

**THOREAU, THE REVEREND BOOK-PEDDLER HAWKINS,
AND DOCTOR LUNSFORD LANE**

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In his reminiscences of Thoreau, which were published in part in *The Concord Saunterer* in 1984, Elias Harlow Russell (1836–1917) describes meeting Thoreau at the home of a mutual friend in Worcester. By piecing together various bits of evidence, both explicit and suggestive, I was able to place the meeting in the home of Thoreau's loyal Worcester friend and disciple, Harrison Gray Otis Blake (1816–1898), who then lived at 3 Bowdoin Street, and to fix the date and time of the meeting as Monday evening, December 10, 1860—exactly one week after Thoreau had begun to feel symptoms of the cold that would cause his death a year and a half later.

Russell reports that in the course of conversation that evening Thoreau "happened to speak, in some connection, of a man named Hawkins who had lately called to solicit his subscription to a life of his (Hawkins') father, a noted temperance lecturer. 'I told him,' said Thoreau, 'that I was not much interested in the subject, as my intemperance did not lie in the direction of ardent spirits.'"

As I reported in the *Saunterer*,

Thoreau's unwelcome caller was the Reverend William George Hawkins [1823–1909], rector of Saint John's Episcopal Church, Wilkinsonville (Sutton), Massachusetts, from April 1860 to April 1862 and editor of the *National Freedman* from 1863 to 1866.

Hawkins was peddling *Life of John H. W. Hawkins* (Boston and New York, 1859; Boston and Cleveland, 1860; and later editions). The elder

Hawkins had died in August 1858. His son was in Boston by 1859, when he wrote the preface to the first edition of the biography. The United States Census for 1860 places Hawkins and his family in Wilkinsonville on July 9, 1860. Hawkins probably offered Thoreau a subscription to the 1860 edition of the *Life*.

The elder Hawkins, John Henry Willis Hawkins (1797–1858), was born in Baltimore and during his early years had been an alcoholic.

Early in 1840 he associated himself with the Washington Temperance Society, originated at Baltimore in the same year, and immediately began to work earnestly in behalf of temperance. He developed a great power of influencing an audience, and so successful were his efforts in the work of reformation that he gave himself wholly to it.

In his youth he was apprenticed to a hatter and quickly became a skilled artisan; it was in connection with this trade, in which liquor was freely doled out to apprentices, that he became addicted to alcohol. Nonetheless, in 1830, in spite of his addiction, Hawkins was one of the "leaders in the hatters and cordwainers strikes [in Baltimore] and advocated for the ten-hour day.¹

The younger Hawkins, William George Hawkins, attended Wilbraham Academy and Wesleyan University, graduating from the latter in 1848. He decided to become an Episcopal priest and attended the Protestant Episcopal Seminary in Alexandria, Va., from 1848–1851. He held rectorships in Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, and Nebraska. As noted above, he was the Rector of St. John's Episcopal Church

¹<http://>>. See William R. Sutton, *Journeymen for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

in the manufacturing village of Wilkinsonville (a village of Sutton, Mass., a few miles south of Worcester) from 1860 to 1862, and it was during this period that he would have called upon Thoreau in Concord. It would probably be impossible to determine exactly when, as Russell recalls Thoreau's saying, "a man named Hawkins who had lately called to solicit his [Thoreau's] subscription to a life of his (Hawkins') father, a noted temperance lecturer," but a plausible possibility presents itself.

In a short, follow-up article in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* that was based upon information I had uncovered while writing the *Saunterer* article,¹ I presented an alternative explanation for the source of Thoreau's terminal illness. In it I state that Thoreau had caught his fatal cold from Bronson Alcott on November 29, 1860, not because he had been counting tree rings on Nashawtuct (Lee's) Hill on December 3rd, as virtually all biographies had claimed.²

The alternative explanation was based upon information in Alcott's Diary, which includes a day-by-day account of a cold that Alcott believed he had caught at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Teachers' Association, as well as a pasted-in copy of the program. Attended by 250 teachers from throughout Massachusetts, the meeting was

¹ Edmund A. Schofield, "The Origin of Thoreau's Fatal Illness," *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 171 (Spring 1985), pages 1–3.

² Thoreau's *Journal* entry of December 3rd is ambiguous as to which hill he had been counting tree rings that day, especially if one tries to resolve the ambiguity with information provided in earlier entries, for he had been working on both Fair Haven Hill and Smith's Hill. The entry says merely, "To Hill." Until his unfinished manuscript, "The Dispersion of Seeds," was published, both Fair Haven and Smith's hills were specified in biographies and other accounts of the onset of the illness. Neither is correct. Using the passage from December 3rd, Thoreau says in "The Dispersion of Seeds," "

held in Concord's Town House on November 26 and 27, 1860.¹ Alcott, as Concord's Superintendent of Schools, was host and chief organizer of the event.

Hawkins, though a clergyman and not a teacher, might well have gone to Concord to hawk the biography of his father, knowing that there would be a large and receptive pool of potential customers.

