JOSHUA STOW: A NINETEENTH CENTURY REBEL

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On April 22, 1760, Joshua Stow, son of Elihu and Jemima Payne Stow, was born in Middlefield, Connecticut. Richard J. Purcell, in *Connecticut in Transition*, calls Stow "a local politician."¹ Thomas Atkins, in his book *Middlefield and Long Hill*, quotes an obituary on Stow, saying, " Truly a good man has fallen in Israel! ... a wise, sagacious and honest man."² Whether merely a local politician, or a respected Connecticut statesman, Joshua Stow was a fascinating character.

Joshua's grandfather, Eliakim Stow, was born in Middlefield in 1708. Eliakim's wife, Lydia Miller, was the daughter of Benjamin Miller, one of the first settlers of Middlefield.³ At one time, Miller was the largest property holder in Middlefield.⁴ Eliakim and Lydia had seven children, one of whom, Joshua's father, was born in 1736.⁵ Elihu Stow had nine children, and he and his large family lived with his father, until Eliakim and his wife decide to move to Granville to live with their youngest son Benjamin.⁶

Elihu Stow was a farmer, and it appears that, at least by 1780, he was fairly well off. He was part-owner of a saw mill, which he and Jacob Miller converted from a grist mill,⁷ and he also owned a grist mill located on the Besek Stream.⁸ According to the Middletown Tax Lists, Elihu paid $238.70 in 1796, $159.70 in 1807, and $157.43 in 1810. Though not rich, he was in the upper-middle class range.
There does not appear to be much information about Joshua Stow's early childhood, although Atkins mentions that he fought in the Revolution, but Joshua's Diaries provide a fairly clear picture of his life from the age of 23 years to 26 years. He had not as yet chosen a vocation, but was not unmindful of his need to do so. At this stage in his life he seems to have been introspective and sensitive young man. On December 6, 1783, he wrote, "kept school in the forenoon, after school sat down and looked over this journal. Had many Melancholy Reflections. Thought of many sinful actions. So many hours mispent. Concluded for the future to amend. It is ______ which way to spend the rest of my days; whither among books or in seeking after honors and worldly intrist... Many are the temptations of this world and many are the troubles." His present circumstances offered him the opportunity to make choices about his future, an uncommon situation in his time. Joshua's father must have been able to continue to provide for him until he could make a decision.

During this time Joshua was not idle. In the spring and summer months he tended the mill for his father, and helped him on the farm, clearing land, mowing, chopping wood, tending sheep and doing other odd jobs at home. He also spent a great deal of time helping his older brother on his farm.
On Sundays he attended church and often listened to the sermons of Reverand Abner Benedict. In the fall, Joshua studied under Rev. Benedict. The subjects he studied were: trigonometry, mathematics, philosophy, and Algebra. At one point he bought "mathematical instruments and a pocket dictionary."

In addition to studying, in the winter months Joshua also taught school. He occasionally had up to 30 students. Later on in his life Joshua exhibited one prominent trait; he was very outspoken. It seems that even as a young man he had begun to behave in this way, for he wrote,"kept school, very cold day. This day resolved to do and say nothing that afterwards I should be sorry for, but to be very cautious in the school as well as elsewhere in all my action." Evidently he had said something to his students he later regretted.

Least the reader think that Joshua spent all his time in serious endeavors one should mention that Joshua did have a busy social life, at least for the eighteenth century. He often visited friends for dinner, went hunting (for fun as well as food), attended weddings, and dances; went huckleberry picking ("found worms in them," he wrote, concluded never to eat anymore"), drank tea with young ladies, and even sent valentines to two different women at the same time. (Made two valentines for Mrs. S. Savage and
In April of 1784 Joshua decided to leave home. At the time he thought it possible that he would be making a permanent move, but this did not turn out to be so. Now-a-days we would probably say he was trying to "find himself." He wrote in his diary, "going ___ a jo urney, settl'd accompts, patched things here. I leave this journal with the ___ with thoughts of going a long journey and expectations of never returning here to live any more. Fare well to my native home and Fare well to my friends."16

Stow traveled to upstate New York, stopping along the way to visit family friends, survey land, and explore the area. On April 30 he wrote, "I am weary of this journey among the Dutch find their manner very different from the English." He was homesick. He traveled as far as Catskill, New York, and then headed for Connecticut. By May 24 he was back home.

