



A Spirited But Difficult

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — In the coming months, America will unfold its observance of the founding of the country — the 200th anniversary. Committees in various Middlesex towns and cities quietly have been making plans for this Bicentennial observance.

The plans are taking various forms. They could be plays, pageants, re-enactment of military skirmishes and battles. They could be the rehabilitation of ancient landmarks, the restoration of pre-Revolutionary buildings.

As many of the seeds for this founding were sown right in this area, let's roll back time to at least a couple of centuries. We must dig into old records and visit old cemeteries, and read old histories.

This is where we catch an inkling of what country living was like prior to the American Revolution.

First Concern

The immediate needs of the new settlers were to provide necessities of human existence... food, clothing and shelter. Their chief concern, at least in most of Middlesex County, was to till the soil. It was no easy task, with crude tools, to cut down the forests, dig out or plant among the stumps, remove the small boulders, fence in and prepare the ground for planting.

Their homes were for protection, their food plain, their garments homespun on hand-looms and sewed at home. Cattle, horses, swine and sheep were a must, and they grazed where they could. Homesteaders erected picket fences around their front yards to keep these animals out, not in! A pair or two of oxen were needed to haul loads of crude homemade carts in the summer, on sleds in the winter.

Much time and tax money went to building and maintaining the gravel roads which criss-crossed the land from farm house to farm house, and often these were lined on both sides with stone walls. These walls made good fences and also was a place to get rid of the rocks.

The more important roads ran from town to town, and particularly toward the trading ports of Boston and Salem. Many of these roads remain in their original location. Today, some are identified with Massachusetts route numbers!

Progress Slow

Things moved slowly as these were the years of establishing a new country. Communication was slow and difficult. People moved about mostly on horseback or walking. There was little reading material and post riders carried communications at uncertain intervals.

The city folk were interested in their way of life: Shipping, manufacturing, merchandising. The country folk worked long hours growing vegetables, wheat, rye, barley and corn. They had orchards of apples, pears and peaches. A profitable income came from cutting the virgin forests, mostly white pine, and sawing the timber into lumber in neighborhood, water-powered saw mills. Much of this was shipped to England. And from the city the country people got manufactured goods, sugar, molasses and rum in return. But they made their own hard cider.

Rum was common. It was part of the festivities surrounding the erection of a barn, a house and even a new meetinghouse on the village green. In times of deaths, births and weddings it was served freely. It might be called an all-occasion drink.

The Sabbath began at three o'clock on Saturday afternoon and lasted until sundown on Sunday. The official state church in Massachusetts was Congregational and the early meetinghouse served not only as a church but a gathering place for public and town meetings.

Long Sundays

Sunday services required a full day's attendance. Foot-warmers were the only heat (unless the preacher had a fiery sermon) in the rather plain buildings. During the noontime break, many would gather at a nearby tavern for lunch, the women and children in one room, the men in another. This was the big social hour of the week. The men would sneak a drink or two of rum, probably heated over the fireplace in cold weather.

It has been reported from Carlisle when the Rev. Paul Litchfield was seen one day to approach a home on a pastoral visit, the mistress of the house found the "cupboard bare of rum." As the parson entered by the front, a small boy scooted out the back door to the tavern to fetch a pitcher of rum. This was dutifully served before the visit ended. It is also reported that the pastor found it necessary to limit his daily pastoral calls.

A Good Example

To pin-point pre-revolutionary life, we would turn to a single community as a proper example. Therefore, we will make it Westford, which received its charter half a century before the fateful events of April 19, 1775. Here are the reasons:

First, as a native son, I have lived with generations of descendants of the early settlers, most of whom still show with pride their strong independence and traits of their forebears. They are hard working, thrifty, generous and solid. Their family names indicate that they came from sturdy English stock. To mention a few: Prescott, Hildreth, Wright, Abbot, Keyes, Fletcher and Spalding.

Antiques

Secondly, I have seen around various homes and particularly in attics many articles of historic value which lend themselves to describing life here two centuries ago.

A good example is a maple desk proudly shown by Mrs. Luella Prescott Colling, 88, of Forge Village. It came down through the family from her great-great grandfather, Jonas Prescott, who distinguished himself at Bunker Hill.

Thirdly, many old Westford records have been saved. The important ones have been faithfully copied in an outstanding and valuable town history. Its author was the pastor of the Congregational Church, the Rev. Edwin R. Hodgman, and a wise choice.

It was sponsored by a small group which called themselves the Westford Town History Association in 1879; its purpose to publish an authentic local history.

The community project called for 600 copies to sell for \$2. It was finally published in 1883. But the author's pay of \$400 for this monumental task was meagre.

The Beginnings

Westford was set aside from the mother town of Chelmsford in 1729... but the beginnings of Chelmsford came in 1652 when some citizens from Concord and Woburn asked to examine a tract of land on the "other side of Concord River." As the early settlers came to Chelmsford, it was natural

that some of them found a home in the western part of the new town. This was to be set aside seventy-years later as the Town of Westford.

