## Thomas Wentworth Higginson: Abolitionist, Feminist, Lover of Literature, and Founder of the Cambridge Room Collection

History has been less than kind to native Cantabrigian Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Few remember him and those who do, dismiss him as a relic of pedantic Victorian reform. Yet Higginson was one of the most radical and influential men of his time, who stopped short of nothing in pursuit of his lifelong passions: abolition, women's rights, and literature. And, he just happens to be the engine behind the Cambridge Room, the Library's Archives and Special Collections.



Colonel Higginson, Commander of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally authorized Civil War regiment of freed slaves, 1862

Higginson's fame as a radical came from his ideal of embracing armed resistance to slavery. Breaking down courthouse doors in Boston to free fugitive slaves, helping anti-slavery settlers in Kansas with a loaded pistol in his belt, preaching sedition, and giving money and moral support to John Brown, gave him the reputation among his fellow Harvard educated elite as a lunatic. In 1862, Higginson took command of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally authorized regiment of freed slaves,

a full five months before Massachusetts formed Robert Gould Shaw's famous 54<sup>th</sup>.

Higginson was as radical in his views of slavery as he was in his views towards women's rights, believing "a woman must be a slave or equal; there is no middle ground." As early as the 1850s, he spoke on behalf of suffrage and professional opportunities for women. He urged Massachusetts to reform its voting qualifications and he helped to found the American Women's Suffrage Association, co-editing its journal.



Henry Williams, former slave and Sergeant of the First South Carolina Volunteers, 1862

Despite being a successful author of non-fiction and fiction alike, Higginson yearned to be a celebrated poet. Yet the closest he would come to literary greatness was in his friendship and support of Emily Dickinson. In 1862, just before he enlisted in the army, Higginson received a letter from Dickinson which contained a few poems and a request for his tutelage. The reclusive Dickinson sent Higginson over 100

poems throughout their 25-year correspondence. It was Higginson who edited Dickinson's first published book of poems after she died. In his introduction, he declared her a "wholly new and original poetic genius."

After living for two decades in Newport, Rhode Island (where he desegregated the schools during his tenure on the School Committee), Higginson returned home to Cambridge in 1879. Highly sought after as a local hero, Higginson was asked to run for Mayor but declined. He did, however, chair the Library's Board of Trustees from 1889 to 1903. Higginson wished to create a space dedicated to the cultural and literary history of



Higginson with his daughter, Margaret, on a tricycle in Cambridge, 1885

Cambridge in the newly built library. The Cambridge Memorial Room, as it was then called, was born with Higginson personally curating the materials from authors and collectors. Today, the collection consists of approximately 1,000 rare books and pamphlets from privately published Cambridge family histories to books of poetry donated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's daughters. It also includes Higginson's oeuvre, in particular his activist and literary writings.

Examples of Higginson's activist works along with collector's editions of books that he curated are available in the Cambridge Room. To view the materials, please contact Alyssa Pacy at apacy@cambridgema.gov. To read more about the fascinating life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, take out any of the following books from the library:

White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (2009) There was a faint hint of romance to the correspondence between Dickinson and Higginson. They met only twice, at Dickinson's home in Amherst. When Dickinson died, on May 15, 1886, Higginson went to her funeral. He read one of her favorite poems by Emily Brontë and wept over her open coffin.

The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown (1995) Read about the six prominent Northerners, who supported and financed John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Joining Higginson in his pursuit of abolishing slavery were Theodore Parker, Samuel Howe, Gerrit Smith, Franklin Sanborn, and George Luther Stearns.



Higginson at 80 in 1903

The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1823-1911 (2000) In 1859, Higginson published the satirical "Ought Women to Learn the Alphabet?" in the Atlantic Monthly. He writes, "John is a fool; Jane is a genius: nevertheless, John being a man, shall learn, lead, make laws, make money; Jane being a woman shall be ignorant, dependent, disfranchised, underpaid?" After it was published, the Atlantic printed a rebuttal, distancing itself from Higginson's radical views on women's equality. Higginson's contemporaries were less comfortable with his views on women's rights than they were with his views on slavery.

Army Life in a Black Regiment (1882) Higginson wrote this memoir from the journal he kept when he was the Colonel of the first black regiment in the Civil War. Although slightly racist and condescending, it remains an unusual and empathetic social document. His transcriptions of spirituals sung by his men are a remarkable contribution to African-American folk culture. [Available in the Cambridge Room.]



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