Joshua's diary shows that he was often concerned about his health, a not uncommon preoccupation in the eighteenth century. In 1784 he was inoculated for small pox, and soon after got sick from the shot. He wrote that he "got "symptoms of the small pox" but felt better once he broke out in pox." At the time, he was staying with his brother, Elihu, who made him sleep in the barn.

In July of 1785 he got sick again, and in January of
1786 he was bitten on the finger by a dog. This disturbed him a great deal, as he feared the dog was rabid. He went to Wallingford to see a Dr. Potter, who cauterized the wound and advised him "to keep a running sore...and refrain from spirits and liquors and spices." Later he visited another doctor and was told to bathe in the sea, despite the fact that it was January. Joshua caught a cold, but was afraid to tell anyone he was ill because he thought people would think him mad. Evidently he recovered.

Throughout 1785 Joshua spent a considerable amount of time at the home of Eli Coe, brother of the woman he was later to make his wife. In writing of his visits to Eli, he often added the initials R.C. to his entries. One can only assume he was referring to Ruth Coe, but he made no other remarks about her until his entry on January 28, 1876. This was Joshua and Ruth's wedding day, but all that was written in the diary is "went to Wallingford with Ruth Coe." The couple visited Dr. Potter, and the doctor told Ruth to avoid doing hard labor and eating meat. Perhaps she was pregnant, but the Connecticut Vital Records list the birth date of their first child as November 8, 1786.

Joshua's wife Ruth also came from a well-known Middlefield family. In the inventory of Joshua Stow's property, made after his death, is property called the Coe Farm and Buildings, valued at $1900 in 1842. This
must have belonged to Ruth's family, so apparently they were fairly well off. Ruth's father was Captain David Coe and her mother was Hannah Camp Coe. There were eleven children in the family. 19

As Joshua Stow matured he became more and more skeptical about the teachings of his church, and more and more outspoken about his skepticism. This greatly annoyed his mother-in-law. Atkins says "She was a zealous christian (sic) and an earnest supporter of the Congregational Church; sometimes the meetings of that order were held at her house. The religious antagonism of her son-in-law, Joshua Stow, was a great grief to her." 20 It seems that Mrs. Coe antagonized Joshua too. Several, citizens of Middletown recalled a story Joshua often told about his mother-in-law. She had asked him to pray aloud, but, when he did so, his prayer was so outrageous she insisted he stop. 21

Joshua and Ruth had three children: Laura (b.1786), Julia (b.1790) and Albert Gallatin (b. 1801). Laura and Julia lived to adulthood, married and had children, but Albert died in 1830 while on a visit to Ohio with his father. 21/

By 1789 it was apparent that Joshua had decided against a career "among books" in favor of political life. From 1789 to 1792 he served as Constable of Middlefield, 22 and in 1795 he became involved with the Connecticut Western Fencing Company, later the ancestor of another
Reserve Land Company. At that time the state of Connecticut had decided to sell off its Western Reserve lands and use the proceeds for the School Fund. The land was sold to 48 members of the Connecticut Western Land Company, of which Stow was a member. Joshua and a man named Jabez Stocking purchased land for $11,423.

According to Atkins, Stow was a member of a surveying party that arrived in Ohio on July 4, 1799, but other sources say this occurred in 1795 or 1796. Atkins also mentions that Stow "made liberal investments of capital" in the Ohio territory.

