



Down from its lofty perch

... atop the Roudenbush Community Center building is the Abbot bell, to be put into the town

museum. William C. MacMillan, Officer David Sweetser and Selectman Douglas R. Johnston are shown estimating its weight.

Academy bell headed for town museum

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — The big bronze bell that called many a student to class in the second Westford Academy building, now the Roudenbush Community Center, is scheduled to be placed on public exhibition when the town museum is completed. Lack of funds is slowing the project.

The 1200-pound casting, three parts copper and one part tin, was not considered the most thrilling sounding instrument in the Center for whenever it rang, it was to call students, sometimes unwillingly, to class.

Nevertheless, it served a practical purpose for the 60 years the building was used as a high school. It pealed on each school day at 8:15 a.m. as a warning, then again in 15 minutes to announce classes were about to start in the three-room building. This was repeated at the lunch hour.

The bell is now in storage awaiting a spot in the town museum, which is to be in the original Westford Academy edifice constructed in 1794. And to make things more perplexing, the Paul Revere bell that was cast for the original Academy, lost for 50 years, is on continuous display at the 1972 Academy on Patten Road.

Permission to move the bell from atop the Roudenbush Community Center was given by the selectmen last August, but the funds and the problem of moving the heavy article had not been resolved.

THEN CAME the heavy winds during the night of March 31!

So strong were they that the 15-foot spire above the belfry was knocked askew and

leaned at a dangerous angle. The four wooden posts which had supported it since 1897, when the school was built by the trustees, had rotted. A giant mobile crane was rushed to the scene to remove the tipped spire.

Town officials seized upon the opportunity to remove the bell from the cupola at the same time, knowing that its foundations had deteriorated to an unsafe condition. And so the spire, with its weather-vane, were lowered in one action; the bell soon followed in another.

Whether funds for replacing the spire will be forthcoming is questionable, but lovers of mid-Victorian architecture along with old grads say it is a "must" to preserve the exterior appeal of the 80-year-old structure, now in daily use.

THE BELL WAS the gift of John William Abbot, a member of an old and distinguished Westford family. It was cast August 2, 1897, by the Meneeley Bell Company of Troy, N.Y. The words, "Knowledge is Power" (Francis Bacon, 1597) and the donor's name molded into the casting. It measures 31 inches at the mouth and was rung from the preceptor's office on the second floor by pulling on a long rope, rigged through alleys.

Abbot was a graduate of the Academy. He and his father, John William Pitt Abbot, were cofounders of Abbot & Company in Graniteville in 1857. Both served many years as Academy trustees. The donor of the bell, however, lived only four months after the dedication of the building.

By 1895, the inhabitants of

the town had doubled over the past century and there was a population of about 2,300. The trustees of the Academy, which was still a private school, felt the need for expansion. They asked architects to prepare plans for a new building on land donated by Allen Cameron, a trustee and also a member of the Abbot firm.

Six responded, including the well-known Cram. Although his plan initially received nine votes to three going to others, old records do not mention Cram's name again. The contract went to H.M. Francis of Fitchburg; the school's building committee then consisted of George T. Day, John W. Abbot, Sherman H. Fletcher, J. Henry Read and Arthur Wright.

BIDS WERE entered from nine contractors, ranging from the \$14,000 price offered by W.C. Edwards of Westford to \$17,600 sent in by C.H. Nelson of Lowell. Heating and ventilation was another \$1,780.

The trustees voted a total of \$18,000 for the project. They negotiated a loan of \$10,000 at four and one-half per cent interest and took the remainder from current funds.

Architect Edwards didn't get his full payment "until the brick work in the basement ... be put in proper shape." By mid-winter, problems developed in the heating system, so the building committee instructed the supplier to "send a competent person to give instructions to the janitor in regard to the heating and ventilation of the building and remain (in town) a sufficient time for that purpose."

With a new Academy building at a new location, what happened to the original building which stood at the head of the town common for over a century? The trustees, on June 19, 1903, voted to sell it with the land for \$1,200. It was purchased by John C. Abbot, whose estate joined the property, and later moved to its present location on Boston Road. For half a century, it was used as a fire house. Now, as a bicentennial project, it is being turned into a town museum.