Tadmuck Hill, near the geographical center of the 19,000 acres belonging to the new Westford, was chosen for the village green. It also has a commanding view in all directions. Here they already had built a meetinghouse. Probably the first person to erect a dwelling on the Hill was Arthur Crouch. The date was about 1680.

But the earliest settler in what is now Westford was probably Solomon Keyes. He had a grant of land in 1664 on the north side of Frances Hill, near Chamberlin's Corner, in the east part of the town. He was married to Frances Grant of his native town of Newbury in 1653. Do you see the connection of name of Frances Hill and that of his wife?

Old Map

A map of Westford dated 1730 shows that the homes were widely scattered. The settlers had spread out, picking the choice lands for farming... and there was plenty of acreage then. Availability of water was a necessary factor in locating a new homestead.

A time of incorporation, only 78 men owned real estate. There were probably no more than one hundred families in the infant town.

So sparsely settled was the Center at the time, as indicated on this map, that not a single dwelling stood between the common and the parsonage. This was located somewhere opposite the Roudenbush School on Main Street.

The Church

The church and the community were a single unit. The early ecclesiastical history of Westford is described in great detail by Hodgman, who you will recall was a minister. By 1727, two years before incorporation, a committee "chose for a minister to settle with us" the Reverend Willard Hall.

A native of Medford where he was born in 1703, he was graduated from Harvard College in 1722. His wife was Abigail Cotton of Portsmouth, N.H. As common in those days, they had a large family: eleven children, four sons and seven daughters.

It is regrettable that there are no descriptions of any length of the physical appearances of these Colonists, nor sketches nor silhouettes. Hodgman did write that Hall "united the offices of pastor and physician, thus, in the condition of society at the time, greatly extending his influence and usefulness. He was a strenuous supporter of education for all."

As was usual in those days, Mr. Hall became the proprietor of a small farm, which apparently stretched from the meetinghouse down Main Street to the top of Depot Street hill. Hodgman reports that he was a good farmer and cultivated with great care and success.

With eleven children, a "sideline" was no doubt a necessity. When Mr. Hall answered the "call" he was a young man of 24. The inhabitants voted that his "salary" was to be eighty pounds for the first year and then to "rise forty shillings per year till it comes to a hundred pounds per year."

Some three years later, he seems to have complained of this condition as vague and unsatisfactory. The parish explained that what they mean by money was "silver" at sixteen shillings per ounce. "We shall hear more about Reverend Hall."

Early Meetinghouse

The first meeting house had been started in 1724 but not completed for several years. It stood near the site of the present First Church, the third meetinghouse.

The ministry of Mr. Hall extended for 48 years but there were some troublesome times during this period. For example, in 1739 he entered a complaint regarding his salary and had to appeal to the courts for redress. What exactly happened is not recorded but Hodgman writes "apparently it did not produce, as it evidently did not spring from, any exasperated or hostile feeling."

By 1774, the town voted "to be in some preparation for settling another minister with Mr. Hall." This was the first intimation "that appears" of dissatisfaction with his services, either on account of the infirmities of age, or any other cause. He was then 71 years old.

New Preachers

Several ministers supplied the pulpit during this brief period and the townspeople were on the alert to select a new pastor. Hall apparently went along with the idea for he told the selectmen "to go to the College (i.e., Harvard, where most of the early ministers were trained) and hire some likely young man to come and preach for them."

Finally Rev. Joseph Thaxter of Hingham was found acceptable to the people for he preached in the town for more than a year on a trial basis. He received a call to settle, both from the church and the town, but he declined.

Along with the Minutemen of Westford, Thaxter was present at the fight at Concord Bridge and could have been considered as one of the first chaplains of the new Continental Army. On January 23, 1776, he was elected to that post and served in the regiment of which Westford's John Robinson was colonel.

A story goes that while in Westford, Thaxter did good luck to a detachment of local soldiers, twelve in number, as they were about to start for Ticonderoga. One of them, Thomas Rogers, "refused to stand up when Mr. Thaxter spoke to them," and that of twelve, all returned but Rogers.

Dismissal

At Christmastime, 1774, the church had come to the decision that its pastor of nearly half a century must go. They offered a small pension and voted "That all past offences subsisting between Pastor and Brethren be mutually forgiven... that Unity, Love and Peace may prevail here." Hall, at his advanced age, not doubt had "great bodily infirmities," but the rumblings of an impending Revolution among the Colonies caused the pastor, with his attitude toward the Colonial Government and the cause of civil liberty great uneasiness among the people.

As a matter of fact, Reverend Hall was a Tory! Two others in town, a father and son, shared the same feelings toward English rule as did Mr. Hall, but pressure from fellow townsmen left the pastor all alone with his views. The town concurred with the church and voted on January 1, 1776, finally to dismiss him.

Buried Among Patriots

Reverend Hall lived three years after his discharge. By this time the townspeople had apparently forgiven him so that the "God of Peace may be with us."

