

Library roots originate in private homes

By Gordon B. Seavey

Two centuries ago, through the efforts of a few benevolent men, the Westford Social Library was established. Its purpose was "to promote Literature and useful knowledge among ourselves and our families...and for the Town in general."

From action taken at Mr. Wood's tavern on April 3, 1797, the group formed the private Westford Library Company with shares being offered. At its formation it was plainly written that its purposes were to promote useful knowledge in the community. Useful knowledge, too, should be imparted to the "rising generations."

The agreement side-stepped the freedom of thought and speech by inserting in its charter "There shall be no books in the library upon civil or religious controversy, or tending to deprave the morals of man."

Zaccheus Wright, a principal founder of Westford Academy, was president until 1806. Although he had no children of his own, this generous town leader insisted on seeing to it that all persons and especially the children, should add to their knowledge through books and schools. Rev. Caleb Blake, parson at the meetinghouse, was treasurer.

The small, initial collection of books was scattered in private homes in various sections of the town.

Just prior to the Civil War, the population of the town had risen to about 1,800 and with this growth, proportionally the number of books held by the Social Library. After the war, an official town library was organized, using the basis of the original company.

Following the construction of the new town hall in 1870, the library was moved into a "commodious room" at the right of the entrance, really a small office which now is the home of the Town Aide and Veterans' Services.

Need Grows

Nearing the close of the 19th century, it was obvious that the library should expand.

The trustees reported in 1893 "our library, with the added riches of years, is already too valuable to remain longer in a wooden building," under crowded conditions. The principal of the Academy, William E. Frost, was chairman of the board, along with Kate S. Hamlin and teacher Nettie M. Stevens. All brilliant, they were noted for their educational interests and they were the ones, no doubt, who urged the inhabitants to do something about bringing the library system up to date, an invaluable system which had been lagging.

In a round-about way, by a series of coincidences, a new library was to be born.

Westford Wanderings

It was an unusually cold night for early winter on Dec. 5, 1891, and it was presumed that wood fires had been burning briskly in homes in the vicinity of the Common. The bell of the meetinghouse rang demanding, awakening sleeping neighbors to the fact there was a fire. It was the pretty Colonial home next door to the church! The horse-drawn fire wagon housed on Boston Road with little equipment and no running water was of little use to the volunteers to douse the flames.

The homestead had belonged to Widow Bancroft but at the time was occupied by the Edward E. Wright family. The father, age 50, perished in the conflagration.

The house, valued at the time at \$500, was insured but there was no coverage on the contents.

In a story in this newspaper recently, the house of half-century ago had been a gathering place of the Millerites, adherents to a group of religious zealots whom Crazy Amos enticed onto the Common on what was to be the night of their ascending bodily into Heaven.

Rises from Ashes

From this calamity there came the oppor-

tunity for the townspeople to purchase a choice site upon which to build a new library, sort of a companion piece to the new nearby town hall. As a consequence, the site, comprising only three-fifths of an acre, was purchased for \$600.

Now comes the funding. In a very obvious plea — and most obviously written by the eloquent Frost, the trustees reported for 1884-85 in part. "It has been the hope...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 had been done by men of wealth in many of our neighboring towns."

The bait had been thrown — and J. Varnum Fletcher quickly caught onto the idea. He had been an energetic boy who spent his youth on the Fletcher Cold Spring Farm and later walked to Boston to learn the market trade at Faneuil Hall Market. New-gained wealth permitted him to maintain a pretentious estate in suburban wealthy Belmont. He never forgot his hometown — and probably Fletcher was just the man Frost had in mind.

The result: The present attractive building of buff brick, trimmed in terracotta and resting on a solid foundation of Westford granite facing the Common. Since 1895, it has borne the name "J.V. Fletcher Library."

Friends and trustees of the present library are in agreement that it needs to expand to keep attuned with the growth and use of the community. The trustees call attention to the fact that the present space is so tight it cannot function properly. They say great libraries are not built in a day.

Culminating three years of study, the trustees have found that a substantial addition is needed. To get going, they are asking \$169,000 from Town Meeting voters for working blueprints.

They picture no modern Varnum Fletcher on the horizon, so it will be up to the townspeople to see the need — and perhaps vote this sum at the May 11 Town Meeting.