

The Blackwell Brothers

No doubt, some of you have read the recently published book, *The Doctors Blackwell*, Janice Namura's dual biography of Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, the first and third women to obtain MD degrees in the United States. Or, you may have zoomed into one of the discussions about the book hosted by the Mercantile Library last spring, but if you didn't do either of those, perhaps you are completely unfamiliar with their two brothers, Henry and Samuel Blackwell, both early members of this organization.

All but one of the Blackwell siblings were born in Bristol, England, the children of Samuel and Hannah Blackwell. The elder Samuel was an ambitious, prosperous sugar refiner, at least until fire destroyed his refinery and several unfortunate investments quickly downsized his comfortable life. Both parents were quite unorthodox in their views: religious dissenters, active abolitionists, promoters of equal education for women, and people who frowned upon the vanity and frivolousness of pre-Victorian England.

In August, 1832, the family, which now included eight children and a pregnant mother, along with two aunts and two servants, immigrated to the United States. This was a seven week journey in a crowded ship that saw several passengers die of cholera before reaching New York City, itself undergoing a cholera epidemic. Here, Samuel purchased a sugar refining company in an attempt to rebuild his fortune. Following another fire and the onset of the Panic of 1837, Blackwell began to look elsewhere. Increasingly disturbed by the role that slaves in the Caribbean played in the production of sugar, he turned his attention to the processing of native sugar beets, and for that he needed to go west. Thus this rather extraordinary family arrived in Cincinnati in 1838, but within months the elder Samuel was dead, leaving to his widow nine children and an estate of just \$20.

Within days, the mother and older girls announced the opening of a "Young Ladies School" in the house they rented on Third Street, while the fifteen year old Sam found a position as a clerk in a bank, where his penmanship compensated for his youth. Soon the mother advertised for boarders. Even thirteen year old Henry pitched in, first by preparing family meals and then by taking on his own position as a clerk in the county courthouse, earning \$2 a week. Although the brothers' formal educations largely ended at this time, maiden aunts and older sisters continued to teach them, and both imbibed their family's liberal moral values. To be a Blackwell was to embrace personal improvement, the betterment of mankind, and develop an appreciation of literature, languages and art. Indeed, Henry first started writing poetry in his teenage years.

Not a great deal is known about their lives over the next decade. From their favorite older sister Elizabeth's correspondence, however, we get glimpses, particularly into Henry's world. We know in 1848 Henry toyed with the idea of heading to California to fill his pockets with gold, before wiser family members persuaded him otherwise. That same year he also traveled to Geneva, New York, to attend Elizabeth's graduation from the Geneva Medical College, and he proudly escorted her to the graduation exercise as well as to the events that followed.

Both Samuel and Henry shared their father's business acumen, and by the age of twenty Henry was manager of two small flour mills in Cincinnati. Profits from this enterprise allowed the family to purchase a brick house adjacent to Lane Seminary in Walnut Hills, the home of all the Blackwells for the

next seven years. The previous owners, Calvin and Harriet Beecher Stowe, had left the city earlier that year. Later the Blackwells would move to a somewhat larger home in Walnut Hills.

In 1850 Henry, now 25 years old, joined the Literary Club, followed two years later by Samuel. Henry and Ainsworth Spofford, our most prominent club founder, became close friends and frequently traveled together on business trips throughout the region, filling the hours by reading aloud to each other from Shakespeare, Aristotle, Plato and Francis Bacon.

We also know, again courtesy of Elizabeth's letters, that Henry became somewhat interested in spiritualism at this time. He, along with several other Literarians, attended a session given by the Fox sisters, the famous "spirit rappers" of the era. Now, did he believe in spiritualism? Doubtful. Within the family, Henry was known for his pranks and good humor, and quite likely he observed the performance as entertainment. He also discussed it with Henry Warriner, also a club member. Warriner also considered himself possessed of clairvoyant skills. In short order these two men put on a demonstration for Henry's sisters. Taking a letter that Elizabeth had written and later another by Emily, Warriner pressed them to his forehead and then provided a character assessment. Both Elizabeth and Emily found them uncomfortably accurate. Of course, who's to say that Henry hadn't provided sufficient information to his friend prior to the demonstration. At any rate, nothing further is heard about spiritualism.

