

# Roudenbush at 90 still in public service

By Gordon B. Seavey

A grand old edifice in the center of Westford is about to celebrate its ninetieth birthday.

It is the ornate Victorian-styled second Westford Academy structure, opened in 1897 and now the home of Roudenbush Community Center.

Senior citizens remember it as their high school where enrollment varied from 30 to 65 or more students. Today, folks regard this sturdy building with its gargoyles, ornate tower and arches as the home for all sorts of action and functions — a busy com-

munity center offering a varied program.

The reason it was erected nearly a century ago by the trustees of the then private Westford Academy is not clear. The decision came at a time when the Commonwealth was asking that each town provide free secondary school education. The population of Westford was then about 2,500, not sufficiently large to support both a private and a public high school.

For an answer, we delve into old records of the trustees, dating back to July 9, 1792, when "Westford School" was initiated.

For its first two years, students either

gathered in homes or most probably in the Meeting House at the Common, for their lessons under Dr. Levi Hedge, a recent Harvard College graduate.

## First building

By the autumn of 1794, the sturdy two-room, two-story Colonial-style building was constructed on a small triangular lot of land facing the Common, the latter used as a playing field for the students.

After nearly a century of occupancy, this structure became outmoded and undersized. It had been heated by wood stoves with long

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## Roudenbush rebirth to serve community

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stove pipes for added heat — which leaked or "blew black" on more than one occasion. For fuel, firewood was stacked undercover in a small building in the rear of the lot. It was called the "necessary house" as inside were two privies, one for girls, the other, for boys.

Also, near the end of the 19th century the rumblings from the State House were growing, indicating that each town should have its own high school, supported by town taxes. The Academy was private, although its tuition fees were modest. Generous townspeople also had established funds to aid indigent and "qualified" scholars.

After three years of study, Trustees Abiel J. Abbot and Daniel S. Richardson reported in 1886 it was "inexpedient to make any change." They were wrong.

Events finally began to consolidate when in 1895 the town voted to enter into an agreement with the trustees to "temporarily furnish a high school education to such children as are fitted and reside in the town under a law passed by the State Legislature of 1895."

### Former governor presides

Fifteen days later, the trustees met in the old school building with President John D. Long, a former governor of the state, in the chair. Real action

was now in the works toward a new edifice.

A new group was assigned to "get estimates of cost and plans of a new Academy building and land for same; also to the disposition of the present building and land."

Headed by George T. Day, the others included Abiel Abbot, J. Adams Bartlett and newly-elected J. Varnum Fletcher. The School Committee was to cooperate with suggestions and advice.

Next came a formal joint meeting where it was generally agreed that the trustees "shall erect an fully equip immediately a suitable building without any extra expense to the town." With the trustees carrying the burden of a new building, two of them versus one from the School Committee was agreed upon.

Initial plans of six architects were studied. Allan Cameron came forth to offer land gratis next to his Main Street home, the present site. H. M. Francis of Fitchburg, the architect for the recently completed J. V. Fletcher Library, received the nod. Building committee was Sherman H. Fletcher, J. Henry Read, Walter Wright, George Day and John W. Abbot.

By September 25, 1896, bids were in for the new structure. A loan of \$10,000 at 4½ percent was negotiated and the balance came from Academy funds.

### Local builder

Winner of the contract was a well-known local builder, W. C. Edwards who lived almost on the West Chelmsford border. Well-known for having erected railroad stations and in particular the Union Station in Boston, Edwards had just completed, with great praise, the J. V. Fletcher Library.

Other bids came from Worcester, Medford, Ware and Fitchburg. Edwards' figure was \$20,234. It was amusing to learn that his bid was handwritten on a billhead of the local grocery store, Wright & Fletcher.

Incidentally, his grand-niece, Rita Edwards Miller, now lives at 59 Main Street, within sight of both the Academy and the library.

The student body transferring from the old building numbered but 35. Added to this were 21 eighth graders from various grade schools. The school committee, in its annual report, said the students found the new school "most commodious!" The old Academy building, which had served well for 123 years, was now up for sale or lease.

### Present use

In 1955 high school students left the venerable building for a new school on Depot Street — the third Academy structure (and now Abbot middle school).

Used to house lower grade-school overflows, later for two

years as a branch of the Lowell YWCA, finally in 1975 the Roudenbush Community Center blossomed.

It is now named the Roudenbush Community Center in honor of William C. Roudenbush, a dedicated teacher who served as a principal for 25 years until his retirement in 1938.

Today, one out of every three Westford families use the services available at Roudy, according to Ellen Harde, committee chairman.

There is a licensed pre-school, consignment gift shop, health services area, playgroup, arts and crafts, discussion groups, exercise classes. Day trips are offered to the public. Many workers are volunteers and income from the programs offset the expenses of the Center. Brochures are mailed town-wide four times a year describing Roudy programs, which include aerobics, dog obedience training and a Sunday afternoon square dance fling.

The sturdy old building has seen a variety of activities and for its 90th birthday, you will note a banner crosses its facade, reading: "Happy 90th, Roudy!"

Gordon Seavey was graduated from Westford Academy in 1922 and has been a trustee for over fifty years. A native of the town, he lives on Depot Street.



The shingled Victorian facade of the Roudenbush Community Center shows no tell-tale signs of its 90-year history, thanks to the loving care of the community it continues to serve. While originally constructed to house the growing Westford Academy student body, the building on Main Street now welcomes townspeople of all ages to a variety of activities.

(Post card, one of a set, available at Community Commodities)