

# Old Meetinghouse on Westford Common to open for visitors

By GORDON B SEAVEY

WESTFORD — The venerable white meetinghouse on Westford Common, which for nearly two centuries has witnessed a wide variety of celebrations, observances and parades, will open its doors this Saturday morning for historical tours.

The free showings will precede the 250th Anniversary parade which will pass in front of the building sometime after 10 a m.

Visitors will be welcomed by members of the Book & Thimble Club, an ecumenical group. They will give a brief description of the ancient wooden structure on the free tour.

Although the town's first meetinghouse, a place for town meetings and gatherings as well as for worship, was built in 1724, the present edifice is the third.

The original building was replaced in 1771 with a more adequate one which burned 22 years later. The current building is of typical Puritan architecture and its erection was approved at a special town meeting in 1794.

It is assumed that there was much action around the common for a brief period as the newly formed Westford Academy was also building for the first time diagonally across the common.

The meetinghouse originally was a single enormous room with wooden box pews on the ground floor and a balcony on three sides. On the open side the preacher gave long sermons from an elaborate pulpit at mid-level.

Cost of the new structure was to be 1,300 pounds and its bell another 28 pounds. On it is inscribed:

*I to the church the living call.*

*And to the grave I summons all.*

The first pastor was Rev Willard Hall, a Harvard graduate who counseled the community and in which he preached for 48 years.

Town records in 1796 state that it was "Voted that the Hoss Stables behind the meetinghouse be built nine feet high. Those who did not walk to the Center and there were not many, now had a place to shelter their animals during the day long service."

## Substantial changes

The meetinghouse underwent two substantial changes. To conform to the style and finish of modern churches, the parish decided to swing the building one quarter turn, placing the tower and steeple facing the common. The old entrance was dropped (the door remains locked) and a new entrance was under the tower.

By this time, John Abbot had installed a clock

in the tower. One had to wind it weekly by cranking two heavy weights up the full length of the tower, one weight for the works, the other to strike the hour on the bell. This was in 1888.

The present bell was cast in Medway in 1856 and weighs at least 1,200 lbs. The height of the tower is 60 feet and the steeple another 60, totalling 120 feet.

A tracker pipe organ was installed which neighborhood boys took turns pumping. There were new pews and improved lighting. The ornate chandelier which now hangs from the ceiling in the sanctuary, held kerosene lamps. To service the lamps, it could be pulled down through an arrangement in the attic which was counter-balanced with a wooden box weighted with stones.

In front of the building, kerosene lamps on wooden posts lighted the entrance and a wooden rail fence was supported by granite posts. The driveway to the door has now been grassed over.

## Academy graduations

The meetinghouse was used for town meetings and office space until the town hall was built in 1867. Westford Academy graduations continued in the sanctuary for many years thereafter.

The sanctuary was redecorated this summer and the building is due to exterior work and increased fire protection. Its graceful, slender spire, topped by a swallow-tail weathervane, is a landmark visible for miles around.

For those waiting for the anniversary parade to come from Minot's corner, refreshments will be available on the lawn from 9 a m. The hours will start shortly afterwards.

Tied in with the meetinghouse history will be notepaper sketched by Edna MacDougall, the new post card showing Minutemen on the common with the meetinghouse in the background, and the 250th anniversary plaque, a ceramic tile in four colors, depicting town scenes over the centuries.

June W. Kennedy will have her newly released pictorial history of Westford, containing 200 photos and sketches with proper description available. It is of limited edition of 1,000 with nearly 700 copies already sold.

Further an excellent illustrated history of the old meetinghouse compiled by Rev. George E. Downey will be available. Since compulsory church attendance was banned in 1835, the church has been on its own and is a very active parish under the name of First Parish Church, United.