

**Naming an Undescribed Dragonfly:  
Williamson's *Williamsonia* and the  
Travails of R. Heber Howe Jr.**



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## R. Heber Howe, Jr.: New England Odonatologist

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Few people have seen or know about the Manual of the Odonata of New England, published privately in multiple parts over a decade by R. Heber Howe, Jr., nearly a century ago. The first section dealing with adult Odonata was published in six parts between 1917 and 1920, with a supplement in 1921, as a memoir of the Thoreau Museum of Natural History of the Middlesex School, a private boys preparatory school in Concord, Massachusetts. Clarence Kennedy's 1920 review of that section of the Manual in Entomological News described it as "the first manual of the Odonata in the United States that covers more than a single state" and "the first manual that seriously attempts to give adequate figures to all of the species listed." Perhaps more importantly and even less known, Howe went on to publish a second section of the Manual in three parts that provided pictorial keys to the larvae of Zygoptera (1920) and Anisoptera (1923 and 1927). He made significant contributions in other areas of natural history (birds and lichens), but among people interested in Odonata, Howe's name is recognized primarily from *Ophiogomphus howei* (Pygmy Snaketail), the little jewel of the Snaketail family named in his honor.

When I moved to the Boston area in 1965, I was aware of Howe's manual and wanted to get a copy of it and reprints of several others of his publications. In particular, I was interested in his 1923 review in *Psyche* on the history and distribution of *Williamsonia lintneri* (Ringed Boghaunter), that elusive, early-spring dragonfly that was believed to be restricted to southern New England and adjacent parts of New York and New Jersey. After two years of looking for that species without success, I thought a visit to the Middlesex School might be helpful. Perhaps Howe had archived his field notes there.

On 9 March 1968, my wife and I went to the Middlesex School in Concord to investigate. No one there had known Howe, who left the school in 1921 and died in 1932, but several knew about him and they let us look through some of their stored material. We found many interesting things. Among them were two old boxes containing memoirs of the Thoreau Museum and in particular about six copies of the Manual published through 1920, but missing the first eight-page part. It seemed likely that the boxes were much as Howe had left them almost 50 years before. I was allowed to borrow, copy, and return any publications I wanted.

The Middlesex teacher I dealt with was Peter Arnold. He was a national park ranger/naturalist in the summers

and was knowledgeable about local natural history. About that time he had published an article in the Massachusetts Audubon magazine on the reptiles and amphibians of the nearby Estabrook Woods in Concord. He seemed a bit puzzled by a biochemistry graduate student's interest in locations where Howe had collected *Somatochlora kennedyi* (Kennedy's Emerald) and *Williamsonia lintneri* in Concord. I remember him asking with some concern if I planned to "grind them up to look at their mitochondria." It was perhaps an indication of why he might have been reluctant to give me copies of Howe's publications.

Nevertheless, I was excited about the discovery and, at a meeting of the Cambridge Entomological Club, told my story to Frank Carpenter, the preeminent Harvard insect paleontologist who, incidentally, had been the doctoral thesis advisor to both E.O. Wilson and Thomas Eisner. He apparently had met Howe many years earlier and wanted to help me obtain a copy of Howe's manual. He wrote a letter to the Middlesex School saying he had heard of these publications at the school and wondered if they would be willing to spare a copy. Harvard's Concord Field Station in Estabrook Woods, associated with the Museum of Comparative Zoology, was adjacent to the Middlesex School, and there was a long-term connection between Harvard and the school. Shortly thereafter, Carpenter received the requested copy which he then gave to me. That year on 10 May, with the help of Howe's publications, I first encountered *Williamsonia lintneri* near Ponkapoag Pond in the Blue Hills south of Boston. Two years later, Rudy Raff and I discovered and subsequently described its nymph from Ponkapoag Bog.

As the result of my search for *Williamsonia lintneri* in the 1960s, I first became aware of R. Heber Howe, Jr. Only recently have I become interested in Howe, the person.

R. (Reginald) Heber Howe, Jr., was born in Quincy, Massachusetts, on 10 April 1875, the second of two children of a well-known Episcopalian minister. He grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, and spent summers at the family home, Weetamoe Farm, in Bristol, Rhode Island. He went to the Noble and Greenough preparatory school in Boston. He then worked for three years at the Plymouth Cordage Company to help finance his college education before entering Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School. At Harvard, he was coxswain on the varsity crew. Immediately after graduation in 1901, he joined the faculty of the newly-opened Middlesex School where he taught natural science for twenty years, founded the Thoreau Museum of

Natural History in 1904, and coached crew. His egalitarian views on sports as recreation, published in the *Education of the Modern Boy* (1925), would resonate strongly with those who decry the current commercialization and emphasis on winning at all cost in school athletics.

