

# 100 year Organ enjoyed

By Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD - Those who hear the tones floating from the 110-year-old organ into the sanctuary of the First Parish meeting house on Westford Common are charmed by the quality of its harmonic reproductions.

In programs offered through musicals in the "Musick in the Meeting House" series, the organ blends nicely with the new grand piano and an assortment of other instruments.

Rev. George E. Downey, now pastor for the past 13 years of the town's original parish, says the organ was designed to support hymn-singing in congregational worship and is "ideally voiced and balanced."

So true is the assertion that four years ago the Organ Historical Society chose to present a concert on the instrument. Several members performed and the program, recorded for classical music broadcasting, was considered a success.

The organ was built by J. H. Willcox & Co. of Cambridge. Called a "tracker," the word described the manner in which a console key, when pressed, by linkage would open the valve at the base of a specific pipe. This allowed air under pressure to produce the desired note.

## Only Two Left

Willcox, an organist at the famed old Boston Music Hall, worked as an organ builder before starting his own shop. The Westford instrument was Opus Number 37, the older of only two of his organs still in existence, the other being on Cape Cod. A third was destroyed by a church fire in Lowell three years ago.

After Willcox and his craftsmen completed the installation, a hand-written note placed in a book the congregation showed that \$2,400 was paid on July 29, 1871.

Until that time, congregational singing was a capella, supported by a bass viol, according to Pastor Downey. As the organ replaced the viol, the latter was bid off at auction for 75¢ to Samuel Hartwell, Jr.

Mary E. Richardson, at the age of 24, became the church's first organist. Records show she was paid \$50 for the year, half in



Westford's historic First Parish meeting house while landmarking the years of town history.

(Photo by Logan O'Connor)

February and the balance in August. She was a graduate of the Academy and an accomplished musician. Three years later, she married Sherman H. Fletcher, one of the town's most distinguished citizens.

Thomas Jenkins is the first to appear in the records as a paid organ blower. At the organist's signal (usually the setting of stops) the "blow boy" would

begin pumping a handle to activate huge bellows. This provided air storage for the command of his unseen player at the console.

The pumper was hidden in a narrow chamber in the bowels of the organ but by peaking through the display pipes in the front of the sanctuary he had a commanding view of the worshippers. Jenkins was paid \$16.50 for the year 1874.

The end of the line of organ pumpers came when electricity provided a method of filling the bellows mechanically.

## Church Remodeled

The purchase of an organ came with a substantial remodeling and redecorating effort to the church edifice by the congregation in a five-year span from 1867.

Continued on page 2