

Eli Thayer (1819-1899)

Eli Thayer is best known for his involvement in the New England Emigrant Aid Company, the effort to populate the Kansas territory with New Englanders who would vote to make the state free of slavery. Locally, he is also remembered for his founding and operation of the Oread Institute (1849-1881) for the collegiate education of women. He was also a congressman for two terms, 1857-61. The entry for him in the Biographical Directory of Congress, shown here, provides further introduction.

From the Biographical Directory of the U. S. Congress:

at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000145>

THAYER, Eli, (father of John Alden Thayer), a Representative from Massachusetts; born in Mendon, Worcester County, Mass., June 11, 1819; attended the common schools, the academies in Bellingham and Amherst, Mass., and the Worcester Manual Labor School; taught school in Douglas, Mass., in 1835 and 1836 and in Hopkington, R.I., in 1842; had charge of the boys' high school in Providence, R.I., in 1844; was graduated from Brown University at Providence in 1845 and was an instructor in Worcester Academy 1845-1848; studied law and was admitted to the bar, but did not practice; founded the Oread Collegiate Institute, a school for young women, in 1848; member of the Worcester School Board in 1852; alderman of Worcester in 1852 and 1853; member of the State house of representatives in 1853 and 1854; while in the legislature secured a charter, and originated and organized the New England Emigrant Aid Co., which had for its purpose the sending out of an advance colony of antislavery settlers to Kansas; elected as a Republican to the Thirty-fifth and Thirty-sixth Congresses (March 4, 1857-March 3, 1861); chairman, Committee on Public Lands (Thirty-sixth Congress); unsuccessful candidate for reelection in 1860 to the Thirty-seventh Congress; delegate accredited from Oregon to the Republican National Convention in 1860; engaged in railroad and other business pursuits; unsuccessful candidate for election in 1872 to the Forty-third Congress; died in Worcester, Mass., April 15, 1899; interment in Hope Cemetery.

Bibliography

Andrews, Horace. "Kansas Crusade: Eli Thayer and the New England Emigrant Aid Company." *New England Quarterly* 35 (December 1962): 497-514.

**HIS WAY TO ACT
NOT TO WAIT.**

**Hon. Eli Thayer Dies at His
Home, Aged Nearly 80 Years.**

**HIS THE PLAN TO COLONIZE
KANSAS FOR FREE SOIL.**

**Will Be Buried From the Oread,
Which He Built.**

Hon. Eli Thayer, one of Worcester's most distinguished citizens, died at his home, 809 Main street, at 7 o'clock, yesterday morning, after a brief illness. He was taken sick on Monday, suffering with a kidney trouble combined with inflammation of the bladder, and with the additional trouble wrought by old age, he was unable to survive. He was nearly 80 years of age.

Eli Thayer, ex-congressman, originator and chief mover in the colonization of Kansas by free soil men, friend of the slave, orator and patriot, was an important figure in American politics during the years that preceded the rebellion. He solved the great problem that faced the territory of Kansas, and thereby prevented its admission as a slave state, and perhaps, it is claimed, saved the Union by keeping the representatives of Kansas in congress and its senators from casting their votes as slavery men at a time when those votes would have meant direful things for the United States.

He was a strong man, a man
of Great Force of Character,
a man who had little patience with such

Eli Thayer

Telegram, Apr-10-1899



HON. ELI THAYER.

sentimentalists, as he would call them, as the Garrison abolitionists.

He believed in doing something, not in standing by and talking.

His mind was broad, his nature amiable, though in this latter trait he was misunderstood, owing to the apparent sternness of his appearance and sometimes of manner. He had a kind heart and his friendships were enduring. His was the power of originating and inventing, and this power was felt in many ways in matters that made history.

Most of his life he lived in Worcester. The Oread, which he built in 1848, was his home until he sold it not long ago, and his funeral will be held at the Oread, through the kindness of the present owner, H. D. Perky. The hour is 2.30 o'clock Tuesday afternoon.

Though Mr. Thayer was married in 1845 and had seven children, there had never been a funeral in the family. His elder son is John Alden Thayer of Worcester and his eldest daughter is the wife of Dr. Charles H. Perry.

