The Methodist Melee on Main Street

By Jamie Eves • May 19, 2019



Angry and despairing, in August 2017 I attended a rally in my town of Willimantic, CT, to protest the violence in Virginia, where a gang of Neo-Nazi thugs invaded the home of the University of Virginia, shouted white supremacist slogans, threatened those who disagreed with them, and murdered a counter-demonstrator. I am proud of the 700 or so folks from Willimantic and surrounding communities who stood together in Jillson Square Park and insisted that they would fight back. Several speakers pointed out that Willimantic, Connecticut, and the entire United Sates, too, have long histories of racism and racial violence, that we should not point fingers at Virginia, and that local as well as national conversations about these issues are needed. This is, of course, true. But history is complicated, and our history — our local history, Willimantic's history — has produced both heroes and villains, homegrown white supremacists and principled resisters. We must condemn the former, but we should also praise the latter, for both speak to what we can be.

One of the resisters was Orrin Robinson of Willimantic, and this is his story, the story of what I call "the Methodist Melee on Main Street," the story of how Robinson and the congregants of the Willimantic Methodist Church faced down a proslavery mob, of how they physically fought back in the dirt streets of the emerging Thread City, of how they defended freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, of how Robinson went to jail for his beliefs and became Willimantic's — and Connecticut's — very own Thoreau.

I found the story of Orrin Robinson and the Methodist Melee on Main Street in an 1895 article in the *Willimantic Journal*, a long-defunct newspaper. The article was one of a series written by Lloyd Baldwin, then an 85-year-old retired carpenter, builder, and contractor, about what Willimantic had been like in the years before the Civil War, when he had been a young man establishing himself in business. Baldwin moved from Norwich to Willimantic in 1828, as an apprentice carpenter hired to work on the construction of one of the Thread City's new, big, granite textile mills, the Windham Cotton Manufacturing Company on Bridge Street. He stayed on to build scores of houses, churches, stores, theaters, and mills. Active in community affairs, he knew the vast majority of the city's residents and was friends with most of them. Although himself an ardent Jacksonian Democrat – and thus presumably not inclined towards abolitionism – Baldwin nevertheless respected the integrity of his neighbor Orrin Robinson, an outspoken antislavery activist. Baldwin's account of the Methodist Melee on Main Street is what historians call a primary source, a first-hand account of events by someone who lived through them. A secondary account of the Melee also exists, written by Allen Lincoln, a polished 19th-century local historian. Lincoln was too young to have any personal memories of the Melee, but he had heard the story from the old timers, probably including Baldwin himself. Lincoln wrote down what he had heard in 1892, as part of a (very long) oration on the history of Windham, CT, which he delivered at the town's bicentennial.

As elsewhere in Connecticut in the 1830s, antebellum Willimantic and Windham (Willimantic is part of Windham) were sharply divided on the issue of slavery. Slavery had a long history in Connecticut. Africans had first been brought here to be slaves in 1639, only a few years after the earliest English colonists arrived. Of the first two non-Native Americans to settle in Windham, one was a slave owner, John Cates, and the other was his black slave, Joe. Slavery remained largely intact in Windham and Connecticut until 1784, shortly after the Revolution, when the state legislature provided for the gradual emancipation of Connecticut's slaves, declaring that all slaves born after March 1 of that year were to be freed on their 25th birthdays. The process was agonizingly slow, however, and slavery did not completely end in Connecticut until 1848. As a result, most of the state's antebellum Democrats and Whigs (the two major parties in the 1830s) remained ambivalent towards slavery, fearing that challenging it openly might create an irreparable breach between North and South, splinter their national parties, and result in secession or even civil war.

There were also economic reasons for Connecticutters to tolerate slavery in the South. Southern slaves planted, tended, and harvested most of the cotton that Willimantic's (and Connecticut's) textile mills manufactured into thread and cloth. Abolition might imperil local jobs and profits. And even those Northern whites who did favor abolishing slavery often shared the insidious prejudice against African Americans that characterized the era. As Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jennifer Frank of the *Hartford Courant* pointed out in their book, *Complicity*, white Connecticutters were as complicit in American slavery as anyone else in the United States. A lot of them were willing to tolerate it, just so long as it remained in the South, safely out of sight. Northern whites as a group did not have clean hands.