His gravesite is the most prominent, on a knoll, in Fairview Cemetery. His stone, the only one of its kind, a flat slab of slate mounted, tablewise, on three supporting granite legs. This is the inscription:

Erected in the memory of
THE REVEREND WILLARD HALL,
First Pastor of the Church of Christ
in Westford.
Died March 19, 1779
Aged 77 Years
and in the 52nd year of his
Ministry

While the pale carcass tho'less lies
Among the silent graves,
Some hearty fired shall drop his tear
On our dry bones and say,
These once were strong as mine appear,
and mine must be as they.
Thus shall our mouldering members teach
What now our senses learn:
For dust and ashes loudst preach
Man's infinite concern.

If one would view the cluster of slate gravestones surrounding the more elaborate one of Parson Hall, several with American flags renewed yearly by local veterans, a person might muse that peace did come to the Minutemen and the Tory in the end.

Hall's widow lived ten years longer, all their children were "well" married, and it was not until the old parson's death that the second pastor was chosen. It was in May, 1770, the Rev. Matthew Scribner (of Yale) was voted in, to serve ten years. His "settlement" was somewhat different. He was to get, plus a salary, "a suitable dwelling house, keeping for a horse and two cows, and twenty cords of wood yearly."

Few Indians

It seems that the Indian population in this area was limited and widely scattered in small groups. Hodgman reports that Forge Pond (shared jointly by Westford and Littleton) was the rallying point of the tribes and it was to be regretted that the Indian name (not Matwasnakee) was not preserved.

He records that Old Andrew, the Indian, sold his "warre" (weir) at the outlet before 1680. Later, the town paid for burying an unnamed Indian.

Indian artifacts have been picked up in many places. Nabanussuck (Nabaset) made good fishing as did Forge Pond where shad and alewives came up via Stony Brook to spawn. After numerous dams were built along the brook, men were assigned to see that sluices were kept open in the spring so these fish could make the yearly trip. Forge Pond was the northerly boundary of the old Nashoba Plantation, set aside for the Indians by Rev. John Eliot in 1654. There were no more than ten families, numbering perhaps fifty persons.

In a wooded dell, not far from the pond, is a small Indian cemetery. If there were ever any identifying marks or markers, Nature has long since destroyed them. However, the location was carefully identified as late as 1950 by George M. Brown of Littleton, whose grandparents lived in the old Captain Jeremiah Cogswell saltbox on Beaver Brook Road, and where he resided for many years. It is at the angle formed by two stone walls.

An outcropping of granite, on the hillside opposite the Captain Pelletier Fletcher house, was possibly a camping ground where squaws would build their fires and grind corn in the "grinding mill" which was worn over the years to a depth of thirty inches.

Industry

The early Colonists were principally farmers, but gradually some industry appeared. Some types were powered by the waters of Stony Brook and its tributaries. From the headwaters at Forge Pond (first used in 1680) to the mouth at the Merrimack River in North Chelmsford there were at least seven mill-sites, with a height of fall varying from eight to twenty-two feet.

In 1724, William Chandler established a fulling mill together with a grist mill, at Brookside. On this spot the business of dressing cloth was carried on for 140 years.

There was some brick-making done in Parkerville and Captain Jonathan Minot of Minuteman fame was one of the operators. Clay from the northern slope of Prospect Hill was turned into some pottery.

Town Meetings

The town forever was forming committees to care for this or that. There were county as well as town roads "to lay out and maintain. Whether they were tightening their belts or didn't wish to make an alliance with other towns, but in 1736 they voted down a new county road. This was to go from the meetinghouse on Tadmuck Hill "through part of Chelmsford, Billerica, Bedford, Lexington."

Later, they agreed to "Pay Capt. Jonas Prescott, Dea. John Cummings and Thomas Read for time and money expended in going to Bedford to meet the Court's Comety."

Birds and squirrels were pests in their crops and a bounty was paid by the province. We read of "An account of the number of squirrels and Blackbirds killed in the town in the year 1741: The number of gray and ground (chipmunks) squirrels is 4,762; the number of old blackbirds (crows?) is 403; The number of young blackbirds is 329; Wayne Hanley of the Massachusetts Audubon Society states that the blackbirds supposedly were red-wings and grackles.

The town did all right on this bounty bit. A year later the Province tax of Westford was less than half the bounty-money drawn.

Even though they could pay a bounty for killing squirrels and blackbirds, the same year it was voted that "the Town Officers shall have no supper at their annual meeting upon the town's cost."

Training Field

Westford Common came about in 1744 when "Capt. Thomas Read, Lt. Jonas Prescott, Jr., and John Abbot was a Committee for to treat with Mr. Joseph Underwood about buying a piece of Land for the Convenience of a training field Round the meeting house half an acre more or less as they see fit." The price was five pounds.

Town Bell

A belfry with a town bell was not only a status symbol but was needed to call the community to worship, to a town meeting or, in case of a fire, to raise the alarm.

Therefore, in 1762 a committee of three was asked to "purchase a bell for sd. Town of about 550 pound weight." It

continued on page 3