



From the ell of this impressive residence at 24 Main Street, nearly a century ago, Harry B. Hall (shown at left on his delivery wagon) operated a general merchandise store, selling for cash and at "lower than city prices". This 1899 photo shows Mrs. Nora Stearns Colburn in front of the fence, perhaps interested in protecting the family pocketbook by trading for "cash only" with Mr. Hall.

(Photo courtesy of Mrs. Austin D. Fletcher)

## Heyday for Common merchants

By Gordon B. Seavey

**W**estford Common is about the geographical center of this community which covers 30 square miles, the largest in area in the county. Here the first meeting house was erected by the townspeople so in the early days it was the center not only of religious life but town government.

It was natural that whatever commercial life was needed, in the early days, was to be found here.

At the turn of the 20th century, there were four mercantile buildings, although not all in operation at the same time. All were grocery and general merchandise emporiums.

Time and economic conditions have altered all this. The J.M. Fletcher store now houses an insurance agency. Three generations of Fletchers operated a grocery store here, next to what is now the parish hall of the First Parish Church.

A post office functioned in a corner by the store clerks, during periods when the Democrats were in power. When political winds changed to a Republican era, across the Common went the post office to a competing general store, operated by Wright & Fletcher. The building, now greatly remodeled into apartments, also houses the Coffee Grinder Shoppe.

A building which had been moved to a spot near the apex of the Common (and alongside what is now the J.V. Fletcher Library) was a store where Peter Swallow and his family lived upstairs and used the ground floor as a store while daughter, Ellen, attended Westford Academy. She was later to become a world-renowned scientist.

Cash only

**A**nd a fourth store, with the fancy title of Boston Branch Cash Store, was in the ell of one of the town's most elegant houses on Main Street, the second house down from Graniteville Road.

It was started around 1881 by Harry B. Hall, who stated in a broadside of that date that "with 27 years' experience in the business [not in Westford] and a large acquaintance in the wholesale trade, of whom I BUY FOR CASH, and SELLING FOR CASH at a Small Profit, losing nothing in Bad Debts, close buyers will find it to their advantage to give me a trial."

According to his flyer (there was no local Eagle newspaper to spread glorious news), he stated that he could offer a good selection of first class groceries at lower prices than one can buy in the city. Presumably Lowell, being nearest, was the "city".

Comparing today's prices, H.B. was right.

He was selling a whole barrel of flour, wooden barrel and all, for \$6.50. There were two kinds of butter — the good dairy kind for 25 cents a pound, or the best creamery for ten cents more. Imagine being able to buy a

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"Good Drinking Oolong" tea for 35 cents a pound!

A pound can of salmon was 17 cents, with peaches at the same price. The coffee was described as the Best Java at 25 cents — or if you wished to roast the beans on the top of the wood-fueled iron kitchen range at home, the fastidious housewife could save a nickel. Nothing was said about decaffeinated, freeze-dried, perc, or instant types.

In addition, H.B. would drive to your home to take an order on certain mornings and make delivery in the afternoon — only for cash.

When writing orders, he might mention that he stocked pails, tubs, brooms, lamp chimneys, bowls, pitchers and other crockery in a back room, at the best prices, of course.

His grand old home is a gem among the many show places in town. Its interior has been remodeled to some extent by the Grants, the present owners.

The house was built in 1802 by a young Abbot student at Harvard who apparently was addicted to the social life, as a ballroom always occupied the top floor. The room also was used for Masonic meetings and several town meetings in times past.

Girls from out of town were boarding here as Academy students.

Most people will remember that the house was occupied by Miss Marian Winnek for 40 years until her death in 1977. She was the great, great granddaughter of J.V. Fletcher, donor of the town's library, now undergoing a \$2.2 million

enlargement program.

Changing times

**I** watched the demise of a blacksmith shop on the site of our new town museum and recall John Feeney, with a real Scot's burr, mending harness in a shop which was almost on the sidewalk. And down Boston Road, Aaron Tuttle built and repaired wagons in a little by-the-side-of-the-road building (still standing).

All else has long gone. A 17-year-old Academy student remarked to me, "How the town has changed." I agreed.

Gordon Seavey is a Westford native who spent his youth in a home facing the Common. He is the former publisher of the Belmont Citizen. With the approaching 200th anniversary of the founding of the Academy and also the erection of the third meeting house, he intends to reveal more stories pertaining to this subject.