Still, there were some residents of antebellum Willimantic who openly challenged slavery — some because they feared competition from slave labor, some out of principle. Who was who is hard to tell. But among those in Willimantic who took a stand against slavery were the city's Methodists, who had only recently organized a congregation and, in 1836, built a new church on Main Street. According to Lloyd Baldwin, in the spring of 1837, the Methodists invited "an abolition lecturer by the name of Phelps" to come speak at the new church. This was not the first time they had done so, and not everyone in town was happy about it. Allen Lincoln identified the speaker as Aaron Phelps, a well known Hartford abolitionist. According to Lincoln, it was the Methodist minister, Rev. Moses White, who had invited Phelps to speak to his Willimantic congregation on three different days. On the first day, all was quiet. On the second, an angry mob gathered outside the Methodist Church in noisy protest, and threw stones through the glass windows. On the third day, a larger mob gathered in advance at the nearby Congregational Church and then marched en masse to the Methodist Church, bent on violence. No sooner had the speaker commenced, than the mob — Baldwin called them "young hotheads, encouraged no doubt by older ones who should have known better" — entered the church and attempted to shut things down. The mob's leader, Charles Schofield, Lincoln wrote, strode to the front of the Church, demanding that Phelps cease speaking, and threatening him if he didn't. But to Schofield's great surprise, the Methodists fought back. According to Baldwin, a "rough and tumble scrimmage" broke out between the two sides that soon spilled out onto Main Street.

Lincoln provided a few more details about what happened, but not all of them were correct, so we should take them with a bit of skepticism. According to Lincoln, “young Orrin Robinson, tall and strong,” stepped out of the congregation, grabbed Schofield by the arm, and marched him out of the Church. Robinson, however, was 46 at the time, hardly young — not as young as the “young hotheads,” anyway — and may not have been especially tall or strong, either. Baldwin wrote that it was the congregation as a whole that resisted.

I try to imagine the scene. Tough, angry, young men, possibly armed with clubs, loud and shouting, shoving open the doors of the church, threatening the speaker and the congregation. The congregation, unarmed, surprised, likely made up primarily of middle-aged and older men and women, as well as children, seemingly no match for the organized young toughs. The thugs probably expected the Methodists to back down. That they didn’t is amazing. I try to imagine these older, peaceable people, including Robinson, courageously standing up to the mob. It seems almost incredible. But they did.

Someone notified the Deputy Sheriff, who Baldwin said was James Webb and Lincoln said was Edward Clark, who hurriedly arrived with at least one constable – and likely more – to break up the fight. After restoring order, the Deputy chewed out the combatants (he presumably read them the riot act) and – probably to ensure that the two sides didn’t start fighting again after he left – arrested and fined 15 or 20 of the leaders on both sides.

All but one of those arrested sheepishly paid their fines and went home. However, standing on principle, Robinson, a "strong abolitionist," refused and instead announced that he would go to jail. Again, I try to picture the scene, the angry, middle-aged farmer, incredulous that the authorities would arrest and fine him because he had defended his and Phelps's right to free speech, free religion, and free assembly under the Constitution. I find myself wanting more details about Robinson and what he was thinking. But even close to two centuries later, I can feel his palpable anger and rising passion. I think I know exactly why he did what he did.

