

WILLIAM ELIOT BARROWS

Thomas R. Beardsley

Although born in Ohio and raised in Massachusetts, William Eliot Barrows left an indelible mark on Connecticut's postbellum history. Between 1874 and 1883, Barrows, the General Manager of the Willimantic Linen Company in Willimantic, Connecticut, attempted to "civilize" a rapidly growing textile community. A potential agent of change at the time was socialism; Barrows despised socialism, but he knew that modifications had to be made to the nation's social fabric during the difficult years of rapid industrialization and political and economic reconstruction if socialism was to be defeated and capitalism triumph. He looked upon Connecticut's restive industrial classes as misguided children, who required fatherly discipline and guidance. Barrows strongly believed in the reforming powers of education and culture. If he exposed the mainly immigrant workers to these things, they might be somewhat less inclined to riot, strike, and drink. To reform capitalism and defeat socialism, Barrows engaged the Linen Company, Connecticut's largest factory, in a well publicized and thorough-going experiment of industrial paternalism.

Barrows was born on July 14, 1842, in Hudson, a small town between Cleveland and Akron, Ohio, the eighth of Elijah and Sara Barrows's ten children. His early life was shaped and tempered by a strict Christian upbringing. His father, Elijah Porter Barrows, was born in Mansfield, Connecticut, in 1805. He graduated from Yale in 1826 with a degree in divinity, and taught in schools and colleges until 1835, when he became pastor of the Free Will Presbyterian Church in New York City. Two years later, he returned to education; from 1837 until 1852, Elijah Barrows held the chair of professor of sacred literature at the Western Reserve College in Ohio. In 1853, when William was 11, Elijah Barrows returned to New England, accepting an appointment as professor of Hebrew language at the Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. In 1866, when William was away fighting in the Civil War, the distinguished and widely admired professor left Andover and retired to Middletown, Connecticut, to produce religious tracts. In 1872, he returned to Ohio and taught at the Oberlin Theological Seminary. E. P. Barrows died in Oberlin in 1888, aged 83.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, 19-year-old William Barrows left Andover and joined the Union army as a hospital steward, holding the rank of private in the 19th Massachusetts Volunteers. The letters he wrote home to his family between 1861 and 1865 reveal much about his character. Those to his mother are chatty and relaxed; those to his father are stiff and formal.

Barrows's letters reveal that he detested the life of an army private and hospital steward. The stench of piled, decomposing bodies horrified him. He bemoaned the quality, and lack, of food, the awful weather, the ruthless execution of deserters, and the endless marching through knee-deep mud. He became despondent and asked his father to arrange a transfer to the navy.

Elijah assured his son that he was better off in the army because there were no chaplains or religious privileges in the navy. William explained to his father that his regiment also had no chaplains, and that the very hard army life was much worse than the navy, and wrote that he could not think of more than four men in the whole regiment with whom he chose to associate. Although Barrows felt great sympathy for the suffering of the wounded, he was simply unable to identify personally with the mostly lower-class, uneducated, and hard-drinking enlisted men. He was not comfortable as one of the masses.

Then, in March, 1863, Barrows was promoted to second lieutenant, and his quality of life improved dramatically. His desire for a maritime life faded. His letters home became more cheerful and positive. He remained abstemious, confessing to his mother that he never smoked, drank liquor, chewed tobacco, or swore – and as far as he knew, only one other man in the regiment could say the same. He wrote his father and apologized for not having as much formal education as he thought he should.

Barrows thrived as an officer. Between March, 1862, and March, 1864, he was assigned to the Army of the Potomac and became known personally by Generals Alexander S. Webb and George M. Meade, who became his patrons, mentors, and role models. In 1863 Webb appointed Barrows as his aide-de-camp, and a close friendship developed between the two middle-to-upper-class men. Like Barrows's father, Webb was well educated. After the war, the General became a professor of ethics and history at West Point, and in 1869 he was appointed President of the College of the City of New York, a post he held with distinction until 1902. Webb's pragmatic, reformist, progressive philosophy impressed his young aide-de-camp, and probably provided some of the basis for Barrows's subsequent social experiments in Willimantic.

Although primarily an administrative officer for the duration of the war, Barrows did see some combat and displayed good leadership. At the Battle of Gettysburg, Lieutenant Barrows took command of three Vermont companies and performed a successful flanking operation. This was his first taste of action, and he proudly sent his father a Confederate officer's sword, and made a walking cane from the captured flag staff of a Virginia regiment, which he used for the rest of his life.

Barrows's had spent his teenage years deeply immersed in an elite, educated Yankee culture. Upper-class life in nineteenth-century New England mirrored that of Europe, where paternalism was defined as noblesse oblige – the belief that those who had been more fortunate were obliged to look after the lower orders. Barrows's perception of his own social standing emerges in a December, 1864, letter to his sister Sara, in which he thanked her for making him a new cap with fancy braid. The cap greatly impressed Barrows's immediate commanding officer, a Captain Pelton, who asked Barrows if Sara would make him a similar one. Barrows wrote to Sara that he thought Pelton, of Middletown, Connecticut, was a "first-rate, good looking fellow," but he also suggested that Sara not make Pelton a similar cap, because "he has no birth."

