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1876: Local Observance of the Centennial

Joanne E. Moller

The year was 1876, the hundredth anniversary of the United States as an independent nation. Celebrations and various events commemorating this special occasion occurred all over the country. In Philadelphia, the nation's birthplace, a centennial exposition was held, with every state and numerous foreign countries displaying their industrial progress. It was proposed by the United States House of Representatives to hold a session of Congress in Independence Hall on July 4, but the bill was defeated in the Senate. Therefore, members of Congress visited Philadelphia informally.¹ On July 4, 1876, the National Woman's Suffrage Association met in Philadelphia, where the delegates presented the arguments in support of woman's rights. Among the featured speakers were Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony.²

Celebrations in Western Massachusetts began on December 31, 1875. On New Year's Eve, Westfield greeted the centennial year with the ringing of church bells, bon-fires, and blowing horns and steam whistles.³ *The Westfield News-letter* predicted that "the centennial year bids fair to be a loud year."⁴

During 1876, *The Springfield Daily Republican* dedicated itself to boost the morale and instill patriotic spirit in its readers. Throughout the year, each issue carried a promise: "to be 'a mighty interesting paper' during this season of the centennial exhibition and presidential election."⁵

On Saturday, January 1, 1876, the headlines of the *Republican* declared: " 'Rah for '76, July 4 moved Forward Six Months.'"⁶ The ensuing article described local celebrations on that evening, such as the bell-ringing and other demonstrations held at Westfield.

The local newspapers printed poems written on the centennial theme, such as "Centennial Bells" by William C. Richards,⁷ and "A Centennial Suggestion" by William S. Shurtleff.⁸ Area papers contained articles of patriotic interest. One item reported that a group of people in the seaport towns of Nova Scotia were planning to rent steamboats and spend a week at the centennial exposition in Philadelphia.⁹ The January 12 issue of the *Republican* contained an article entitled "Last Century News," describing events of the corresponding date in 1776. The article included information on the weather, Revolutionary War news, and items of local interest, such as marriages, births, deaths, and social events of the day.¹⁰

The local newspapers realized the excitement and expectations that area residents held for the coming year, and sought to strengthen these emotions through its articles, whether fact or fiction. Regular features included historical news of the past, short stories, and poems, and in honor of the centennial, many were on the patriotic theme. The readers welcomed these and even responded to them in letters to the editor. Seth Hunt, for example, wrote to the editor of the *Springfield Daily Republican* suggesting that in honor of 1876, the United States perform "some noble and beneficent act, that shall be historic and worthy of another centennial celebration a hundred years hence."¹¹ He recommended the enfranchisement of women, who comprised half of the population, but who played no role in political decision-making. Hunt concluded with a call to action: "Let us then begin, in this year of Jubilee, the work of making a consistent republic, in which there shall be neither male nor female, but all equal in rights and priveleges; thus making ours, truly 'a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' "¹²

As July 4 drew closer, even advertisements began to have a centennial theme. In May of 1876, for instance, the circus came to Springfield. As the ads proclaimed, P. T. Barnum and his "New and Greatest Show on Earth" would arrive in Springfield on May 19. The show included a centennial display, which was widely advertised. Each day's show would begin with a thirteen gun salute and the ringing of bells. Each performance was promised to be "a Jubilee of song and splendor" including "patriotic, historical tableaux; National Anthems by a chorus of several hundred trained voices, accompanied by salvos of cannon... fired by electricity." The audience was urged to rise and join in the singing of "America," and each evening, the grand finale would be a brilliant display of fireworks.¹³

Many others took advantage of the centennial season to market their goods and services. As early as May, the "Special Notices" section of the *Springfield Daily Republican* included advertisements for board and lodgings in the Philadelphia area for visitors to the great exhibition. Mrs. H. M. Conkey advertised "splendid rooms and excellent board with private families in all the better parts of Philadelphia, at immense saving of hotel prices."¹⁴ This ad ran at least twice weekly until July. As it got closer to July 4, a special section was established in the Special Notices column of the *Republican* called, appropriately, "Centennial Boarding." In addition to the ads for the Philadelphia celebration, notices ran for lodging at the Grand Union Hotel in New York, to accomodate centennial visitors to New York City.¹⁵ Goods were advertised as relating to the centennial, whether they were or not. Hyde and Company of Chauncey Street in Boston advertised fireworks of every description at the lowest prices.¹⁶ E. P. Wolcott, on the other hand, indicated that the first "centennial peaches" were available at his restaurant at 254 Main Street, Springfield.¹⁷