While on a sabbatical leave in 1912, Howe completed a doctorate from the Sorbonne in Paris with a thesis on lichens entitled "Classification de la Famille des Usneaceae dans l'Amérique du Nord". Thereafter he was known as "Doc" by his students and colleagues. While working on his manual between 1916 and 1920, Howe published several papers listing dragonflies he found in different regions of New England ranging from the Franconia region of New Hampshire to Chatham on Cape Cod. It was in this town that he built a summer home and could also pursue his interests in sailing and horseback riding. He was a skilled yachtsman and participated in the Barnstable Steeplechase on Cape Cod.

In 1922, during a sabbatical leave studying Odonata larvae at Harvard's Bussey Institute, he was appointed instructor of physical education and director of rowing at Harvard, a position that he left to found the Belmont Hill School in Belmont, Massachusetts in 1923 and become its first headmaster. There he raised funds to build the David Mason Little Memorial Museum in 1925 to display and study specimens collected locally by students at the school. According to a history of the Belmont Hill School published in 1985, Howe was an able leader. He was enthusiastic, friendly, and genuinely concerned about every student. At the Belmont Hill School, he adopted Middlesex School's long tradition whereby each student carved a wooden plaque of his own design to adorn the walls of the school after graduation. The students and faculty were devastated when Howe died of a heart attack on 28 January 1932, at the age of 56.

Howe married Marion Appleton Barker in 1904. They had two children: Susan, born in 1905, and Richard, born in 1915. His daughter Susan married Phillips E. Wilson, a teacher at Belmont Hill School. Wilson described his father-in-law as "about 5-foot-eight, broad shouldered, and well-coordinated" and bald with gold-rimmed glasses. A 1931 Belmont Hill School graduate described Howe as "powerful physically for his size and always exceedingly fit." Howe apparently started each day with a cold shower and expected the same of his students.


Clearly Howe had strong and broad natural history interests. He joined the Boston Society of Natural History in 1901. In his early twenties, he coauthored books on the Birds of Rhode Island (1899) and the Birds of Massachusetts (1901). He described several subspecies of birds,

a Veery from Newfoundland and a Sparrow Hawk from Florida. He also published a significant article in *The Auk* on the breeding behavior of the American Robin in eastern Massachusetts. Later he became a world authority on lichens and, with his wife, published a book, *Common and Conspicuous Lichens of New England* (1908). There is a lichen named in his honor. All of that was before he acquired a passion for dragonflies around 1915.

As Howe describes, in the spring of 1914 he had suggested that one of his students, E.L. Pierson, Jr., make a collection of dragonflies in Concord for the Thoreau Museum. Among the species found was the rare *Williamsonia lintneri*, which had never been reported before in New England. During the following summer Howe collected "almost daily" and "visited practically all of the ponds and river valleys," recording 52 species of dragonflies and damselflies for the town of Concord. Thus, Howe was nearly 40 when he first took an active interest in dragonflies. Despite his late start, Howe, with characteristic intensity, soon became the expert and consultant on Odonata for all of New England, publishing numerous distributional papers. He described *Gomphus alleni* in 1922 that unfortunately turned out to be a previously described species, *Gomphus quadricolor* (Rapids Clubtail). It seems likely that the discovery of that rare species, *Williamsonia lintneri*, on the Middlesex School grounds led him to become especially interested in Odonata. Fortunately, we can follow Howe's developing interest in dragonflies through his correspondence to Philip P. Calvert, preserved in the Ewell Sale Stewart Library archives at Drexel University's Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

The first section of his *Manual of the Odonata of New England* appeared in 1917 only two years after he took an active interest in the group. Howe's years as an educator rather than a professional entomologist certainly influenced this work that he described as "an attempt to supply a field manual of New England Odonata for the use of all classes of students. A pictorial key of genera, and illustrations of the diagnostic characters of the species are given, in the hope that an easy recognition of these insects will lead to a more general study of them." In preparation of the manual, Howe corresponded with and received considerable help from the major odonatologists of his time, exchanged specimens, and, with permission, liberally used figures from others in the Manual, where he acknowledged their help. It appears that some of those serious taxonomists who shared their work were privately bothered by Howe's approach, which seemed less rigorous and catered to amateurs. This displeasure surfaced in 1922 in a dispute involving the description of a new species of *Williamsonia* with E.B. Williamson, a national authority on Odonata at the time. The details of that episode are

recorded in archived correspondence and will be the topic of a subsequent article that Mark O'Brien and I are now researching.

After Howe became the founding headmaster of Belmont Hill School in 1923, he had little time for his natural history work and published little thereafter. He did publish another short section of his manual dealing principally with the larvae of Corduliidae (Emeralds) in late 1927, but never completed it, omitting a section on the larvae of Libellulidae (Skimmers). He maintained his association with the Boston Society of Natural History. In 1930, he gave his collection of over 1,000 adult and 500 larval dragonfly specimens to the Society, which also had his 3500 lichen specimens. These collections later went to Boston University when the Society disbanded in 1946. 

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