

## THE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE OF A MASSACHUSETTS TOWN.

BY GEORGE H. HAYNES.

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THAT the same town which gave rise to an insurrection that threatened the very existence of this Commonwealth should later have made a series of deliberate attempts to commit suicide might at first seem to indicate remorse for early misdeeds. Such an outcome would satisfy the demands of poetic justice; unfortunately, however, it does not square well with the facts. Shays's Rebellion and these attempts at suicide are doubtless the most unique features in the history of Pelham, yet both owe their chief interest to the fact that they were symptomatic of influences which extended far beyond her borders; for, just as Shays's Rebellion, according to the present view, was a protest, turbulent and revolutionary, to be sure, yet against genuine grievances which were wide-spread, but which for various reasons became most burdensome in Hampshire County, so the explanation of Pelham's attempts at suicide is to be found in causes of municipal melancholia, familiar in scores of Massachusetts towns, but which became exceptionally acute in Pelham.

The impulse to self-destruction manifested itself first almost precisely fifty years ago. On the last day of January, 1854, a special town meeting was convened for purposes thus set forth in the warrant:

"2d To see if said Town is willing to give up and surrender her town Charter and become disfranchised as to all privileges and rights.

"3d To act on the subject of having said Town divided in any legal way and manner and having the parts annexed

to adjoining towns, and to use any legal means to accomplish the same."

At the meeting it was voted: "to surrender this Town's Charter according to the warrant calling this meeting. Seventy-three in favor (73). Thirty-six (36) against." To carry this action into effect committees were chosen to urge petitions already forwarded to the Legislature, to circulate petitions in Pelham, and to work up annexation sentiment in the adjoining towns. In Amherst, however, these advances met with a chilling reception. A special town meeting was called to determine the town's will, and by a vote of exactly two to one (168 : 84. 27 February, 1854.) it was "Resolved: as the sense of the Town of Amherst, that as at present advised, and in the present state of proceedings before the Legislature, on the petition of the town of Pelham for leave to surrender its Charter, and to be annexed to the adjoining towns, we are opposed to the surrender of its Charter, and to the annexation of any portion of its territory to the town of Amherst," and the town's representative in the General Court was forthwith instructed to oppose Pelham's petition.

In Pelham the annual town meeting was approaching. In view of Amherst's action it was decided to bring the matter up again, and an article was inserted in the warrant: "To see if the town will vote to rescind a vote . . . to surrender the Charter of the town." Excitement ran high, but when the town meeting day came (March 6, 1854), the attempt to rescind the previous action was defeated, and the town reasserted its determination to give up its corporate existence, not this time, however, by a vote of more than 2 : 1, but by the close vote of 87 : 84,—in a ballot which must have called out nearly every voter in town, for in the following year the population of Pelham was but 789. Making the ordinary computation of one voter for every five inhabitants the enrolment would have been 178;—there were 171 votes cast upon this question.

Two years later (January 28, 1856), another special meeting was called "To see if the town will Vote to surrender her Charter & be devided by the Legislature and set to the different Towns adjoining." Upon dividing the house on this question, the vote stood 73 : 36 *against* surrendering the charter. The smallness of the vote and the reversal of attitude are remarkable, in contrast with the votes of 1854. For almost a dozen years Pelham thereafter seems to have accepted life, without further protest; but in the early winter of 1867 a special town meeting again considered the proposal that the charter be surrendered. By a vote of 45 : 43 the project was defeated.

In 1870, however, the struggle was renewed with great determination. The principal article of the warrant for the March town meeting (March 15, 1870), was "To see if the town consent to surrender its Charter and divide its territory between the towns of Amherst, Prescott, Enfield and Belchertown as already petitioned for to the Legislature by the citizens of the town of Pelham, and also to designate lines of Division." The town's action is thus recorded:

"Voted: that we Surrender our Charter—86 in favor; 36 against."

"Voted: that we draw a line strait across from the North Northeast corner of Belchertown to the Northwest corner of Enfield, and merge all territory now belonging to Pelham in Belchertown or Enfield. And then, starting at the centre of the North line of Pelham, run parallel with the West line of said Pelham to the South line, merging all West of said line in the town of Amherst, and all East of said line in the town of Prescott."

A large committee was appointed to confer with representatives of Amherst, and another committee to attend any hearing upon the subject which might be given by the Legislature's Committee on Towns. Both Amherst and Prescott, in special town meetings, took vigorous action to oppose annexation.

