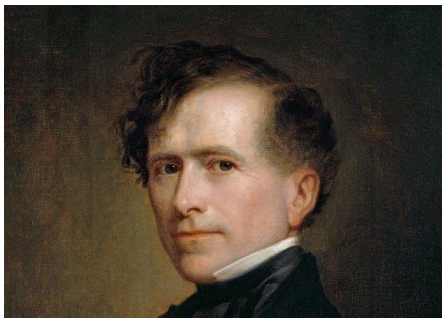




Stories Series.....

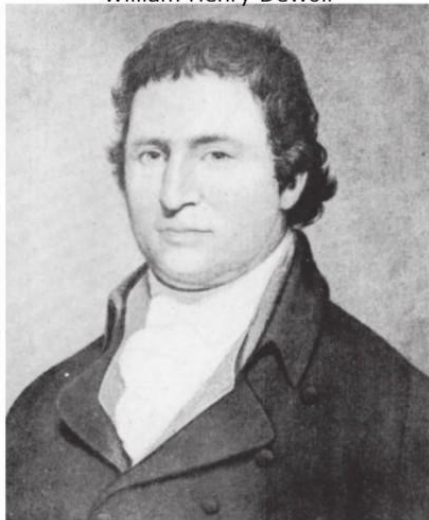
STORIES SERIES, NUMBER FOUR

WILLIAM HENRY DEWOLF AND FRANKLIN PIERCE



It took 49 ballots at the Democratic National Convention of 1852 to nominate Franklin Pierce as the party's candidate. Because of growing tension between the north and south, he was considered by many to be the "compromise" candidate. As soon as he took office as the 14th President of the United States in March of 1853, he began the process of appointing dozens of supporters to positions as consuls around the world. In the first eight months of his term, seven of those appointees died.¹ William Henry DeWolf was one of them.

William Henry DeWolf



James DeWolf's fourth son William Henry (1802-1853) served briefly as a seaman in the Navy, and became known as "The Commodore". He was appointed as the Consul in Dundee, Scotland in early 1853. His obituary in the November 1853 Bristol Phoenix stated that his appointment by President Pierce was "...at the united solicitation of the representatives of Rhode Island".²

After George DeWolf, who built the mansion at 500 Hope Street in 1810, fled the town in 1825, the mortgage passed through the hands of James DeWolf to William Henry and his wife Sarah. James was politically active, having served in the state legislature for about 25 years on and off between 1798 and 1837; he also was elected to a six year term to the United States Senate in 1821, but served only 4 years until he resigned in 1825. He was a Democrat-

¹ *Daily Evening Star of Washington DC*, November 18, 1853

² *Ibid*

Republican, a Jeffersonian. In 1833 President Andrew Jackson himself paid a visit to the DeWolf Homestead at 500 Hope Street. By 1853 “Old Hickory” Jackson was replaced by Pierce, whom the political pundits had nicknamed “Young Hickory”.

James DeWolf died in 1837, and in 1838 William inherited 1/10th of the estate, which included land on Poppasquash and in Kentucky, as well as 1/4th of the plantations in Cuba and 1/4th of the ownership in various ships. William used part of that inheritance to expand the mansion, adding a small ballroom (which is now the gift shop). Not known for his business acumen and not very successful in the whaling industry, by 1847 his inheritance was gone and his prospects were dim. Just about broke, he sold his share in the ship “*Corinthian*”, then ran away to Cuba with his mistress. Ultimately seeing the error of his ways and seeking forgiveness, he returned to Bristol. His long suffering wife Sarah took him back. They had been married in 1823. She was the daughter of the Reverend Doctor Rogers, the first graduate of Brown University who became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

The 1850s were consequential years for the United States, for Franklin Pierce, and for the DeWolfs. The Fugitive Slave Act had been passed in 1850; the Republican Party was born in 1854, and that same year the trial of escaped slave Anthony Burns riveted the country.

For Franklin Pierce, a day in January of 1853 was one of profound horror and grief. Just two months before being sworn in to office he and his wife lost their son Bennie in a train accident. Without warning, an axel on the rail car they were riding in broke in two, causing the car to be thrown from the tracks at forty miles per hour, careen down a twenty-foot embankment and land in a pile of wreckage. Bennie, age eleven, was thrown from his seat on impact and killed right in front of his distraught parents. This was the passing of their third and last child. It so profoundly rattled Mr. Pierce that he took his Presidential oath of office with his hand on a law book. Some historians intimate that Pierce believed the death of his son was a punishment for his sins, explaining why he did not use the traditional Bible. The inaugural ball was cancelled as well.³

In May of 1853 the news in Bristol was that James Dickinson, the man who had robbed the grave of James DeWolf – among other transgressions – was finally apprehended in Ohio and charged with murder.