Wilkinsonville was on the main railroad line between Worcester and Providence; Hawkins could easily have learned about the meeting from the newspapers, at least six of which were being published in Worcester at the time.² The prospect of finding two hundred fifty literate people gathered for two whole days in one place would no doubt have proven irresistible to him.

At Blake's home in Worcester on December 10th, less than two weeks after the teachers' meeting, Thoreau (according to E. Harlow Russell, as noted above) said that "Hawkins . . . had *lately* called to solicit his [Thoreau's] subscription" (emphasis added). We can reasonably conclude that Hawkins had knocked on Thoreau's door while the teachers were in town less than a fortnight earlier—*i.e.*, on or about November 26 or 27, 1860.

While there is no way of telling from Russell's brief account how long Hawkins and Thoreau might have conversed; had they talked at any length they would have realized

¹ In its annual report, Concord's School Committee noted that there was "a larger attendance than usual" (*Reports of the School Committee, and Superintendent of the Schools, of the Town of Concord, Mass.*, . . ., (Concord, Mass.: Benjamin Tolman, 1861), page .

² In welcoming the assembled teachers, the Hon. John Shepard Keyes said, "We welcome you to the homes [most of the teachers were put up in private homes] of a place where Sanborn teaches, and Alcott talks; where Thoreau dreams, and Channing sings, where Hawthorne writes, and Emerson thinks." Small wonder, then, that there was "a larger attendance than usual."

that—aside from Thoreau's unconcern about "ardent spirits"—they had a good deal in common.

In other words, Hawkins is of more than passing interest in Thoreau studies.

In 1862, at almost exactly the time of Thoreau's death,¹ Hawkins moved the few miles from Wilkinsonville to Worcester. In 1863, as noted above, he became editor of the *National Freedman*, which he apparently edited from Worcester, where he lived until sometime in 1865. In 1866 he relinquished his editorship.

Just before moving to Worcester from Wilkinsonville, Hawkins met Lunsford Lane (1803—ca. 1870?), a noted former slave, author, and wide-ranging abolitionist lecturer who was born in North Carolina and who had lived in Cambridge, Mass., and Oberlin, Ohio. Years earlier Lane had paid his "owner" to gain his own and his family's release.²

Hawkins describes meeting Lane in these words:

The present writer was at that time [*i.e.*, at the outbreak of the Civil War] residing in Wilkinsonville, where he first made the acquaintance of Lunsford, and so much interested did he become in his history that he is only fulfilling a promise then made, that at some time he would endeavor to make more public the foregoing history. Dr. Lane, at the same time, gave a lecture in the

¹ Recall that Hawkins was Rector of his church in Wilkinsonville from April 1860 until April 1862; Thoreau died on May 6, 1862.

² Lane's parents are described as being "of pure African descent" (John Spencer Bassett, *Anti-Slavery Leaders of North Carolina*. Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press (1898), page 61 (citation based upon the electronic text of the work posted at <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/bassett98/bassett98.html>>, accessed September 25, 2003).

hall of that village, which was very well attended, and with which the people were much pleased.¹

Hawkins soon kept his promise, writing a long, rambling (but valuable) biography entitled, *Lunsford Lane; or, Another Helper from North Carolina* (Boston: Crosby & Nichols, 1863). Hawkins wrote the book while he was living in Worcester on Salisbury Street across from the Highland Military Academy.

Two decades earlier, Lane had written his own account of his escape from slavery, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (Boston, 1842), in which he reported that he had waited on Lafayette when the latter had passed through Raleigh in 1824 and that he was greatly impressed by Lafayette's devotion to liberty. Lane's is currently one of the better-known slave narratives being discussed by scholars.²

John Spencer Bassett, writing thirty-five years after Hawkins' biography of Lane appeared, said its

narrative is not free from the extravagances of a zealous Abolitionist. In places conversations have been reproduced with a freedom worthy of the Greek historians, and at times the author has allowed his imagination to portray surroundings which are characteristically Southern, but which in this case did not exist.³ As for the main facts of the narrative, I have no reason to reject them.

¹ Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane*, page 203.

² See, for example, *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, and Thomas H. Jones*. David A. Davis et al., editors. University of North Carolina Press,

³ Bassett may not have realized that Hawkins was born in Baltimore, yet Hawkins announces in the second sentence of his preface (dated "WORCESTER, September 29, 1863") that he was born in the South and had lived in both Virginia and Maryland.

Bassett granted that "[i]nformation about the case is hard to obtain in Raleigh, but from an old resident I obtained a corroboration of the account of the mobbing of Lane as . . . given [in Hawkins' *Narrative*]" (*ibid.*).¹

Bassett corresponded with Hawkins and was assured that "the facts were obtained from Lunsford himself, and that on a visit to Raleigh after the war the 'material facts outlined in the story' were confirmed by a number of colored people who had known, or were related to, Lunsford Lane."

Hawkins closed his reply to Bassett with the following words: "He impressed me as being a man of uncommon natural intelligence and truthfulness, and I have no doubt that the account of his life which I have given is substantially true" (*ibid.*).