In 1789 Joshua joined the Ethosian Society, called by Stow's political opponents the Infidel Club. In 1819 German Converse of the Connecticut Journal accused Stow of being an infidel. Later, when Stow sued Converse for libel, numerous citizens of Middletown paraded into court to testify as to whether Joshua did, in fact, have such a reputation as had been alleged. It was partly the fact of past Stow's membership in the Ethosian Society that led many to conclude that he was known as a non-believer.

According to other members of the Society, such as Manoah Camp and Thomas Lyman, the group began meeting in 1787 and had disbanded by 1793. Each member contributed toward a library in which were included the following works by Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Dr. Huntington; Winchester's Dialogues and other books. At the Libel trial conflicting testimony leaves in doubt the question of whether
And Order. 36 In 1819 Joshua Rice was a leader of the
the library had a copy of Petit Pierre or Ethan Allen's
Bible. 34 the support of the Crown by the latter. Although
Members of the Congregational Church belonged, as
well as non-members, Namooh Camp testified that the pur-
pose of the Society was "to strengthen the mind." 32 and
Thomas Lyman believed that it was a political, rather that
a religious, organization. 33 The political situation of
1819 was such that it was difficult to separate political
issues from religious ones, and it seems that Republicans
considered the discussions of the Society to have been of
a political nature, while Federalists believed these dis-
cussions to have been religious.

According to Joshua's brother Obad, about the time
Joshua joined the Ethosian Society he started to express
his doubts about the validity of the Scriptures. Obad, who
was a prominent member of the Society of Middletown,
or Congregational Church (which also included among its
members other denominations), claimed that Joshua had
once believed: "it was strange that a ghost should
ravish a Virgin and get her with child, especially as
it was a good ghost, and he did not believe that his
salvation depended on believing in a Bastard." 34 As Joshua
continued to feel this way, Obad stopped talking to him?
Their sister, Mrs. Hezekiah Rice reported that at the time
of their arguments Obad was "deranged." 35

Joshua's political enemies thought he was an Infidel,
but his cohorts thought he was only opposing the "Stand-
ing Order." By 1818, Joshua Stow was a leader of the Toleration Party, a party of Democratic-Republicans who opposed the support of the Church by the State. Although Stow was a member of the Church in Middlefield, which included Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists and Universalists, he did not like the way in which members of the church used their power to control the political life of the people. He felt that the congregation had a "holier than thou" attitude and that they considered their Society a club for the elite. As clerk for the Society from 1804 to 1815 Joshua drafted resolutions opposing the role of the state in forcing people to pay taxes for the support of religion. As a church official, he was a member of a committee that invited ministers to preach. The Domestic Missionary Society, a Congregationalist-Federalist organization, provided the Society with financial aid and tried to control which preachers went to Middlefield; Stow objected strongly to this policy. When a Reverend Davis preached in Middlefield in 1816, Joshua argued with him and stated that the doctrines he preached led to "mental derangement and some consequent suicide." In the 1790's and early 1800's Joshua Stow, as a Jeffersonian and opponent of the Congregational Church, was going against the Standing Order. But by 1818 his party had begun to supplant the Federalists, and Joshua's
political career rose. He was then Post Master of Middletown, and, although he left this post for a short while he held it again from 1821 until shortly before his death. He was also the Collector of Internal Duties and Taxes of the United States in Middlesex County from 1815 to 1819, and Director of the Office of Discount and Deposit of the Bank of the United States.

In July of 1818 the town of Middletown elected Alexander Wolcott and Joshua Stow as delegates to the state's Constitutional Convention. It was at this convention that Stow made his name known throughout the state. The primary aim of the Toleration Party was the separation of Church and State. The party did not want the state to have the power to compel citizens to support a particular church, nor did it want the Legislature to provide funds for specific church run organizations such as Yale.

