

A LOCAL PIONEER – JAMES A. WESTON

Written by Matthew Normand, City Clerk



James Adams Weston, a name many locals today associate with the Weston Observatory in Derryfield Park, was a man whose love of Manchester paved the path to prosperity for those who followed. His genuine concern for her inhabitants, coupled with his omniscient recognition of future generations who had yet arrived in the Queen City, resulted in epic accomplishments vaulting him to pioneer status in the city's 168-year history.

Born on August 27, 1827 to local farmers in the south end of Manchester, Weston grew up as most boys in town, without unique advantages or privileges. He learned the value of hard work early in life spending most days tending to his

parent's farm. He still found time, however, to quench his thirst for knowledge by studying the science of mathematics while attending the Manchester and Piscataquog Academies. It was this love of mathematics that jumpstarted his remarkable journey.

At age 19, when most present day youths are enjoying dorm life at their university of choice, Weston was appointed as assistant civil engineer of the Concord railroad. Management quickly recognized his acumen and promoted him to Chief Engineer three years later in 1849. Weston worked on major projects for nearly all regional railroads and was soon recognized as one of the most efficient civil engineers in all of New England.

Weston was eventually drawn into public service. As a loyal member of the Democratic party, he was nominated for mayor in 1861 and again in 1862, ultimately losing to his Republican challengers. Finally in 1867, Manchester held the coronation of her very first native to ascend to the office of mayor – the Honorable James A. Weston. The impressiveness of Manchester's own son becoming mayor at the age of 40 may have only been exceeded by the fact that the majority of the city was either Republican or Whig at the time.

Mayor Weston's exceptional sense of diplomacy was obvious to all during his first inaugural address on January 7, 1868, as he set a more centrist agenda for the coming year. In an effort to appeal to his Republican colleagues in attendance, Weston declared that "the subject of the city debt should receive our most serious attention and care, and every proper effort should be made to guard against its enlargement." He called for greater scrutiny of departmental appropriations, noting that "each department should be carefully examined, and, as far as can be foreseen, should receive such sum as a judicious and economical administration of its affairs shall demand." The newly minted Mayor went on to challenge those in City government who had frequently overdrawn

departmental appropriations forcing the board to scramble at the end of the year to cover these shortfalls. Weston wasted little time, however, drawing from his core progressive beliefs and speaking to the base that had gotten him elected.

By 1868, a pressing need existed to connect those residents along the outlying regions of the city and beyond, to the flourishing commercial sector and the many diverse social organizations that operated within the center of the state's fastest growing municipality. "It has been said by intelligent observers," Weston announced to all in attendance, "that there is no more infallible sign of the civilization of a country, or of the advancement, elevation and good tastes of any people, than the common roads...A community rising in real prosperity and sound intelligence, at once shows its characteristics in the convenient, agreeable, and easy means of social and commercial intercourse."

The planning and preparation of the roadways was as important as the final result to Weston. He believed that streets be located early, before their paths were encumbered, and conformed to the general plan for city growth. "When a new street is projected, the results of the next hundred years should be kept constantly in view", Weston insisted. By leveraging his engineering background, he pushed for macadamizing the main streets – a process by which a road is paved by laying successive layers of crushed stone. Other major New England cities had adopted this process with great success.

Weston pushed on with his forward-looking agenda. He criticized his predecessors for allowing a comprehensive survey and set of plans to lay an interconnected sewer system, a plan that had been completed five years earlier, to languish without action. He demanded that the Committee on Sewers and Drains begin their review to bring this project to fruition.

He also called on city leaders to promote the improvement of sidewalks throughout the downtown. While the expense of constructing sidewalks had been previously borne by the private abutters, resulting in many substandard and unsafe pathways, he asserted his authority by ordinance to direct the superintendent of streets to participate in the grading, preparation, and oversight of all sidewalk projects. This was quite possibly the present 50/50 Sidewalk Improvement Program in its infancy.

Weston's first one-year term ended but his vision did not. Manchester continued to prosper over the next several years as her infrastructure improved and clever entrepreneurs learned to more efficiently harness the power of the Merrimack drawing greater industry downtown. In 1870, the city population stretched to 23,509 residents, a majority of whom honored James Weston with another term beginning on January 4th.