Ell Thayer Was Born in Mendon, June 11, 1819. He received the education of a boy of the day and went to the Bellingham high school and Amherst academy. In 1837 he came to Worcester and entered the Manual labor school, now Worcester academy. After a short interval, in which he was employed in his father's country store, he returned to the school and prepared for Brown college, which he entered in 1841. He worked his way through, and this delayed him a year in taking his degree, which he did in 1845. He came immediately to Worcester. He distinguished himself in college as a scholar and was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa in his sophomore year, an unusual honor. He became a teacher in Worcester academy after graduating and was later its principal.

The same year he bought what was known as Goat hill at the cost of \$150 an acre, and was called a fool for paying such a price for the land. But in 1848 he built the north tower of the Oread on the hill and opened a school for girls. In the interval before 1852 he built the south tower and the connecting part. The school earned a wide

Reputation For Its Excellence.

He was an alderman in 1851 and 1852, and at the same time a member of the school committee. In 1853 and '54 he was elected to the legislature, where he originated the bill for the incorporation of the bank of Mutual Redemption, which was a clearinghouse for Worcester country banks, and relieved them from tyrannies practiced by Boston banks.

The time of the great struggle preceding the war had come. The attempt to repeal the Missouri compromise was before congress, and the North was greatly excited. Meetings were held and petitions circulated, but it was foreseen that the bill would become a law. A meeting was held in March, 1854, in Worcester city hall, at which Mr.

Thayer made a remarkable speech, in which he announced the plan to save Kansas from slavery by colonizing the territory with free soilers. He would form a bulwark of living men between the territory and slavery. He would settle so many free soil men there that the majority would be against slavery.

The plan was received with enthusiasm by the meeting, but the energies of Mr. Thayer had to be expended to their utmost before he actually began the great work, to which he gave

Good Years of His Life.

He hired Chapman hall, Boston, in April, a month before the passage of the bill which was making the trouble. He spoke afternoon and evening for three months, and finally persuaded 27 men to make up the first party of colonists. In the meantime he had secured the assistance of Horace Greeley, and the New York Tribune, which paper reached the farming classes, with which he wished to be in touch.

The first colony departed in July, 1854. Opposition was met from Missouri border ruffians, and much talk of violence followed, and some actual violence. The spirit of the North was aroused by the trouble, and there was no difficulty after that in securing money and colonists. They went to Kansas in companies, and singly, and by the end of 1856 the state was safe for free soil.

The free soil party had made great

strides during this agitation, and very nearly elected its candidate for president, Fremont, against Buchanan.

John Brown was one of the men active in the Kansas trouble. He deceived Mr. Thayer completely, and it was not until long years after that he knew it was Brown and his sons themselves who had brutally murdered a family of three men to retaliate for alleged

Atrocities of the Slavery Men.

Moreover, John Brown came to Mr. Thayer in Worcester, and obtained

guns and money from him to be used in Kansas, as Brown asserted, but the money went to buy more guns for the Harper's Ferry raid, and afterward when the guns of the Brown party were taken to Washington, Mr. Thayer recognized a very fine gun he had given Brown. He kept silence concerning the matter. He did not care to have it said he assisted in the raid.

Mr. Thayer was not an abolitionist. He had little sympathy with Garrison and Wendell Phillips and Higginson in their opinions and meetings. He believed that no expression of sentiment would solve the slavery question, but that the solution was in action. And he acted and did more than any other man in shaping affairs in the central West at the time.

In 1856 he started a project to colonize other border states, especially Virginia, Kentucky and North Carolina. He established a town in what is now West Virginia, and called it Ceredo, "the bread-giving city." The place prospered. Many settlers came and several manufacturing industries were established, in spite of the sharp opposition from fire-eating Virginians. There were threats of violence, but Gov. Wise of Virginia said that the colony

Should Not Be Molested.

Then influence of the town upon West Virginia was very great and is acknowledged as having great weight in keeping the state in the Union. The Brown raid put a stop to its usefulness and growth, however.

