

Biography

Thomas Wentworth Higginson had a long and varied career, spanning such areas as private tutoring, preaching as an ordained minister, serving in the military, and writing. Higginson reached the rank of Colonel in the military and had the distinction of commanding the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment of freed black slaves, documented in his Army Life in a Black Regiment. He was a firm believer in equal rights for everyone, regardless of gender, race or creed.¹ Higginson is also notable for his correspondence with Emily Dickinson and his help in editing her works before publication.

Thomas Wentworth Storrow Higginson was born to Louisa and Stephen Higginson, Jr. on December 22, 1823, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Storrow was soon dropped, but he was commonly referred to as Wentworth in his early years. During his childhood, Higginson read prolifically, including several of Jane Austen's books and Emerson, whom he was especially impressed with. This, together with Higginson's love of nature and physical activity foreshadowed the majority of his life-long interests.²

In 1837, Higginson entered Harvard University at the age of 13 and was the youngest of his class. While at school, he developed the habit of taking long walks, nine to ten miles was not out of the question. He joined Phi Beta Kappa at 16, became president of it and through his efforts helped expand it to a national organization. Higginson was acknowledged as an able scholar by his professors, although he was known to sleep through lectures and sermons he found boring or monotonous. Despite this habit, he managed to graduate second in his class in 1841.³

In June of 1841, Higginson became an assistant teacher at a school in Jamaica Plains. It quickly became evident to him that this job did not suit him, and in February of 1842 he left the school. He became a private tutor/caretaker for family friends. During this period he met his second cousin, Mary Channing. After a few months, they were engaged. Another development was writing what he called his first poem, which was published in an anthology by Longfellow.⁴

Higginson left tutoring in the Spring of 1843, and after doing odd jobs to get by for a while, he began attending Harvard Divinity School in 1844. Higginson left the school after his first year, although he stayed in the same room. He continued privately studying, and in the Autumn of 1846, re-entered the school. He received his degree in 1847.⁵

After graduation, Higginson accepted an invitation to preach at Newburyport, where he became an ordained minister on September 15, 1847. He was married to Mary Channing on September 30, now that Wentworth was certain of being able to support them. Higginson spoke at antislavery meetings and preached sermons to the same effect while at Newburyport. While his relatives sympathized with his views towards slavery, they found his attitudes regarding women to be somewhat extreme. "You don't want women to vote, do you, or be lawyers, or go to Congress!"⁶ his mother wrote to him at one point. However, this was exactly what he wanted; in 1849 he nominated a woman for membership in a club intended to "organize intellectual Boston"⁷.

During his preaching in Newburyport, Higginson had the pleasure of receiving several well-known people of the time, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher and Lucy Stone. At about this time, Higginson also had the opportunity to visit

Henry David Thoreau in Concord. Higginson resigned after preaching in Newburyport for two years, due to opposition to his abolitionist views and sermons.⁸

Higginson stayed in Newburyport for roughly two years after his resignation, during which time he held evening classes and generally interesting himself in the welfare of the people. On September 18, 1850 the Fugitive Slave Law was passed, arousing outrage in Higginson and many other abolitionists. In April of 1851, Higginson, as part of the Boston Vigilance Committee, received a request to rescue Thomas Sims, the first escaped slave to be apprehended in Boston and returned to slavery. Higginson, along with a few other abolitionists, helped devise a plan to rescue Sims; they would communicate with Sims via a black clergyman and convince him to jump from his third floor window onto several mattresses which would be placed underneath the window. However, the plan was doomed before it could be enacted, since masons had been hired to place iron bars in the window.⁹

Much to Higginson's surprise, he was invited to take charge of a Free Church in Worcester, MA in May of 1852. His new congregation was far more receptive to his sermons and political views. Higginson also concerned himself with prison reform and the futures of discharged convicts. His interest in his community additionally extended to helping organize and manage the Worcester Public Library.¹⁰

In May of 1854, Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave from Virginia, was apprehended in Boston. Higginson, along with a few other abolitionists, engineered a daring attack on the court house where Burns was being tried. Higginson and the others bashed down the door, and he immediately jumped inside the court house. There were several policemen waiting inside who repelled the would-be rescuers. Higginson escaped, and, although he was to be tried for violating the Fugitive Slave Law, the case was dropped due to lack of evidence.¹¹