About this same time, after borrowing some money from an English cousin, Henry and Samuel became junior partners in a wholesale hardware store--Coombs, Ryland and Blackwell--located on Main Street where Great American Ballpark now sits. The outgoing, personable Henry often served as a travelling salesman, covering Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and later Wisconsin, where he also speculated in land.

One day while working in the store, a small, woman, with a round face and large dark eyes, entered. She introduced herself as Lucy Stone. Henry already knew who she was-- the young, very spirited suffragist and abolitionist from Massachusetts who on occasion wore bloomers. Although she was seven years older, he was instantly smitten . . . but maybe not by the bloomers. Smitten is perhaps too strong a word, for Henry did not see Lucy again for almost three years, when he attended an anti-slavery meeting in New York City. Following that re-connection, he launched his ardent two year courtship, assuring himself that the seven year age difference would not be a problem.

But there was a serious problem. Lucy Stone had no interest in marriage, an institution, to her way of thinking, only one step removed from bondage. When Henry visited her in Massachusetts or when she stayed with the Blackwells in Cincinnati while on a lecture tour, she enjoyed his company but resisted any romantic attachment. But our Henry was not to be dissuaded. Indeed, in his very long, tightly written letters, he seems to have gone out of his way to convince the fiery Lucy that he was sound marriage material for her. That marriage could be a partnership. But he did more than write letters.

While participating in an anti-slavery meeting in Salem, Ohio, he learned that a Tennessee slave owner was bringing a young slave by train through the village. He and several others boarded the train, asked the eight-year old girl if she wanted to be free, and when she said "yes," carried her off to freedom. Anti-slavery advocates praised the move, but more conservative citizens denounced Henry for his theft

of property, and the *Enquirer* even claimed that he had assaulted the slave owner's wife. After a \$10,000 bounty was placed on him by the state of Tennessee, business fell off in the hardware store, and for weeks Kentuckians came into the office and stared at his face so that they would remember him should he venture across the river.

And, then, just weeks before his wedding, he and a local attorney obtained a writ of *habeus corpus* from Judge Bellamy Storer, another club member, to remove two slaves being taken to Louisville on the mail boat, *Jacob Strader*. Despite the efforts of Senator Salmon Chase and Judges Storer and Walker, a veritable club triumvirate, the court returned the two men to their owner. For Blackwell's efforts, as he described it in a letter, the *Enquirer* called him a "public nuisance, a destroyer of the business of the City, a British renegade, a negro thief etc. etc. & invoked a mob & a coat of tar and feathers etc. etc.—all of which I shall be well satisfied to endure, if we can get Ohio *one step nearer* a free State."

Both brothers became active in anti-slavery organizations in Ohio, and Henry, probably Samuel as well, involved himself in the formation of the state Republican Party. In 1855, they helped engineer the nomination of Salmon P. Chase, a strong anti-slavery lawyer, for the governorship. Of course, Lucy praised Henry's actions and within a few months she finally accepted his offer of marriage. But theirs was not to be a traditional marriage. This was to be a marriage of equals. At the beginning of the service Henry read a statement to that effect, later published, and the word "obey" was removed from the vows. Nor did Lucy ever take his name. Although a New York newspaper had published this bit of doggerel,

"A name like Curtius' shall be his,
On Fame's loud trumpet blown,
Who with a wedding kiss shuts up
the mouth of Lucy Stone!

It was not to be. She remained Lucy Stone and continued her fierce activism.

In 1855, Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman living on a farm in Boone County, Kentucky, gathered her three children and fled across the partially frozen Ohio River. Taken in by free blacks in Cincinnati, slave catchers soon discovered her whereabouts. Rather than be enslaved again, she killed her youngest child and would have killed the others and herself if she had not been caught and turned over to local authorities. With Henry out of town, Lucy Stone visited Garner in jail, wrote letters on her behalf, helped arrange for local attorneys to defend her case, and even considered becoming a guardian for one of the children. In the end, as we know, the recent Fugitive Slave Law forced Garner and the children back into slavery.

