Moments throughout history to honor deceased veterans

Observances grew common after Civil War

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Contributing Writer

Honoring the dead has been a practice of many civilizations. In the United States, group action became popular shortly after the Civil War when the dead were honored on Memorial Day, or Decoration Day as it is also (decreasingly) known since the time of the Civil War.

For some reason unknown today, Westford waited 17 years before it became town practice to have the usual parade of living war veterans and special observances in churches and cemeteries.

Thirty-five Westford men lost their lives in the "War of the Rebellion," a term then in common usage. In 1868, May 30 was set aside by the Grand Army of the Republic to decorate graves of departed soldiers and sailors.

First formal recognition of the day in Westford came in 1882 when a detachment from Post 115, GAR, came from Groton to join local veterans in decorating the graves of comrades. In the evening, the Graniteville Cornet Band played in the new town hall at evening services. Rev. Edwin R. Hodgman, who later wrote the History of Westford, described the town's participation in the war. He mentioned the women who gave their time in making bandages and carrying for the wounded, and letters of encouragement to the men in service. "Hooker's Battle Above the Clouds" was read with "fine effect" and a Captain Palmer described the objects and the organization of the GAR, of which the American Legion and other groups are now a counterpart.

War monuments

The war effort in Westford, however, had been recognized earlier as a two section, 80-foot, flag pole with a bandstand at its base that had been erected on The Common with public contributions. This flag staff was turned from two giant white pines grown in town. Age and vandals finally caused its demise and its replacement is a fibreglass pole, twenty feet shorter.

File photo

The son of one of Westford's 172 Civil War veterans presented the bronze figure of a Union private to the town in 1910.

Another act honoring the veterans was the installation of two marble slabs near the entrance to the new town hall built in 1870. In black letters, the name of each man who died in service was recorded, with his outfit and place of death.

A proud son, whose dad was to be the first from Westford among the 172 men to answer the call of President Lincoln for volunteers to "fight for the preservation of the Union," was to present much later an outstanding bronze figure of a soldier in a Civil War private's uniform, in full equipment. This is mounted on the finest granite in a triangle at the head of the Common.

The donor in 1910 was Edwin C. Metcalf who in 1859 had graduated from Westford Academy and stayed home to run the little Metcalf farm near Minot's Corner to care for his mother while his father, William Metcalf, was away at war.

Edwin Metcalf had become a distinguished Bay State citizen, mayor of Springfield and finally a successful businessman in Auburn, N.Y.

The day came when Edwin was called back to Westford, the town of his birth, to bury his father in Fairview Cemetery. To his surprise, he was met at Westford depot by a delegation of local veterans.

"They were strangers to me, they came without solicitation and they came without any previous knowledge on my part," Metcalf said later. "I was so much pleased and so greatly touched at the spirit of devotion and loyalty of those who had stood shoulder to shoulder during the Civil War that I then and there resolved that I would do something in Westford to the memory of those veterans."

In due time, this small triangle was carefully graded, enclosed with a granite curbing, ready for its dedication on Memorial Day, 1910. This was probably the largest outpouring of people the town had ever seen. A special train from Boston via Lowell had brought dignitaries to the dedication ceremonies which included lunch served under a big tent on the Common.

Parade memories

Only until recently did the town give up its Memorial Day parades, due to lack of interest mainly on the part of war veterans.

Old timers will remember the parade always formed on Main Street and the head of Graniteville Road, marched to the Civil War memorial just described, and then across the street to a bandstand on the Common for speech making. At noon, the American flag was raised at full staff on the Common. Then, on to the Town Hall for lunch.

Families from out of town would join with local people to individually decorate family plots in the town's four cemeteries as well as in the two private ones. At Fairview, they could tether their horses along the roadside and rest a bit in a stylish gazebo on the grounds.

Lilacs and apple trees were usually in full bloom on Memorial Day. These blooms, water-filled in a glass jar for the lack of anything better, were the common decorations.

Gordon Seavey, a native of Westford, often was called upon to play "taps" on his Boy Scout bugle.