

-Thomas Bramwell Welch-

How many Hotonians, taking a sip of Welch's Grape Juice, know that they are imbibing the product of a prominent Christian temperance advocate, anti-slavery crusader - and Wesleyan Methodist? Thomas Bramwell Welch was born in Glastonbury, England, a site rich in early Christian legend. He came to the United States with his father 1834. He attended public schools in Watertown, New York, part of the up-state New York region known as "The Burned-Over District" (of which Houghton was a part) for its roiling passions of anti-slavery, anti-Masonry, Spiritualism, utopianism, Mormonism, and evangelical Christianity.

At age 17 young Welch joined the "Wesleyan Methodist Connexion" in the same year (1845) in which the denomination itself was founded. From its beginning, as most of us know, the Connexion strongly opposed (1) the "manufacturing, buying, selling, or using intoxicating liquors" and (2) "slaveholding, buying, or selling" of slaves. The young, devoted Welch was soon active in the underground Railway.

But he and his fellow Wesleyans were in difficulties from the start with their communion sacrament. True to their prohibitionist convictions, they used grape juice instead of wine, but the substitute proved unsatisfactory with a foul taste and a propensity soon enough to "go bad." (i.e. ferment).

Still, the saints persevered, the denomination grew, and Welch by age 19 had graduated from Gouverneur Wesleyan Seminary (Methodist Episcopal) and began to serve in several Wesleyan parsonages in NY State. But soon after, his voice failed. No longer able to preach his come-to-Jesus sermons, he turned to medicine and dentistry. By then his photograph shows a beard luxuriant and flowing even by later 19<sup>th</sup> century standards.

In 1865 with a wife and seven children, Welch relocated to Vineland, New Jersey, a small alcohol-free utopian society based on agriculture and progressive thinking. Presumably his “full-quiver” of progeny had made him exempt from the Civil War draft. Four years later he invented a method of pasteurizing grape juice from the Concord grape so that fermentation was halted, more or less permanently.

Welch was right in the middle of the great Age of Reform of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, where as one contemporary put it, “Americans seem to have daggers in their brains” - daggers particularly of anti-slavery and temperance. He persuaded local churches to adopt his "Dr. Welch's Unfermented Wine" for their communion services. It is indicative of the casual standards of the era that there is no evidence that Thomas Welch ever actually graduated from medical school or even attended any school of dentistry. Nonetheless, he became a successful dentist in Vineland. Later, he and his son Charles founded the Welch's Dental Supply Company in Philadelphia and published a dentistry journal.

The Welches began to promote the sale of grape juice just as a sideline, and business was slow until 1890. But in 1893 Welch's Grape Juice Company was incorporated, and the company picked up, appealing to more than just teetotalers. Welch died in the year of his company's incorporation and is buried in Vineland's Siloam Cemetery.

Today Welch Foods Incorporated is part of a fruit and drink conglomerate, headquartered, fittingly, in Concord, Massachusetts. So when Wesleyans and Hotonians gather for a bit of conviviality and fellowship, why not lift a grape-juice toast with “the cup that cheers but does not inebriate,” to their own Thomas Bramwell Welch?

Stanley Sandler '60