

Fletcher Library traces roots to local of widespread fame

By Gordon B. Seavey

Jonathan Varnum Fletcher, whose love for his native town of Westford never flagged, became a merchant prince in the Faneuil Hall district of Boston.

He kept the family homestead at the sharp turn of Depot Street near Stoney Brook, one of the prime farms in the county, for his second home — and he gave the town its attractive library at the Common five years before his death.

The new library which was to bear his name was to replace a makeshift collection of books housed in one room in the Town Hall. This in turn had evolved from a social library established by the early settlers. Trustees of the one-room affair reported in 1894 that it had been a year of increased usefulness and that 828 more books had been issued during that year.

In an appealing request, probably written by William E. Frost, then principal of the Academy, the report said: "It has been the hope...of many inhabitants of the Town that some one of the men of wealth who grew to boyhood and manhood under the elevating influence of Westford, would feel a desire to forever associate his name with his native Town by presenting it with a handsome library building, as has been done by men of wealth in many of our neighboring towns."

Whether or not this appeal had been aimed directly to J.V. Fletcher, who then lived in Belmont, he "arose to the occasion."

In a letter which he wrote from his Boston office on March 15, 1895, he said: "It has been my intention for a long time to do something for my native town, in the line of aiding the erection of a suitable library building." It is said that the offer was greeted with cheers at town meeting.

Growth Ten Times

Nearly a century has passed, the population has grown from perhaps 1,500 people to 10 times that amount, and the budget from \$500 to operate the fa-

cility to near the \$200,000 mark. The many services now provided by the library have grown proportionately.

An addition was made to the building 18 years ago and now the town is waiting for contractors to add a second expansion, this to cost \$1.4 million, a bill to be footed by the taxpayers.

J.V. Fletcher's original gift of \$14,000 must have seemed a small fortune. But then, men's suits were selling at Talbot's in Lowell for \$8 to \$25.

All the necessary preliminaries have been accomplished, the contracts signed, and construction is to begin within days on the much needed expansion.

The new work will be more than double the present capacity in both space and number of volumes. The present structure of buff brick, long a landmark, will still be the focal point of the

side of Prospect Hill to the town for conservation purposes. Regretably, this valuable acreage in the heart of the town is unused.

Unlike other members of his family, young Varnum was sent to Groton for his schooling at what is now Lawrence Academy. Then he set out on a career in the provision field.

Business beginnings

Following a brief start in Medford, he moved to Boston where he was "a senior tenant, with two stalls, in the Quincy Market." He had wed Marcy Ann Hill, and had built a mansion on Pleasant Street, Belmont (then West Cambridge), which is still standing.

Belmont had become a town in 1859, carved from the outskirts of West Cambridge, Waltham and Waltham.



Boston,

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edifice, with new additions on either side. Library director Ellen D. Rainville suggests that when alterations are completed, the complex will look something like Monticello.

Westford Lineage

Varnum Fletcher, as most of his friends called him, was a direct descendant of Solomon Keyes, believed to have been the first permanent settler in 1664, in Westford. His parents were Joseph, son of Captain Peletiah Fletcher, and Frances Grant Keyes, and he was the tenth and last child, born in 1812.

For many years, his great-great granddaughter, Marian Winnek, lived in town and at the time of her death had deeded most of the northwest

Fletcher served as president of the Quincy Cold Storage Co., and also served as a director of the Faneuil Hall Bank for 40 years, becoming its president in 1888. He was also the first president of the fledgling Belmont Savings Bank.

Austin Fletcher of Lincoln



Until a fire destroyed this grand old homestead in 1897, the home of J. Varnum Fletcher was the scene of many family reunions. Known to generations as the Fletcher Cold Spring Farm, it straddled Depot Street at a sharp bend near Stony Brook. The home was rebuilt, but the huge barn across the street lived a long and useful life until torn down.

Street, Westford, likes to tell the story of when his father, J. Willard Fletcher, was superintendent of Cold Spring Farm.

J.V. Fletcher (no close relation) gave Austin, then a small boy, a passbook with \$5 from Belmont Savings which he still keeps, "adding a bit now and then, and taking some out, too."

Dorothy Backman, vice president of the bank, reports that Fletcher's is the seventh oldest account at the institution, and wishes to thank Austin for putting in a little now and then, and not taking any out.

She also reports that "Account No. 1" is still open and belongs to a Fletcher.

Political positions

J.V. was Belmont's first selectman, and was elected as a state representative and state senator from that area, and served as chairman of the

Banks & Banking Committee on Beacon Hill in the late 1880s.

Following his death in 1900, the Trustees of Westford Academy, of which Fletcher had long been a member, resolved: "We rejoice that the donor of the J.V. Fletcher Library was spared to see some of the benefits received by the pupils of the Academy and our schools in consequence of his gift to the town which he hoped would be the source of knowledge, wisdom and entertainment for all time."

Fletcher was a person who seemed to be constantly on the go, although he managed to enjoy spending time at Cold Spring Farm with members of his family and friends. Often they would gather in the tall pines for a picnic near Stony Brook where he had built a gazebo over a bubbling spring.

J.V. kept a fine pair of horses in the pretentious stables on his Belmont estate. Once, when driving through town in a surrey "with a fringe on top," something frightened the animals into running away, throwing Fletcher from his seat. He hung onto the reins with all his strength, although badly shaken and scratched, until the horses could be brought to a halt.

An oil painting of the country boy turned provision merchant and banker, by a prominent Belmont artist, hangs in the town library — a reminder of the generous person who never forgot his early life in Westford.

Perfect setting

Local author Eliza A. Babbitt wrote in 1890 (when the town's population was only 1,050), "Among the small villages of

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eastern Massachusetts, few can vie with Westford in picturesque situation. Crowning as it does the summit of Tad-

muck Hill, its houses nestled among the trees, the graceful, slender spire of one of its churches can be seen for miles around."

Maybe this is what J.V. Fletcher had in mind with his donation for a new library.

The J.V. Fletcher Library was dedicated on June 4, 1896. It was built on the sturdiest of foundations, coursed ashlar granite from Hildreth quarry in Graniteville, as were the massive front steps.

As modern renovation takes place, much of the quartered oak trimmings

and terra cotta will be retained on the first floor, along with the cypress woodwork on the second level. The oak staircase to the second floor will be used, but probably not as much as a new elevator.

Director Rainville says she keeps looking out the window, hoping to see huge machines coming to the yard. The library will remain open during the construction, but many of the activities will be scattered in other buildings near the Common.

Gordon B. Seavey is a native of Westford and who was the publisher of the Belmont Citizen for over 30 years. He now lives on Depot Street. He states that the name of J.V. Fletcher is revered in Belmont.