

Rare Westford document

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
WESTFORD — For two centuries this northern Middlesex County town in Massachusetts has been observing the 4th of July in some form or other. It has not been alone.

Schoolboys (and girls) have recognized it as the date on which the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776 establishing these United States.

And it is also a day to celebrate. As part of community exercises, youthful orators quote many parts of this famous document, usually beginning with "When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another. . ."

No one two centuries ago was much surprised at the news from Philadelphia when it finally arrived. Just when the resounding information came across the borders of Westford is not certain. Within a few days, a week or perhaps a bit longer after the signatures were affixed?

Unaided by the speed of modern communications, nevertheless news travelled throughout this area rather rapidly. Couriers on horseback spread news either by word of mouth or perhaps a handwritten or printed paper to the community leaders. From this point it quickly passed along country roads by excited neighbors to isolated farmhouses.

Utilizing the full power of the growing press, the colonists were able to dispatch the details of major events even to remote areas. We can imagine families and neighbors gathered around a fireplace or in candlelight or along a stone wall to listen to a more educated person read the latest issue.

There was the New-England Chronicle of Samuel and Ebenezer Hall which had moved back to Boston from Cambridge, where it had been in hiding while the British occupied the city. More famous of course, was the Massachusetts Spy, which Isaiah Thomas, the fiery printer, had moved from Boston for safety reasons to settle permanently in Worcester.

BENJAMIN EDES had taken the Boston Gazette to Watertown and did not return to Boston until November 4, 1776, not for safety reasons but because of an outbreak of smallpox in the city.

The controversy between England and the colonies gave these newspapers, and others like the Salem Gazette, an unusual opportunity to assert themselves and to take a commanding position in local, colony and national affairs. The publishers vigorously upheld the freedom of the press — as they do now.

There is no question but in the movement toward American independence, the Patriot press played a tremendous part. It widely spread the news and propaganda of the colonists long before the Concord fight and continued to do so thereafter without fear. They were a courageous group.

But the day July 4 had a very special meaning to Westford two years prior to 1776.

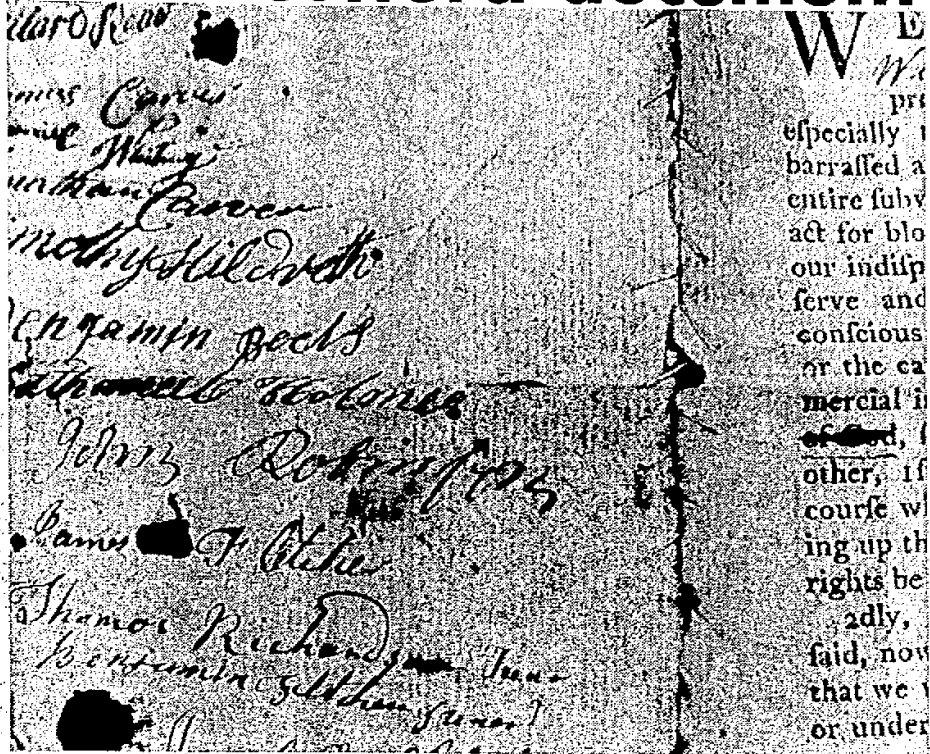
And this is why.

