

Guides Gazette

March 2022

George Luther Stearns

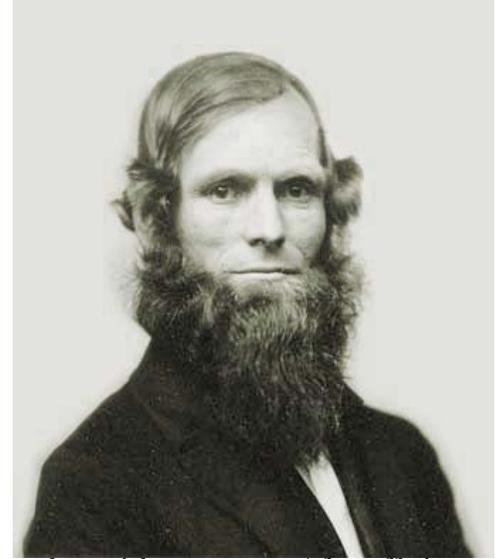
By Julia Bloom

On the far right wall of Doric Hall is a simple plaque that is often unnoticed among the other artwork in the room. It is dedicated to a man named George Luther Stearns, “A merchant of Boston who illustrated in his life and character the nobility and generosity of citizenship.” Although Stearns is largely unknown today, his work in the abolitionist movement helped spark the Civil War, and his efforts in fighting for Civil Rights created the first Black regiments in the country.

George Luther Stearns was born on January 8th, 1809, in Medford, Massachusetts. He was descended from the English Sterne family that came to Boston on the *Arabella* in 1630, and was the grandson of Captain Josiah Stearns, who led a company of militia in the Revolutionary War and had a successful career in state politics. After his father died when George was 11 years old, he took on various jobs to support his family, including as a clerk in Brattleboro, Vermont and ship chandler in Boston. As a young man he started a linseed oil factory with his brother before moving into lead pipe manufacturing, which brought him a significant profit. In 1836 Stearns married his first wife, Mary Train, but after she died from poor health four years later, Stearns never fully recovered, using his commitment to his work to manage his grief. He also became known for his long beard, which he grew after his doctor suggested it as a way to ward off his frequent bouts of pneumonia. In the fall of 1842 Stearns was severely injured in a horse riding accident, and while he recovered he met Mary Elizabeth Preston, who was related to the famous feminist and abolitionist Lydia Maria Preston Child. They married on October

12th, 1843 and moved to an estate two years later on College Hill in Somerville which Stearns named the Evergreens, near the current site of Tufts University. The Stearns had three children, Harry, Frank, and Carl, and were members of an extensive social circle of wealthy Bostonians.

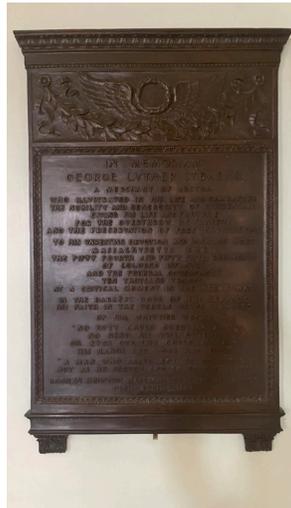
In the mid 1840's Stearns became involved in politics through debates over abolition at his Unitarian church, and through his membership in the Whig party, which was increasingly split by debates on slavery. On June 17th 1848 he attended the Worcester Convention, a Whig political gathering that led to the formation of the antislavery Free Soil Party. Stearns was inspired by the strident antislavery speeches at the convention, and quickly became a firm supporter of the new party. After the Fugitive Slave Law that allowed slave catchers to kidnap free blacks and escaped slaves in the north passed in 1850, Stearns was alarmed and became more involved in the abolitionist cause, vowing never to let fugitive slaves who sheltered with him be recaptured. He hid escaped slaves at the Evergreens and his Boston office, including a jockey named William Talbot, who the Stearns helped flee to Canada and find work in Harvard Square after the Civil War. Stearns was also appalled by the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854, a law that allowed residents in these new territories to vote on whether they would become free or slave states. In 1855 Stearns joined the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company, a Corporation that paid abolitionists to travel to Kansas in order to vote for it to become a free state. On May 22nd 1856, Senator Charles Sumner, a close friend of the Stearns was beaten on the Senate floor by Representative Preston Brooks as retaliation against Sumner's strident antislavery views. Horrified by the attack, Stearns pledged to dedicate his life



to the antislavery cause. After offering suggestions on coordinating fundraising to the antislavery Faneuil Hall Committee, Stearns became the chairman of the newly formed Massachusetts State Committee in 1856, and worked to organize a network of donors using his finance skills and business connections.

