Although it is almost fifty years since Howe's death, no really satisfactory biography of him has been written. In an attempt to remedy this situation, at least partially, this lecture reviews briefly his family background, his personal life and his professional career. Special attention has been given to relating Howe as a person to his accomplishments as a metallurgist.

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Gensamer has aptly described Howe as an intellectual who, insofar as circumstances permitted, lived the life of an intellectual. This trait was a direct consequence of his heritage for he came from a family of intellectual activists who were always promoting a variety of social reforms. Had they lived today, I am
certain that their names would be as much in the news as they were a hundred years or more ago. As a small indication of this, and one with a remarkably contemporary flavor, when President Polk visited Boston in 1847, Howe’s mother wrote in her journal: “The President has just made a visit here; he was coolly but civilly received. His whole course has been very unpopular in Massachusetts and nobody wanted to see the man who brought this cursed Mexican War upon us. I, of course, did not trouble myself to go.”

Since his family background did have such an influence on Howe, it is worthwhile to review some salient features of it. His father, Samuel Gridley Howe, was a typical product of his times. As one of his biographers, Harold Schwartz, puts it: “He lived in an age when science directed reason and showed the way to a better life for all. Progress was the watchword and of its inevitability there was no doubt… Integrity and morality were the secret. Bolster them with firmness and a refusal to compromise with evil and you have it.”

He was born in Boston in 1801 into an old New England family who were, in those days, ardent Jeffersonians. When the time came for him to go to college, his father ruled out Harvard because it was too strongly Federalist—so he was sent to Brown. There he was exposed to the traditional classic curriculum then in vogue in American universities, which he found very unattractive. In modern jargon, his studies seemed to him to be “irrelevant” and they failed to motivate him to do anything beyond making mischief. He became an academic underachiever but an outstanding disciplinary problem, and when he graduated in 1821, there was certainly no indication that he was to become the most famous member of his class.

In the Fall of 1821, he entered Harvard Medical School and promptly grew more serious about his studies, becoming an expert dissector and a competent anatomist. Yet when he finished Harvard in 1824, the prospect of a career in medicine gave him little satisfaction.

What did appeal to his hot-blooded nature was to aid the Greeks who were then in revolt against the Turks. This revolution had aroused considerable sympathy in the United States and in Europe and Howe had been tempted to join it when it first broke out, but his father would not allow him to leave his studies. Now he was not to be denied, especially since the year before, Lord Byron had gone to Greece and had added an extra touch of glamour to what was widely viewed as a noble effort to free the cradle of Western civilization from the infidel. So, to the great dismay of his family, he sailed for Greece in November, 1824.

This is not the place to describe in detail his many and varied contributions to the Greek cause which ranged from the practice of medicine and the administration of refugee camps to actual combat. Howe was, however, quickly disillusioned by the depraved condition of the Greeks after long years of Turkish oppression, and at the unbelievable savagery of the fighting on both sides. Yet he stayed on for six years, and when he returned to the United States in 1831 he brought with him a worldwide reputation for his achievements in Greece.

Now, at the age of thirty, he was again faced with the problem of what to do with his life. He was, by this time, quite certain that he did not want to practice medicine, but his training and experience had prepared him for little else. He tried to obtain an overseas position with the United States Government, but failed. He tried to manage a newspaper but again failed. Then came an opportunity which fired his imagination. He received an offer to become Director of a recently incorporated, though not yet established, asylum for the blind in Boston. He accepted eagerly and, with characteristic enthusiasm, set off in September 1831, to study European methods for teaching the blind.

In Europe, the reputation he had won in the Greek revolution opened many doors to him, but it also led to one of the most harrowing experiences of his life. The year before, there had been an abortive uprising in Poland and many of the rebels, who had fled to Prussia, were suffering great privations. Their suffering led to efforts in the United States to raise funds for their relief, the disbursal of which was in the hands of an American Committee in Paris. This Committee, under the Chairmanship of General Lafayette, met weekly at the home of James Fenimore Cooper. When Howe arrived in Paris on his way to Berlin, Lafayette asked him to deliver some money to several refugee camps on the way. This Howe agreed to do—and did. But immediately upon his arrival in Berlin, he was secretly arrested and thrown into prison. There he was kept in solitary confinement for some weeks before he was finally deported to France.

On his return to Boston, he plunged into the business of setting up the asylum, and, in August, 1832, he formally opened the establishment that was later to be called the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind. Under Howe’s energetic guidance, the school increased rapidly in size, in effectiveness, and in fame.

Five years later, he undertook a task, the success of which was probably the greatest achievement of his life. This was the rehabilitation of the deaf and blind girl, Laura Bridgman. She was eight years old when the Doctor began to work with her and the prevailing opinion was that such children were hopeless idiots. But Howe disagreed and by much patient, and often inspired work, he at last succeeded in teaching her to communicate. The news that for the first time a deaf-blind child was being educated swept the world and made Howe doubly famous. And, curiously, it was Laura Bridgman who was indirectly responsible for Howe’s meeting his future wife, Julia Ward.

Julia Ward Howe is best known today as the author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic but she was, in fact, one of the most active and versatile women of her day. She wrote poetry and plays, she lectured on subjects ranging from German philosophy to the abolition of slavery, she preached from Unitarian pulpits, and she was one of the organizers of the American Woman Suffrage Association. She was the only woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters until 1933. In addition, she was personally charming, had a puckish sense of humor, was a talented musician, and an accomplished linguist.

The best biography of her, that published by three of her daughters, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1917, and was dedicated to their brother, Henry Marion Howe.