

Poor speller made mark in Westford.

By GORDON SEAVEY
Sun Correspondent

WESTFORD - Those interested in early days of Westford associate Jonas Prescott as one of "our own" because he established a corn mill, later expanded to a sawmill, at the outlet of Forge Pond 300 years ago. He came from Groton.

This was the beginning of the industrialization of Stony Brook Valley, using for water power a sizable stream of that name which left Forge and ending in the Merrimack River at North Chelmsford.

With his sons, Jonas II and Ebenezer, they later set up forges, also using their water power. A low grade of bog iron was found nearby in Groton which fed the forges.

Appropriately, the area soon took on the name of Forge Village, the only designation of this sort in the world.

His sons married and built homes near their work. Jonas II fathered nine children, his brother eight. This was the beginning of the Prescott family in Westford, prominent over the generations. Today there is only a handful of descendants.

Prominent family

The Prescotts of this branch became large landowners as their numbers grew. At one time, it was believed they owned several hundred acres in the northwest part of the town around Forge Pond, some of which was in Littleton.

One old deed describes the purchase of land from an Indian with his signature mark, "to have and to hold as long as trees shall grow and water flows."

An interesting sidelight is that they owned sufficient land to accommodate three railroads. If those had been at the proper time and conditions, there might have been a metropolis in the vicinity of St. Catherine's Church.

Near the Arch Bridge and the church, the Acton & Nashua (the red line) crossed both the Boston and Maine Railroad and the electric car line which ran from Lowell through the town of Ayer, all on Prescott lands. Such a convergence of rail lines sometimes produces a railroad center - but not here!

Jonas senior was most active in Groton, although he was born in Lancaster in 1648. He watched over a garrison house on James Brook on the Old Ayer Road.

Active in Groton

A garrison house was one large enough to take in neighbors when an emergency arose, or which would house a garrison of soldiers if needed. If the walls were lined with brick, that was more for insulation than for protection from the Indians. A stockade around the house was to protect and keep within safe limits the inhabitants and animals.

Jonas became a selectman about the time he built his little mill at Forge and in 1791 became Groton's tenth town clerk. Researchers report that his handwriting was plain enough but that his spelling was "simply abominable."

Here's a sample:

"groton dasamber 21 1691 at a general town meting legaly warn & the town being genaraly mett together did then voat that thay gouls invite som meet parson to prach gods word to thom with as much speed as may be"

Jonas couldn't get by the third grade if spelling were a criterion. Nevertheless, we must give the old gentleman who lived to be 75 credit for many, many other accomplishments.

He worked hard as a wheelwright, a forgerman and a blacksmith - and he prospered. He was highly respected and was a force in both Groton and Westford.

His descendants spread throughout the area. Most notable was his grandson, Col. William Prescott, who commanded the forces at Bunker Hill and served with distinction throughout the Revolution. The colonel's son was William Hickling Prescott, Harvard University's famed historian of the southwest and South American countries. A city in Arizona takes the name of Prescott from this scholar.

The Prescott family became so great in numbers that in order to keep some sort of genealogical order, a family history entitled "Prescott Memorial" was written. It has long been out of print and today a copy is worth \$50. A reprint of Westford's early history costs \$5.