

Old records reveal what life was like

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WESTFORD — Old town records do not always make interesting reading. However, an unusual item here and there can be assembled into a word picture of what living might have been in an era gone by.

During the recent Bicentennial celebration, much was spoken and written about life in Westford during colonial times. Now, let's jump ahead a full century and imagine that we live in Westford just prior to the Civil War. If we had old letters and writings, a much clearer picture could be had than from persuing yellowed records.

The assessors' valuation of the town for the year 1860 does present a fairly good idea as to who lived in Westford, what they did for a living and their obvious material wealth.

These valuations were published in booklet form, printed on 32 pages by Stone & Huse at the Daily Courier office at 21 Central St., Lowell. Required by law every 25 years, it was a "full and fair cash value" of the real and personal property of those liable to taxation.

John Cutter, Elbridge G. Parker and Phinehas Chamberlin were the assessors. They reported the entire valuation of real estate in town was \$643,930 and personal property \$220,364. This figures to \$532 per person.

FARMING WAS the major occupation. Of the nearly 20,000 acres in town "from actual survey," 780 acres were annually tilled, 300 were in orchards. For "upland mowing," there were 1,571 acres which had produced 1,300 tons of hay, pastures took 3,200 acres. Producing firewood kept farmers busy during the winter. The assessors noted that 41,000 cords were cut in that year from 5,000 acres. While some of this remained in town to heat homes, the greater amount was hauled into cities by oxen or horse-drawn carts. A cord of hardwood weighs nearly three tons.

Oxen were still in demand for work on the farm, in woodlots and quarries. In numbers, they nearly equalled the 219 horses. Cows and steers totalled 900, hogs 135 and sheep a mere 12.

Manufacturing was limited. Two saw and two grist mills were listed, and one forge, two machine shops and three worsted yarn factories.

The population had risen only slightly since the census in 1776 of 1,193. The figure for 1860 was 1,624 with 281 dwellings. Those males over 21, paying a \$2 poll tax (since abandoned) numbered 392. George T. Day teamed up with Alpheus Swallow of Dunstable as state representatives.

The "War of the Rebellion" had not started, but no doubt Westford men and women were eagerly seeking the limited information available. Communication was difficult, newspapers were scarce and there was no telephone, radio or TV. Hodgman wrote in the History of Westford, "The winter of 1860-61 wore away in dreadful anxiety, and on the breezes of spring came the sulphurous breath of war, mingling unnaturally and reluctantly with the fragrance of the violet and the arbutus."

Two hundred Westford men served in the Civil War, 35 died. In comparison, 250 local men (with a lesser populace) had served in the American Revolution.

THE MOST common securities in 1860 were in railroads, with money invested in banks and insurance companies in lesser amounts. According to Assessor John Gagnon, up until 1916 residents were required to pay not only local taxes on real estate but on the securities they held. The Stony Brook Railroad, opened in 1848 between North Chelmsford and Ayer Junction (then Groton), was the most popular single investment.

All residents were recorded, regarding their means, for all to see and compare.

Widow Sally Reed was exempted from real estate taxes but had to pay on \$900 she had out at interest." John Cutter who owned what is now the Kimball farm on Littleton Road was assessed for \$3,928. His inventory included 120 acres of choice farm land, the

house, barn and other buildings, two oxen, nine cows, one horse, and three shares of Stony Brook.

Abbot & Company, which was then starting in Graniteville, had to pay on \$7,000 worth of machinery and stock in trade and on a \$100 horse! The Stony Brook Railroad was assessed \$700 for the depot at Westford Station, on one-eighth of an acre of land, used as a "dwelling

house." Westford Forge Co at Forge Village had 10 acres of land and machinery and stock totalling \$10,000.

Rufus Patten had 196 acres along the road which bears his name. The foundation of his home still stands. His was the only residence on the long street which today is lined, both sides, with new homes, plus the fourth Westford Academy building.

Assessors today would find

it difficult to locate property described in 1860. For example, Israel Blaisdell in the Parker Village section of the town owned, besides his "home place of 110 acres, the Loring lot, wood and meadow land, 30A; Bicknell lot, sprout land (recently cut over for lumber), 18A (rated \$12 per acre); Byam lot, Tadine swamp, 32 acres."

Who can tell where these lots are now located?