

Early students were rough-hewn

By Gordon Seavey
Contributing Writer

The people of Westford have always supported the cause of popular education with "commendable liberality" wrote town historian Rev. Edwin R. Hodgman.

He tells of schools which were at first kept in private houses for short periods. In 1734, it was "voted to raise twenty pounds money to ye school master." Students gathered at home for studies.

Joseph Underwood Jr. was the first to teach and was paid 16 pounds. A graduate of Harvard College, it was his father who sold land for the town common for the substantial price of 20 pounds for

"half an acre more or less around the meeting house."

Second teacher, Ephraim Craft, was paid 2½ pounds for teaching one month in 1736. His homestead still stands at 3 Depot Street, now occupied by the Thomas Finnegan family. Josiah Burge was the third teacher. He lived near the 22-acre Burge Pond. It seemed the "scool" was kept for about one month a year.

Finally, tax-supported education came down to nine district one-room buildings strategically located throughout town. One example is the Parkerville School at Carlisle and Concord roads, now being restored.

Teachers mostly were poorly trained and poorly paid. Teaching

supplies were limited. To read parts of the Bible in the early days without spelling out the words was always considered a great achievement.

Youth were often discouraged with the non-availability of an education and most dropped schooling at an early age to help on the farms. A few of the brighter ones were apprenticed to a lawyer, doctor or specialized craftsman. Few went to college.

In 1792, with the founding of Westford Academy, those who did want to get a secondary school education could do so in their own hometown.

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