



Today's Westford Academy greatly benefited from early efforts of the Carver family, whose imposing monument stands in West Burying Ground. (Photo by Leighton O'Connor)

Sally Carver, Age 9

Studied Greek, geometry...and logic

By Gordon Seavey

In the West Burying Ground on Concord Road, among the ancient slate slabs of the early burials, is a huge gravestone styled in the Victorian era.

It is so large that it consists of five separate sections of granite, all laboriously wrought, to perpetuate the memory of three generations of an old Westford family by the name of Carver.

It was placed there in the late 1800's by a descendant of Robert Carver, the latter said to be a brother of John Carver, the first governor of Plymouth Colony.

As the Carver family multiplied and spread out from Marshfield, a Benjamin Carver came to Westford where he spent his life on a farm probably between the Center and the Minot's Corner area.

He was the father of ten children, of whom the third was Jonathan, born in 1751. Jonathan was to become a prominent figure in early local history and his name pops up many times in the old records.

Jonathan married a local girl, Mary Proctor, and of the three children born to them, two girls died at an early age. Sally, born

in 1783, turned out to be a very precocious young lady. And this is where our story really begins.

Because of her apparent intellectual ability, at the age of nine she was selected to be among the initial entering class of the newly organized Westford Academy, one of the earliest secondary schools in the country.

The first preceptor, Levi Hedge, certified after an oral examination that Sally, in spite of her youthfulness, was capable of holding her place among the 31 registered students. This oral exam required, in part, the ability to "read the Bible readily without spelling."

Sally's classmates were from local families, anxious to have their youngsters receive an education unobtainable for the parents. There were out-of-towners, too, who were to board with local families or relatives. Billerica sent three, Lexington, two, and one each from Groton, Chelmsford, Townsend and Stow.

No doubt much younger than her peers, Sally nevertheless was faced with a curriculum of "English, Latin and Greek languages, together with writing, arithmetic, and the art of

speaking...and if desired, practical geometry, logic, geography, and music."

There is not much information as to Sally's career, nor do we know if she ever was graduated from the Academy.

She married Theodore Peabody and they had three children. Jonathan, who died age two, Ann Maria who died at 19, and Sarah E. C. Peabody who married the Rev. Dr. Theodore Wells of Dover, N.H.

At the time of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Academy, Mrs. Wells presented the trustees with a small book with wooden covers entitled "Entertaining Histories." This book, she said, was presented to her mother as a "reward" from her teacher, Amos Crosby, the third preceptor, whom Sally called "Captain Crosby."

Mrs. Wells is listed as a graduate in the English Course of the Academy in 1825 under the name of "Sally" Peabody. This name she may have used in deference to her brilliant mother.

Sally's father was among the prime movers in establishing the Academy and as one of the subscribers pledged 18 pounds toward its organization. He was a

man apparently of moderate means; his donations to the the new school fund, and to the Social Library established five years later, were in the "middle bracket."

He was one of the original trustees and served as Academy treasurer for a long period.

Jonathan Carver also was a selectman for six years and town treasurer for four. In 1803 voters sent him to the Massachusetts General Court where he served for three years.

It is believed that his farm was in the western part of the town, in the Beaver Brook area. This was considered the most productive lands in town, originally called the Greater Tadnuck Meadows.

Westford Academy is no longer a private school, having given way to a state-mandated high school in 1905. Its current enrollment is near the 1000 mark, although reduced in recent years past because of the introduction of Nashoba Valley Technical School.

In June, the graduating class numbered 241, receiving their diplomas from the fourth school, now located on Patten Road.