

Ed. Note: This article by local historian John C. Bond was clipped from the Norwell News of October 27, 1966.

The Rev. Samuel J. May

Norwell, like many other South Shore towns, is a community of lovely homes. Long before we ever dreamed of living in this section, we knew the town as a pretty country place that we drove through en route to visit friends who had a summer cottage at Humarock Beach.

We always admired the gracious homes that line Main Street, especially starting at Homestead Farm with its cows in the meadows and the bright red barn [today's Whiting Fields]. It was about all that we knew of Norwell, for we always swung down Bridge Street and over the North River to North Marshfield thence on to Marshfield Hills and the beach at Humarock.

One of the houses passed was the venerable May Elms, which also had a big barn, and from whose fields the fragrant aroma of new-mown hay would greet us on a June day.

It wasn't until we became residents of Norwell, 20 years ago, that we learned that May Elms held a special place in the history of the town, which was originally part of Scituate.

Here [at May Elms], we were told Louisa May Alcott, the famous author of *Little Women*, *Little Men*, and *Aunt Jo's Scrap Book* came to visit her uncle, the Rev. Samuel J. May.

Rev. May came to Scituate (Norwell) in 1836 to occupy the pulpit of the First Parish Church—a post that he apparently filled to the satisfaction of the members for six years. In the *Life of Samuel J. May*, published in 1873, it is recorded that his ministry “...is still fondly remembered by many grateful hearts which were first moved to give themselves to God and humanity by the influence of his life and spirit.”

Although the Rev. Mr. May was an ardent abolitionist [anti-slavery person] and a disciple of William Lloyd Garrison from the moment he first heard him speak in 1830, Rev. May seems best remembered in Norwell as the founder of The Cold Water Army.

The May biography records his interest in the cause of temperance [anti-alcoholic drinking] as follows: “At that time drunkenness was more common than it is now; and Mr. May, while doing his utmost to impress his adult hearers with a sense of the enormity of the evil, and the extent of their peril, devoted himself mainly to saving the young from this vice.

“He enlisted a Cold Water Army, composed of children from all parts of the town, procuring music, and preparing banners with appropriate devices designed by himself, and mottoes inscribed in his own handwriting. Although not remarkable as works of art they were very creditable specimens of his taste and skill, and must have produced a fine effect when he marshaled his five hundred young followers under these flags, and all recited in concert:

‘So here we pledge perpetual hate, To all that can intoxicate.’

Often they marched through the streets with Mr. May at their head. Sometimes they held picnics in the groves and fields, a field near his own house being called ‘The Field of Waterloo.’

All the rum shops in town were closed with one exception, and finally this obstinate seller capitulated. Mr. May resolved to have a public execution of the last enemy. He got hold of the remaining liquors in the man's shop, procured an old horse and cart to carry the barrels to the scene of action, and summoned his little army. They came in full ranks to the appointed grove. He made an address, led them in singing, and then took an axe and beat

the head of every barrel. As the contents flowed forth upon the earth, the children are said to have cheered as boys and girls have seldom cheered. His precepts and example made such an impression upon some of their minds that, when they afterwards became members of the church they would never partake of wine, even at the Lord's Supper."

Six years before he came to South Scituate, the Rev. May heard the young and fiery William Lloyd Garrison speak for the first time. Garrison's violent opposition to slavery and his position at the head of the abolitionist movement made him a controversial figure in the Bay State. Today some would call him an agitator.

"The hearing of Garrison's lecture," Rev. May wrote in his memoirs, "was a great epoch in my life. The impression which it made upon my soul has never been effaced; indeed, it moulded it anew. It gave a new direction to my thoughts, a new purpose to my ministry."

On the Sunday following his first attendance at a Garrison lecture, the Rev. May was called at short notice to fill a pulpit in Boston. His sermon was on prejudice and was a ringing denunciation of slavery and a call for abolition. Words like the following may also have been heard from the pulpit of the First Parish Church in South Scituate for the dedicated minister became a continuing champion of the cause.

"Tell me not," he said, "that we are forbidden by the Constitution of our country to interfere in behalf of the enslaved. No compact our fathers may have made for us, no agreement we ourselves could make, would annul our obligation to suffering fellow-men. If need be the very foundations of our Republic must be broken up; and if this stone of stumbling, this rock of offence, cannot be removed from under it, the proud structure must fall. It cannot stand, it ought not to stand, on the necks of millions of men. For God is just, and His justice will not sleep forever."

Recognizing that his stirring words had aroused an unusual emotion throughout the church, Rev. May, before pronouncing the benediction, said:

"Would to God that a deeper emotion could be sent throughout our land until all the people thereof shall be roused from their wicked insensibility to the most tremendous sin of which any nation was ever guilty and be impelled to do that righteousness which alone can avert the displeasure of God.

I have been prompted to speak thus by the words I have heard from a young man, hitherto unknown, but who is, I believe, called to God to do a greater work for the good of our country than has been done by anyone since the Revolution. I mean William Lloyd Garrison. I advise, I exhort, I entreat you—go and hear him."

Had Mr. May been here in this day [1966] he would, no doubt, have been among those brave men and women who stood for civil rights at Montgomery, at Selma, and at Jackson.