

Memories

J.V. Fletcher — library benefactor

(Gordon B. Seavey is a Westford native and retired publisher of the Belmont Citizen whose personal hobby has been uncovering Westford's interesting history.)

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — A ceremonial ground-breaking ceremony held on the Westford Common last month signalled the initial construction of a substantial addition to the J.V. Fletcher Library, which has been a town landmark for nearly a century.

This addition, the second within the last 18 years, will more than double the present interior capacity of the library in both space and volumes. When the work is completed in 1988 at a cost of \$1.4 million, the present overcrowded conditions will have been eliminated.

The present structure of buff brick will still be the focal point of the edifice, with new additions on either side. Librarian Ellen Rainville suggests that it will look something like Monticello.

Westford native Jonathan Varnum Fletcher, a produce giant of Faneuil Hall Marketplace a century ago, was the prime contributor to the attractive building when it was erected in 1895.

Fletcher saw to it that only the best workmanship and materials were applied. At the time, it had the most up-to-date heating system, plus a gas-generating machine in the basement to supply lighting.

Then a wealthy Belmont resident, J.V. Fletcher heard that Westford had appropriated \$5,000 towards a new library to replace the one-room affair in Town Hall.

He wrote from his Boston office on March 15, 1895, "It has been my intention for a long while to do something for my native town, in the line of aiding the erection of a suitable library building." The offer was greeted with cheers at town meeting.

Direct descendant

Fletcher was a direct descendant of Solomon Keyes, believed to have been the first permanent settler in Westford in 1664. J.V. spent his youth on the Fletcher's Cold Spring Farm, considered one of the finest and most productive in the county. It was there he acquired his love of the land and what is produced.

Soon after his education at Groton School (most of his relatives had attended Westford Academy), J.V. set out to make his mark in the City, which he did. He also married into the wealthy Hill family of Belmont, who were noted market gardeners.

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, Watertown and Waltham.

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 Street, Westford likes to tell the story of when his father, J. Wilard 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. 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 a chairman of the Banks & Banking Committee on Beacon Hill in the late 1880's.

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 schols 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 tenacious 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 surry "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.

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

eastern Massachusetts, few can vie with Westford in picturesque situation. Crowning as it does the summit of Tadmuck 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 ashler granite from the old H. 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



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J. Varnum Fletcher

floor will still be used, but probably not as much as the new elevator.

(Persons who would like to

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