The other settlements planned were delayed by the demands upon Mr. Thayer's time, caused by difficulties about the charter of the New England Emigrant aid association, which colonized Kansas. Had the work begun in other border states a few years earlier, Mr. Thayer always believed that much

more territory would have been saved to Union, including all of Virginia. And had the North had Virginia, she would have had Stonewall Jackson and Gen. Robert H. Lee, he said. Ceredo still exists, a thriving little town.

Mr. Thayer was first elected to congress in 1856. The knownothings had

been in power for the two years previous, and Alexander DeWitt was the member of congress for the Worcester district. In the two years, however, republicans had gained greatly in power. DeWitt had lost some popularity because of an incident during the investigation in congress of the assault by Brooks on Charles Sumner.

Brooks Had Turned to De Witt,

and said that the cane with which the assault was committed was about the size of that carried by DeWitt. He asked the Worcester man to hold up the cane, which he did, and the incident had been made much of in the district. So a compromise was made by which the knownothings were to have the county offices, and the republicans the congressman, the candidate being Henry Chapin. But Henry J. Gardner, the know-nothing leader, said no to this a few days before the election, and DeWitt announced himself a candidate, and Mr. Chapin withdrew. The republicans had to nominate some one, so a convention was called five days before the election, and Eli Thayer was named with not the least hope of carrying the day. He accepted at once, and announced that he must have means to get about the district, for he was to take the stump and make four speeches a day for the five days. Dr. Joseph Sargent went to him and told him he must make no such attempt, that it would certainly kill him, but Mr. Thayer persisted, and did as he had promised.

**The result was that he
Carried the Election Almost Two to
One,**

and the republicans won the county offices as well.

His service in congress began in December, 1857. The southerners had a plan to seize the Central American states and ultimately Mexico, and build a great slave holding republic. The republicans were hot against the plan. Mr. Thayer, to the surprise of every one, arose in congress and announced himself in favor of the plan. "I'm going down there with my Yankees," he said, "and colonize the whole country." He pointed out that New England could furnish 10 colonists to the South's one, and that spoiled the plan for the southerners. The bill was never reported on by the committee. Mr. Thayer had no faith in the plan, but a company was formed in the northeastern states to further the colonizing.

Mr. Thayer's speech made him a leader in congress. It was acknowledged that he had instituted a new era in congressional discussion.

Soon afterward he made a speech, now celebrated, in which he claimed that the South was impoverishing itself by its slavery. He said he could produce one negro power for \$10 in a steam engine, while it cost the southerner \$150 to keep the slave, to say nothing of the risk of losing his labor by death or sickness.

Another of His Great Successes

In congress was his effort to secure the admission of Oregon, which was opposed by republicans, for the real reason that it was a democratic territory. Mr. Thayer claimed the way to make Oregon republican was for the republican member of congress to admit her. He won 14 republican members to his way of thinking, and the state was admitted by a majority of 11. That night Mr. Thayer was serenaded by the Marine band, which serenaded the same evening President Buchanan and Alexander H. Stevens, which fact was made much of by Mr. Thayer's opponents in Worcester.

Later on, in 1860, the Worcester district passed him over in the selection of a delegate to the national convention, and Oregon selected Horace Greeley and him to be its representatives. He took an active part in the convention in securing the defeat of Seward, the candidate of the New England states.

While in congress he was a member of the committee on public lands, and in the office saved the government a great amount of money.

**Mr. Thayer Was Renominated in
1858,**

and elected practically unanimously, but it was clear that he would not win the nomination in 1860, and he announced himself an independent republican candidate. His opponent on the regular ticket was Goldsmith F. Bailey of Fitchburg, a man dying of consumption. Mr. Thayer was defeated by a narrow margin, conducting a campaign almost alone against a score of speakers sent out to oppose him. Bailey died after one day in the house.

After leaving congress, Mr. Thayer was in the office of Secretary Chase of the treasury as a confidential man, from 1861 to 1862. He did the placing of some of the bond issues with the banks. In 1862 he submitted a project for the military colonization of Florida, and President Lincoln and all the members of the cabinet with the exception of Seward and various military men of high standing favored it. Regiments were offered from western and other states and considerable progress was made to carry out the plan. James A. Garfield was to be the military commander and Mr. Thayer the military governor, though the latter's commission was never issued. The plan was eventually abandoned because of the progress of other

Operations Against the Rebels.

