

# The South Danvers Observer

## “In These Imperiled Times”

The South Danvers Observer is published quarterly.

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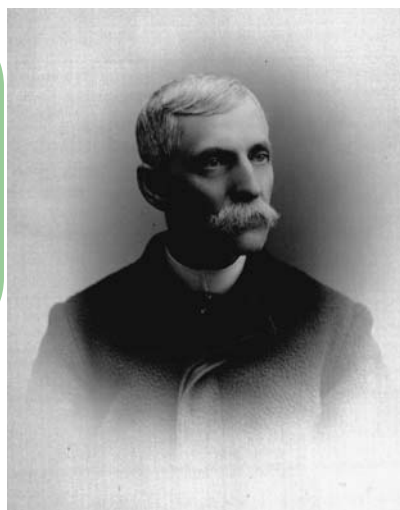
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*“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”*

*Thomas Jefferson, 1787*



Charles D. Howard, publisher of the *South Danvers Wizard*

—Newspapers weren’t responsible for the American Revolution, but they played a vital role in fanning the flames of rebellion. Though the papers of the 18th century looked nothing like those of today, they were still vital for the freedom of an emerging country. And yet, at the time of the Revolution, there were only 40 newspapers in the colonies.

As the Industrial Revolution transformed American society, so, too, it altered the methods for the production of newspapers. By 1860, there were papers in every major city, as well as many smaller towns.

Despite these changes, it was public demand for up-to-date and accurate information during the Civil War that brought about the greatest development in the press.

Larger publications, such as *The New York Times* and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, could afford to pay field reporters and artists to follow the troops and send articles and illustrations of the battles back home to their subscribers. Not so small-town papers like the *South Danvers Wizard*. Their articles, written by the publisher and editor, focused on local events of interest to their readers.

With the outbreak of the Civil War, though, the *Wizard*, like every other small paper faced a crisis. How could they give their readers what they hungered for?

A glimmer of the difficulty facing the people in towns like South Danvers was revealed in the April 17th, 1861 issue of the *Wizard*, in which the attack on Fort Sumter was announced.

“Not a few regarded the intelligence [referring to the telegrams which arrived in the town on Sunday April 14th] as unreliable and refused to give credit to it. On Monday it became confirmed by later intelligence, and all were reluctantly forced to give it credence.”

Both Fitch Poole, the editor of the paper, and Charles D. Howard, its publisher, felt the weight of responsibility to provide their subscribers with timely reports. “The greatest anxiety,” Poole stated on April 17, 1861, “has been . . . to obtain the latest news, and we would

have issued an Extra, [regarding the conflicting reports on whether or not war had begun] but from the belief that we should have to issue another to contradict the first. In a very few days we shall be able to get at the truth of the whole matter.”

Getting at the truth of the whole matter was, after all, the reason for any newspaper.

How to provide the *Wizard’s* subscribers with accurate information was soon solved. In the following issue, on April 24, 1861, a letter written by 17 year old Moses Shackley, a private in the 8th Massachusetts Infantry, was published in the *Wizard*. Written in haste, its few lines hinted at the riot in Baltimore which caused the deaths of four soldiers from the 6th Massachusetts Regiment on April 19th.

During the next four years, letters from a number of South Danvers soldiers were published in the *Wizard*. And though the men described everything from the endless marches, to their boredom in camp, to the terror of battle, the very act of agreeing to be published seemed to cause them to censor their words.

More often than not, Union losses were reported as victories. Perhaps they wished to conceal the truth of those early losses. Perhaps they didn’t want to worry their families. Or maybe they were following orders.

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Fitch Poole, editor of the *South Danvers Wizard*

## Dr. George Sterne Osborne 1838-1901

—While Dr. George Sterne Osborne wasn't one of the *Wizard's* earliest correspondents, nor its most frequent, his letters are among the most compelling. As an Assistant Surgeon with the 1st Massachusetts Calvary, he was at the battles at Chancellorsville, Brandy Station, Gettysburg, as well as dozens of others throughout Virginia from 1863 to 1865.

It is uncertain whether Dr. Osborne actually suggested that entries from his journal should be published in the *Wizard*. More likely, it was his parents who allowed portions of the diary he mailed home to be printed in the newspaper. These were published under the title, *Life in the Saddle*.

Dr. George S. Osborne was the youngest child of Dr. George and Sarah Waters (Whittredge) Osborne. He graduated from Peabody High School in 1855, the first class to be awarded the Peabody Medal. When he left for Harvard College in 1856, it is doubtful he, or anyone else, could have imagined what lay in the future for the

young men he met that year. Not only was his class of 1860 the first from Harvard with more than one hundred graduates, but well over half of his classmates entered the war. Out of the 110 who graduated with him in 1860, 61 went on to enlist in the army. Of those, 14 were killed in battle.

