

Meeting House enters third century

By Gordon B. Seavey
Contributing Writer

In the matter of a few months, the venerable white church opposite Westford Common will enter its third century of religious and community service to the townspeople.

Newcomers know the building as the First Parish Church. But long-time residents still refer to the church as the "Meeting House," the designation a carry-over from when the congregation was "gathered" in 1725 and the population numbered in the hundreds.

The church, the inhabitants and the town government were one. The citizens voted that first year to immediately erect a church building, its first and most modest, for public worship as well as an assembly place for all town meetings. Also, it was the central

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quarters for the town's military equipment, gun powder and bullets, and weights and measures.

Town meetings continued to be held in the church until the present town hall was completed in 1870.

In the early days, the community grew slowly but finally a larger meeting house was deemed a necessity. The year was 1771. Ill-fated, this second structure was struck by lightning 22 years later and burned to the ground. Prudently, the hand-hewn nails were sifted from the ashes and sold at auction.

The congregation voted to immediately rebuild. The result is what you see today.

Third Meeting House

As one views today the stately although pristine church building, it might be assumed that it has stood there untouched for two centuries. Not so. It has withstood many alterations, two major and several minor.

Initially, the structure was one big room with wooden box pews on the ground floor and a balcony on three sides. The pulpit, from which preaching went on all Sunday excepting a break at noon,

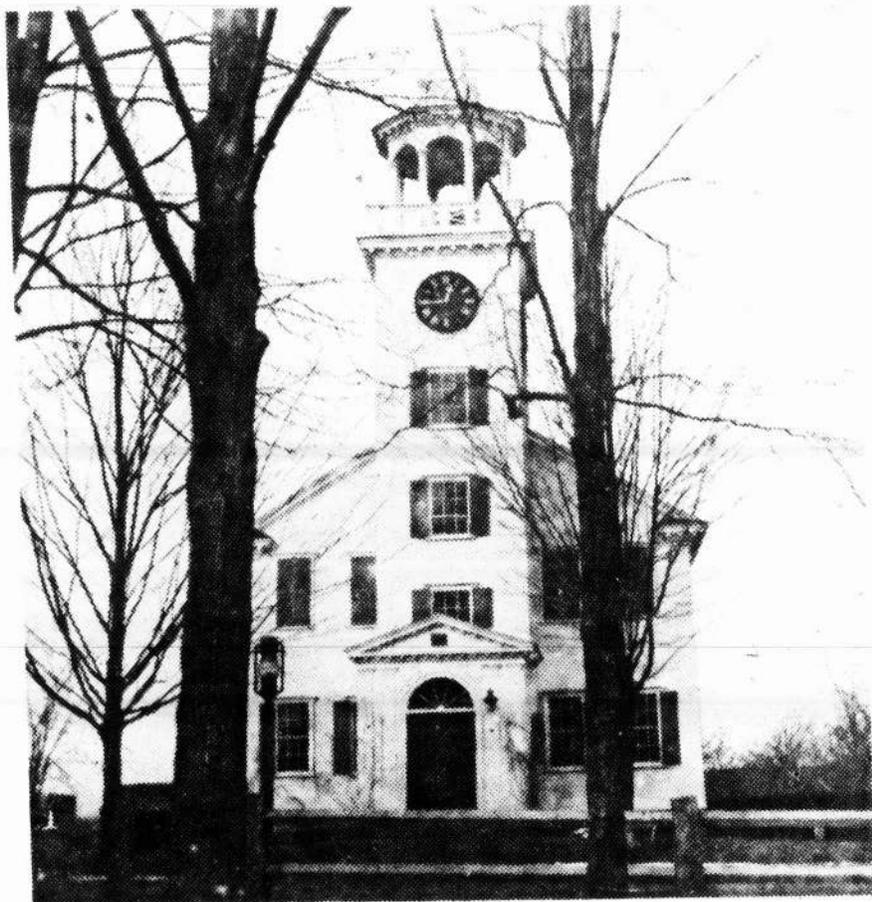


Photo courtesy of Gordon Seavey

Century-old photo shows the Westford Meeting House (also known as the First Parish Church) as it now faces the Common with its rail and granite post fencing. Note the post with a kerosene light atop and in the rear, the "hoss" sheds, leased for \$2 a year.

was located half-way up the west wall. Later the interior was made into two levels.

To "conform to the style and finish of modern churches," it was decided to follow parishes in Groton and Billerica and swing the entire building 90 degrees so its tower and main entrance faced east toward the Common, as it does today. Local historians still try to rationalize such a change, particularly when such a project was undertaken without modern equipment. All this occurred shortly after the Civil War.

Captain John Abbot gave the town a Willard steeple clock in 1837. It was installed in a small room beneath the 1,500 pound bell in the belfry, 60 feet above the ground. It strikes on the hour. Until electrified, the sexton weekly climbed hazardous stairs in the tower to crank two heavy clock weights suspended down through the tower.

Until 1824, the only music allowed was a cappella singing. Inasmuch as it stood upright, pointing toward Heaven, the bass viol came into use. Violins, you see, don't point in the same direction.

Fifty years later, the congregation decided it proper to have an organ and gathered \$2,400 for a Willcox tracker style church organ. Still in use, it is kept in top condition. Until electrified, blow boys pumped the organ, filling the bellows each Sunday for 50 cents.

"The weathervane on the pinnacle of the First Parish Church" wrote Rev. George E. Downey who served the parish for 25 years, "has ridden there as the generations passed beneath. It has monitored the changing winds of doctrine, as well as the evolution of religious life styles."

Gordon Seavey was christened 87 years ago in the First Parish Meeting House.