As Fourth of July celebrations developed, they appeared first as notices and ads, and later as news items. Such notices included the Fourth of July steamer excursion to Saybrook, costing two dollars round-trip;¹⁸ an excursion to Gallup's Grove, Springfield, which included a basket picnic, games, and amusements at fifty cents for the round-trip;¹⁹ and notices of the Fourth of July horse races at Hampden Park in Springfield, with purses of \$400, \$600, and \$1,000.²⁰ On the Fourth of July, the *Springfield Daily Republican* informed its readers that the Northampton Public Library had on display a copy of the July 4, 1776 edition of the *New England Chronicle*.²¹ The *Republican* quoted from the newspaper as a centennial message, and to show how newspapers had changed.

July of 1876 saw the northeast in the midst of a heat wave.²² The weather on July 4 in Springfield was reported as hot and fair, with no precipitation. Temperatures ranged from 78 at seven in the morning, to 90 degrees at noon, and 80.5 at nine p.m.²³ Because of the heat and the holiday, many local residents thought that public and private business should be suspended not only on the Fourth, but also July 3rd, and perhaps all that week.²⁴ This did not occur, however. Business went on as usual, with only Tuesday, July 4, being the legal holiday.

When it came to the actual Fourth of July celebrations, it was basically the same everywhere. Small towns throughout Western Massachusetts celebrated with concerts, picnics, speeches, dedications of monuments and buildings, horse races, regattas, games, dancing, and fireworks.

Chicopee held public exercises at the Town Hall, with a number of speakers and a reading of the Declaration of Independence. This ceremony was preceded by a parade of town officials, citizens, and public service officers such as members of the police and fire department. A morning parade was held at Chicopee Falls, featuring "Horse Marines, Bushwackers, and all manner of folks...." Music throughout the festivities was provided by the Bernardston Band. The celebration ended with fireworks in the evening.²⁵

The Fourth of July celebration in Great Barrington began at sunrise with a gun salute and the ringing of bells. A horribles parade throughout the town began at nine-thirty a.m. *The Berkshire Courier* described the participants as "arrayed in their finest garb — in fact the very height of garbage." At noon the civic parade began, consisting of a company of cavalry, a brass band, the fire department, and various church and social organizations. The *Courier* noted that "an attractive feature (was) a national car, decorated, drawn by four horses, containing young ladies representing the Goddess of Liberty and the thirteen original states." The parade continued through the town and on to nearby Robbins Grove. The ceremony here included a reading of the Declaration of Independence, and music, both vocal and instrumental. Speeches were presented by Dr. C. T. Collins, serving as 'President of the Day,' and Dr. J. A.

Penniman, who addressed the crowd on local history. A town-wide picnic and fireworks in the evening rounded out the day.²⁶

Enfield, Connecticut spent over one thousand dollars to enlarge their Town Hall for the occasion. On the Fourth it was dedicated, and a huge party ensued.²⁷ The observance at Lee consisted of a few speeches, one of which was by James M. Barker of Pittsfield,²⁸ and a picnic, with fireworks in the evening. Much of the celebrating, however, was left for the following year, when the town would be commemorating its own centennial.²⁹ Lenox held its centennial exercises in its church, with Judge Rockwell delivering the featured address. Richard Goodman was designated 'President of the Day,' and Major Belden was the 'Chief Marshall.' A picnic and evening fireworks ended the celebration.³⁰

The Springfield Daily Republican reported that the people of Longmeadow held their centennial church service at five o'clock on the afternoon of July 4. Afterward, the townspeople gathered around the flag pole on the green for a "centennial tea-party," while the pastor told the youngsters stories about the Revolution.³¹ It was a quiet celebration at Northampton. A town-wide tea party was held, featuring speakers and readings of the Declaration of Independence.³² In Feeding Hills, a parade was held, starting at one o'clock in the afternoon at the Congregational church and ending at the Town Hall. There were featured speakers, singing, and refreshments. At sunset, a gun salute was fired, and fireworks in the evening ended what must have been a day to remember.³³