Among George's classmates was Robert Gould Shaw, who commanded the first African American regiment from this state.

It's impossible to discover how well George knew Shaw, but there is no doubt they were acquainted. Robert Gould Shaw's parents were among the most prominent families in Boston. Included in their friends were Senator Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

While the Osbornes of South Danvers weren't as wealthy or prominent as the Shaws of Boston, neither were they unknown. Dr. Osborne Sr. served as the president of the Warren Bank, the Treasurer of the Peabody Institute and was twice nominated in the race for Lieutenant Governor for the state.

George might have come from a less lofty position in society than Robert Shaw, but they were the same in one vital way. In the actions they took for the cause of African Americans. Their paths toward that cause, however, were as different as they were.

Robert Gould Shaw couldn't wait for the war to begin before enlisting. Having always been something of a rebel, he decided to join the 7th Regiment of the New York Militia in early April 1861. As he and many others suspected, the war began soon after. At his parents' urging, he accepted a commission as a Lieutenant for the 2nd Massachusetts Infantry on May 11, 1861. After surviving the battles of Cedar Mountain, Bull Run and Antietam, he was offered his own command. That of the first African American regiment from Massachusetts, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry.

George's path into the war took him through Harvard Medical School, which

he entered immediately after graduating from Harvard College. As part of his training, he volunteered in the hospitals for black refugees at Fort Monroe and Mill Creek in Virginia as an Acting Assistant Surgeon. It was during this time he penned his first letter home, which his parents offered to the *Wizard*. After he completed his medical training in 1863, he immediately volunteered with the 1st Massachusetts Calvary.

Though the letter sent home during his medical training and the journal entries published in the *Wizard* hint at the extent of his work with the wounded, Osborne, like most of the *Wizard's* correspondents, maintained an optimistic attitude. Perhaps his parents edited portions of his journal before they allowed them to be published. More likely, though, Osborne edited his own entries, especially if he gave permission for his parents to read them. It is doubtful he would wish to worry his parents or friends by revealing the enormous number of casualties or the struggle of the surgeons to maintain sanitary conditions in the hospitals.

According to Dr. Thomas A. McParlin, Medical Director for the Army of the Potomac, the conditions at the hospital at City Point, Virginia, where Osborne worked for part of the war, were horrific.

"The inmates of the hospitals experienced great annoyance from dust, and from the swarms of flies which seemed to spring up everywhere. For the first evil there could be but little remedy. A large number of mosquito bars procured and distributed served to abate the latter. . .the capacity of the hospital tents when properly filled amounting to 4,500 beds, while 6,000 men were present. . ."

During Osborne's service with the 1st Massachusetts Calvary, he witnessed the battles of Chancellorsville, Rapidan Station, Gettysburg, Williamsport and many others. And though it is unlikely he could have known they were there, two of his classmates from Harvard were **(Continued on Page 3)**



Part of the African American Civil War Memorial, where Dr. George S. Osborne's name is inscribed.  
(Photo from Flickr.com)

## Dr. George Sterne Osborne, 1838-1901 (Continued)

*"I could see two lines of skirmishers about a hundred yards in front of me, firing at each other, and could distinctly with my glass see the rebels running a gun up the side of a hill and putting it into position. This opened very quickly, and my position proving too good a mark—as several shells burst near, and solid shot struck into the ground on both sides of me—I moved back toward a house in the rear, and just as I was nearing it word was brought to me that Sergeant Reed, Co. E was wounded. I immediately returned and found him with his right leg completely shattered by a round shot. . . . He was taken back to the house, and I returned with him, as quite a number of men of other regiments had been wounded and taken there. . . . The sergeant's leg was amputated by the flap operation. . . . At Cedar Mountain, I caught up with the regiment. . . . When the first three guns opened I was standing on the side of the road. . . . watching the skirmishing taking place about a 100 yards in front, and happened to look directly at the position of the battery. . . . and almost instantaneous a shell passed 20 feet over my head to the left. . . . I therefore rapidly retired from that position. But even after going about a quarter of a mile I found I could not get out of range without going so far as to be out of range of the regiment, therefore halted at the reserve post. . . . Here I remained but a short time as I was soon called back to see a man who had been hit in the head by a shell. While visiting him in the woods, the firing was very sharp, the shot striking all around my position, one shell bursting vertically over my head but providentially, I received no injury."*

*From September 16, 1863 letter from Dr. George S. Osborne*

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killed at Gettysburg.