At the Convention, Stow was chosen to represent Middlesex County on a committee of 24 who were to frame a constitution and present it to the entire body. In 1819, Sherman Converse of the Connecticut Journal claimed that "While in the Convention, he (Stow) openly avowed that in his opinion, the government had no more right to provide by law for the support of the worship of the Supreme Being, than for the support of the devil." Although the truth of this statement is in doubt (see below), it is true that Stow introduced into the Convention
Article 7 of the Constitution which provides for the separation of Church and State. 46 This article was subsequently adopted by the Convention, and the entire constitution was eventually ratified. 47

Despite the fact that Converse wrote a damning editorial about Stow, in which he accused him of fraudulent behavior as a bank director, farming out his job as Post Master while still collecting $600-800, and blaspheming the Lord, Joshua was elected to the Upper House of the Connecticut Legislature in 1819. 48 In Connecticut in Transition, Richard Purcell remarks that "a seat in the Council (upper House) was one of honor and power."49

By 1819 Stow had reached that position. It appears that during his lifetime he never held a great deal of power in the state, but Atkins writes that "Judge Stow has filled important offices ... with great credit to himself. He was for several years chief judge of the county court, for several years a member of both branches of the legislature...."50 When Stow sued Converse for libel he was able to call on a number of prominent Republicans to testify on his behalf such as Alexander Wolcott, Thomas Lyman, Samuel Hart, Sylvester Wells, and John Russ.51 That Joshua won his case against Converse shows that the Republicans had succeeded in breaking the grip of favorable to Clark's section, but a score of Stow
the Federalists. Unfortunately for Stow, he did not gain much of a settlement. The case was tried twice and each time the Judge was distinctly dismayed about the jury's decision. The second jury awarded Stow less than the first, and the Judge, Stephen Titus Hosmer, appeared to be furious, and Hosmer was a Federalist! 52

I have found no references to Stow's life from 1822 until 1830, but in 1831 there was an interesting account of his activities published in the Middlesex Gazette. At the age of 71, Stow was still upsetting the status quo, this time amongst his own party members.

The Republican party was divided between conservatives who supported Clay and liberals who supported Jackson. In January of 1831, the party held a meeting to choose delegates for a convention to nominate a candidate for the office of senator. The Middlesex Gazette, a Clay supporter, reported on that meeting: "Business was brought to a stand by the entrance of an individual whom, for want of an epithet sufficiently significant and comprehensive we shall denominate, par excellence, Joshua Stow. We use his name in full consciousness of its opprobrious nature but with a settled conviction that no other appellation will convey so just an idea on his character." 53

At a later meeting the Republicans chose delegates favorable to Clay's faction, but that same night Stow
hold another meeting and Jacksonian delegates were chosen. At the Convention, Joshua appeared with a document claiming his delegates had been chosen first. He was successful in getting them seated, but the Clay man, Mr. Alsop, won the nomination.

Joshua Stow seems to have retained his youthful rebelliousness, and his interest in community affairs, throughout his life. He was an educated man who appears to have formulated opinions on many different issues, and was not afraid to express those opinions. Although he did not get along well with his family, they did not all dislike him, or even oppose him. Some of them felt that he was basically a good and generous man who simply opposed abuses of power by the ruling members of society. Said his son-in-law, Joseph Hale, "Mr. Stow is very liberal (meaning generous) except towards the Standing Order." 54