Like Hawkins, Lane is first listed in the Worcester City Directory for 1863, having recently moved to Worcester from Oberlin, Ohio; his occupation that year is given as "steward" at Wellington's hospital on Mason Street, which was the private undertaking of Worcesterite T. H. Wellington. Mr. Wellington "provided, at his own expense, a hospital in Worcester, for the sick and disabled soldiers, which he supported [for] about five months, and dispensed aid to fifty or sixty sick or wounded men."²

¹ "In the autobiography written and published the year after his escape [1842], Lane tells of his night of terror. 'I started to leave (Smith's shop); but just before I got to the door I met Mr. James Litchford, who touched me on the shoulder, and I followed him back. He observed to me that if I went out of that room I should in less than five minutes be a dead man; for there was a mob outside waiting to drink my life.'" The reader is invited to read the full account of Lane's harrowing escape from the mob as published in the *Raleigh News and Observer* of December 29, 1991, and posted on the Internet by Barbara Kawamoto at <<http://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/nc/wake/bicen/terror.txt>> [accessed on September 28, 2003]).

² Abijah P. Marvin, *History of Worcester in the War of the Rebellion*. New edition, with additions and corrections. Worcester: Published by the author (1880), page 417. Marvin erroneously refers to Wellington as "George Hawkins dedicated his biography of Lane to T. W. Wellington, "Of whose

Hawkins describes Wellington's contribution, and Lane's involvement, thus:

Deep were the sympathies aroused by the fearful carnage of civil war; thousands were made sick by the sudden change of life and diet, and many of these found in T. W. Wellington, of Worcester, a true and generous friend. The Massachusetts sick and wounded, at an early stage of the war did not receive that amount of care needed to preserve life. . . . Mr. Wellington early saw that something must be done, and that there was no time for delay. With no desire for display, . . . he secured a roomy house at No. 110 Mason Street, Worcester, which he opened on the 20th of August, 1862. Having known Lunsford Lane sufficiently to feel entire confidence in him, he placed him as steward over the hospital, into which the family removed.¹

Since Marvin states that the hospital lasted for only five months, Lane's tenure as steward would have expired rather early in 1863.

According to Hawkins, Lunsford Lane "soon placed his family in comfortable circumstances" after their move to Worcester. In the City Directories for 1864 through 1870, Lane's occupation is described simply as "medicines." This cryptic designation refers to Lane's familiarity with medicinal plants, which Hawkins explains as follows in his florid prose:

Early in life, when a slave, . . . he had evinced considerable knowledge and good judgment in the curative art. Although he had perused no work or treatise upon "materia medica," we have no doubt that the best-informed members of the profession had much more respect for his evident good sense and modesty of

unobtrusive benevolence and genuine sympathy of heart,/The disabled Soldier in the Hospital and the wronged fugitive Slave/Have received many Substantial Tokens."

¹ Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane*, page 207.

professions than for the multitude of quacks who add nothing to the health or to the credit of the community.

The vegetable medicines used by Lunsford among the slaves upon his master's plantation . . . were those of his own selection and the result of continued experiment. . . . Soon people of the better class sought his advice, and readily accorded to him the physician's prenomens of Doctor. He had continued to practise [sic] the art after his settlement in the Free States, . . . never designing, however, to enter upon it as a profession. And yet if Dr. Lane's Vegetable Pills have never done much good to mankind, he promises they will do no harm; but they have added something to his pecuniary support.¹

For some inexplicable reason, Lane's occupation is dismissed in the state census schedule for 1865 simply as "Laborer."²

Hawkins disappears from the Worcester city directories after 1865. According to the *National Cyclopædia of American Biography*, he "later served as chaplain of the Inebriate Asylum at Binghamton, N. Y.; he was also actively interested in domestic missions."³ He died in 1909.

Lunsford Lane is listed in the city directories of Worcester through 1870, after which he disappears. He lived in Ward 2, but his name does not appear among the names for that ward in the schedule of the U. S. Census for 1870, which was enumerated on June 28 of that year, nor so far as I can tell, do the names of his

¹ Hawkins, *Lunsford Lane*, pages 194 and 195.

² Massachusetts State Census schedule, Dwelling 458, Family 666 (line 28 of an unnumbered page), nominally as of 1 May 1865. Lane's age is given as 56 and his birthplace as North Carolina. His wife Martha is also listed; her age and place of birth are the same as her husband's. Their sixteen-year-old son, Charles L., is listed as having been born in Massachusetts.

³ *The National Cyclopædia of American Biography*, Volume 11, page 370.

neighbors on Wilmot Street, the short, out-of-the-way street on which he lived. He does not appear in the schedule for nearby Ward 3 either. It is possible he died sometime between late 1869 (when the directory would have been compiled) and June 28, 1870, the date of the census. However, even had he died his family should have been listed.¹

¹ I have been told by a colleague that Lane moved to Cambridge and died there in the 1880s but have been unable independently to confirm that statement.