Meantime the State Legislature was considering the problem. As early as February 5,—by what authority it is not apparent,—the Pelham selectmen had caused to be presented to the General Court a petition that Pelham might be divided and merged in the adjoining towns. This was referred to the Committee on Towns, to which, shortly after the March town meeting, there was referred also the remonstrance of certain citizens of Pelham, against the proposed division. Presently, on the recommendation of the Committee, both the House and the Senate voted to give the selectmen of Pelham leave to withdraw. But the matter was not ended without one more struggle. Pelham was at that time represented by a man who for fifteen years had been one of the most urgent advocates of the dissolution of the town. He therefore (May 5), prevailed upon the House to pass the following order: "That the Committee on the Judiciary inquire whether the town of Pelham has a legal existence, it having voted to surrender its charter." It was indeed an interesting question. Must a town live, in spite of its wish to die? A week later (May 12, 1870: House Doc., 373), upon the question "Whether Pelham has a legal existence?" the Committee returned the following report:

"That, in the opinion of the Committee, no Town can vote to surrender its charter or dissolve its corporate existence, without the consent of the legislature had and received. A town is the creature of the legislature, and has only the powers given it by statute, and among these is not the power of annulling its existence. Its general powers are to provide schools, maintain its highways, protect the lives and property of its citizens and support its paupers; its general duties are to furnish its part of the State tax, its quota of soldiers, &c., &c.; it is, in fact, an intermediate agent between the State government and the people. And as it is strictly limited to the powers conferred by statute, and as the town of Pelham has not the power of surrendering its charter without the consent of the legislature given it by statute, and as it clearly

cannot relieve itself of the obligations imposed upon it without such consent, the Committee are unanimously of the opinion that the town of Pelham has a legal existence, any of its votes to the contrary, notwithstanding."

Per order,

WM. COGSWELL.

It having been thus authoritatively decided that Pelham must needs live until the Legislature gives her leave to die, it remains to ask: what were the causes of these repeated attempts at self-destruction? Were the Pelhamites a disorderly rabble who wished to throw off the restraints of law? Or were they theoretical anarchists, resolved to make an end of government, in order that they might revert to that blissful "state of nature," in which each might be a law unto himself? In either of these cases, novel experiments might have been the result. Indeed, when these episodes were first called to my notice, there were put before my imagination scenes like these: Tommy, in the early fall, would ask: "Papa! Don't I have to go to school pretty soon?" and would be answered: "Oh! There won't be any more school here, for now we don't live in Pelham any more: but your mamma'll teach you how to read." Or Susan, after a tedious drive over from Packardville, would ask: "John, what in the name of goodness is the matter with the roads? Why don't your highway surveyors 'tend to their business." And John would reply: "We don't have highway surveyors any more. P'raps some of us will patch up the roads a little, by and by."

Unfortunately for the interest of this story, such scenes as these find not the slightest basis in fact. It is true that in the period of suspense some features of Pelham government were at loose ends, and her officials indulged in crazy bookkeeping. At the State House there is on file a curious letter from the town clerk of Pelham, dated January 29, 1873, in response to a request for the town

reports, to be filed in the state archives. In part it reads as follows:

"I doo not think our town affairs are in such shape or have ben for the years 1870 & 1 that a report could be made thay doo not Know how much thay are in debt much more than you do whare thay have borowed money thay keep no Account of it on book as can be found and ther is interest money cauled for that has not Ben paid for 3 or 4 years and in fact our present Board of Selectmen New nothing about

Perhaps i am Saying to much But Such are the facts.

Yours Respectfully,

CLERK OF THE TOWN OF PELHAM, MASS."

But these men of Pelham never expected anything else than that they were to be citizens of *some* town. They had no wish to revolt against state authority, and until the question of dissolution and merger should be decided, they had not the faintest notion of suspending the regular functions of local government. On the very day following the vote of the House, refusing to grant the petition for the dissolution of the town, a regularly summoned town meeting was held, and the regular appropriations were voted, including \$1,000 for the maintenance of schools, and \$1,200 for highways; it was also voted "to raise \$500 for breaking and opening roads next winter, if needed to be expended"; and "to set up the Poor to the lowest bidder." It was still an open question, whether Pelham now had a legal existence, yet here her citizens were making provision for carrying on all the ordinary functions of local government.

