

Failure to Relocate Meeting House, Spun off New Tavern

By Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD — Had the town fathers in Chelmsford, back in 1702, abandoned their old meetinghouse and built a new one about two miles west on Chestnut Hill, there might have never been a "setting apart" of half the town's area to form Westford.

As we look back now, it probably was not a good idea. But that was what the early families living in the west part of Chelmsford wanted, those who had to travel up to six miles to worship and to attend town meetings.

Even though the old house which had served the people from the earliest settlement had fallen in decay, nevertheless they patched it up. The record shows the building was repaired "both w/out Side to keep out rain and snow, and also with inside such Inlargement as may be needful and in perticular A long table from one allee to another"

Religion was a definite part of every early settler's life and the family spent all day Sunday in worship at the meetinghouse. With difficulties in travel, it was important that each community, mainly for convenience, have its own meetinghouse, for worship and for public and political gatherings.

The western part of Old Chelmsford was coming to be populated, particularly on Frances Hill at Chamberlin's Corner, Tadmuck Hill and in the fertile Stoney Brook Valley. It was customary to locate the main village in the geographical center of each town.

These folks petitioned, in 1706, for a new meetinghouse to "be set in the senter of the toune." Chelmsford Center was not so placed.

Presumably the "senter" would be on Chestnut Hill, about halfway between the present Chelmsford and Westford centers. It is a 350-foot elevation of land located near the junction of Westford and Spalding Roads close to the Westford-Chelmsford line.

Nothing ever became of this idea.

New Precinct

Apparently determined not to give up, the "Westford" folks began to talk about a new meetinghouse for themselves. By 1713 agitation for a new

precinct was well underway

This continued from time to time and by 1724 an agreement was reached and approved by the General Court which divided Chelmsford practically in half. This move further led to the construction of a new meetinghouse on Tadmuck Hill (Westford Center), described as being very sightly. Construction began immediately.

In the meantime, the "calling" of Reverent Willard Hall, just out of Harvard College, was made to supply the pulpit. He was ordained two years later

The manner in which Westford came into existence explains why its largest and earliest cemetery is placed a mile away from the meetinghouse. As part of Chelmsford, the early settlers in this western part of the old town had up to five miles to carry their dead to the churchyard at Chelmsford.

Again for convenience, they chose a pretty knoll between Tadmuck Hill and Chamberlin's Corner, known as Fairview. Earliest head-stone bears the inscription "Abram Wright, died 1702," but it was believed that there were earlier, unmarked graves.

Land from Groton

Just a year after the town was incorporated, in 1729, as Westford, the people (mainly Prescotts from Groton) who had settled the Forge Village area of what was then Groton, asked to be "set aside." They found it more convenient to attend church in the newly formed parish 2 1/2 miles away on Tadmuck Hill than to walk or ride horseback six miles to Groton.

At that time, the entire center of the village, including the important mill site at the outlet of what was then called Stony Brook Pond (now Forge Pond), was part of Groton. Jonas and Ebenezer Prescott, Abner Kent and Ebenezer Townsend asked the General Court to adjoin their lands with Westford. Granted Sept. 10, 1730, this was to be the only major change in the town's boundaries following incorporation.

The territory is triangular in shape, the base now dividing the pond and the two sides running north about three miles to the apex at Millstone Hill.

The deal beat the Louisiana Purchase as no money was

exchanged for the valuable water power rights, already being used as a saw and grain mill, and many new acres. Joshua Fletcher (the town clerk) received 2 pounds, 11 shillings, 7 pence for going to court with Captain Jonas.

Thus Westford obtained from "Grotton" a bit more territory, again for the "greater convenience in attending public worship."