



Peleg S. Barber

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1823-1901

Memorialized by the
Peleg S. Barber Fund in
The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

In 1959, the will of Martha P. Babcock established the Peleg S. Barber Fund in honor of her grandfather, to be administered by the New York Community Trust to promote the welfare of children.

When Peleg S. Barber returned from the California gold rush to his home in Rhode Island in 1853, he was thirty years old and a wealthy man. He was also a man with deep social concern, and he spent his long life using his time, money, and considerable talent in service to his community.

Peleg Sherman Barber was born April 29, 1823, the son of Abial and Betsey Brown Barber in North Kingston, Rhode Island. While he was a young boy his family moved a few miles away to Hopkinton, where he was educated in the public schools. For several years he was employed in the cotton manufacturing business, but, when gold was discovered in California, cotton could not match its lure for a young man without family responsibilities. Young Barber decided to go west.

Peleg reached California in 1850 by way of Panama, a route taken by many of the early prospectors. His adventures led him to the gold mines of Grass Valley, west of Lake Tahoe, where in three years he established the basis of his fortune. "But," according to his family biographer, "being entirely unfitted by nature for the wild life which surrounded him, he eagerly turned his face toward New England and settled in Westerly, Rhode Island."

Three years after his return from California, Peleg married Sarah Gardner Brown, a widow six years older than he and the mother of two daughters. His bride's home was in Pawcatuck, on the Connecticut side of the Pawcatuck River, directly across from Westerly. There the Barbers decided to live. One of Sarah's daughters married a man named John Babcock. Their daughter, Martha P. Babcock, was born on June 25, 1867. She became the apple of Peleg

Barber's eye. The feeling was mutual, for Mattie, as the child was called, was devoted to her step-grandfather. She was later to become the principal heir of his fortune.

Peleg Barber's middle and later years were filled with business, politics, and civic activities that made him a respected name on both sides of the Pawcatuck River. His financial acumen manifested itself in real estate and banking interests. He had large real estate holdings in Westerly and Pawcatuck which he controlled and managed profitably, and in 1892 he financed the erection of a business building on High Street in Westerly known as the Barber Memorial Building. He was interested in the Pawcatuck National Bank and was one of its directors from 1873 to 1899. When the People's Savings Bank was organized in 1886, he was elected chairman of its board of trustees. During the last two years of his life, he served as president of both institutions.

Although he had been an active Republican since the party's formation in the 1850's, he was not persuaded to run for office until 1884, when he was elected to the General Assembly of Rhode Island by a comfortable majority. During the 1885 session, he served on the Committee on Appropriations. He was an ardent supporter of Republican principles and a consistent advocate of temperance, and is said to have served well his constituency and his state.

But it was as a community leader that Peleg S. Barber made his greatest and most lasting contributions. In 1875, he was instrumental in having a new school built in his district. When the school first opened, there were three teachers and room to spare, but a few years later Mr. Barber found himself chairman of a committee to add a three-story annex at a cost of several thousand dollars. He felt very close to "his school," having, in the words of his biographer, "a warm place in his heart for children. It was his delight on all proper occasions to bring sunshine and gladness into their lives by the presentation of some token of his affection." At Christmas and at the end of the school year that token was frequently a book of poetry or history for each teacher and graduate, and souvenirs for the other pupils. Some years

later he established the Peleg S. Barber Memorial Fund to provide three prizes for students writing the best essays on subjects chosen by the principal.

Less than a quarter of a century after that first small school was opened, it became obvious that much more space would be required by the burgeoning population of the area, and, at Mr. Barber's urging, another school was built. He gave several hundred dollars' worth of books to the library in the new \$50,000 school, which was dedicated in 1900, and in his will he left a substantial fund with the income to be used for the purchase of books.

When the rapid growth of the Pawcatuck side of the river demanded greater protection against fire, Peleg Barber played a major role in the formation of the Pawcatuck Fire District, serving on the committee that purchased the land and built the hose house. Elected treasurer at its organization, he served for fourteen years. Later he became chairman of the Board of Assessors. The company that was formed for the new fire house was called the P. S. Barber Hose Company in honor of its "patron saint."

