

Fire destroyed landmark 64 years ago

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
WESTFORD — One of Westford's most interesting old landmarks, the original John Abbot house, fell victim to fire 64 years ago yesterday, to the day and date, (February 25, 1914) on a frigid cold winter night. And by chance, Mabel M. Prescott, then a junior at Westford Academy, had just received a box Brownie camera, and looking for subjects, had taken a picture of the Abbot house buried in snowdrifts the Saturday prior to the fire.

The following day, Prescott, who now lives at 32 Boston Road, managed a picture of the remains, which accompanies this article.

Commanding a choice location in Westford center, alongside the white-spired First Parish Church and overlooking the town common, the Abbot house had come down through generations of the family, probably starting with Joel Abbot. Its imposing front faced Main Street, opposite the present Center Post Office. It was a center entrance colonial with four corner rooms on each floor. Over the years it had been substantially remodelled.

At the time of its demise, a wide porch ran along the west side, a cupola had been added along with modern porticos over the doors. The white-fenced front yard had been removed. On the north side,

facing the church, was a sizeable ell. A large barn and carriage house, complete with dovecot attached, set back a bit between house and church. Distance saved this set of buildings.

When Prescott took her photograph on Saturday, little did she know that the next morning, the venerable building would be in shambles, with the roof gone and the remaining walls scorched by the inferno. Her camera clicked again.

ALTHOUGH STILL in the Abbot family, it had been leased to a well-known local young man, Edward Fisher, who was occupying the home at the time with his wife and two children. He was a highly

respected citizen and town clerk, and had his law office and library in the wing of the house. He also was associated in Lowell with his brother, Judge Frederic A. Fisher.

It was a bitter cold night on February 24, 1914, according to his daughter, Esther Fisher Hosmer, and no doubt the fireplaces and heating system had been pushed to the limit. There had been problems with one of the chimneys previously, but it was thought proper repairs had been made.

Fire erupted in the middle of the night and the flames and smoke awakened Esther, then only five, whose cries gave the alarm. Sensing the fire had gained unquenchable headway, the father picked up

his daughter and gathered his wife, Helen, with the younger daughter, Barbara, and dashed safely to the street. Everything else was left behind.

The volunteer fire department did its best, but to little avail. Its headquarters was nearby on Boston Road, housed in a tiny white building on the property of Alfred and Ruth Tuttle. Yearly rent was \$60. The horse-drawn wagon carried ten fire extinguishers, some ladders and hose.

The Westford Company was headed by Edward M. Abbot as chief.

It was a case of too little, too late. The fire had already gone out of control when spot-

ted. The volunteer firemen had to be summoned by telephone as there was no central alarm system. Ironically, the fire engineers had requested a modern alarm system in the warrant for that year. As was customary, the church bell was rung to alert the neighborhood.

THE HOUSE and contents, including many valuable antiques, were a total loss. Fortunately, the ell where town records were kept, as well as Fisher's clients' files, was saved.

There were other aspects to the holocaust, too, that kept townspeople talking, even to

this day. Alec Fisher, who boasted he had never missed a fire call, didn't learn about his brother's place going up in smoke until the next day. William E. Wright slipped on an ice-coated ladder and injured a leg.

As to the time the original house was built, it is not known. History of the First Parish Church notes that when it came time to build a third meetinghouse, the town voted to do so on January 13, 1794. A week later the assembly voted to buy land of Joel Abbot and "that the South Side Hill shall be set in a perriell line from the Southeast Corner of Joel Abbot's house...." Twenty

pounds was the purchase price.

It is also thought that perhaps at one time a member of the Butterfield family, which was large, operated a tavern in the building. Whether true or not, it was ideally located for a noontime break for the all-day Sunday worshippers.

OTHER FIRES of historical importance in this century were the Colonel John Robinson Revolutionary farmhouse in 1937, the Forge Pond ice houses in 1920 and again in 1931, and the Nashoba Farm at the corner of Hildreth Street and Concord Road in 1918.



The day after

West view of the Abbot homestead in Westford, taken the day after it burned, 64

years ago today.