

Historic church celebrates 250th

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — The grand march has ended and the prizes given out for the best costume to end an initial celebration, a 250th anniversary ball of the founding of first church in town, the First Parish.

The Westford Bicentennial Committee reminds us that this recent affair is only one of the many functions townspeople have participated in to celebrate the founding of the country.

Soon the historic church will be publishing an 80-page history covering the major events during the past useful 250 years. Written by its pastor, Rev. George Downey, it is expected to be released by the end of the month.

An interesting sidelight has been brought out with reference to the building of the first two churches, both of which no longer exist. The third, with its graceful tower and delicate spire, has been a landmark at the center, where it has stood for 180 years. Westford has long been known as the Hilltop Town and the distinctive but plain building has been admired over the generations as it stands "tall" among the surrounding trees.

THE FIRST meetinghouse was finally begun in 1724 after a long hassle with the mother town of Chelmsford. It stood near the present site alongside the common and took several years to complete.

By 1768 the building apparently had become too small for the slowly growing community and it was voted to sell it to a small group of Baptists who had settled in South Chelmsford, near Heart Pond.

It must have taken a lot of brute strength, Yankee skill and patience to move the building in its entirety a distance of perhaps five miles. This was done in the wintertime on sledges, over the snow, and in many places the edifice was dragged over fields, stone walls and all.

It took only two days to reset the building in the area which is now the old South Chelmsford cemetery, so perhaps it wasn't too large an edifice.

In use for half a century, it was replaced by the present Baptist Church, built in 1836 (the same year Lowell was incorporated) on its present site.

IT WAS NOTED that some of the Westford parishioners had either feelings about the Baptists or they may have thought it wasn't a good deal. As a result, the meetinghouse was broken

into and an attempt was made to remove some of the pews.

Westford's second meetinghouse was ill-fated. It had been completed only two years when lightning set it afire in 1773. It was entirely destroyed, but the frugal parishioners saw to it that the "nales ... salvaged from the ruins" were sold.

The third and present building was erected in 1795 but remodeled extensively in 1868. Not only that, but it was turned around 90 degrees so that the steeple now faces the common.