

HORATIO THE ELEPHANT - 1820

Did You Know That...

...Westmoreland did not have good luck with bridges across the Connecticut River? The first bridge from Putney, Vermont, across to Westmoreland was completed in 1812, but in 1813 ice froze to the supporting timbers and the high spring waters lifted the bridge off its foundations. In 1814 the bridge was rebuilt, serving the needs of the people until flooding and winds in February 1824 swept it downstream. Construction was begun on a new bridge about a mile north of the original location in 1828. But on September 5, when two-thirds complete, a heavy rainstorm took that bridge away as well. Ferry service resumed at the lower location, and Britton's Ferry ran until 1930 when the ferry sank and four passengers drowned.

But the most infamous bridge bad luck Westmoreland had occurred Tuesday, September 19, 1820, sometime between 12 and 1 o'clock at night. Horatio the Elephant crashed through the bridge. Thought to be the third elephant in the United States, Horatio was a bull elephant from Poonah, about 100 miles from Bombay. An obvious rarity and oddity in the states, Capt. Abraham Roblin of New York City imported Horatio and began touring him in New England. Those wishing to see Horatio paid 25 cents (half price for children). Twenty-five cents in 1820 is about \$6.40 in 2022. An advertisement appeared in the August 29, 1820, *Woodstock Observer* that this "Great Natural Curiosity" could be seen at Barker's Hotel in the Village Square in Woodstock, Vermont, Wednesday, August 30. Standing between 9 and 10 feet tall and about 30 feet from the tip of his trunk to the end of his tail, Horatio was moved in the middle of the night to prevent people from getting a sneak peek without payment. After all, this was a money making venture.

Others also believed owning an elephant a good investment. On September 5, 1820, the *Woodstock Observer* noted "The large Elephant called Horatio was purchased in this town last week of Mr. Roblin, the former owner, by Messrs. Curtis and Campbell of Windsor, and Messrs. T. & J. Emerson of Norwich, in this county. The price is variously stated from ten to eighteen thousand dollars." That would be at least a quarter million dollars today. Roblin was called back home by "urgent private business." Horatio's new owners began their exhibition tour arriving in Putney, Vermont. But the new owners could not control Horatio, and contacting Roblin, he returned from the city to assist. The news account from the *Keene Sentinel*, reprinted September 26 in the *Woodstock Observer*, best relates what happened next.

"On Tuesday night, between 12 and 1 o'clock, they attempted to pass the Bridge over [the] Connecticut River. Maj. Curtis, one of the owners, and a colored man were

forward, and Capt. Roblin and another colored man, each on horseback, were in the rear of the Elephant. They passed in safety until near the gate on this side, when, in consequence of some delay in opening it, the Elephant stopped between the last pier and the abutment. Maj. Curtis had succeeded in opening the gate, but the Elephant remaining still, Capt. Roblin and the colored man advanced and were in the act of spurring him forward with their whips, when one of the cross-timbers on that side of the Bridge, (which proved to be defective) and into which the plank timbers running length-ways of the Bridge were let suddenly gave way, and the Elephant, the two horses and their riders were precipitated together with the falling timbers and planks a distance of thirty-six feet, on the rocks!

“The two horses were instantly killed. Captain Roblin had his thigh broken, his head very much bruised, and received such injury in the spine, and the whole system, that he lived but about four hours...The colored man had a leg broken only, which was amputated...”

Horatio, weighing between three and four tons, surprisingly survived the fall. The following morning, he was raised to his feet using tackles, but was unable to stand on his own. In the afternoon, he was moved onto an ox-sled and pulled by eight yoke of oxen up the steep bank to a barn in Westmoreland.

On September 21, Captain Roblin’s funeral was held with Rev. Allen Pratt officiating. In attendance was a large contingent of Freemasons for their brother, sympathizers and the curious. Roblin’s family resided in New York City, and with slow communication, probably were not yet aware of his death, thus not making the funeral. Rev. Pratt made his own brick tomb available for Roblin’s burial. There is no record of Roblin’s body ever being relocated.

Then, on September 26, Horatio passed away as a result of injuries sustained in the fall. His skin was removed and mounted for display. *The Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot* advertised May 30, 1821, “The great elephant Horatio” was on exhibit at the Market Museum adjacent to Boston’s Faneuil Hall. It remained there for several years.

RAY BOAS



Great Natural Curiosity.

**To be seen at Barker's Hotel, on
Wednesday, August 30, the largest
ELEPHANT,**

Ever exhibited in this country, called the **HORATIO**, in compliment to the name of the ship which brought him to this country.

He measures in height between 9 and 10 feet, is 20 feet from the nose of his trunk to the end of his tail, and weighs between three and four tons.

The proprietor, in order to gratify the public curiosity in regard to this animal, made a voyage to Bombay on purpose to procure one of the largest kind; which was done at great expense and risk.— This Elephant was obtained at Poonah, 100 miles from Bombay. He had been employed in the wars in India, and was captured from one of the Mahratta chiefs. His immense size and docility excite, at once, the admiration and wonder of the beholder. Although but a short time in training, he is under the most perfect subjection, and will lay down and receive his keeper on his back, at the word of command. Any person may approach him and lay their hands upon him without the least danger.

Admittance 25 cents—Children half price.

Caption