Safford lot, on which he built a comfortable residence. Orrin Robinson was a character in his way. He early espoused the cause of abolition of slavery and fought the battles of the abolition party physically and mentally, honest in his convictions without doubt.” (Coming from Baldwin, an ardent Jacksonian who probably did not at all share Robinson’s views, this was high praise.) In an 1863 article in the *Willimantic Journal* (published only a year before Orrin Robinson’s death), William L. Weaver wrote, “Just below and across the way is the sawmill, looking very much

as it did thirty or forty years ago, and there we saw ‘Uncle Orrin’ in attendance where, if we mistake not, we used to see him when a schoolboy, looking just the same, apparently just as old and no older than he did then, giving us the impression that there is one individual among us not subject to the love of fashion and change.” Honest and steady. The kind of man who would have made a stand.

And here is a nugget that may — or may not — mean something. The large, extended Robinson family in which Orrin grew up were farmers, and their farms were located along what, in the 1840s, came to be known as Jackson Street, at a time when most of the land along the street was still farmland. Jackson Street was named not for former President Andrew Jackson, but for humble Lyman Jackson, a tenant farmer who lived on it. Lyman Jackson and his wife and children had moved to Willimantic sometime in the 1830s, perhaps just a year or two before the Melee. Orrin and Jerusha Robinson no longer lived on Jackson Street by then, but their “comfortable house” by the sawmill was only a short walk away. Orrin Robinson and Lyman Jackson would have known each other, as would Jerusha Robinson and Clarissa Jackson, Lyman’s wife. And one more detail. Lyman and Clarissa Jackson, Orrin and Jerusha Robinson’s neighbors, were free Blacks. There is not evidence enough to know anything else for sure. But it is suggestive.

Orrin Robinson’s weathered tombstone stands tall and straight in the Old Willimantic Cemetery, not too far from Lyman Jackson’s. Jerusha’s and Charlotte’s stones have toppled and are no longer readable. Orrin Robinson’s and Lyman Jackson’s stones are modest, flat marble, with plain letters. Neither man was wealthy. Robinson died in 1864, before the end of the Civil War, which — legally, at least — decided the fate of slavery in the United States. But he did live long enough to witness the Emancipation Proclamation. In my imagination, I picture him smiling at that.

Our history in Connecticut is complicated, with white supremacist forebears who threatened to forcibly shut down an abolitionist speaker, and resisters who — for reasons we can only guess at today — staged a 19th-century version of a counter-demonstration, a resistance that involved meeting violence with violence. For every hero, there was a villain; for Prudence Crandall, an Andrew Judson; for Orrin Robinson, a Charles Schofield. Should we criticize and say that the Methodists should have reacted peaceably instead? Why did they stand up against slavery in the face of stronger, younger men? Maybe knowing someone personally, as a neighbor, was important, breaking down barriers. Maybe it wasn’t, and Orrin and Jerusha Robinson did what they did for reasons other than human decency. But when it comes to the Methodist Melee on Main Street, I know which side I am on.

I’ll give Allen Lincoln, the late 19th- and early 20th-century Willimantic local historian, the last word. Lincoln noted that folks in his own times, sixty years after the Melee and thirty

years after the Civil War, had a lot to say about the bigotry of the old days. But it is the bigotry of our own times, he warned, that we all have to watch out for.