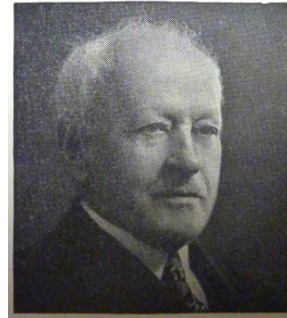


## Zelotes W. Coombs (1865-1946)

Coombs was professor of English at WPI from 1890 and dean emeritus after 1937. He was a past president of the Worcester Historical Society, and active in other civic affairs. He was mentioned or pictured fourteen times in Mildred Tymeson's 1965 history of the institute, *Two Towers: The Story of Worcester Tech 1865-1965*.

His principal contribution to the city and its history consisted of a series of short articles on the city's past under the title of "Jottings," published in a weekly "advertiser" magazine called *This Week in Worcester*. Two sample jottings are included below. *This Week* ran from December 8, 1928 through the end of 1938, and the "jottings" series by the Worcester Historical Museum began almost immediately. Starting in 1931, Coombs penned most of them, eventually totaling 300 or more articles. *This Week in Worcester* can be found in the reference collection in the local history and genealogy section of the Worcester Public Library.



Coombs, ca. 1930s  
Photo used by *This Week in Worcester*

Worcester Telegram, Apr-24-1946

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WORCESTER, MASS., WEDNESDAY MORNING, APRIL 24, 1946

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# PROF. COOMBS IS DEAD AT 80

**Dean Emeritus Served W. P. I. 47 Years; Noted Historian Was Draft Board Member**

Prof. Zelotes W. Coombs, 80, dean emeritus of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, died late last night at his home, 32 Richards street.

Prof. Coombs, who served Worcester Tech for 47 years until his retirement in 1937, had been in good health. Earlier in the day he attended a luncheon meeting in the Sheraton Hotel, and Monday night he was host to the Shakespeare Club at a dinner at the Worcester Club.

Achieved scholar and eminent educator, Prof. Coombs was the first administrative officer in the history of Worcester Tech to receive the title of dean of admissions.

**Came Here in 1890**

He came to Worcester Tech in 1890 as instructor in English and secretary to Dr. Homer Tyler Fuller, then president. He was head of the English department for 27 years, secretary of the faculty for 27 years, and chairman of the committee on admissions for 21.

Worcester Tech bestowed the degree of doctor of science on him in 1943.

**Wrote Many Articles**

He had written many articles, especially in the fields of local history and antiquity. He was also the author of a book on the history of the Worcester Art Society, founded in 1877 and dissolved in 1914.

Because of his knowledge of Worcester County he was in great demand as a speaker.

Prof. Coombs was born in Wrentham, June 8, 1865, son of George W. and Ellen (Wood) Coombs. He received his early education in Worcester public schools. He was a graduate of Amherst College, from which he received the degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts.

He studied for a year at the University of Berlin, Germany, as a student in English and modern languages.

He taught at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and at the University of Virginia before coming to Worcester Tech.

He was active in many civic, educational and religious organizations. With the advent of Selective Service, Prof. Coombs was named to Draft Board 170—Wards 7 and 8—and served as its secretary.

He was a former president of the Worcester Historical Society and chairman of the governing board of Worcester Junior College.

He was a member of the Foreign Policy Association, the Shakespeare Club, the Bay State Historical League, the Hope Cemetery Commission and All Saints Church. For six years, 1908-14, he was a director of the Worcester Free Public Library, and was secretary of the board for four years and president in 1913.

**Famous Scrapbook**

For 47 years he kept a scrapbook; every day he clipped the Worcester Daily Spy, and later, the Worcester Telegram and The Evening Gazette. Alumni members in other cities clipped hometown newspapers and forwarded the clipping to Mr. Coombs. In time the scrapbooks told a graphic story of Worcester Tech's progress.

He leaves two sisters, Misses Georgia and Helen W. Coombs, whom made their home with Prof. Coombs.

Funeral services will be held at All Saints Church at a time to be announced.

**SUCCUMBS**

Prof. Zelotes W. Coombs, dean emeritus of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and prominent educator, who died last night at his home, 32 Richards street.

**'Gift-Packaae'**

Two examples of "Jottings," from *This Week in Worcester*:

## *Historical Society*

By ZELOTES W. COOMBS

# JOTTINGS

### *More About the Norwich Steamboat Line*

AS has been noted in a previous paper, the coming of the Norwich and Worcester Railroad to Worcester in 1840, made this town a prominent center for transportation to New York. The Boston and Providence Railroad had been opened in 1831. Naturally it made connection with a line of steamers plying to New York. Thus an excellent method of reaching the metropolis from Boston and from the eastern part of the state was opened. The line of railroads along the Sound, what we call the Shore Line, was not to be opened for many years to come, and this is true of the link of communication so familiar to us, the line from Springfield to New Haven by way of Hartford. Even before the Boston and Providence road was opened there had been a regular stage coach line in operation from Boston to Providence, there connecting with the line of steamers to New York. Thus for the residents of the eastern part of the state, as noted above, but also for those living at some distance, southern New Hampshire and even farther away, would reach Boston by stage coach, there take the coach to Providence, and so gain the steamer to New York.