So Robinson and "Constable Hosmer" – who Lincoln said was William Hosmer, but also might have have been Stephen Hosmer, a prosperous farmer with extensive fields at the base of Hosmer Mountain, on the edge of the city, or Stephen's son, John, a respected Main Street merchant – set off on foot, according to Lincoln, for Brooklyn, the Windham County seat and site of the county jail (the same jail, it turns out, that would later hold another Connecticut hero, Prudence Crandall). Apparently, Hosmer was reluctant to drag the stubborn old Methodist to jail – Willimantic was still a small community, barely more than a village, and the two families, Robinsons and Hosmers, would have known each other. So, as Baldwin wrote, "making an excuse that he had forgotten his papers, … [Hosmer] left Robinson in the road, supposing that would end it." But Robinson had his gumption up, and he continued on towards Brooklyn on his own. Lincoln said he did so "cheerfully." "Determinedly" might be a better adverb. Hosmer returned to Willimantic, picked up any paperwork that he may have left behind, and headed back towards Brooklyn. He overtook Robinson, still on his way to the county seat, accompanied him the rest of the way to Brooklyn, and "committed him to jail." Again, I try to picture Robinson, perhaps sputtering and angry, perhaps "cheerful" as Lincoln said, taking himself to jail, now fighting not a proslavery mob, but his own government. But still not backing down.

Thus Orrin Robinson of Willimantic, Connecticut, dedicated abolitionist, middle-aged farmer, and devout Methodist, refused to pay a fine for the "crime" of defending an abolitionist speaker's right to speak – and his own and his fellow abolitionists' right to assemble and practice their religion the way they saw fit – against an angry proslavery mob. He also refused to take advantage of Hosmer's implied offer to let him go home and forget the whole thing. Instead, he voluntarily went to jail, committing an act of antislavery civil disobedience more than a decade before Henry David Thoreau's more celebrated night in Concord jail for the similar offense of refusing to pay his poll tax because it supported a war – the Mexican-American War of the 1840s – that Thoreau believed was fought to acquire new land for slavery.

I don't know what happened to Robinson next — how long he stayed in jail, whether he finally backed down and paid his fine, how his neighbors greeted him when he finally got back to Willimantic. Sometimes, the historical record leaves out a lot of important stuff.

As for Phelps, according to Lincoln, he escaped Willimantic unharmed. In all the confusion, "Aunt 'Rushy Robinson" tossed her cloak over him and quietly led him to safety in her home.

Why did Orrin Robinson become an anti-slavery activist? Why was he willing to go to jail for his beliefs? Why did he stand up to a mob? The historical record is silent about all of that. But here is a nugget that may — or may not — mean something. Old maps show that the Robinsons (they were a large extended family) were farmers, and their farms were located along Jackson Street in Willimantic at a time when most of the land along the street was still farmland. Jackson Street was named not for former President Andrew Jackson, but for humble Lyman Jackson, a tenant farmer who lived on it. Lyman Jackson and Orrin Robinson thus were close neighbors. They would have known each other well. And one more detail. Lyman Jackson, Orrin Robinson's neighbor, was a free black man. There is not evidence enough to know anything else for sure. But it is suggestive.

I found Orrin Robinson's weathered tombstone in the Old Willimantic Cemetery, not too far from Lyman Jackson's. Both stones are modest, flat marble, with plain letters. Neither man was wealthy. Robinson died in 1864, before the end of the Civil War, which — legally, at least — decided the fate of slavery in the United States. But he did live long enough to witness the Emancipation Proclamation. In my imagination, I picture him smiling at that.

Our history in Willimantic is complicated, with white supremacist forebears who threatened to forcibly shut down an abolitionist speaker, and resisters who — for reasons we can only guess at today — staged a 19th-century version of a counter-demonstration. Maybe knowing someone personally, as a neighbor, was important, breaking down barriers. Maybe it wasn't, and Orrin Robinson did what he did for reasons other than human decency. But when it comes to the Methodist Melee on Main Street, I know which side I am on. If the time ever comes when I have to make a stand, I hope that I have as much courage as Orrin Robinson.

I'll give Allen Lincoln, the late 19th- and early 20th-century Willimantic local historian, the last word. Lincoln noted that folks in his own times, sixty years after the Melee and thirty years after the Civil War, had a lot to say about the bigotry of the old days. But it is the bigotry of our own times, he warned, that we all have to look out for.