

## **Wilbur W. Cox: First President of the Boston Massachusetts Stake**

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When President Gordon B. Hinckley announced that a temple would be built in the Boston area, there were fifty-one such facilities operating in the world. By the time the temple was dedicated in Belmont, Massachusetts, on October 1, 2000, that number had doubled; the Boston temple had the distinction of being the one hundredth operating in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and became available to approximately 116,000 members living in the New England area at that time.<sup>1</sup> Martha Ballantyne, the daughter of the first Boston stake president, Wilbur W. Cox, recalled a time when the Church was held together in that area by four main families—her own, consisting of her father, her mother, herself, and her two sisters; the John Hinckley family; the A. G. Cranney family; and the George Albert Smith Jr. family. All of them lived in Belmont. The transformation from tiny branches to the strong presence of the Church in New England today was due in large measure to the remarkable and visionary efforts of Wilbur W. Cox, who served as the district president and who was called to be the first president of the Boston Stake when it was organized in May 1962.

This forceful servant of the Lord was at one time a less-active member. The story of his return to activity in the Church is a classic example of the Lord intervening and bringing about His will for the growth of His kingdom. President Cox was a powerful man—handsome, intelligent, and forward-looking. While living in Belmont, his wife, Nora, and a family friend, Elizabeth Skolfield Hinckley, were instrumental in reactivating this remarkable man, who became a strong force for good and a legend among members of the

Church in the New England area. Under his leadership the scattered branches of the Church from Cape Cod to New Hampshire emerged, providing the foundation and strength for the Church as it exists in New England today.



*Wilbur W. Cox was born in 1912 in Manti, Utah.*

### **Early Years**

Wilbur Wallace Cox was born in 1912 in Manti, Utah, and was reared in that small community. World War I and the Depression shaped his family's experiences and his early life. The future Sister Cox, Nora (Leonora) Bench, who lived in nearby Fairview, met Wilbur on a blind date; they dated until he went away to the University of Colorado to study engineering. Although the separation interrupted their courtship for a time, they resumed it later and were married June 15, 1937, in the Manti Temple.

Wilbur was what was called in the vernacular a "jack Mormon." His parents were not active in the Church, nor were his grandparents. His maternal grandfather, William Wallace Brown, had been

elected mayor of Manti in 1910 and was of sufficient means to financially support his grandson Wilbur as he attended the University of Colorado. After Wilbur received his degree in engineering, he landed his first job in Salt Lake City, but the Second World War came soon after, and following the attack on Pearl Harbor he enlisted for officer training in the navy. His joining the navy was spurred by his interest in submarines, but, according to his wife, his large stature kept him from pursuing that interest. The cramped quarters of those vessels were just too small to accommodate his more than six-foot frame. Instead, the navy sent him to Bowdoin, a men's college in Brunswick, Maine, and to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At those two schools Wilbur studied radar, which was then a top secret field. From Maine he was sent to Corpus Christi, Texas, where he taught at the naval base until the war ended. In 1946 he was mustered out and went to work in New York City at Ebasco Services. In September 1946 his family joined him at their new home in Douglaston on Long Island. He commuted every day to Manhattan on the Long Island Railroad. Although Brother Cox remained inactive in the Church, his wife took their two daughters, Karen and Martha, to every meeting by herself. A third daughter, Susan, was born in 1946. Wilbur was unable to bless or baptize his daughters.

### **Return to Activity**

In 1951 he took a job in Boston as an executive of Arrow Mutual Liability Insurance, a workmen's compensation company. The family settled in Belmont, Massachusetts, where Wilbur became prominent in the community and where his journey toward his outstanding contribution to the Church in that area began. Of her father's activation, Wilbur's daughter Martha Cox Ballantyne wrote:

“Every one [of the new converts to the Church] needs three things: a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing with ‘the good word of God’ (Moroni 6:4).”

My father Wilbur W. Cox, called as the first president of the Boston Stake, regained his faith and became a leader in the Church because of these “three things,” provided to him, I believe, by the hand of God.