For residents in the central part of the state this method was too circuitous. So, with the opening of the Norwich and Worcester Railroad, in 1840, and the inauguration of the line of steamers to New York from Norwich, the southern terminus of the new road, an easy and sure connection was provided, and it became popular at once. A special train ran every evening from Worcester to connect with the steamboat line, this train naturally bearing the name of "The Boat Train." It started from the Foster Street station, which was the Worcester terminus of the Norwich road until the first Union Depot was opened in 1875. This train left the city at about eight o'clock P. M., and moved slowly across the Common to the Junction, for years a most important railway station, in some respects even more important than the Foster Street station. This importance it gained, to a considerable degree, from the fact that the Western Railroad, opened in 1839, crossed the Norwich and Worcester at this point. For years there was an elaborate system of signals operating at the crossing, the signals consisting of huge wicker baskets painted red or green, and operated by ropes and pulleys. Travelers from points to the west of Worcester, on their way to New York, would come by the Western road to the Junction, changing there to the Boat Train. The same was true of travelers from the east, that is, as far as Framingham. They would come into the

Foster Street station, there transferring to the Boat Train.

The Worcester and Nashua Railroad was opened in 1847, and this gave opportunity to residents in the northern part of the county to come to Worcester and there to take the Boat Train on their way to New York. Prior to the opening of the Nashua road, stage coaches running in every direction, brought into Worcester their loads of passengers, many bent on reaching New York and by the new route over the Norwich road and Norwich line of steamers. Thus the railroad and the steamboat line did a profitable business, and many took the trip solely as a pleasant traveling experience. The Boat Train made its way down the valley, picking up passengers at every station, and it stopped at practically every one. For some years after the inauguration of the steamboat line, Norwich was the starting point for New York. Navigation down the treacherous Thames was dangerous, however, and before many years the terminus was located at Allyn's Point, a few miles below Norwich. From Norwich to this place the Boat Train took to the tracks of the New London Northern Railroad. Ultimately New London was made the steamboat terminus, navigation to this point being safe at all seasons of the year. For some years the Norwich line used the tracks of the New London Northern road to New London, on the western side of the river, but later it extended its own tracks to the wharf at New London, its route passing through the Government Reservation, where now is located the Submarine Base, permission being readily granted by the Navy Department, because of possible advantage in a railroad so conveniently located. The Norwich Line steamers left for New York from the New London wharf for many years, until the line was given up in 1934.

The run from Worcester to New London consumed about three hours. Travelers therefore went on board the steamer at about eleven o'clock P. M., and could occupy their staterooms at once. The New London Northern Railroad mentioned above also ran a boat train from up in the western part of the state, and even from Vermont, by way of Palmer, this train connecting with the Norwich Line boat. Thus the Norwich Line was well patronized; it constantly improved the size and quality of its boats, the City of Worcester for years seeming the last word in Long Island Sound speed and luxury. Old-timers lament the passing of this popular line, which operated for nearly a century, and which certainly did much in making Worcester a great traffic center.

## Worcester Historical Society Jottings

U. WALDO CUTLER, *Executive Director*

### The History of Worcester Common

By ZELOTES W. COOMBS

AFTER the General Court had accepted the report of the Commissioners as to the settlement of what was to become Worcester, it delegated to this commission, which was now called the Committee of Settlement, the duty of arranging the further details of apportioning the land, recording titles, etc. This committee met at Cambridge, July 1669, and drew up a report. This report subdivided the land for the Proprietors, set apart a tract for the location of the meeting-house, fifty-acre plot for the minister, and it suggested that "twenty acres should be reserved near the centre for a training field, and to build a school-house upon." A lot of twenty-five acres was appropriated for the maintenance of the school and school-master, and fifty acres for the use of the country."

THIS setting aside of the twenty acres near the centre of the town was the beginning of the Common. It is a question whether the plot ever actually contained the full area specified but encroachments on the reservation began immediately. The first church in the new community had been a rude structure of logs near the present Trumbull Square. In 1719 this log church was replaced by a more elaborate parish church erected on the Common. The new building was used until 1763 when it gave place to a more modern structure on practically the same site. This building, with changes and additions, was in use until 1888, when the new Old South at Main and Wellington Streets was built. During all these years, however, the Old South building occupied a portion of the Common. The City Hall, built in 1824, as the Town Hall occupied another portion. These two buildings were removed to give place to the new City Hall, which was built in 1897.

There were other encroachments on the original tract. Toward the eastern end the burying ground took in about an acre. It was used from 1730 to 1795, and was set off by a substantial stone wall. In 1853, pursuant to an order of the City Council, the stones over the graves were buried beneath the surface of the ground, where, with the graves, they rest today. A plan in the

City Clerk's office indicates the location of each grave, and each inscription was also carefully copied and preserved. In 1723 there was built at the eastern end of the Common a "pound" for the reclaiming of disorderly beasts. This pound was thirty-three feet square and seven feet high. Its successor was on the south side of Shrewsbury Street, a short distance from Washington Square.

IN the centre of the Common was located the cannon-house of the local artillery company, the town hearse-house, and a building for the town hook and ladder truck. There was a small school-house on the southeast corner, built in 1800, and a two-story school-house of brick, adapted for four schools, on the northeast. The Norwich and Worcester Railroad ran across the Common about where the Mall is today, as did the Providence and Worcester road for a few years after its opening in 1847. Later this road built its own depot on Green Street, but the Norwich and Worcester used the Common until the new Union Depot in 1875 brought all the lines under one roof. The two roads mentioned had utilized the Common as a highway leading to the Foster Street station.

Besides these public or semi-public encroachments on the original training ground, various portions of the plot

### *This Week in Worcester*

Aug-30-1932

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were from time to time made over to private individuals for a nominal consideration, or even for no consideration at all. As a result the original tract has shrunk to a little over seven acres. Today the only encroachments are the Col. Timothy Bigelow monument, dedicated in 1860, the Soldiers Monument, dedicated in 1874, and the City Hall. Small though it is in comparison with the original tract it remains a beauty spot and a breathing place in the centre of the city. Since it was set off our splendid park system has come into being. If every effort to make use of some part of the Common for some public purpose had been successful we should today have no Common at all. May we hope that the future will see every such effort defeated as has been the case in the past.