The reasons for Pelham's strange action, then, are not to be found in any abnormal turbulence of disposition, nor in vapid theorizing as to government. The reasons were more prosaic, and better fitted to appeal to the sensitive "pocket nerve" of the descendants of those frugal

“North of Ireland Scotchmen,” who by reason of Worcester’s religious intolerance, had shaken the dust of that inhospitable town from their feet, and had settled upon the bleak Pelham hills. I say “on the bleak Pelham hills,” for in those words is found the key to the whole situation. The influences which were at work in Pelham have been felt in scores of our Massachusetts hill towns, but *here* a combination of circumstances made them exceptionally burdensome.

Pelham is a small town, about six miles in length by three and one-half in width. Looked at from the west, it presents a long range of hills, for the most part covered with forests. From the level of Fort River, at the western boundary, in the course of about four and one-half miles, the traveler makes a steady climb of nearly nine hundred feet to Pelham Centre; from here to the east there is an abrupt descent of nearly nine hundred feet in about two miles, to the west branch of the Swift River; then the land rises rapidly to the East Pelham Hills, now in Prescott, parallel to the Pelham range, of about the same altitude, and but three miles distant from them. Such conditions make travel difficult. The land, too, is not of great fertility. As a result Pelham has always been sparsely settled. Three small hamlets have been built up, but there has never been a village of any considerable size. The old Conkey tavern, where Daniel Shays and his discontented neighbors hatched their insurrection, was built for a tavern on a spot from which not a single house was in sight; no one lived within half a mile of it, yet a still extant bill for liquors to supply the tavern’s trade indicates that a lively custom was anticipated.

These straggling hill towns, capable of progressive development under the old order of things, have been hard hit by the industrial changes which the last seventy-five years have brought to Massachusetts. Indeed, Pelham’s population reached its maximum in 1820, and since 1850 has

dwindled steadily until now it is barely a third of what it was eighty years ago.

PELHAM'S POPULATION.<sup>1</sup>

Year.	Population.	Year.	Population.
1820	1278	1875	633
1850	983 (U. S.; Mass., 872.)	1880	614
1855	789	1885	549
1860	748	1890	486
1865	737	1895	486
1870	673	1900	462

In the half-decade, 1850 to 1855, this little town lost nearly a tenth of its population. (If the Federal census figures are trusted, the loss was fully a *fifth!*) It was in the year 1854, it will be remembered, that it was first voted to give up the town's charter. The later attempts to commit suicide, it is to be noted, also occurred during a decade, 1865 to 1875, when the falling off in population was portentous. The evolution which was then in process may have meant the "survival of the fittest," but it was *not in Pelham* that they continued to survive,—in 1855 no town in Hampshire County supported more paupers than did Pelham. Northampton, with a population seven or eight times as great, was burdened with precisely the same number (eleven); next came little Prescott, Pelham's neighbor to the eastward, with nine. The thinning numbers did not make the eight school districts any fewer, nor did it shorten the miles of straggling highway, which kept open communication with a few remote farmhouses. In the midst of such discouragements, and with such a gloomy outlook, it is not surprising that the Pelham citizen should have become a pessimist.

Pelham has never had a real focus. The oldest church and the post-office were located on almost the highest

<sup>1</sup> In 1822 Prescott was incorporated, being made up of parts of Pelham and New Salem; this accounts for quite a large loss in Pelham's population.

Note the variation between the Massachusetts and the Federal census returns for 1850.



land in town, at a distance of six miles from Amherst, which was destined to be the town's chief market. The best lands in town, as well as the most accessible, were in the valley of the Fort River, along the Amherst border. The residents of this section of the town early saw that their natural affiliations were with Amherst, not with Pelham. As early as 1807 two men living in the southwest corner of the town had petitioned to be set off from Pelham and annexed to Amherst, but it was voted to "pass" that article in the warrant. But the farmers of that district felt it to be a great hardship that they should have to support church services at Pelham Centre, which they could reach only by that weary climb of five or six miles, when close at hand lay the church at East street, in Amherst. Accordingly, in 1812, six of these men petitioned the General Court for leave "to be set off to Amherst for *parochial* purposes." But the parish had no notion to lose some of its most well-to-do members; it therefore voted not to set them off, and chose a committee to oppose their petition at Boston. This attempt came to nothing. But it was in this western strip of the town that the sentiment in favor of dissolution was always strong, for they wished to be merged with the more prosperous Amherst. Again and again both the town and the General Court were importuned that individual residents of this section might be set off. And, indeed, Amherst would doubtless have been glad to receive them. In the winter of 1854, after having opposed the petition for the surrender of Pelham's charter, in the Amherst town meeting it was voted: "To receive John Russell, if the Legislature will set him off from Pelham." Even after the final refusal of the Legislature to allow Pelham to go out of existence, in the very next year her representative,—and in all her history no other man ever served the town as an officer more often or more faithfully,—petitioned to be thus set off from Pelham; but in vain, Pelham was willing to blot her own

