

1843 revisited

'Crazy Amos' plays a joke on Westford

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD - A century and a half ago, Westford was a serene mixture of farming and industry. Its population in 1840 was about 1,400, with 500 families equally split among five villages and the adjacent farming areas.

Life in those days meant long hours of hard work, with little entertainment available even when there was time free.

Then, new theories on religion came to the town, which had only two churches, the First Parish, established in 1729, and the Congregational Church, established in 1828.

The movement was first a ripple and then a giant breeze of religious fervor centered in an old colonial homestead next to the staid First Parish Church.

The teachings of evangelist William Miller had found their way to Westford, Groton and hundreds of communities throughout the East. Ardent followers in Boston built him a temple in Scollay Square, which later became the Old Howard Theatre, home of burlesque.

Miller personally delivered several thousand speeches throughout the East, and hundreds of other preachers joined forces to "spread the word."

His power as a speaker was shown in Portland, Maine. After a lecture there in 1841, booksellers moved more Bibles in one month than they had during the previous ten years.

Named the day

Miller, a native of Pittsfield, Mass., declared that Christ would raise the righteous dead and judge them with the righteous living, who would be caught up to meet in Heaven. Everyone else would perish.

He named the day, "The Earth would burn up like a scroll about March 30, 1843," he said. The date was later changed to April 3.

His message caused believers to impoverish themselves, giving or selling their belongings to non-believers in the certainty that they would have no further use for them.

The opening of the year 1843 found numerous folk flighty and understandably nervous.

When the Great Comet of 1843 appeared after orbiting for 514 years, it greatly increased the faith of Miller's followers that he was correct.

It seemed the biggest ball of fire ever to approach earth. It is said that even confirmed atheists trembled at this blazing spectacle.

More believers flocked to Millerite camps.

Westford folk no doubt participated in a great camp meeting in nearby Groton which drew believers as well as the inquisitive from miles around. It was held "about two miles from

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the village on the main road to Keene," on what we know as Route 119.

Ascension house

Local records give little information on the adherents in Westford. But stories told from parents to children over the past century indicate that, as April 3 approached, believers gathered in the Richard Kneeland house (at that time occupied by a Bancroft family) opposite the Common.

The large homestead had been stripped bare of its contents, and it is said the furniture had been broken up to provide fuel for a bonfire on nearby

Prospect Hill, the town's highest elevation.

Dressed in long, flowing white robes, the occupants filled the house to capacity, ready to leave at the proper moment for Prospect Hill. There was much praying and singing of hymns while waiting for the "word," the great moment.

Suddenly, long, loud blasts from a horn pierced the night.

They came from a young man named Amos, who was probably standing on the steps of the old Academy building at the head of the Common, now Westford Museum.

The fervent praying ended abruptly. The time had come.

Rushing out onto the Common, they could barely see Amos waving and blowing his trumpet. "Hallelujah! Glory to God! The time has come," they all shouted.

Now, Amos was not Angel Gabriel. He was apparently a harmless town character, probably retarded, who had gained the title of "Crazy Amos."

Crazy or not, it is said he belated this advice: "You are all fools! Go plant your corn. Angel Gabriel won't do it for you."

The letdown for the believers must have been great. From his study in his home on the other side of the church, the Rev. Ephraim Abbot, who served the First Parish Church at the Common for nine years during this period, probably smiled and murmured, "I did my best to counsel you. See you this Sunday?"

Amos must have had a happy smile on his face as he strolled back to his home, still standing at 45 Hildreth St. He had played a masterful joke on the Millerites - and it worked.