At his death, on October 11, 1842, Joshua possessed a considerable amount of property, valued at over $20,000. 55 But he also had a huge debt. In his will he asked that his wife be given: his home farm of 75 acres and the buildings on it, valued at $5215; in addition to livestock, carriages, sleighs, harnesses, farming tools and utensils, and furniture, plus his bank dividends of $200 per year. 56 The Probate records show that, once his debts had been paid off, through the sale of some of the above property
and other Connecticut property that he owned, Joshua
was able to leave his wife about $738 worth of property.
When Ruth Stow died, on February 23, 1852, she possessed
$777.55 worth of property, of which $492.13 remained
once her accounts were settled. 57 This she left to
her four grandchildren; Susan E. Hale, and Julia Ann Hale,
daughters of Julia Stow and Joseph Hale; and Mary Ann Coe
and Cyrus Coe, children of Laura Stow and Curtis Coe:
Ruth's property was inventoried and the list shows that
she was able to leave her home in tact, along with four
acres of land and sundry other items: such as: imported
wine, beverages, clothing, furniture, dishes, silver plate,
a carriage, beds, silver tea sets, "Marseilles quilts,"
and even some cash.
It would appear that although Joshua Stow died
insolvent he was able to leave his wife with the means
to live comfortably until her death at the age of 92.
According to "For a man living in the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries, this was quite an accomplishment.
Joshua Stow Birth (1756)"
Joshua Stow Birth (1756) (July 6, 1782)
Joshua Stow Birth (1756) (Feb. 23, 1852)
Joshua Stow Birth (1756) (Sept. 2, 1782)
Joshua Stow Birth (1756) (Jan. 2, 1782)
Footnotes


3. Ibid., p. 74.
4. Ibid., p. 74.
5. Joshua Stow Chronology.
7. Ibid., p. 18.
8. Ibid. (also J.B. Beers, History of Middlesex County, p. 77.)
9. Ibid., p. 81.
10. Joshua Stow Diaries. In February of 1784 Stow visited a friend
who had a one-month old baby. He wrote in his diary, that the
baby "was so small that a ring suitable to my little finger
would slip over her hand to the elbow."
11. Ibid.
12. Rev. Benedict came from New York. He was a Yale graduate (1769)
ordained in 1771. (David D. Fields, Statistical Account of
the county of Middlesex in Connecticut, p. 46)
According to Beers, "by his personal address and influence, he
is said to have secured the freedom of all the slaves held
by his people." (Beers, p. 437)
14. Ibid. (July 6, 1783)
15. Ibid. (Feb. 14, 1784)
16. Ibid. (Apr. 21, 1784)
17. Ibid. (Dec. 11, 1784)
18. Ibid. (Jan. 3, 1785)

21. Joshua Stow vs. Sherman Converse a Libel containing the
    History of Two Trials Before the Connecticut Superior Court
    and some Account of the proceeding before the Supreme Court
    of Errors, p.32. (hereafter referred to as the Libel Trial.)

21A. Thomas Atkins, *History of Middlefield and Long Hill*, p.82.

22. Joshua Stow Constable Records


    (see also, Hollister and Bingham's histories)


28. Libel Trial

29. ibid, p.31. "Furcell, Connecticut in Revolutionary 1775-1783, p.266.

30. ibid, p.195."


32. ibid, p.31. 1, p.2.

33. ibid, p.31. 2.

34. ibid, p.28. Although Joshua's father did not hold the same
    views as he did, Elihu did evidence the same tendency to
    rebel against prevailing notions. Says Atkins, "Elihu, like
    the Stows in general, was not afraid to express his opinions,
    even if in the minority. For instance he was very much opposed
    to taxation for the support of the ministry, and refused to
    pay his tax, allowing his horse to be sold at public auction
    rather than act contrary to his convictions," p.76.

35. ibid, p.30. The two brothers never seemed to get along,
    and one might speculate that some of the problem was due
    to jealousy on the part of Obed. Joshua continued to prosper
    throughout his life, while Obed, a tanner and shoemaker,
    never obtained the wealth his brother did.

36. ibid, pp.46, 154.
37. ibid, p. 51.
38. ibid, p. 44.
39. ibid, p. 46.
41. Libel Trial, p. 2.
44. ibid, p. 239.
45. ibid, p. 240.
46. ibid.
47. According to Beers, on Oct. 5, 1818 Middletown accepted the
    Constitution by a vote of 250 to 125.
49. ibid, p. 124.
51. Libel Trial, p. 3.
52. ibid, p. 162.
54. Libel Trial, p. 154.
56. ibid, pp. 45-7.
57. ibid, 1852, p. 341.
58. ibid, p. 358.

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