name off the map, but not to allow the farms of one or two of her residents to be merged with Amherst. Amherst, on the other hand, was willing to annex a few farms, but did not care to take with them six or eight square miles of sparsely settled country with all its charges for schools, roads, etc. As a Pelham man put it, "Amherst was willing to take the meat, provided not too much bone was thrown in, while Pelham did not care to see herself left with all bone!"

Opposition to the surrender of the charter grew as one climbed the hill and got nearer the church, the post-office, and the old meeting-house, which for more than 160 years has been the centre of the town's political life. During one of the movements in favor of the surrender of the charter, petitions were circulated for signatures in its favor. A young man of West Pelham was making the rounds with one of these, and called at a house near Pelham Centre. The man of the house was not at home; his wife listened with evident impatience to the statement of the caller's errand. When asked if she wished to sign, she snapped out: "I'd sign quick enough, if it was to keep things as they are! If the charter is given up, will there be any post-office here?" The reply was evasive, and, as the woman's spirit was evidently rising, her caller started to withdraw, with the conventional and pacificatory remark: "This is an unusually fine day for this season of the year!" "Yes!" was the rejoinder, "We do sometimes have fine days up here, as well as all in Amherst!" To the invitation to sign this same petition one of this woman's neighbors replied: "By ——! I guess I won't sign, but the old town's got to go to hell, anyhow!"

This gloomy prophecy has not been fulfilled, yet the conditions which prompted it were obvious. In the transformations which were coming over New England, Pelham's population had inevitably to dwindle. He who drives over her hills today sees almost as many fire-scarred chim-

neys as houses; here and there an old garden rose or lilac, blossoming by the wayside, is the sole surviving trace of a vanished homestead. The varied industries which found here a favorable location in the early part of the 19th century have disappeared, and the little water-powers are for the most part unused. There is but one manufacturing enterprise in the town,—a fishing-rod factory,—and this is near the Amherst line. The old Pelham family names figure now on the tomb-stones in her *eleven* cemeteries,—not on the voting list: *there* they have been replaced by those of new-comers,—men who are nomads in spirit, who virtually “camp” in Pelham, until some less unattractive opportunity for earning a scanty livelihood presents itself; then they “move on.”

Yet indications are not lacking that Pelham's nadir is well passed. The process of readjustment has been painful and depressing; but Pelham is working out her own salvation, if with fear and trembling yet also with intelligence and with a lively hope. While contemptuous Amherst is deeply in debt, having almost reached the legal limit, frugal Pelham is not only out of debt, but has a surplus at interest. Only four schools are now kept open, in place of eight, but the school buildings are neatly painted, and in good repair. The State aids in paying a part of the salaries of experienced teachers of good grade, and high school opportunities are available in Amherst. Indeed, of the sum,—approximately \$1,500,—annually expended for schools in Pelham, only about forty-five per cent. is raised by local taxation; the rest is furnished by the State. The churches and the ancient meeting-house look well cared for. Post-boxes for rural free delivery are scattered along the highway all up the weary climb to Pelham centre, linking her people more closely to the outer world. The State Highway Commission has put in a section of excellent gravel road. Finally, an electric railway, with all its civilizing and transforming powers, has invaded

Pelham's borders, has begun to climb her discouraging hill, and already aspires to work its way across Pelham and Prescott to the larger towns beyond. With the State's aid in education and with the replacing of isolation by ready accessibility through free delivery and rapid transit, Pelham finds life better worth living. It will be strange indeed if, in this day of awakening delight in the beauties of nature, the attractions of her wind-swept hills with their splendid views, of her picturesque valleys and clear streams remain undiscovered and unappreciated. Pelham is becoming adjusted and reconciled to the new life, and her persistent attempts to commit suicide have already become an almost forgotten episode.

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