Higginson's abolitionist activities also extended to being an active part of the Underground Railroad. Higginson helped to find shelter and raise money for escaped slaves, often out of his own pocket. On the topic, he said, "Let every man choose once for all, between his love for freedom, and for a full pocket; for, as I have observed, in this land of liberty it is difficult to combine both."¹²

In November of 1853, Higginson was approached by Mr. F. H. Underwood, who was trying to find writers to contribute to a new magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*, concerned with antislavery and other issues. While Higginson assented, the magazine wasn't actually published until 1857, mostly due to various financial concerns.¹³

In September of 1856, Higginson was made an agent of the Kansas National Committee, an organization devoted to getting Kansas admitted as a free state. Higginson's job was to help transport, organize and get abolitionist emigrants settled in Kansas. Despite the frequent violence that earned the territory the name "Bloody Kansas" Higginson and his group managed to avoid any trouble. He drew from this experience in the writing of "A Ride Through Kansas."

In February of 1858 John Brown struck up a correspondence with Higginson. The former asked the latter for assistance in raising funds for what he liked to call "Rail Road business on a somewhat *extended scale*"¹⁴. Higginson met Brown in Boston that March, and Higginson described Brown as being "a pure enthusiast."¹⁵ Brown's plan was to liberate slaves, by force if necessary, and colonize them in the Alleghany Mountains. Higginson helped to raise money for Brown's enterprises and on October 16,

1859, Brown led his doomed raid on Harper's Ferry. After Brown's capture, Higginson wanted to try to rescue him, but the former forbid any attempt. Brown was tried and then, ultimately executed on December 2. Unlike most of the others who directly helped Brown, Higginson did not flee to Europe or Canada after the raid on Harper Ferry's.¹⁶

In the period between Brown's execution and the start of the Civil War, Higginson began studying military tactics, taking fencing lessons and practicing with drill clubs. In autumn of 1858 Higginson severed his ties with the Free Church, being busy with not only his studies but writing as well.¹⁷

In April of 1862, Emily Dickinson began a correspondence with Higginson which would last the rest of her life. Having read his article, "Letter to a Young Contributor" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, she petitioned him for literary advice. While he did his best to oblige, he feared that there was little help he could offer.¹⁸ After her death in 1886, Higginson helped to edit and publish her poems.

In August of 1862, he enlisted as Captain in the 51st Massachusetts Infantry. In November of that year, he was offered an opportunity of a lifetime, the chance to take command of a regiment of freed slaves. After taking a trip to verify the condition of the men Higginson accepted the offer and the rank of Colonel. Colonel Higginson served until being discharged in October 1864 due to an injury he had sustained in August of 1863.⁵ One of his subordinates summed up Higginson's influence in the regiment as, "He met a Slave; he made him a Man."¹⁹

Higginson's wife had moved their home to Newport, RI while he was in the army, and after recovering his health he resumed writing, public speaking and his involvement in his community. In 1870, he published *Army Life in a Black Regiment* which documented his unique experience during the war. Higginson was hired to write a history that would appeal to young people. It was published in 1874 and later, in 1879 it was adopted by Boston's public schools.²⁰

Higginson's wife passed away on September 2, 1877 after recurring struggles with various illnesses. He went abroad for several months starting in the Spring of 1878, during which time he stayed with Charles Darwin for a while. After returning he was quietly married to his second wife, Mary Thacher Higginson in February 1879. The couple had their first daughter, Louisa, in January of 1880.²¹

Higginson was elected as a representative in the legislature for two years starting in 1880, and also accepted an appointment to be the Governor of Massachusetts' chief of staff. In July 1881, the Higginsons had their second daughter, Margaret. Later that year he resigned from his staff position.²²

In 1888 the Governor offered Colonel Higginson the position of military historian, which he accepted. Two years later the family began summering in Dublin, NH, where one year they had Mark Twain as a neighbor.²³

Throughout his remaining years, Colonel Higginson continued to write newspaper and magazine articles, as well as his own projects. His strength began to fade in the winter of 1911, even if his interest in life never did. The end came on May 9, 1911 and he was shortly afterwards buried in Cambridge Cemetery.

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