Once again, Weston strived for a balance between the conservative and responsible management of government and the prosperity and convenience of the growing populous. Noting the awesome responsibility that he and his colleagues had been entrusted with, Weston explained that "the good management...of the government is of the greatest importance, affecting as it does our welfare and prosperity in every substantial particular. The magnitude of the trust may be readily comprehended when we consider that we are,

as public agents, invested not only with the power to determine the necessity for the expenditure of money, but also clothed with authority to levy taxes for the payment of such expenditure upon our fellow-citizens...in the exercise of this power, let us remember our personal and official responsibility.” He applauded the progress on city infrastructure that had been made in prior years and called for a continuation in this regard. Conversely, Weston summoned the great sacrifice of the valiant soldiers, many of whom sealed their devotion to Manchester with their lives fighting in the Civil War which ended five years earlier. He beseeched his audience that it was time to show the gratitude due these brave citizens for all posterity. Though it would take until May 30, 1878 to lay the cornerstone, the fabled Soldiers’ Monument residing at Veteran’s Memorial Park was born.



Soldier’s Monument, 1880 – Proposed by Mayor James A. Weston in 1870 to honor Manchester’s soldiers of the Civil War, the cornerstone to this elegant, Gothic monument was not laid until May 30, 1878. Weston told those in attendance at his January inaugural address that “their bones lie mingled with the soil of every battlefield, and there they will remain forever. Yet we can point to no enduring monument erected by a grateful people, that shall transmit to posterity the devotion and sacrifice of our fellow citizens who went forth to victory and to death in defense of the Union and the Constitution.” The monument is composed of New Hampshire granite and bronze featuring a fountain surrounded by a thirty foot basin. Four bronze statues representing the principal divisions of the service in the army and navy – the infantry soldier, the cavalryman, the artilleryman, and the sailor, rest atop granite pedestals along the basin. The main column, fifty feet in height, supports a massive, eight foot granite statue representing Victory with her mural crown, a shield laying at her feet, and holding a wreath and recumbent sword – emblematic of triumph and peace. Photo from the Manchester City Archives.

All was not fluid in the Queen City however, as she began to suffer from agonizing growing pains. With increased residency came increased demands for services – namely, the flow of clean and abundant water. Highlighting this necessity, tragedy struck on July 8, 1870. According to a *New York Times* article written the same morning, a coffee bean roaster ignited nearby woodwork at Drake & Carpenter, a coffee and spice dealer on Manchester Street. The fire spread quickly and raged across the entire block between Manchester and Hanover Streets, engulfing a six-acre area and leaving 200 families homeless. Fear and panic spread swiftly among residents as sparks were said to have traveled as far as the intersection of Elm and Myrtle Streets, threatening to burn the entire city to the ground. The only immediate source of water downtown to battle the flames was a small well at City Hall, fed by a cement pipe from the pond situated in Hanover Common (now known as Bronstein Park). Fortunately, diminishing winds and torrential rains assisted the fire department in battling the inferno before it tore across neighboring blocks. This fire, however, charred an indelible mark on the consciousness of both public leaders and private citizens alike, setting in motion two significant decisions soon to come.

Weston seized upon this calamity the following year in his third term as mayor by pushing for the establishment of the Water Works Commission. The Commission's charge was to determine the best source for providing municipal water to commercial and residential customers and the best method to effect that mission. While everyone agreed that something needed to happen, great public discourse arose over where the water would come from and who would manage the enterprise going forward. Mayor Weston knew, however, what others were slow to accept. For better than a decade, various iterations of the Manchester Aqueduct, a privately held water management company, attempted to bring city water to Manchester. Each attempt was met with failure due to the sheer magnitude of the undertaking.

Weston and others commissioned numerous water studies and land surveys to provide the conduit for success in this endeavor. One of the most celebrated hydraulic engineers in the country, William McAlpine, was hired by the city just one month later to bring forth a resolution. McAlpine agreed with Weston. He determined that the majestic 2,500 acre Massabesic Lake and surrounding watershed would best serve as the primary water source and would most efficiently be administered by the city.

