

Distinguished Citizens First Academy Trustees

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — With students from Nashoba Tech renewing restoration of the original academy building, it is now expected that it will take the entire academic year to complete the extensive and time-consuming work.

The two-story building, erected in 1794, is one of the oldest of its type in the country, and will become a town museum.

Education in Westford a couple of centuries ago, not as it is today, was meagre. One-

room neighborhood schools provided the basic training for the children. As they grew into early youth, many dropped out, particularly the boys, mainly to help run the farm. A few of the brighter ones, perhaps, were apprenticed to a lawyer, doctor, or a specialized craftsman. Few went to college.

There was no secondary educational system in town and little in the country.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, higher schooling in town found a real friend in Zaachus Wright. Ironically, though, he and his wife had no children to educate.

It was he who sparked the founding of Westford Academy, one of the earliest secondary schools in the newborn country. The pupils of both sexes were to be "taught useful sciences and literature — and the principles of morality."

The town was not ready for school taxation which today consumes three-quarters of the taxpayers' money. Then, such a project had to be financed by gifts from the local citizens, many of whom were poor farmers. Fifty-seven families, probably a third of the number then, purchased shares at \$20, buying from one to six units as their means provided. This totalled 118 shares.

Started Collection

Joseph Keyes, Francis Leighton and Joshua Read, acting as a committee or agents for the town, collected 120 pounds which bought 20 additional shares. With \$280 pounds gathered, this was sufficient to get the project off the ground. The subscribers then met formally on April 30, 1792, to elect the persons who would be responsible for the operation of the school, the trustees.

There were to be eleven trustees, "a majority to be chosen out of the inhabitants of the town." The subscribers thought it wise also to obtain the services of other outstanding men so they selected four from nearby communities.

Only four of these original trustees were native sons. They were John Abbot, Jonathan Carver, Dr. Charles Proctor and Colonel Wright. Three others were living in town at the time.

Colonel Wright, then 54, was elected the first president and was to serve 17 years. He held nearly every town office "in the gift of the townspeople." Most of the town records of the period are in his handwriting and are stored in the vaults in the town hall. He was a person of great reverence toward his fellow-man and a staunch believer in the value of knowledge through education and literary works.

Wright was with the 6th Middlesex Regiment in 1776 and

served at the battle of White Plains. He topped off his original donation with an added 360 pounds in real estate. His home still stands on Chamberlain Road.

Captain Abbot, like Wright, was a founder of the town's first library system and was town clerk and treasurer at various times. He is described as "an enterprising and useful citizen." He was a lieutenant in Captain Bates' company at Concord on April 19, 1775.

Dr. Proctor, 37, lived in the ~~original town~~ ~~at the~~ ~~present~~ ~~shop~~ ~~on~~ ~~Route~~ ~~118~~, near the present ~~shop~~. He studied his medical profession in Chelmsford and was described as a "kind and benevolent friend, a dignified and upright man."

Town Minister

Rev. Caleb Blake was 30 and had just come to town to be the pastor of the church. He was a graduate of Harvard and was to serve as a trustee for 41 years.

He was a country parson and not very outstanding although he preached until 1826. He was content to do farming on the side and later purchased what is now known as the Day farm, near St. Mark's Church. The long hill that reaches from the Center parallel to Boston Road to Route 496 carries his name.

James Prescott, Jr., at 26 was the youngest of the trustees and a brilliant and loyal person. He was an original subscriber and became president when Wright resigned. He was on the board for 37 years. He practiced law in town for a decade and became chief justice of Middlesex County.

From Outside

Going out of town to balance the board, they asked General Joseph Bradley Varnum of Dracut. He was then 42 and served for 28 years. More of a military and political personage, he lent great prestige. He was a drillmaster for the Dracut Minutemen and commissioned a captain at 18. Later, he became major general of the state militia.

After being a state representative and later senator, Varnum ~~was~~ ~~elected~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~national~~ ~~House~~.

He was president pro tem of the senate but the peak of his career came when he was made acting vice president of the United States on Dec. 6, 1813 for four months. Even though he was heavily involved in other affairs, his love for his "adopted" academy kept him on the rolls for 28 years.

Another distinguished non-resident was Rev. Ezra Ripley, 41, a Harvard grad and pastor of the First Church in Concord, ordained in 1778. He preached his final sermon the day after his 90th birthday.

Rev. Ripley gave the land on which the battle monument at the North Bridge was erected, it was fabricated from Westford granite. Ralph Waldo Emerson was his stepson. He was a trustee for eleven years.

From Littleton

From Littleton came Sampson Tuttle, 54, and the oldest. He was a well known lawyer and justice of the peace, and a graduate of Harvard.

Another Harvard graduate

and the second minister in Acton, Rev. Moses Adams, 43, served on the board for nearly a decade.

Ebenezer Bridge, 48, of Chelmsford, who captained the Billerica Minutemen at Concord and later was a colonel at Bunker Hill, made up the board. He became the county treasurer and register of deeds and also a state senator. His great interest was in agriculture.

These were the men who met frequently to oversee the early

days of the new academy, days which must have been trying but rewarding.

The first tenets of the fledgling school was to educate young people of both sexes. The original board was all male, a custom which prevailed down through the years. When Mrs. Bette Hook, a retired academy teacher and member of the school committee, was elected this spring to the now fifteen-member board, a new era had arrived.