*Wilbur with his wife, Nora, and their two daughters, Martha and Karen.  
Photo taken while Wilbur was a naval officer in Corpus Christi, Texas.*

### ***A Friend***

My parents moved from New York City to Belmont in 1950. My father had not been active in the Church since my parents' marriage in the Manti Temple, but my mother, Nora Cox, had always accepted whatever callings came to her, and she had many friends in the church. About 1951, she was called as Relief Society president of the Cambridge Branch. Her Relief Society "theology leader" [as that position was called in those days] was Elizabeth S. Hinckley, Mrs. John N. Hinckley. The Hinckleys, who lived at 75 Orchard Street in Belmont, became our family's best friends, sharing birthday parties, Sunday

evening meals, and holidays at S. Smith Stevens' New Hampshire farm. "Aunt Betty," as we called her, had served a mission under B. H. Roberts and was a church history scholar and what we now call a scriptorian. She had a quick, succinct, and faith-sustaining rebuttal to every doubt my father would express. Never did the Hinckleys criticize my father's smoking, his drinking, his swearing. John and Betty gathered our family in the warm, enveloping arms of their love, our true friends.

### ***A Responsibility***

My father called himself "the third counselor" (in the Cambridge Branch Relief Society Presidency) and indeed participated in my mother's Relief Society assignment: the branch president, Ira A. Terry, accepted comments from "Brother Cox" (he always called everyone "Brother or Sister") during planning meetings at our home, held there because there was no meetinghouse. One Saturday afternoon in about 1954 President Terry came to our house. When I answered the door, I said, "President Terry, Mother is not here." He replied, "I don't want to see your mother. I need to speak with your father." President Terry did speak with my father. He said, "Brother Cox, the Lord wants you to give up your bad habits and serve as Sunday School superintendent of the Cambridge Branch." Then he left. My father kept the Word of Wisdom from that moment. Immediately he began leadership of the Sunday School, then the Cambridge Ward Building Committee, and was soon called as branch president. Later he became district president, Boston Stake president, president of the California Central Mission, patriarch, president of the Sanpete Stake, and president of the Manti Temple. His years of service in the church began when an inspired and humble branch president issued a call, "a responsibility."

### ***Nourishing with "the Good Word of God"***

My father was first nourished with the Book of Mormon, my mother's copy, which still falls open to Mosiah 27:[14:] "Behold, the Lord hath heard the prayers of his people, and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father; for he has prayed with much faith concerning thee that *thou mightest be brought to the knowledge of the truth . . .*" [italics added]. Later he became fascinated by King Benjamin and would read aloud from Mosiah 4. My father's assignments as priesthood leader caused him to instruct his brethren in the oath and covenant of the Priesthood, D. and C. Section 84. As temple president he memorized the sealing ceremonies, pronouncing revealed holy ordinances by apostolic authority. The "good word of God" compelled my father throughout his years of leadership in Boston and beyond.<sup>2</sup>



*Wilbur Cox was the first stake president of the Boston Massachusetts Stake (1962). He is pictured here with his counselors, Glen Wade and Ward Low.*

### **Friendships with Church Leaders**

Russell M. Nelson, who would later serve in the Quorum of the Twelve, spent one year in Boston in the early 1950s. In his autobiography, *From Heart to Heart*, he describes the Church in that area during that time and recalls the remarkable activation and prominence of Brother Cox and his family:

Our Church meetings were held in a home across the street from the Longfellow House on Brattle Street. We worked hard to keep it looking nice. We labored, too, in plays, banquets, and other fundraising activities, in order that one day there might be a chapel there. Our Church assignments were to the Relief Society presidency of the branch for Dantzel [Elder Nelson's wife] and to the position of secretary of the adult Aaronic Priesthood in the branch for me. The spiritual welfare of a number of wonderful men became my concern, including Wilbur W. Cox, the husband of the branch Relief Society president, Nora, with whom Dantzel was associated.

Evenings in the home of Wilbur Cox were special. Getting to know this wonderful man and his gracious wife was such an enriching experience. He had developed quite a hobby with his ham radio interests. . . . During the course of the year, Brother Cox seemed to be losing some of his apathy toward the Church and gradually became more and more active. In later years, Brother Cox rose to be one of the great leaders in the Church. . . . This was one of the many fast friendships that we enjoyed in Boston.<sup>3</sup>

An article on the Church's Web site stated, "The roster of those who either hailed from New England or have served there in prominent capacities reads like a Who's Who of Church leadership."<sup>4</sup> Among the countless other leaders who came to New England during what might be called the Cox era were Boyd K. Packer, L. Tom Perry, Robert D. Hales, and Henry B. Eyring (Apostles), Henry D. Taylor (Seventy), Merrill J. Bateman (Seventy and former BYU president), Loren C. Dunn (Seventy), James O. Mason (Seventy), Robert Wood (Seventy); Elaine Jack (former general president of the Relief Society), Richard Bushman (an eminent scholar), and Steven Covey (internationally known motivational speaker and author). While these names are familiar to many members of the Church, there are numerous other less known but extremely talented Latter-day Saints, holding positions of leadership all over the Church, who at a formative time in their lives came under the pervasive influence of Wilbur Cox as he served so dynamically for many years.