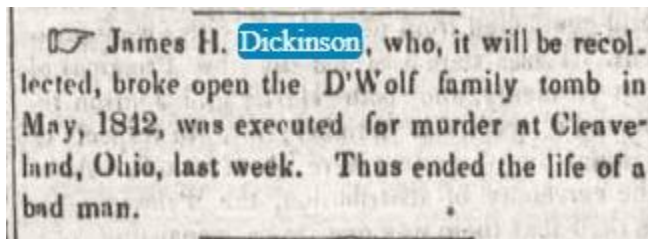
James DeWolf, Bristol merchant, ship owner, state representative, United States Senator, and slave trader, was on business in New York in 1837 and visited his daughter while there. He died unexpectedly. His wife, anguished, died 12 days later. They were buried in the family plot in Bristol. And then, as is well known about town, the tomb was broken into and robbed in 1842.

The trial began on May 11, 1842: The State vs. James H. Dickinson. The prosecution claimed that he “feloniously stole and carried away from the tomb of the late James DeWolf sundry silver coffin plates”. A Fall River silversmith, Ellis Gifford, told the tale of Mr. Dickinson bringing him the plates, wanting to sell them for cash. The silversmith testified that he saw the words *Bristol* and *Wolf* engraved on the plates.

³ “*The Triumph and Tragedy of Franklin Pierce*”; New England Historical Society, updated in 2021

The very same James H. Dickinson, living a life of crime under various names from England to Philadelphia to Pittsburgh to Cleveland to Buffalo; broke from his jail in Bristol and a chase ensued across the Common to catch him; he attempted another jail break from the state prison in 1843; he later retreated to England in 1852 and married his cousin. On the voyage back to America, he met a Mr. Beaston - many say his accomplice to a variety of robberies during that voyage. And in April, the two met again at Riley's, on River Street, in the Flats - and off on a bender they went: Mr. Beaston, flashing cash and drinking brandy; Mr. Dickinson, sipping beers.

On April 18, 1853, at the end of the bender, Mr. Beaston was found dead. Headless. Mr. Dickinson was found guilty, and sentenced to hang. That piece of news was published in the Bristol Phoenix the following month.



Amazingly, a second trial had to be ordered because the jury's verdict said one word, "guilty" and left out the all-important "...of murder in the first degree". So, in March, 1855, Mr. Dickinson was found guilty, again. June 1, 1855 was his last day on earth. He had a cigar

and a glass of wine. He was brought to the scaffold and gave a short oration. The crowd, moved, took up a collection. \$49.66 was given to his wife. At 1:04 pm he was hanged. ⁴

Also in 1853, in July, the auction notice was published in the Bristol Phoenix, advertising the sale of the Arkwright Mills Estates, where workers once made cloth from cotton grown by southern slaves. Spread out over Cranston, Coventry and Scituate, the estate was comprised of

heavily wooded land, two cotton mills previously destroyed by fire, and 51 tenements with supporting service buildings such as blacksmith shops. Once owned by James DeWolf, the sale of the estates was conducted by Charles Tillinghast of Providence, with William Bradford DeWolf and Byron Diman of Bristol as additional contacts.⁵

In September of that year a horrific explosion onboard a steamboat took the lives of four of the eight children of Mr. and Mrs. William Frederick DeWolf. Gone in an instant were daughters Anna, age 16; Charlotte, age 14; Mary, age 10; and Maria, age 8. William, Henry, Cecelia, and Edward Padelford DeWolf (age 5) survived, with their parents. The family was heading back to Chicago after their summer vacation in Bristol and Newport.⁶

And then came the news of the death of William Henry. His consular appointment had been announced in the local paper on June 3, 1853. He spent the summer in preparation for his new assignment, and in putting his local affairs in order. On June 7th a Cincinnati columnist included a pointed commentary in his weekly column. First he recounted the slave trading legacy of the DeWolf family, with particular focus on

⁴ "By The Neck Until Dead"; John Stark Bellamy II; published by Cleveland Memory at the Cleveland State University Library, 2002