Shortly after Gettysburg, Barrows was promoted to first lieutenant, and quickly thereafter attained the rank of brevet major on General Meade's staff. He mustered out of service in July, 1865.

Seeking a job, he was able to call on two of the nation's most popular and well known war heroes as references. George Meade wrote: "Captain Barrows served at my HQ, Army of the Potomac.... I knew him to be a young gentleman of high character and a most gallant and meritorious officer, and if you can find him the appointment he seeks, I shall consider it a personal favor...." Alexander Webb recommended Barrows for a job as an instructor at West Point.

Barrows was looking for a career in manufacturing. Back in October, 1864, he had informed his father that one of his commanding officers was "an extensive wagon manufacturer," and had offered him a job after the war. The offer – along with his close proximity to Meade and Webb, both army-trained engineers – had sparked an interest in engineering and business. He found work as an apprentice engineer at the Lowell machine Shop in Lowell, Massachusetts, the cockpit of the First Industrial Revolution in America.

Barrows's patriarchal outlook, already shaped by his family life, Yankee upbringing, and Civil War experience, was further honed by his postwar work at the Lowell Machine Shop, where his interests in the welfare of America's industrial classes began. Barrows later admitted that he became highly interested in workers' living conditions while at Lowell, just as he has been by the welfare of the soldiers under his command during the Civil War.

Barrows served his apprenticeship and then moved on. In 1872, when he was just 30, he was appointed manager of the Ivanhoe Paper Mills in Paterson, New Jersey, where he supervised the importation of top-of-the-line industrial machinery from Great Britain. Barrows's combination of engineering skills and business acumen soon attracted the attention of the Willimantic Linen Company, which hired him in 1874 and put him to work in Hartford as an assistant treasurer. He was only 32. When Austin Dunham, the Company's founder and chief executive, died in 1877, the 35-year-old Barrows became vice president, general manager, and treasurer. He was appointed president five years later, in May, 1882, on the death of the post's previous incumbent, Thomas Smith. Still only 40 years old, he now wielded considerable power – too much for his opponents in the Company, who considered him to be an overspending eccentric. By 1883, Barrows had redirected much of the Willimantic Linen Company's extensive wealth away from its stockholders, and invested it in several controversial schemes.

In 1877 America's industrial communities burned with radical political ideas imported from Europe. The foreign creed of socialism took root in some of the country's industrial communities, alarming America's capitalist establishment. Barrows was part of the establishment, but he had no wish to shoot or bayonet the revolting or striking workers. He believed he could win them over with kindness and training, grooming them to his own sophistication and abstemiousness. Thus, as general manager he displayed a great deal of

paternalistic benevolence towards Willimantic's "uneducated and primitive" French Canadian and Irish workforce. But Barrows was no egalitarian. He didn't believe in worker empowerment – he just created more subtle ways to control them.

Barrows provided free food and non-alcoholic drinks, which he distributed to his workers during extended coffee breaks, and built a company store-and-library, a dance pavilion, refined Victorian housing, and the largest mill in the world, containing a special ambiance thanks to the colored glass in its windows and its numerous tropical flowers and plants. This mill was also the first designed specifically to be illuminated by electricity. Barrows also provided social and educational programs. The cost was astronomical, but this persuasive and charismatic hero of Gettysburg argued that the Company's investment would be repaid tenfold.

Barrows's numerous innovations and social experiments came to the notice of Yale University, which awarded him a prestigious honorary M. A. degree in June, 1882.

But in Willimantic, many of the directors of the Willimantic Linen Company had grown unhappy with what they considered his excessive spending on social experiments. Perhaps under pressure, he resigned in October, 1883, and left Willimantic to supervise George Pullman's paternalistic scheme to create the model industrial town of Pullman, just outside of Chicago. Barrows's departure was not greatly mourned: "The general opinion about here is that Mr. Barrows has spent more money for beauty than for practicality," commented the Willimantic Journal. "Personally, Mr. Barrows is, however, a perfect gentleman, always on the side of good morals and an advocate of elevation of public sentiment, but we think the Linen company needs a manager less revolutionary in his ideas."

Pullman lured Barrows to Illinois with a \$12,000 salary, 500 shares in the Pullman Land Association, a new house in the Pullman community, and the position of vice president of the Pullman Palace Car Company, which made "sleeping cars" for the railroad.

Barrows arrived at Pullman, Illinois, in the fall of 1883 and was shocked by the autocratic nature of the community. He may have been the inside source who passed along damning information on the community – and its unhappy residents – to the muckraking journalist Richard Ely, who exposed it. Barrows resigned his post at Pullman on December 5th, 1884, claiming that George Pullman had not fulfilled his part of the contract regarding shares in the Pullman Land Association.

In 1885 Barrows took a job as a special commissioner to that year's Industrial Exposition in New Orleans. Based in Lima, Peru, he searched South America for suitable exhibits. Between 1886 and 1888, he managed the Hinckley locomotive works in Boston, Massachusetts, which repaired and built steam railroad engines. In 1889 Barrows became a leading shareholder and manager of the Welsbach Incandescent Gas Burner Company of Gloucester, New Jersey. He also became involved in early experiments to produce electric refrigeration units. After a long and

distinguished career in industrial and social experimentation and innovations, William Eliot Barrows died in his home at Haverford, Pennsylvania, on July 30, 1901, shortly after his 59th birthday.