From 1864 to 1870 Mr. Thayer was engaged in railroad and other enterprises, with offices in New York, and afterward went to Philadelphia to promote elevators and other of his inventions, for he was of an inventive turn of mind. He returned to Worcester in 1872.

In the meantime, in 1866, because of the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, Mr. Thayer had renounced the republican party and become a democrat. He was taken up by the party in the Worcester district and made its candidate for congress in 1872. He cut down the republican majority from 7000 to 300, though the candidate against him was the present United States senator, George F. Hoar.

In later years he had been devoted to the care of his real estate interests and literary work. He had published a valuable volume entitled "The Kansas crusade," and many shorter articles and pamphlets. He had assisted historians from time to time, among them McMasters, and Gov. Theodore Roosevelt was his friend. Mr. Thayer was Roosevelt's guest at his home for some time a few years ago.

End

Charles Nutt, History of Worcester and Its People, vol IV, pp.577-580:

ELI THAYER, was born in Mendon, Massachusetts, June 11, 1819. He was the seventh in direct descent from John and Priscilla Alden, through Ruth, daughter of Rev. Noah Alden, of Bellingham, who married Eli's grandfather, Benjamin Thayer.

His early schooling was had in Bellingham Academy and in Amherst Academy, but his immediate preparatory training for Brown University was in the Worcester County Manual Labor High School, which he attended for three years and from which he was graduated in 1840. Even as his preparatory work was interrupted by a year's service helping his father in the country store at Millville, so also was his college career broken by a year of teaching in the Boys' High School of Providence. This school had need of a master hand to restore it to good discipline and the need was filled by Mr. Thayer, whose graduation at Brown was thus delayed until 1845, when he took second honor; and in 1848 he received from his college the degree of Master of Arts. He was inclined to study law, and did qualify for the bar, but did not seek admission. He felt a deep interest in education, and while in college formed certain original ideas and plans regarding the development of an institution for instruction of young women. Early in his senior year, his predecessor, Principal Wheeler, offered him the assistantship in the Manual Labor High School at a salary of \$500. This sole assistantship he declined, but later accepted at \$550 "with prospects of a raise."

During the summer of 1845 he purchased a barren and rocky eminence on the opposite side of Main street from the school known as Goat Hill; subsequently added to his original four acres until he possessed ten, extending from Piedmont street nearly to King street, at \$150 per acre. He began his assistantship in the fall of 1845, and was regarded by Principal Wheeler as a loyal and competent helper and an accomplished teacher. These two men ever after entertained for each other the highest regard and friendship. In 1847, when Principal Wheeler resigned to assume charge of the Worcester High School, Mr. Thayer was elected his successor, though Thayer's name has no mention in the trustee's records during his four years of teaching. It is said of Mr. Thayer that he was invariably good-tempered and patient with his pupils; condoning rather than condemning their shortcomings; helpful to those needing assistance; direct, simple, and clear in his method of instruction. He governed by a quiet confidence rather than by show of power, but the transgressor soon found that offences could not be repeated with impunity. He tolerated no evasion of rules, but is said by his diplomacy to have quietly settled an open rebellion against Principal Wheeler to the satisfaction of the disputants. The catalogue of 1848, the second issued under the new corporate name, Worcester Academy, bears the name of Principal Thayer and one assistant, George Capron, his brother-in-law. The total student enrollment was one hundred and fifty-two, of which nearly one-third were in the "Classical" and the remainder in the "English" department. As a scholar, Mr. Thayer's attainments were high. He was familiar with English and classical literature. Though a man of great dignity and apparent reserve, he showed to those closely associated with him warm feelings of friendship and affection, great benevolence of heart, and practical charity. Taken all in all, he became one of the most eminent of Worcester's citizens.