New Marlboro held its centennial exercises in a nearby grove. The Declaration of Independence and an address on some local history were read.³⁴ *The Pittsfield Sun* reported that "even Cheshire has raised money for the Fourth." The small town held a picnic that day and fireworks in the evening.³⁵ Six-Mile Lake, near Hartsville, was the site of the celebrations by the people of Stockbridge and Sandisfield. The residents celebrated with steamboat races and sailing on the lake, and a baseball game on shore. In the evening, there was band music, dancing, and fireworks.³⁶ West Stockbridge joined in the festivities by holding a parade on the morning of the Fourth, followed by speeches and a reading of the Declaration of Independence. A town-wide picnic was held, with the people enjoying "foot and potato races," and a baseball game.³⁷

The smaller towns in Western Massachusetts were inclined to celebrate wholeheartedly, but among the larger cities, Holyoke could not have been outdone. *The Republican* reported that Holyoke had hired fourteen special police, increasing the force to twenty-six for the occasion. It was reported that in Holyoke "every precaution has been taken to preserve order, and to guard against fire. All arrangements have been perfected, and it will be the biggest time Holyoke ever had."³⁸ These arrangements began at midnight on the

third, with a thirty-eight gun salute, one for each state in the Union.³⁹ Daylight saw the beginning of a mile-long parade featuring the "Yokohama Rattlers" and at nine o'clock the dedication of the St. Jerome Catholic Church took place. Another parade, including a sixty-piece band, began at ten a.m. and culminated at one that afternoon with the dedication of the Civil War Soldiers Monument.⁴⁰ C. W. Slack of Boston was the featured speaker, and he described the bravery of local soldiers in the Civil War. He also noted the beauty of the statue itself, which had been made, ironically enough, by an ex-officer of the Confederate Army.⁴¹ Following the speeches, drill companies from Holyoke, Northampton, and South Deerfield performed and competed for a one hundred dollar prize.⁴² A giant regatta began on the Connecticut River at five in the afternoon. Stands had been erected for the spectators and the betting was heavy.⁴³ That evening there was a patriotic display of fireworks.

An accident in Holyoke early on the morning of the Fourth marred an otherwise flawless celebration. One person died and another was badly injured as a result of the premature discharge of a cannon. The two men were serving as "rammers" and "swabbers" of the cannon. William Grant was severely injured in the chest by the blast, and was struck in the abdomen by a piece of rammer blown from the cannon. Late that day, Charles Sawyer died from injuries sustained in the accident. He had been wounded in the side and the arms, badly burned in the face, and thrown approximately fifteen feet.⁴⁴ The drill competition of the afternoon was won by a Holyoke drill company and the members decided to give the \$100 purse to the family of William Grant, who had been so seriously injured.⁴⁵

Westfield showed its patriotic spirit by decorating public buildings and private residences with bunting, and by displaying flags. Sunday evening, July 2, 1876, saw the beginning of the formal celebration, with centennial services held at the Second Congregational Church. The program was presented by the Sunday school, under the direction of the superintendent, E. B. Smith. Included in the agenda was singing by the choir, patriotic orations, and the reading of a centennial message from President Grant.⁴⁶ The first round of powder and firecrackers began at six o'clock Monday evening, July 3rd.⁴⁷ *The Western Hampden Times and Westfield News-letter* noted that "the town was in a state of patriotic commotion from that time till twelve o'clock last night (July 4, 1876)."⁴⁸ On July third, down at the town green, there was a bonfire which attracted a large crowd. At midnight, bells were rung for a half hour to usher in the celebrated day, and after that were rung again at sunrise, noon, and sunset on the Fourth.⁴⁹