When Elder Boyd K. Packer was assigned to serve as president of the New England Mission in August 1965, the Packers and the Coxes hit it off immediately. Wilbur and President Packer had much in common and became fast friends. Both were dedicated to moving the work of the Church forward in a major way, and both made bold decisions. They expected a great deal of the members in terms of support and immediate implementation of their visionary plans. President Packer admired the Coxes greatly and was inspired by Sister Cox's role in bringing her husband back into Church activity. In his addresses, Elder Packer often referred to traveling throughout the Church and meeting faithful women who had labored and prayed for years that their husbands would become active in the Church and had finally realized that great blessing. He would then sermonize, "You must never, NEVER give up, not in



*Wilbur and his wife, Nora, with their three daughters, Martha, Karen, and Susan. The photo was taken while Wilbur served as president of the California Central Mission.*

this world nor the next!” Sister Cox provided a dramatic example of this persistence.

When the Coxes first arrived in Cambridge, there were two houses on the property the Church owned on Brattle Street and Longfellow Park, just across the road from the home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The Church had managed to purchase this valuable historic property through the instrumentality of Elder Levi Edgar Young, a mission president in the early 1920s. The branch met in one house, and missionaries and the mission president lived in the other. In order to begin building a chapel on that site, the meetinghouse was demolished and the mission home was moved around the corner to 15 Hawthorn Street. The house on Hawthorn became the mission home where the Packers lived as well as the Truman Madsen family, the Paul H. Dunn family (First

Quorum of the Seventy), the John R. Clarke family (later president of Ricks College), and many other mission presidents and their families. During construction of the meetinghouse (which is still in use), the branch met in the Harvard Divinity School Chapel, a privilege arranged by George Albert Smith Jr., then a professor at the Harvard Business School.

Among Sister Ballantyne's memories of this time is the recollection of the great effort the Saints made to complete the Cambridge chapel, which was dedicated in 1956. She remembers Hank Taylor, a son of Elder Henry D. Taylor, helping with the finishing touches. Sister Taylor worked right along with her husband and other members of the branch, though she was pregnant and should not have been near the fumes emanating from the paint and stain. The members worked day and night to get the chapel ready in time to be dedicated by President David O. McKay, who was passing through New England on his way home from dedicating the Swiss Temple and, incidentally, trying to unravel the terrible missionary apostasy in France. The day before his arrival, branch members worked around the clock setting out foundation plantings and sod. By dawn everything was finished, and the dedication went on as planned.

### **An Energetic Leader**

President Cox exhibited a very unusual leadership style: his charisma combined with his innovative ideas to bring about much progress. Because of his talent and forceful personality, the Brethren in Salt Lake City gave him a lot of latitude to do things as he saw fit. There was not as much centralization and standardization in the Church administration then as there is today; this climate suited Brother Cox's style well. He was an accomplisher and in record time got the buildings he wanted in Massachusetts—Cambridge, Fort Devens, Billerica, Foxboro, and Weston. His power and intelligence and efficiency swept away objections and pettiness. He motivated everyone to work together and was no respecter of persons. Those who held prestigious career positions or were noted scholars worked right alongside those without education—Wilbur Cox was not a snob.

One of President Cox's practices was to drive his Volkswagen all over the huge stake area from New Hampshire to the Cape, usually with lanky Henry B. (Hal) Eyring, a future Apostle, folded up in the passenger seat and Bob Wood or Gordon Williams in the back. He often held meetings in the car. Elder Eyring in a recent *Ensign* article made mention of these trips he took with then district president Wilbur Cox. Concerning the calling the Lord gave him through President Cox, Elder Eyring said: "[My calling] took me across the hills of New England from the early hours of Sunday to late in the evening. I visited the tiny branches and the scattered Latter-day Saints from Newport and Cape Cod on the south to Worcester and Fort Devens on the west and Lynn and Georgetown on the north. I realize that those names mean more to me than they do to you. For me the words bring back the joy of going to those places."<sup>5</sup> It is remarkable that Elder Eyring has such fond memories of the trips, considering how exhausting they were. President Cox would make these extensive visits all day long, week after week, traveling hundreds of miles, and come home having completely worn out the men who accompanied him. Sister Cox said she would feed them upon their return, and they would be so tired that they would hardly be able to speak. Despite their fatigue, the sweeping trips through the New England area transformed the Church and transformed the men President Cox took with him. They drew from his incredible brilliance and energy and commitment to the Church and became visionary Church leaders themselves—from bishops and stake presidents to Seventies and Apostles.