The state legislature passed enabling legislation in June of 1871 allowing Manchester to construct its waterworks at a cost not to exceed \$600,000, to be raised by loan or taxation, and to appoint seven water commissioners to oversee the entire operation. On August 1st, after much public input and deliberation, local elected leadership voted unanimously to initiate this daunting mission.

Tragedy would strike once more however; this time on October 8th as the Great Chicago Fire reduced a majority of the city to ashes, killing hundreds and destroying three square miles in three days. While this fire was easily one of the largest national disasters of the 19th century, Manchester's own near disaster was still on the mind of many in the city. In an open letter to the citizens of Manchester in the local *Daily Mirror and American* on

October 10th, the Honorable James A. Weston wrote of the “terrible conflagration which has laid in ashes one of the largest and most beautiful cities of the West.” He called for an immediate expression of sympathy. In closing, Weston extolled that “few words are best – actions speak louder than words. Let our citizens meet tonight in the City Hall, at 8 o’clock, and say by their action there, how much they sympathize with the suffering people of Chicago.”

Numerous residents turned out in support of immediate action. It was decided that \$15,000 in aid be sent to the Chicago sufferers – an astounding sum of money and a significant show of support to the city of Chicago considering the Manchester Fire Department had been appropriated little more than \$12,000 for the entire year in 1871. *Harper’s Weekly* would later write in an article dated October 21, 1871, “the grief of Chicago is the sorrow of the country, and private citizens and public bodies are rivals in generosity.” A few weeks later, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen voted unanimously to appoint Joseph Bennett, City Clerk, as messenger to carry the relief money to the Windy City.

As Weston’s term officially ended in 1872, construction of the hydraulic powered city water system, a project that he had labored away so many years of his life, began to take shape. In typical Weston fashion, the pump house hydraulics were built not just for the present but well into the next century, generating enough pressure to pump water for a city of 125,000 residents. Running at full capacity, the pump house could generate nearly six million gallons of water every 24 hours.

When Weston took office for a fourth and final term on January 6, 1874, the waterworks venture was in its final year of construction. The popular mayor beamed with pride during his inaugural address stating that “the enterprise of supplying pure and abundant water for the benefit of its citizens, is the most important one that the city has ever entered upon, both as regards the universal benefit to be derived therefrom and the debt created thereby.” While Weston was referring to the nearly \$600,000 expended to complete the project that brought water to homes and hydrants along 23 miles of water pipes, the city will be forever indebted to *him* for the planning and completion of this crowning achievement.

Weston succumbed to a lengthy illness and died in 1895, at the age of 67. The *Daily Mirror and American* noted on May 8th, the day of his death, that he was “identified with the metropolis of New Hampshire as he has been from its birth to the prominence it has now attained in the industrial and financial world, he has become a fixture and a living landmark of the city, and to see Mr. Weston was to see one of the few men that made Manchester what it is...by his death this city loses one of its pioneers and an honored citizen.”

Upon his passing, Weston bequeathed the city \$5,000 for the purpose of building an observatory on the top of Oak Hill (Derryfield Park) for the advancement of science, for educational purposes, and for the use, enjoyment, benefit and mental improvement of the residents of Manchester. The city honored one landmark with another on September 6th

of the following year, when the cornerstone of the observatory was laid during the city's Semi-Centennial celebration. The observatory quickly became a destination of interest and was easily accessible via the Bridge Street trolley line. The observatory is built of New Hampshire granite, and is fifty feet to the floor of the outlook, and sixty-six feet from base to finial. Its impressive height served as an ideal location for spotting air raids during World War II. While the public can no longer go into the tower, the observatory still stands in Mayor Weston's honor.

Mayor James A. Weston faithfully served this city his entire life with the integrity and zeal that all citizens, past, present, and future, should be forever grateful for. He went on to serve the state as governor twice, once in 1871 and again in 1874, but the historical significance of his many accomplishments on behalf of the Queen City is astounding. Never hindered by condensed tenure or political obstacles, Weston strived tirelessly to achieve his many goals for Manchester. James A. Weston was, in fact, a true pioneer who blazed a path to prosperity for the city he loved that few may ever equal.