It was on July 4, 1774, that 207 Westford men signed a "Solemn League and Covenant," protesting the closing of Boston port. They met to discuss the issues no doubt in the meetinghouse at the center, where all town meetings were held.

The culmination of the deliberations, according to records of John Abbot, town clerk at the time, was the first organized local protest of any great significance toward the British.

The action was: "Voted unanimously to take under our consideration the papers sent from Boston to our town in consequence of sd Boston Harbour being Blocked up. Voted unanimously that the covenant lastly sent to Westford (with some small alterations thereon) should be signed by our town.

"Voted that the Covenant signed by the inhabitants of Westford Relating to Boston affairs be kept or Left in the town Clerk's hand During the town's Pleasure, and also to return the names of those who do not sine this paper."



Robinson's signature

Strong signature of Col. John Robinson is among the signers of the July 4, 1774, document on display at the Westford library.

Note linen thread holding paper together, also, changes made in original wording.

THE DOCUMENT, rescued by a thoughtful person whose ancestors lived in the northern part of town, is preserved in the J.V. Fletcher Library. It is an aging sheet, held together with linen thread and when opened measures 13 3/4 inches in width by 20 in height.

The document, which had been printed in the Boston area and sent probably to all Massachusetts communities, is in type on the first page, leaving two blank pages for signatures.

A formal agreement, the covenant had been worked out by the Boston Committee of Correspondence, of which Dr. Joseph Warren, a top-ranking Massachusetts patriot leader, was a spokesman. It was the colonists' reply to the actual closing of the port of Boston on June 1.

It was sent to outlying communities on the 8th. Its probable impact was considered seriously, no doubt, by Westford people for three weeks until formal action could be taken. This was on July 4.

It is rather a lengthy manuscript and begins with this basic statement:

"We the Subscribers, inhabitants of the town of Westford, having taken into our serious consideration the precarious state of the liberties of North-America, and more especially the present distressed condition of this insulted province, embarrassed as it is by several acts of the British parliament, tending to the entire subversion of our natural and charter rights: Among which is the act for blocking up the harbour of Boston; and being fully sensible of our indispensable duty to lay hold on every means in our power to preserve and recover the much injured constitution of our country; and conscious at the same time of no alternative between the horrors of slavery, or the carnage and desolation of a civil war, but a suspension of all commercial intercourse with the island of Great Britain: Do (and here the words 'in the presence of God' were deleted) solemnly and in good faith, covenant and engage with each other, 1st, That from henceforth we will suspend all commercial intercourse with the said island of Great Britain, until the said act for blocking up the said harbour be repealed, and a 'full' (and this word was deleted) restoration of our charter rights be obtained."

ARTICLE 2 signifies that the signers would not "buy, purchase or consume, or suffer any person, by, for or under us to purchase or consume, in any manner whatever, any goods, wares and merchandize that shall arrive in America from Great Britain . . ."

The next article affirms the promise to hold to the covenant "until the port or harbour of Boston, shall be opened, and we are 'fully' restored to the free use of our constitutional and charter rights." Here again the word "fully" was crossed out in the Westford document.

In another place, the localites had added the words "imported from Great Britain" just to be certain that there was no misunderstanding of their feelings about that country!

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THE SIGNATURE of Colonel John Robinson stands in prominence among the other signers almost to the same extent that John Hancock's does on the Independence document signed two years later.

Zaccheus Wright, town leader, founder and first president of Westford Academy and the town library system, shows up along with the captains of the town's three Minutemen companies: Underwood, Bates and Minot.

While the covenant could have been subscribed to by adults of both sexes, the men apparently signed for their families. This was long before women's lib.

Pioneer families, some descendants of whom still live in town, have their names inscribed. There are 23 Fletchers.



Lone survivor

Admiring the tin "rum" cup used during the Revolutionary War by Col. John Robinson to deal out daily portions to his troops is Mrs. Alice Prescott Collins, 89, a descendant. She is shown in front of her 1780 homestead in Forge Village.