⁵ *Bristol Phoenix*, July 7, 1853

⁶ *New York Times*, September 9, 1853

James DeWolf and the fortune he had accumulated. “Notwithstanding the colossal wealth of Captain D’Wolf, very little of it remains in his family at this day. William Henry, the recently appointed Consul to Dundee, saw the last of his ‘last thousand’ many years ago, and though he has managed to retain



possession of one of the splendid old mansions of the family, has tasted the dregs of the cup of adversity....Mr. DeWolf will make a pretty good Consul. Aside from being one of the finest looking men we ever saw, he is a gentleman of superior address, and possessed of considerable knowledge of public affairs.” Then comes the thinly veiled warning: “The new Consul may arrive in Glasgow and Dundee in time for the last of the Scotch ovations to Mrs. Stowe; knowing him to be one of the most convivial men living, we commend him to the Sawneys* as a most admirable lion for the ‘farewell banquet’ to the authoress of Uncle Tom. The daughter of the greatest abolitionist, and the son of the greatest slave trader of America, in juxtaposition, will

serve to point the remark that ‘this *is* a great country’.”⁷ (*The photo is that of Mrs. Stowe.*)

The Glasgow Ladies’ New Anti-Slavery Society, fired up by the British edition of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, had invited the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe to come visit. On April 15, 1853, two thousand people crammed into City Hall in Glasgow to hear her speak. For a *Connecticut Explored* publication in 2011, Katherine Kane, the Executive Director of the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Hartford wrote: “Stowe’s book, originally run as a 45-part series in an abolitionist newspaper, was a runaway success, selling 10,000 copies in a week and more than 300,000 copies in the United States in its first year, despite being widely banned in the South. It became the best-selling book of the 19th century, second only to the Bible, and galvanized the abolition movement. In Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen, Scotland, throngs shouted, cheered, pushed, and shoved at every train station. Boys tried to jump on her moving carriage to peek in the window. The evening “soirees,” or public gatherings, held in her honor were standing room only. By the fall of 1852, more than 150,000 copies had been sold throughout Britain ‘and still the returns of sales show no decline’ according to Clark & Company. In just one year, 1.5 million British copies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were sold.”

That October, with Scotland as his final destination, DeWolf stepped aboard the *Baltic*, which departed from New York City bound for Liverpool, England. His obituary in the Bristol Phoenix reported:

“...(he) had only been at his destination for two days, when he was compelled to return by the sudden illness which finally terminated his life. During his voyage he received every kindness from Captain Comstock and Purser Creary, who is also surgeon of the *Baltic*, but sank so rapidly that he died on the day after his arrival.” He died at the residence of his daughter Rosalie and son-in-law John Hopper. His remains were brought back to Bristol for internment.

⁷ *Cincinnati Commercial*, June 7, 1853

* Slang for Scotsmen

We shall never know if the words of the Cincinnati columnist would become true – that William Henry would make a “pretty good Consul”. We do know that history has not been kind to President Franklin Pierce. In 1854 he signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Designed to solve the issue of expanding slavery into the territories, it failed miserably. In May of 1856 tensions manifested themselves in the attack in the Capitol itself by Representative Preston Brooks, D-SC on Senator Charles Sumner, R-MA. Kansas continued to “bleed”. In June of 1856 Pierce’s own Democratic Party failed to nominate him, the sitting President, for re-election. This was - and still is - unprecedented in US history. On November 4th, 1856, James Buchanan was elected President. On March 4, 1857 he was inaugurated.

Challenges and changes came to the DeWolf family as well. While building a new house for his family, John Hopper (the son of famed Philadelphia Quaker abolitionist Isaac Tatem Hopper) died suddenly on the construction site in Milton, NY in January of 1864. He was buried at Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

On March 5, 1864, Sarah Rogers DeWolf died at age 62. She was living at the time in New York with her widowed daughter Mrs. Rosalie DeWolf Hopper. Sarah’s body was brought back to Bristol for internment.



In 1865 Edward Colt, something of a mystery to the folks of Bristol, came into town and purchased the DeWolf Homestead at 500 Hope Street. His mother Theodora DeWolf Colt then set out to rebuild and rebrand the family home, built by her father George, as Linden Place.

Franklin Pierce, after years of heavy drinking, died in 1869 at the age of 64. The obituary published in the New York Times on October 9, 1869 acknowledged the difficulties of his presidency this way:

“Although his record as a statesman cannot command the approbation of the nation, he still should be followed to the grave with that respect which is due to one who has filled the highest office in the gift of the people – a President of the United States.”⁸



⁸ *New York Times*, October 9, 1869