Samuel, who greatly admired Lucy Stone, eventually married her close friend Antoinette Brown, the first ordained clergywoman in the country and another prominent women's rights advocate. Their marriage also became one of equals. Like Henry, Samuel had pursued Antoinette Brown for almost two years before she decided that marriage and a career could be compatible. Both brothers stayed true to their marriage vows.

Not long after this 1856 wedding, the brothers sold their shares in the hardware business and moved to New York City, and eventually to New Jersey, along with their mother and two youngest siblings. This left Cincinnati bereft of Blackwells for the first time since 1838.

But what of the Literary Club? Sketchy club records provide no indication that Henry presented a paper, although during those early years debates and informal contributions dominated the proceedings. Much of the available information about their club contributions comes from a memorial to Samuel Blackwell that John Herron read to the club in 1901. In that memorial, Herron quotes passages about the club from Samuel's journal. Apparently, Samuel did write one paper, a no doubt scintillating examination of the Byzantine Empire in the 11th Century, which Benjamin McConkey read when Samuel was laid up with an injured knee; and Henry provided a well-received poem at the anniversary dinner in 1853. Although Henry traveled a great deal, both men eagerly participated in the club debates, particularly when the topic at hand concerned slavery.

Part of the Blackwell family moral fabric was the thread of temperance. Both men remained teetotalers their entire lives, and the drinking at the Literary Club greatly disturbed them. At the July 4th outing in 1853, the club journeyed by train to Plainville, near present day Mariemont, where they enjoyed a meal in a grove overlooking the Little Miami River. As Samuel wrote, "the dinner was excellent, but the Catawba deluded some. It must be absolutely excluded next time." At the next anniversary dinner, he and Henry got their wish, no liquor was furnished . . . although, as Samuel wryly noted, "some brought their own." The following April, a disappointed Sam recorded that both he and Henry had attended an "informal"—a name for meetings with no scheduled paper or debate-- where "a regular feast of misrule took place." The following May the club banned all liquor, and Samuel triumphantly wrote, "We have not been able to do that before." For the 1854 July 4th gathering, the club voted to exclude both liquor and women--which implies that women had attended club social gatherings at some point. Samuel confided in his journal that although attendance was down, the occasion "embraced the best part of the Club."

Our club did not remain dry for long. In 1856, after Samuel and Henry moved east, the club regained its thirst for alcoholic beverages, whether Catawba or German lager. And perhaps, on occasion, the Lord of Misrule even returned.

Both men must have maintained connections with the club, for on several occasions their names appear in the club minutes. Henry, responding to a specific request, read a paper on "Women in Government," as part of a budget. A little over three months later, he again presented a paper, this time on "The Cause of Woman Suffrage." No doubt both of these were similar to speeches he made at conventions in the East. The last mention of Henry occurred at the 50th anniversary dinner in 1899, when someone read his poem from 1853. Although Samuel had less involvement, John Herron's memorial in 1901 is a testament to the strong attachment he had with the club.

The Blackwell brothers, historically overshadowed by their wives and sisters, became fixtures in the reform movements of their day. The East Coast was where freedmen's rights and women's rights organizations were located, and where most of their conventions and lecture tours took place. All

Blackwells supported the temperance movement and opposed the licensing of prostitutes, a reflection of their Calvinist beginnings. The brothers wholeheartedly supported their wives, and Henry helped found the American Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. A year later he provided a thousand dollars to start publication of the *Woman's Journal*, and later assisted in the editorial process. Henry and Samuel supported a variety of other liberal causes as well, including The American Friends of Russian Freedom, the Friends of Armenia, the annexation of Santo Domingo, and Henry George's Single Tax movement. Samuel died in 1901; Henry in 1908.

As a clergyman at Henry's funeral stated, in a tribute that could have stood for both brothers, "I do not know whether Mr. Blackwell belonged to any church organization and I am not much concerned to know; but of this I am sure, that he belonged to the Church of Churches, the Church of the Good Samaritan."

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