In early 1857 Frank Sanborn, a friend of Stearns, introduced him to John Brown, a Free Stater who had led violent attacks on pro-slavery forces in Kansas. During his visits to the Evergreens, the Stearns family was impressed by Brown's courage and willingness to risk his life in the battle against slavery. George soon agreed to finance Brown's work and purchase weapons for him and his supporters to use. After Kansas became a Free Soil territory in late 1857, Brown looked to combat slavery elsewhere, and in March 1858 he revealed his plans to Stearns and six of his colleagues to capture a southern arsenal in order to start a large armed slave rebellion in the south. After some consideration, Stearns and the others agreed to support Brown in this plan, and on March 12th, 1858 Stearns and the other six men, Franklin Sanborn, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Gridley Howe, Theodore Parker, and Gerrit Smith formed “The

Secret Committee of Six” to raise funds and purchase weapons for Brown’s raid, with Stearns elected chairman. In May 1859 Brown visited the Secret Six in Boston to finalize his plans. Before leaving, Brown gave Stearns a Bowie knife he had taken from a proslavery fighter in Kansas, saying “I am going on a dangerous errand and we may never see each other again.”



On October 16th, 1859 Brown and 21 men attacked the Federal Armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Brown targeted the armory due to the large supply of guns and ammunition there, hoping to re-

cruit Virginian slaves to escape and join him in the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains where they could launch additional raids on the south. The raid ultimately failed, and many members of Brown’s group, including his son, were killed or captured after the militia stormed the firehouse Brown’s men took shelter in, which became known afterwards as “John Brown’s Fort.” Brown himself was jailed and found guilty in a November 2nd trial, and was executed by hanging on December 2nd, 1859. Shortly after Brown’s capture, the identities of the Secret Six were leaked to the press through Brown’s letters, and Stearns and a few others fled to Canada to avoid capture. Stearns returned home a few months later, and he and his wife continued their abolitionist work through and after the Civil War, providing support for Brown’s family and the Free Soil movement. John Brown quickly became a martyr for abolitionism, gaining national and international attention to the cause. In early 1860 Stearns and three other Secret Six members were summoned to testify in Congress about the Harpers Ferry raid, and Stearns met with the Senate Committee on February 22nd, 1860, though he obscured his full

involvement in Brown’s plans.

Stearns supported John A. Andrew’s candidacy for Governor, and encouraged him to prepare the state militia for the impending conflict brewing between the states. After the Civil War began in April 1861 Stearns founded the Boston Emancipation League, which argued for immediate emancipation of all slaves in the US, and pushed President Abraham Lincoln to adopt freeing all slaves as government policy.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation’s passage on January 1st 1863, Stearns urged Governor Andrew to form volunteer regiments of Black troops. Andrew gave Stearns the job of recruiting soldiers for this new regiment, and Stearns travelled through New England, New York, and Canada over the next several months, helping to create the famous 54th and 55th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the first Black regiments in the country. In spring 1863 Secretary of War Edwin E. Stanton offered Stearns the position of Recruiting Commissioner for the U.S. Colored Troops, and on June 17th Stearns accepted his commission and continued his recruiting of Black soldiers with the rank of Major. Stearns spent three months in the position, recruiting over 6,000 Black men to the army in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and New York and supporting them and their families with job and educational opportunities. However, Stearns clashed with Stanton, whom he believed was ineffective, and military officials in the War department who refused to treat Black and white soldiers equally. In January 1864 Stearns resigned his post and returned to Medford, where he continued his antislavery and civil rights work. He also urged Emancipation societies to turn their efforts towards ensuring Black citizens and freedmen would obtain equal rights and opportunities to whites in both the North and South.

After the war Stearns continued to advocate for civil rights, founding two newspapers, “The Nation” and “The Right Way” to promote his views, and working to influence public opinion on

President Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction policies. In 1866 Stearns fell into financial difficulty, but in February 1867 he learned that a rival lead manufacturer in New York had developed a new way to build lead pipe, and travelled there in March despite his ill health. In early April Stearns had another bout of pneumonia, but was unable to recover. He died on April 9th, 1867 and is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery. The poet John Greenleaf Whittier published a poem in his honor one month later, saying “No duty could overtask him, No need his will outrun/ Or ever our lips could ask him, his hands the work had done.” His family donated the Evergreens to Tufts University in 1920, and although it burned down two years later, a plaque to Stearns now stands on the site, next to the Cousens Gymnasium. Another plaque to Stearns was placed in the Massachusetts State House in 1901, and it honors this unsung but passionate advocate for freedom and civil rights.

Debt Assumption By Ben Hussey



Tucked behind the East Wing of the State House sits Ashburton Park; its name a tribute to the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842. In the middle of the park stands a replica of the Bulfinch Column. The original column was built in 1790 by Charles Bulfinch and was originally erected on top of Beacon Hill.

Although the column we have now is not the original, the plaques from the original edifice were preserved and are now located on the replica. The original inspiration for Bulfinch constructing this

