

Noah Worcester

Noah Worcester (November 25, 1758-October 31, 1837), entirely self-educated after the age of 15, studied and thought his own way to unitarian doctrine and also to pacifism. A formally unschooled farmer and school teacher, he became a respected and influential minister, author, editor and peace advocate, honored by two institutions of higher learning and a "father of the American peace movement."



Born to Noah and Hannah Worcester on their farm in Hollis, New Hampshire, Noah descended from generations of ministers. His great grandfather, William Worcester, had come from Salisbury, England to serve the church in Salisbury, Massachusetts, founded in 1638. His grandfather, Francis Worcester, was pastor of the church in Sandwich. From the age of 12, Noah led the family's daily worship service whenever his father was not present.

In 1776 Noah joined the Hollis militia, at age 16 among the tallest of the men. He served as company fifer for eleven months. In the Battle of Bunker Hill in June, he was almost taken prisoner but escaped with only the loss of his backpack. During the following winter he worked for his uncle in Plymouth and taught at the village school, though he had "never studied geography or grammar, or even had the benefit of a dictionary." He read extensively, taking notes on birch bark, and also fell in love with Hannah Brown.

He then served two more months as fife-major. The action in the Battle of Bennington confirmed him in his abhorrence of war. In September, 1778, he purchased the remaining 14 months of his minority from his father and began a new life as schoolteacher and farmer in Plymouth. He and Hannah were married on his 21st birthday. They moved to Thornton, New Hampshire in 1782. There he farmed, taught school and worked as a shoemaker. He continued his reading, even at his shoe bench, with pen and paper at his side to note important thoughts. He developed the habit of "examining religious subjects by writing short dissertations on different questions."

In 1785, stimulated by a sermon of John Murray, Worcester sent a "letter to the editor" entitled "On the origin of evil," the first of his many publications. After much reflection on how he could be the most useful, he chose the ministry. He preached his first sermon in Boscawen, New Hampshire in 1786 and filled many pulpits during the next few years. In June, 1787, the church at Thornton voted to settle him as "the minister of the town" and ordained him in October.

He remained in "small and humble" Thornton for 23 years, serving as pastor and teacher. Thornton's people, "few and poor," often worshipped in a schoolhouse. In winters when the school's provision of firewood failed, Worcester taught the children in his home. He

was active in local government, but when some suggested he run for the U.S. Congress, he declined.

During these years Worcester was a prolific contributor to both popular and theological journals. In 1791 he was awarded an honorary A.M. by Dartmouth in recognition of his work.

In 1797 his beloved Hannah died after a fall from her horse. The Worcesters had ten children. The first died in infancy and the last was stillborn after the fall. The other eight lived to enjoy full lives in a variety of positions in academic and religious fields.

Early in the new century, Worcester traveled and preached for the New Hampshire Missionary Society. But he later wrote that "prior to this, I had found, to my own satisfaction, that neither Moses and the Prophets, nor Christ and his apostles, had any belief in the doctrine of the Three in one God; that they were all Unitarian instructors, that is, that they all represented Jehovah as One and not as Three."

In 1806 Worcester suffered tendon ruptures in his legs, leaving this man "of uncommon muscular power" for several months unable to walk or stand. Forced to be sedentary, he spent almost all his waking hours in study, reading and writing. His theological views ultimately led to estrangement from his congregation and from orthodox Congregational colleagues as well, whose "reiterated reproaches and denunciations" of dissenters from trinitarian doctrine he avoided as much as possible. In February, 1810, he accepted his brother's offer to join his ministry in Salisbury.

That same year he published *Bible News of Father, Son and Holy Ghost*, a treatise that attracted wide attention during this period of the [Unitarian controversy](#). Henry Ware Jr. wrote, "The appearance at this moment of a bold and free-minded advocate of liberty and truth, bursting away by solitary study and the unaided action of his own mind from the old prescriptive theology, was well adapted to make a sensation. Mr. Worcester became an object of much interest and sympathy, and his cause was made identical with the great movement against ecclesiastical authority."

The Christian Disciple, a monthly journal, had been established by the Revs. [William Ellery Channing](#), Charles Lowell, Samuel Cooper Thacher, and [Joseph Tuckerman](#). In May, 1813, Worcester became its editor. The letter inviting him to Boston to take up this position cited the union of his "talent in writing, skill in reasoning, with Christian gentleness and a catholic largeness of spirit."

Residence in Boston led to observations and reflections on "the baneful influence of the war spirit, . . . the barbarity of war and its demoralizing influence." In December, 1814, he published *A Solemn Review of the Custom of War*, an incisive indictment of "the basest passions of human nature" that lead to armed conflict. The treatise was read widely in the U.S. and England and was translated into several languages in Europe. Worcester founded the Massachusetts Peace Society, its first meeting being in his home. In 1815 he

established *The Friend of Peace*, a quarterly journal of the Society, which he edited and largely wrote until 1828.

In July, 1818, Harvard College conferred upon the Reverend Noah Worcester the degree of Doctor of Divinity. The Massachusetts Peace Society grew to include the most respected ministers, judges and other community leaders throughout the state. Similar societies were formed throughout New England and further west.

In his early Boston years Worcester often accepted preaching engagements in the city and neighboring towns, but ill health precluded much activity in his later years. In 1821 his friend, Joseph Tuckerman, asked him to prepare a memoir of his life. In response he provided a series of letters addressed to Dr. Tuckerman over the next ten years. Another friend and colleague, Henry Ware, Jr., completed and published an account of his remarkable life.

Noah Worcester died on October 31, 1837. His body was first entombed near his residence in Brighton, Massachusetts, but later moved to Mount Auburn cemetery where an obelisk remains, its inscription reading: To Noah Worcester, D.D., erected by his friends, in commemoration of zealous labors in the cause of peace: and of the meekness, benignity and consistency of his character, as a Christian philanthropist and divine: "Speaking the Truth in Love."

The Noah Worcester Papers are at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Worcester correspondence can be found at Columbia University, the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, the New Hampshire Historical Society, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. His tracts and sermons are largely available at the Andover-Harvard Theological Library. Aside from works mentioned in the article above, Worcester's many publications include: *Some difficulties proposed for solution: in a letter to the Rev. John Murray, concerning his discourse on the origin of evil* (1793); *Solemn reasons for declining to adopt the Baptist theory and practice in a series of letters to a Baptist minister* (1807); *Abraham and Lot. A sermon, on the way of peace, and the evils of war* (1812); *A respectful address to the Trinitarian clergy: relating to their manner of treating opponents* (1812); *The signal: proposing a society for the moral and religious improvement of the clergy* (1815); *A solemn review of the custom of war; showing that war is the effect of popular delusion, and proposing a remedy* (1815); *The atoning sacrifice, a display of love—not of wrath* (1829); *Causes and evils of contentions: unveiled in letters to Christians* (1831); and *A review of atheism for unlearned Christians* (1836). William Ellery Channing's eulogy for Worcester was published *A tribute to the memory of the Rev. Noah Worcester, D.D.* (1837). Henry Ware's *Memoirs of the Rev. Noah Worcester, D.D.* (1844) is the principal biography.

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