

Second Academy Bell Headed For Town Museum

by Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD — The big bronze bell that called many a student to class in the second Westford Academy building, now the Roudenbush Community Center, is scheduled to be placed on public exhibition when the town museum is completed. Lack of funds is slowing the project.

The 1200-pound casting, three parts copper and one part tin, was not considered the most thrilling sounding instrument in the Center for whenever it rang, it was to call students, sometimes unwillingly, to class.

Nevertheless, it served a practical purpose for the sixty years the building was used as a high school. It pealed on each school day at 8:15 a.m. as a warning, then again in 15 minutes to announce classes were about to start in the three-room building. This was repeated at the lunch hour.

The bell is now in storage awaiting for a spot in the town museum, which is to be in the original Westford Academy edifice constructed in 1794. And to make things more perplexing, the Paul Revere bell that was cast for the original Academy, lost for fifty years, is on continuous display at the 1972 Academy on Patten Road.

Permission to move the bell from atop the Roudenbush Center was given by the selectmen last August, but the funds and the problem of moving the heavy article had not been resolved.

BIG BLOW

Then came the heavy winds during the night of March 31!

So strong were they that the 15-foot spire above the belfry was knocked askew and leaned at a dangerous angle. The four wooden posts which had supported it since 1897, when the school was built by the trustees, had rotted. A giant mobile crane was rushed to the scene to remove the tipped spire.

Town officials seized upon the opportunity to remove the bell from the cupola at the same time, knowing that its foundations had deteriorated to an unsafe condition. And so the spire, with its weathervane, were lowered in one action; the bell soon followed in another.

Whether funds for replacing the spire will be forthcoming is questionable, but lovers of mid-Victorian architecture along with old grads say it is a "must" to preserve the exterior appeal of the 80-year-old structure, now in daily use.

AN ABBOT GIFT

The bell was the gift of John William Abbot, a member of an old and distinguished Westford family. It was cast August 2, 1897, by the Meneeley Bell

Company of Troy, N. Y. The words, "Knowledge is Power" (Francis Bacon, 1597) and the donor's name are molded into the casting. It measures 31 inches at the mouth and was rung from the preceptor's office on the second floor by pulling on a long rope, rigged through pulleys.

Abbot was a graduate of the Academy. He and his father, John William Pitt Abbot, were founders of Abbot & Company in Graniteville in 1857. Both served many years as Academy trustees. The donor of the bell, however, lived only four months after the dedication of the building.

By 1895, the inhabitants of the town had doubled over the past century and there was a population of about 2,300. The trustees of the Academy, which was still a private school, felt the need for expansion. They asked architects to prepare plans for a new building on land donated by Allen Cameron, a trustee and also a member of the Abbot firm.

Six responded, including the well-known Cram. Although his plan initially received nine votes to three going to others, old records do not mention Cram's name again. The contract went to H. M. Francis of Fitchburg; the school's building committee then consisted of George T. Day, John W. Abbot, Sherman H. Fletcher, J. Henry Read and Arthur Wright.

\$18,000 OVERALL COST

Bids were entered from nine contractors, ranging from the \$14,000 price offered by W. C. Edwards of Westford to \$17,600 sent in by C. H. Nelson of Lowell. Heating and ventilation was another \$1,780.

The trustees voted a total of \$18,000 for the project. They negotiated a loan of \$10,000 at 4-1/2% interest and took the remainder from current funds.

The architect didn't get his full payment "until the brick work in the basement...be put in proper shape." By mid-winter, problems developed in the heating system, so the building committee instructed the supplier to "send a competent person to give instructions to the janitor in regard to the heating and ventilation of the building and remain (in town) a sufficient time for that purpose."

With a new Academy building at a new location, what happened to the original building which stood at the head of the town common for over a century? The trustees, on June 19, 1903, voted to sell it with the land for \$1,200. It was purchased by John C. Abbot, whose estate joined the property, and later moved to its present location on Boston Road. For half a century, it was used as a fire house. Now, as a bicentennial project, it is being turned into a town museum.



A GRADUATE OF WESTFORD ACADEMY 68 years ago, Allister F. MacDougall misses the spire and weathervane which adorned the top of Roudenbush Community Center for 80 years. It was blown askew in heavy winds on March 31, 1977. (G. B. Seavey photo)