

A look back to a simpler time in Westford

By Gordon B. Seavey

At the turn of the century, Westford Academy, believe it or not, had sufficiently strong baseball and football teams to meet with Lowell High and Manchester (N.H.) High.

According to the school paper, *The Academy Observer* (price five cents) in 1899: "When the baseball season opened April 19, Westford won the first five games. When we met Lowell High we were obliged to record a defeat. The game was hard fought, the Westfords (no Grey Ghosts then) holding the lead until the last inning, when, by what we considered a one-sided decision of the umpire, the Lowells managed to win. Kill that ump!"

Perhaps it was because full back Edward Fisher dislocated his shoulder while trying to rush the whole Manchester team for a touchdown, the paper reported, that the final score of that conflict was not given.

Coach at the time was George A. Goode, a smallish man with a goatee, who preferred sports to serious work, wore a brown derby to impress the ladies and produced winning teams.

Arsonist in town?

Several large and suspicious fires taxed the local volunteer fire department in 1920. The most notable conflagration was that of the huge buildings of the Daniel Gage Company's complex at Forge Pond on the spot now occupied by the town swimming beach.

Constructed of rough sawed pine boards and a tarred roof, it was quickly consumed by fire in August. The buildings were valued at \$75,000 and the remaining ice which melted into huge lumps was figured at \$36,000. Insurance coverage was \$30,500, showing a staggering loss of \$80,500 — a terrific sum in those days. 65 years ago.

Rebuilt, although on a lesser scale, it burned in the midsummer of 1931. Thus the Forge Pond ice business finally went down the drain.

And then the town farm barn burned, valued at \$6,000 and its contents at \$4,300, on Dec. 6. This, too, was a suspicious fire, and the town carried its own insurance!

A day later, Jack Healy's "old home" went up in smoke. It was valued at \$1,300 and the return on insurance was only \$250.

What is a berry house? The year 1920 was nearing the end of the berry growing business in Westford. The growers had shacks in the area of the "berry-patches" where the little baskets of picked fruit were assembled and stored to keep them out of the sun until they were packed at the end of the day for the Boston Market.

Perley Wright, who lived across from the town hall, was another victim of fire this year. As he had stopped growing berries in preference to trucking them to Boston in his Reo Speedwagon, local boys (they say) had

targeted his abandoned berry house for a Fourth of July prank. In the light of the ensuing conflagration, several dark figures were observed against the flames — but none were ever really identified. Police Chief John Sullivan's report was very meagre.

Ahead of his time

The man who later was called the "Father of Civil Engineering in America" was educated in part at Westford Academy. His name, Loammi Baldwin, who entered the local school in 1795 from Woburn. He probably lived with a Westford family as a boarding student.

As many out-of-town students did, Baldwin prepared himself for Harvard College, which he entered in 1800. He furthered his engineering studies in England.

A remarkable thing about Baldwin was the fact that he proposed the piercing of the Green Mountain range near Adams, MA, with a tunnel to facilitate

transportation to the west. It wasn't until the late 1870's that the famous Hoosac Tunnel was drilled for 4 1/4 miles in almost the exact spot he had selected.

This is the longest tunnel of its kind in the world.

Baldwin was also noted in Massachusetts as building the fortification works to protect Boston Harbor, the Boston Mill Dam and the docks of Charlestown and Norfolk, VA. Of particular interest in this area, Baldwin's father, with no formal training, constructed the Middlesex Canal. Also, the Baldwin name is commemorated in the Baldwin apple, a variety he discovered growing wild while surveying in Wilmington and grafted on to his own trees. The Baldwin apple was one of the best late season apples, grown in great numbers in Westford and kept well in cool cellars for much of the winter. Remember, mechanical refrigeration was unknown then.