Spectators began lining the streets at seven in the morning on July Fourth, to view Westfield's "Ancient and Horrible's Parade," which was forming on the green. The procession was the first of its kind in Westfield and it began at eight o'clock. The parade included two to three hundred participants and was led by the Westfield Brass Band.⁵⁰ Throughout the day there was music on the green

and people enjoyed picnicing with friends and family. The evening festivities included more music and a fireworks display. By midnight, all was quiet again. Fortunately, Westfield escaped serious accident or fire.⁵¹ *The Newsletter* reported that "it was the general verdict of the people that everybody had a good time."⁵²

It could easily be assumed that Springfield, as the largest city in the area, would hold the most memorable centennial celebration. This, however, was not the case, although the events of the day were quite unforgettable. The Springfield city officials refused to make an appropriation for any type of Fourth of July observance, in addition to prohibiting the use of firecrackers within the city limits.⁵³ To demonstrate their opposition, a crowd of approximately fifteen hundred assembled to vent their anger on the Mayor and other city officials. The homes of Mayor Wright, Councilman Carr, and Alderman Newell became the targets for the mob's general harassment and occasional brick-throwing.⁵⁴

Because of the city's lack of funding for the occasion, Springfield residents celebrated rather quietly. On Sunday July 2, churches all over Springfield — the First Baptist Church, Trinity Methodist Church, State Street Baptist Church, the North Church, and the State Street Methodist Church — celebrated by sponsoring dinners, picnics, and steamer excursions, by holding services consisting of patriotic sermons, hymns, and readings, and by decorating the church buildings, inside and out.⁵⁵ All this contributed to an old-fashioned type of observance. On Tuesday the Fourth, the Masonic lodges of Springfield and Hartford held a drill competition, vying for prizes and entertaining the crowd.⁵⁶

The only other event taking place in Springfield on the Fourth of July, 1876, was horseracing at Hampden Park. This was well attended because it was a holiday — a time for leisure and pleasurable activities, not especially for patriotic reasons. Admission to the park was fifty cents, and the first race began at two in the afternoon. Music was provided throughout the day by Colt's Full Band of Hartford. The winner of the first set of four heats was "Royal George," bringing \$600. The purse for the second set of heats was \$1,000, and the winner was "Susie."⁵⁷

Thus ended a relatively quiet celebration in Springfield, with the residents observing the centennial by attending the celebrations in neighboring towns, or for the most part on their own, enjoying picnics, and family and church parties.⁵⁸ And as a result of the violence exhibited in the mob action of the evening of July third, between twenty and thirty persons finished their celebrations in the basement of Springfield City Hall — at the city jail.⁵⁹

In general, reactions to the centennial celebrations, local and afar, were enthusiastic. The July fifth edition of the *Republican* contained reports of

celebrations in towns and cities throughout the United States, from Montgomery, Alabama to Eastport Maine; from San Francisco to Brooklyn; and from St. Louis to Indianapolis. There were reports of Americans celebrating with dinners and formal teas in London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin.⁶⁰ The celebration in Philadelphia was considered the best of all, as it should have been, with New York City being a close second.⁶¹ Speeches from all over the country were printed. Charles Francis Adams spoke in Taunton, Massachusetts on "The Progress of Liberty," and Reverend Richard S. Storrs in New York City presented an oration on "The Declaration of American Independence, and the Effects of it."⁶² Other major speeches were by Robert C. Winthrop in Boston, and William M. Evarts at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.⁶³

The only events which reportedly marred the occasion were the unusual number of premature cannon discharges occurring throughout New England.⁶⁴ At about this time, news of an Indian attack in Montana proved to put a damper on the memories of the celebrations and the name of Colonel George Armstrong Custer on everyone's lips.⁶⁵

However, the feeling of the day was one of jubilation, and optimism about the future. Local newspapers demonstrated that optimism. *The Springfield Daily Republican* commended the small towns of Western Massachusetts on their celebrations, realizing that they took care of themselves better than the larger cities could have served them. *The Republican* congratulated them on their individuality and their genuine effort: "This is well. The small towns have infrequent occasion of festivity, excitement, and enthusiasm, and we are glad to see them continue to make the national birthday a home occasion."⁶⁶

A fitting ending was a quote from the July 6, 1876 edition of the *Republican*:

Our Centennial Fourth was, on the whole, a great success.... The republic starts off on its second century, reconstructed, re-established, and about as bumptious as ever. Everybody was happy save Susan Anthony — she filed a protest at Philadelphia because 'woman, lovely woman' is still counted out of the game. But we shall have her in when we celebrate the beginning of the third century.⁶⁷

NOTES

- 1 *Springfield Daily Republican*, July 4, 1876, p.4, col. 6.
- 2 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p.5, col. 3.
- 3 *Western Hampden Times and Westfield Newsletter*, Jan. 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3.
- 4 *Westfield Newsletter*, January 5, 1876, p.2, col. 4.
- 5 *Republican*, 1876
- 6 *Republican*, January 1, 1876, p. 5, col. 3.
- 7 *Republican*, January 1, 1876, p. 5, col. 3.
- 8 *Republican*, January 3, 1876, p. 3, col. 1.
- 9 *Westfield Newsletter*, Jan. 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 7.
- 10 *Republican*, Jan. 12, 1876, p. 4, col. 4.
- 11 Northampton, Jan. 10, 1876 — in *Republican*, Jan. 13, 1876, p. 3, col. 1.
- 12 *Republican*, Jan. 13, 1876, p. 3, col. 1.
- 13 *Republican*, May 16, 1876, p. 1, col. 1.
- 14 *Republican*, May 16, 1876, p. 1, col. 2.
- 15 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 7, col. 1.
- 16 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 2, col. 6.
- 17 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 5, col. 6.
- 18 *Republican*, July 1, 1876, p. 2.
- 19 *Republican*, July 1, 1876, p. 2.
- 20 *Republican*, July 1, 1876, p. 2.
- 21 *Republican*, July 4, 1876, p. 5, col. 6.
- 22 *Springfield Daily News*, September 23, 1975.
- 23 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 8, col. 4.
- 24 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 4, col. 1.
- 25 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 1, col. 1.
- 26 *Berkshire Courier*, June 21, 1876 p. 2, col. 4, and *Pittsfield Sun*, June 28, 1876 p. 3, col. 2.
- 27 *Springfield Daily News*, September 23, 1975
- 28 *Pittsfield Sun*, June 28, 1876, p. 3, col. 1.
- 29 *Berkshire Courier*, June 21, 1876, p. 2, col. 7.
- 30 *Sun*, June 28, 1876, p. 2, col. 8.
- 31 *Republican*, July 4, 1876, p. 6, col. 3.
- 32 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 6.
- 33 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 6.
- 34 *Sun*, June 28, 1876, p. 2, col. 8.
- 35 *Sun*, June 28, 1876, p. 2, col. 8.
- 36 *Sun*, June 28, 1876, p. 2, col. 5, and *Courier*, June 21, 1876, p. 2, col. 4.
- 37 *Sun*, June 28, 1876, p. 2, col. 6.
- 38 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 6, col. 5.
- 39 *Republican*, July 4, 1876, p. 6, col. 2.
- 40 *Republican*, July 3, 1876, p. 6, col. 1.
- 41 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 5, col. 6.
- 42 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 5, col. 6.
- 43 *Daily News*, September 23, 1975.
- 44 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 6, col. 3.
- 45 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 5, col. 6.
- 46 *Westfield Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 2.
- 47 *Westfield Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3.
- 48 *Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3.
- 49 *Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3.
- 50 *Westfield Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3, and *Republican*, July 4, 1876, p. 6, col. 3.
- 51 *Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3.
- 52 *Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 3.
- 53 *Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 4.
- 54 *Newsletter*, July 5, 1876, p. 2, col. 4, and *Daily News*, September 23, 1975.
- 55 *Republican*, July 1, 3, 4, 5, 1876.
- 56 *Republican*, July 4, 1876, p. 1, col. 2.
- 57 *Springfield Daily News*, September 23, 1975.
- 58 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 8, col. 1.
- 59 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 6, col. 6.
- 60 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, pp. 5, 6.
- 61 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 8, col. 1.
- 62 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, pp. 1-5.
- 63 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, pp. 1-5.
- 64 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 8, col. 1.
- 65 *Springfield Daily News*, September 23, 1975.
- 66 *Republican*, July 5, 1876, p. 8, col. 1.
- 67 *Republican*, July 6, 1876, p. 4, col. 1.