Every year he gave a reception and banquet to honor the firemen "and their lady friends, including other guests, from both sides of the river, which were events long to be remembered," according to one chronicler. The parlors on the second floor of the hose house were used for "the social and literary features," which sometimes included poetry readings, while the ground floor, cleared of fire-fighting apparatus, was the scene of the banquet. He wrote into his will a fund to continue the Pawcatuck Fire District's annual reception.

Six months after the P. S. Barber Hose Company was founded, Mr. Barber turned his attention to the building of a new court house and police station in Pawcatuck. When as chairman of the building committee he turned the keys over to the Board of Selectmen, he also turned a part of the cost of the project back to the town treasury, offering a sizable donation of his own to cover part of the appropriation.

"Mr. Barber was possessed of a kindly disposition," wrote his biographer, "and was the friend and supporter of every good cause. He was a helper to feeble

churches, in outlying districts." One of these "feeble churches" was the Wequetequock Chapel Association. When it was struggling for funds to acquire a piece of property, he instructed the leaders to draw on him for the balance needed. He had been a member of the First Baptist Church in Hope Valley near his boyhood home since he was a young man. When that church planned new memorial windows in 1899, Mr. Barber contributed two, one of which was in memory of his sister.

In 1900 Sarah Gardner Barber, his wife of 44 years, having been in ill health for some time, died at the age of 83. A year later, Peleg Barber's health, too, began to fail. However, he was active to his last days, attending to business at the two banks of which he was president. He was 78 years old when he died on October 3, 1901. In mourning, the flag of the West Broad Street school was flown at half-mast and the P. S. Barber Hose Company was draped in black.

Martha P. Babcock was 34 when her beloved grandfather died, leaving her a sizable portion of his estate. It enabled her to live comfortably and to travel widely. Her journeys, usually with a companion, took her from the sophisticated atmosphere of Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo to the rugged beauty of Alaska. She spent months at a time in London, wintered in Florida or California or Washington, D.C., and returned frequently to visit relatives in Westerly and Newport. As described by one who accompanied her on many of her travels, Miss Babcock was a small, round-faced woman with lovely eyes, a youthful appearance (few could guess her actual age), and an out-going personality—the sort of woman who struck up acquaintances with ease. She was kind and sympathetic, with a ready ear and like her step-grandfather had a concern for others. Like him, she was generous and democratic. For example, her driver was always accommodated in first class hotels and shared her table when they were traveling.

When age and declining vigor eventually brought an end to the traveling, Martha Babcock spent most of her time in the great brown-shingled house overlooking the Hudson River at Dobbs Ferry, New

York, where she had made her home. The house was on a terrace fifty steps above the street, with unobstructed views far up and down the river. From her lovely old desk by the window, she wrote long, conversational letters to the many friends she had made during her travels. Entertaining was limited to close friends who came for lunch or a quiet dinner. She enjoyed reading and music, and occasionally she attended the opera in New York.

In her later years, her life revolved around the faith that had become its center. During a period of illness in the 1930s she had turned to Christian Science, and she credited her recovery to its teachings. Many of her friends were people who had been close to Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the sect, and Miss Babcock had close ties with the Mother Church in Boston. A Christian Science adviser stayed with her as her companion and nurse until her death on June 28, 1959.

Shortly after Peleg Barber's death, Miss Babcock's father had prepared a memorial book, "In Affectionate Remembrance of Peleg Sherman Barber" with the imprint, "Written for his granddaughter, Miss Mattie P. Babcock." He wrote, "He was a man who appreciated the duties, the honors, and the obligations of citizenship; who knew what our institutions had cost, and who was ready to sacrifice his time, money and comfort, to promote the best interests of society." It was in affectionate remembrance of such a man that Martha P. Babcock established through her will the Peleg S. Barber Fund, asking that it be used in a way that would have pleased her grandfather greatly—to promote the welfare of children and "to bring sunshine and gladness into their lives."



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