George rose quickly from Assistant Surgeon to full Surgeon. But when Massachusetts formed the 5th Massachusetts Calvary (Colored), the state's first and only African American Calvary, Osborne volunteered.

Massachusetts was an Abolitionist state, but not all viewed those who offered to serve in colored regiments with favor. As one of Osborne's classmates, William Eliot Furness, stated, there were many who believed "commanding negroes was an insult [which should be] repudiated with scorn." Furness knew this attitude better than most. He himself had volunteered to serve with the 3rd U.S. Colored Infantry.

While serving as Surgeon for the 5th Massachusetts Calvary (Colored), George Osborne aided in the transfer of thousands of sick and wounded from City Point, Virginia to the north. He finished out his service in September 1865.

The toll upon him was severe and he needed time for his own recuperation. After returning home for a while, he later traveled to Europe, both to study in Vienna and Paris, but also to rest. Upon his return, he married Sarah Pollard Vanbrunt from Dedham.

They lived with his parents at 19 Main Street, where he practiced medicine with his father. George and Sarah had four children, Elizabeth, Henry, Agnes and George Ralph. He served on the school board and as a director of the Warren National Bank. After his wife's death in 1894, George went to live with his daughter Elizabeth and her husband, Francis A. Doggett on Lynde Street in Salem, until his death in 1901.

In 1999, George S. Osborne's name was added to the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

## "In These Imperiled Times" (Continued)

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What these men couldn't conceal, however, were their own beliefs regarding race.

South Danvers had long been known as a staunch supporter of Abolition. While a good number of the men who volunteered to fight in the war echoed those sentiments, many others did not.

And it is in the pages of a local newspaper, such as the *South Danvers Wizard*, that a mirror is found which reflects a typical Massachusetts town's conflicted and contradictory beliefs regarding race during the Civil War.

## The Unknown Soldiers of South Danvers, Joseph Smith and Thaddeus Allen

—When the Civil War began, few, if any, of those in South Danvers looked to slavery as the primary cause of the war. Volunteers served because they believed the south had betrayed the Union. Until the early part of the 20th century, it had been referred to the War of the Rebellion for a good reason. Emancipation, when it was discussed, continued to be controversial. Especially when it came to the subject of accepting African Americans into the military.

Just weeks after the Emancipation Proclamation, the first regiment of African Americans was formed, the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers. By the end of the war, there were 161 United States Regiments of African Americans, as well as dozens other state regiments. One tenth of all the troops who served in the Civil War were African American.

South Danvers census records from 1860 indicate a nearly 100% white town. The only two African Americans living here were Emily and Martha Lewis who worked for Sylvester Osborn. However, by 1864 two African American men, Joseph Smith and Thaddeus Allen, arrived looking for work.

Thaddeus Allen was born about 1847 in Mississippi. His father was born in Maryland and his mother in Virginia. The only evidence of Thaddeus Allen's time in South Danvers is found from his enlistment record, when he joined the 58th Infantry, United States Colored Troops on March 11, 1865 at the age of 18. Though it must have been a grueling journey from Mississippi to Massachusetts, it isn't hard to imagine why Thaddeus would travel so far to enlist in the fight against slavery. Most of his service was spent on guard duty in Natchez, Mississippi. After the war, he returned to Mississippi where he worked as a preacher. He and his wife Lorette, had a son Elijah in 1879.

Joseph Smith was born about 1830 in Missouri. He arrived in town sometime between 1863 and 1864 and is listed in the 1864 South Danvers tax records as owning \$600 in property. In Missouri, he had worked as a farmer and when he arrived here, he hired himself out as a laborer. On March 8, 1865, he volunteered for the 6th Regiment, United States Colored Heavy Artillery. The unit served primarily in Mississippi and Louisiana. The regiment fought in several skirmishes, but most of their service was spent in garrison duty in Natchez and Vicksburg, Mississippi. Not long after Joseph's enlistment, he died in a Vicksburg, Mississippi hospital on May 17, 1865.

Both Thaddeus Allen's and Joseph Smith's names were inscribed on the African American Civil War Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 1999.

*"We have so frequently stated that, in our view, the sole object of this war is to quell the existing rebellion, and not to emancipate the slaves, that it is wholly unnecessary to repeat it except to anticipate the occurrence of events which may compel the government to favor emancipation. . . If the rebels choose still to continue the war, emancipation may come as an incident of it. It will then become their act and not ours. . . We can wholly wash our hands of the effects of the act. . . we do not look for immediate peace but for a long and bloody struggle. . . yet it will be a shorter one . . . if the government is required to carry on the war and protect slavery at the same time."*

*South Danvers Wizard  
June 11, 1862*

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