In the middle of Mr. Thayer's two-year principalship (June, 1848) the trustees entered upon the construction of the four-story brick-and-stone structure known as Academy Hall, in alignment with the two original buildings, the "Mansion House" and "Chapel." The brief life of this fine building is noted in this article. Later in this year (1848), while still principal of the Academy, Mr. Thayer began on Goat Hill the construction of an edifice in which he was to realize his cherished plans for the education of young women. Of this castle-like structure, the "Oread Institute," he was his own architect and he personally supervised its construction. Originally designed to form a quadrangle, the south facade only was built. The stone of which the edifice was built was quarried from the rocky hill on which the Oread stands. So reticent was Mr. Thayer as to his intentions that his purpose in building was not known until the north tower was well under way. The enterprise was nicknamed "Thayer's Folly." But early in 1849 the north tower was completed, and having now

resigned the principalship of the Academy, on May 14 of that year Mr. Thayer here opened a school with seven rooms and fourteen boarding pupils. He reserved the remainder of the building for his family and for teaching rooms. Completing the south tower in 1850 and the connecting part in 1852, he had in hand at once a popular school, filled to its capacity with boarding pupils and with day pupils bringing the total of one hundred and fifty names. Twelve teachers were on the staff in 1854. Here Mr. Thayer embodied his long-cherished plans, and in the higher "collegiate" department he offered a four-year course of study closely modelled after that of Brown University. Here was given for the first time in New England education of a collegiate type for women. No Smith, no Wellesley, no Vassar, no Bryn Mawr had heard the demand of women, and no college, save Oberlin, had opened its doors to the sex. At no period of the school's history was it more prosperous than in these years when Mr. Thayer was the active head of the school. It is worthy of note that as his own chapel was too small for a proper audience, the first graduating exercises of the

Oread were held in the Academy Hall. Principal Thayer had a few years before been master. The spirit with which Mr. Thayer embarked on this new enterprise, and the independence with which he assumed the entire burden of responsibility for its success or failure, is shown in the following statement from one of its early catalogues:

"Individual effort originated and has so far sustained this institution. It has received no endowments from private munificence or public bounty, except good wishes and liberal patronage; and this is all the endowment it will receive in the future. Whatever may be the result, it must stand on its own merits and the will of the people. We hope that its patronage will never be prompted by any feelings of compassion or condescension. We sell education at cost. If our merchandise is not worth our price, or if we have brought our wares to a market for which there is no demand, we ask no one to share our loss. Oread Castle was founded in good faith under the honest conviction that it might serve the country and the world, by advancing, in some degree, the worthy cause to which it is devoted. Such we hope may be its destiny."

Of his enterprise he found cordial approval and moral support in such eminent men as Presidents Wayland and Sears of Brown, and in the then pastor of the Church of the Unity, Edward Everett Hale.

Mr. Thayer's active mind was not content with solely educational matters, and in the midst of his successful enterprise, the Oread, he began taking active interest in political life. He was elected a member of the School Board in 1852, a position which he held for several years. He gave freely of his time and attention to public affairs, leaving the school more and more to the care of his corps of excellent teachers, and in 1857 he retired from the principalship permanently. In 1853 he became an alderman, and in the following year became a member of the State Legislature.

Mr. Thayer was always interested in beautifying and improving the city of Worcester. Many of the streets in the neighborhood of the Oread and Academy were laid out by him, and he had much to do with the development of the southern part of the city as a manufacturing district. The failing fortunes of the Academy, his former charge, led to his taking a ten-year lease of that school and assuming control, and in 1854 he purchased of the trustees the remainder, about one-quarter of their original sixty acres, with the building thereon. These buildings, with the exception of "The Mansion House," were demolished, and of the bricks of Academy Hall, only six years after its erection, were built the four brick tenements, even now known as "Brick City" on Canterbury street, the very first buildings in those open fields.

The lasting fame of Eli Thayer will not be due to his local reputation as an educator, honorable as that is. His part in the stirring politics of the "Fifties" was unique, efficient, and most valuable. On March 11, 1854, in the City Hall of Worcester, he first divulged his plan to settle the disputed State of Kansas with emigrants from the free states. Most historians have failed to make a clear distinction between the agitation of this period against slavery, per se, and the sentiment of the North against the advance of slave power. One was a movement of so-called philanthropy, exclusive of all other considerations. To this party belonged Garrison and his fellow agitators. The other body had to do, as its supporters believed, with the welfare of the Nation, the preservation of the Federal Union, and the maintenance of the true principles of the Constitution and Republican government. To this body belonged Thayer and his co-workers. There was as wide a difference between the Garrisonites and the political workers for the anti-slavery cause as between the Garrison-men and the slave holders.

