

# 'Guided' foliage trip north reveals Westford history

By Gordon B. Seavey  
Eagle staff

In these waning days of brilliant fall foliage, much color hangs to the hard woods just across the Massachusetts border in the Monadnock region of southern New Hampshire.

Should you be interested in reliving the history and noting the influence Westford men and women had on some of the communities, drive through this area with a copy of Hodgman's excellent *History of Westford, 1659-1883* tucked into the glove compartment.

Hodgman devoted some twenty pages to the migration from Westford to other communities prior to and after the Revolutionary War.

He wrote that the records were "prepared with muc" — are after extended investigation and inquiry, in order to show that the men of the past have done to help forward the settlement of our country and the advancement of the nation."

Fortunate are we today to have his accurate, detailed and impeccable grammar bound in a volume of nearly 500 pages.

"They were pioneers, even as were their fathers before them, the vanguard of an advancing civilization" he wrote of those who had the urge to move on.

## Communities Revisited

Come with me to visit a trio of communities not far away whose earliest beginnings were fostered in part — if not whole — by Westford folk. Although it is mostly about men whom Hodgman reports, whole families moved out of Westford to the "wilderness" beyond.

It must be remembered that our early settlers were mostly farmers who needed plenty of land to support their large families — and large families, with everyone working were needed to survive on a farm.

Less than a century ago, we would have needed a horse and wagon to go on this trip. Today, pick up the car keys, head for Route 119 toward Groton and at West Townsend take Route 124 to New Ipswich, our first stop.

Immediately, you will be on

the same route taken by our forebears, only the roads won't be dusty and rough. And you won't have to slow down for ox carts or people, sometimes in tandem, or horseback.

You'll certainly know you are in New Ipswich when at the foot of a short hill is a narrow bridge, with a small mill complex on the right. This area is called Highbridge.

Rueben Kidder was "for the first twenty years the father of the town." Andrew Spalding signed the church covenant. And John Chandler unwittingly became the originator of the giant water-powered mill system of the state when he founded, in 1790-01, a saw mill and a corn (grist) mill.

He harnessed the rapidly flowing Souhegan River and its falls at Highbridge. This was the forerunner of the Columbian Company which, according to a historical marker, was the beginning of the textile industry for carding, spinning and weaving of wool and cotton.

The sign says, "This manufacture of fabrics spread throughout the state and contributed prominently to the economic and social growth and the development of the textile industry nationally."

## Visit Original Village

At Highbridge, don't fail to turn to the left briefly off Route 124 so that you may drive through the old center with its interesting homes, including the Barrett House, which you will find on your map.

James Spalding was a patriot who was among those who left for Concord immediately upon hearing news of the impending march of the British to Concord, MA. Hodgman reports that his wife, Hannah, and oldest son, Jonathan, spent the afternoon of that day atop Mt. Watatic, where they saw the smoke of the British cannon.

This anecdote seems incredible. Nevertheless, this New Hampshire mountain may be seen from Westford from certain vantage points, such as the belfry of the First Parish Church. Perhaps April 19, 1775, was a clear and calm day weatherwise.

Let's continue on Route 124. About two miles before Jaffrey

on the right you will see a large, yellow homestead in a touch of the Greek Revival style. A neat sign by the side of the road states it is the Benjamin Prescott Inn, for bed and breakfast.

It was built by Prescott in 1857 and has been beautifully restored. Period furnishings are tastefully arranged so that one gets the impression he or she is in a museum. Innkeeper Barry Miller has named each room for a prominent member of the Prescott family.

## Prominent Westford Name

The Benjamin Prescott name in Jaffrey started when he and his bride, Rachel Adams of Chelmsford, left for the "wilderness", reportedly with axe in hand and a sack of food on his shoulder. They were barefoot and probably trudged the very same road where you found the Inn. Subsequently, they had nine children.

James was the grandson of Jonas Prescott, the person who built the forges at the outlet of Forge Pond in 1676. James farmed and also established an Inn in Jaffrey.

A prominent and leading man of the period, he was a representative to the state for 11 years, justice of the peace and a deacon in the Baptist Church.

He was called Colonel Prescott, either out of admiration or because he had spied against the British for the Colonists, was caught, but escaped the same day. He died at the age of 85. Perhaps keeping an Inn for 40 years with good food always available was the secret of his longevity.

## View of Monadnock

In the rear of the Prescott Inn, atop Witt Hill is a commanding view of Mount Monadnock, the most climbed mountain in the world, the local Jaffrey folks say.

As we drive through the pretty town of Jaffrey, be sure to continue on to old Jaffrey Center. Here is the wedding-cake-topped spire of the Old Jaffrey meeting house. A string of horse sheds are in the rear and just beyond is an old cemetery, mostly with slate markers.

Among these is the grave of Willa Cather, Nebraskan author of many popular mid-west novels.



Innkeeper Barry Miller (above) stands ready to greet visitors at the Prescott Inn, a bed and breakfast establishment in Jaffrey, NH dating back to the mid-1800s. The Prescott family roots go back to Westford's early days (right). The magnificent Jaffrey meeting house boasts a wedding cake steeple. Author Willa Cather is buried in the cemetery in the foreground.

(Photo courtesy of Gordon Seavey)

There is also a very sentimental marker on the grave of one who must have touched the hearts of the children she taught, possibly in the nearby little red schoolhouse. It reads

EDITH E. FROST

To the first girl I ever loved,  
my schoolteacher in Jaffrey  
(Placed by Harlan S. Robbins)

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