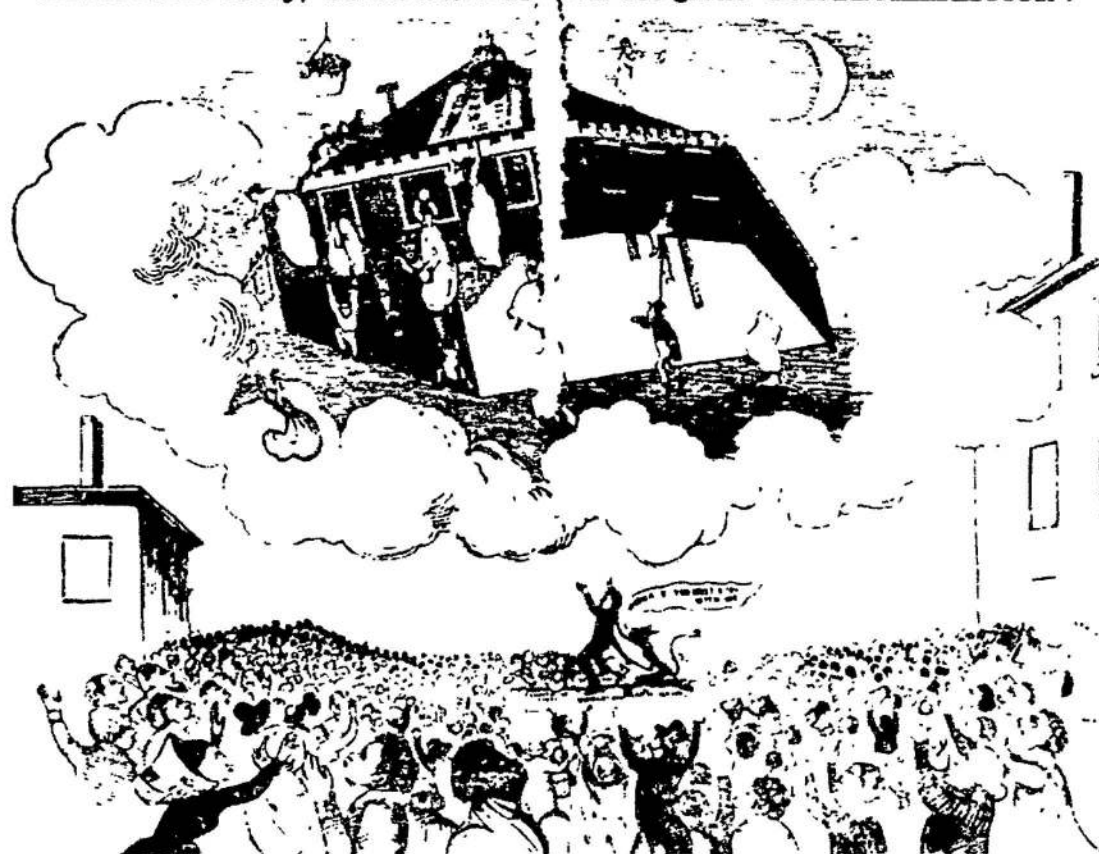
Whittler of toys

"Crazy Amos" was a cruel name for a lad who probably enjoyed a simple life of whittling.

Kate Hamlin left a description of him many years ago. "He sings, dances, plays with the boys, promises to make all sorts of toys, bows and arrows, doll

GRAND ASCENSION OF THE MILLER TABERNACLE!

Miller in his Glory, Saints and Sinners in one great CONGLOMERATION!



Public mockery

A contemporary cartoon mocks the belief of followers of William Miller they would rise bodily into heaven on a speci-

fied date in 1843. (Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities)

furniture - anything asked for. For a few days or possibly weeks, he is goodnatured, kind - and fond of playing jokes."

We never learned Crazy Amos' family name but no doubt he lies somewhere near his ancestors in either the Fairview cemetery (established in 1702) or the old West Burying Yard on Concord Road.

Groton, too, had an "ascension house." It was on the property now owned by Groton School, but age took its toll and it had to be demolished.

As for the Kneeland house, it burned in 1891 - a sad ending for a pretty old colonial with

flowers and shrubs in front with a white picket fence surrounding the yard. A painting of it by H. H. Robinson in oils now hangs in the Fletcher Library.

The local body of Millerites probably dispersed through the years.

As for Miller, it is reported that he had "a full woodshed and pantry, and his fields and livestock were well tended."

Possibly a head injury in 1810 (he fell from the back of wagon) caught up with him. In his last

years marked mental deterioration and blindness developed into complete insanity. He died in 1849.

We can feel sad for those who lost spiritual hope - and their worldly goods.

Even though some of our old families were disillusioned and misled, perhaps they turned once again to the sturdy First Parish meetinghouse, which still proudly stands next door to the ascension house, or to other religious bodies.