Elder Eyring and his cousin Robert Edwards (both nephews of Camilla Eyring Kimball) were in Cambridge when their uncle Elder Spencer W. Kimball came and spoke forcefully about young men's duty to get married. They were single at the time but followed his counsel soon after. Wilbur Cox was the leaven in the loaf for these young men and many others like them. His daughter commented that her father was both a simple and an extremely complex person. She also remembered that he was very close to Elders Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, and Gordon B. Hinckley when they were new Apostles.

Following retirement from his profession, Wilbur Cox was called in 1968 to preside over the California Central Mission, headquar-



*President and Sister Cox returned to Sanpete County, where they served as president and matron of the Manti Temple.*

tered in Oakland. After three years of service in that capacity, the Coxes returned to their native soil, Sanpete County, Utah, where Wilbur became president and later patriarch of the Sanpete Stake. In 1978 President Spencer W. Kimball called Brother and Sister Cox to serve as president and matron of the Manti Temple. During the years the temple was closed for renovations, President Cox continued as interim president. In his book *The Manti Temple*, Victor

J. Rasmussen reported the following concerning Wilbur Cox: “He played a major role through the almost four years of renovation. Great appreciation is expressed to President Cox, who was on the job every day, making decisions, directing and making sure that what was planned was done properly.”<sup>6</sup>

President Cox was known for being able to cut through the red tape at the Church Office Building and would not be put off by anyone. While some of those responsible for the renovations wanted to gut the Manti Temple (as was done to the Logan Temple during its remodeling), President Cox was persistent in his desire to preserve the labors of his pioneer ancestors, some of whom had lived in tents, sacrificing the material comfort of their own lives while they built the temple. As a result of his efforts, the original interior of the temple was left intact as much as possible, a remarkable and lasting contribution.

In 1994, nine years after his release as temple president, Wilbur Cox passed away in his sleep at the age of eighty-two. He was eulogized at his funeral by several of the General Authorities who knew and respected him, including President Boyd K. Packer and Elder Henry B. Eyring.

The following remarks by Wilbur W. Cox at the formation of the Boston Massachusetts Stake underscore his powerful testimony:

Wonderful elders and wonderful sisters, over the eleven years that my dear wife referred to, you and those who have gone before you, have been a rich and wonderful part of our lives. Before we came to New England, we didn't know what a blessing it was to live in the mission field. And now we do, and the fact that a stake has been formed shall not change that feature of it, either in the stake or in our lives. This stake will not have an isolationist policy. The stake will function to help you brethren, to help you with your contacts, to help you with your converts, and to help those converts help other converts. Elder Harrop, I want to have an early meeting with you to see if we can't facilitate this in the Boston stake.

Brethren and sisters, the gospel of Jesus Christ is our most priceless possession. It is the way to eternal progression and exaltation, and our responsibility as servants of the Lord is to defend this faith in those who are members and bring the gospel to those who are not, that everyone in the world who is willing to receive this gospel will have an opportunity to receive the gospel, so that they too may have a right to eternal progression and exaltation.

I love the gospel of Jesus Christ. I firmly believe without question, in the divinity of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the fact that he restored this gospel in this land in this last dispensation of time. Let us make it the beacon light of our lives, and in our efforts, make it the beacon light in the lives of all those who will listen to it. I offer you this humble testimony in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“History of the Church in Massachusetts,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints New Releases, March 25, 2002, [www.lds.org/media/newsrelease/extra/display/0,6025,192-1-153-4,00.html](http://www.lds.org/media/newsrelease/extra/display/0,6025,192-1-153-4,00.html).

<sup>2</sup>Martha Cox Ballantyne, untitled personal account in her possession; original punctuation used.

<sup>3</sup>Russell Marion Nelson, *From Heart to Heart* (Salt Lake City: Quality, 1979), 86.

<sup>4</sup>“History of the Church in Massachusetts.”

<sup>5</sup>Henry B. Eyring, “Education for Real Life,” *Ensign*, October 2002, 20.

<sup>6</sup>Victor J. Rasmussen, *The Manti Temple* (Manti, UT: Manti Temple Centennial Committee, 1988), 76.

<sup>7</sup>The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, New England Mission, “Excerpts of addresses delivered at the organization of the Boston Stake in Cambridge, Mass., Sunday evening, May 20, 1962,” L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.