Mr. Thayer secured from the Massachusetts Legislature the charter of the "Emigrant Aid Society," designed to foster organized emigration from the free states into Kansas, and to utilize the provisions of the "Squatter Sovereignty Act," whereby the question of legalizing slavery was left to the decision of local suffrage. This Society was financed by efforts of Amos Lawrence, of Boston, and his work found permanent recognition in the naming of Lawrence, Kansas, in his honor. And to Eli Thayer fell the task of lecturing and preaching the gospel of organized emigration, a task which he executed with such entire success as to enlist cordial and active support.

Beginning August 1, 1854, when a party of twenty-nine set out to found Lawrence, over five thousand men and women were sent directly by this company. Later Mr. Thayer carried on a similar work in Western Virginia, founding the town of Ceredo, and infusing such healthy sentiments into that part of the country that when the Civil War ensued the State was saved to the Union. Mr. Thayer in his latter days embodied the record of these epochal years in a book entitled, "The Kansas Crusade," a copy of which, bearing his autograph, was recently placed by his son in the Nelson Wheeler Library.

In 1856 Mr. Thayer was elected to the National Congress, retaining his seat until 1861. The admission of Oregon to statehood, in spite of much opposition, was brought about almost wholly by Mr. Thayer's untiring efforts, which found recognition when he was sent as delegate from that State to the famous National convention of 1860. Under President Lincoln Mr. Thayer was a special confidential agent of the Treasury Department, 1861-62, and in the remaining years of the Civil War he was active in councils of the National government. From 1864 to 1870, Mr. Thayer was New York agent of western railroad interests. He was himself an expert in the matters of invention and often acted as referee in such cases. His later years, in Worcester, were occupied with private pursuits incidental to his land holdings. He spent much time in study and travel.

His long-time friend, the immortal author of "The Man Without a Country," Dr. Edward Everett Hale, says: "Hon. Eli Thayer was a most remarkable person to whom this country is more indebted than it knows. When the Southern leaders chose to throw Kansas and Nebraska open to all emigrants, Mr. Thayer accepted the challenge. In consequence of his prompt action, Kansas became almost immediately a free State, and the population of that State, to this hour, has been a body of self-respecting, intelligent people, fit founders of a great republic."

Ex-President Taft, in his address at the semi-centennial celebration of the founding of Kansas in 1904, says: "These two men, Robinson and Thayer, superintended and guided the movement to preserve this State to the cause of freedom. With their lives often at stake, nothing daunted or discouraged these two patriots. To their one purpose they sacrificed everything but honor and honesty. There are no greater heroes in the history of this country than Eli Thayer of Massachusetts and Charles Robinson of Kansas, who, almost alone and single-handed, entered upon the work of peopling a vast territory with free and brave men so as to forever exclude slavery from its limits."

The author cannot better conclude this monograph than by using the language of the critic of the New York "Herald," directly after Mr. Thayer's death on April 15, 1899: "Eli Thayer is dead! Had this announcement been made four decades ago, it would have convulsed a continent! But, coming as it does, at the latter end of the century, people simply stop and ask, 'Who was Eli Thayer?' Charles Sumner shall supply the answer: 'Kansas should have been named Thayer! I would rather have accomplished what he has done than to be the hero of the Battle of New Orleans.' Nor was Sumner wrong! What Eli Thayer accomplished directly or indirectly through his work in and for Kansas was the final disruption of the Whig party, the birth of the Republican party, the Civil War, the Emancipation of the slaves, the restoration of the Union, and the manifold blessings accrued from these events. Lincoln, Stanton, and Grant were demi-gods compared to Eli Thayer. Yet, Eli Thayer was the humble instrument who made these demi-gods possible to the United States. For it was Eli Thayer, a luke-warm abolitionist, who snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, and who, when the slave oligarchy of the South seemed triumphant turned their triumph into permanent defeat."—George O. Ward, M. D.

In August, 1845, Mr. Thayer married Caroline M. Capron, of Millville. To them were born five daughters and two sons, one of the latter, John Alden, postmaster of Worcester (see biography).

End