

The day Crazy Amos outfoxed the religious zealots

By Gordon B. Seavey

A century and a half ago, Westford was a serene mixture of farming and industry. Population in 1840 was about 1,400 with 500 families equally split among five villages and the adjacent farming areas.

Town life, compared with today's many activities and modern living, meant long hours of hard work and dull hours in between.

New theories of religious life came to the town which then had but two churches, the First Parish (1729) and the Union Congregational (1828).

First it was a ripple and then a giant breeze of religious fervor and passion, all centered in an old Colonial home next to the staid First Parish Church.

It was the teachings of William Miller that had come to Westford, to Groton and to hundreds of communities throughout the East. A temple of granite was built in Scollay Square, Boston, by ardent followers. It later became the Old Harvard Theatre, home of burlesque.

Massachusetts-born, it is said that he was a person who drove millions crazy. As he preached, the Millerite Cult grew. Westford had its followers.

Miller was a voice of delusions. It caused believers to impoverish themselves, give or sell their belongings to nonbelievers in the certainty of their faith that they would have no further use for them.

He declared that Christ would raise the righteous dead and judge them with the righteous living, who would be caught up to meet them in Heaven. His belief was a literal interpretation of the Scriptures. His preaching appealed to untold numbers.

The Earth would burn

Miller's delusion was that "The Earth would burn up like a scroll about March 30, 1843." The date later was changed to April 3.

Earlier in the year, the Great Comet of 1843, after orbiting for 514 years, had burst forth. This greatly increased the faith of his followers that he was correct.

The opening of the year 1843 found the people flighty and understandably nervous.

While the Millerite Cult kept expanding, Rev. Ephraim Abbot, who served the First Parish Church at the Common for nine years during this period, must have been worried about himself and his loyal flock.

Keynote of Miller's hold on the people was the thoroughness of his self-preparation and his absolute belief he was right. Other religious leaders tried to show him the error of his conclusions. All to no avail!

Miller personally delivered several thousand speeches throughout the East, while hundreds of other preachers joined forces to "spread the Word."

Miller's dynamic speaking power was shown in Portland,

Maine. After a lecture there in 1841, booksellers moved more Bibles in one month than they had during the previous ten years.

Then came the strange and eerie event. The biggest ball of fire ever to approach earth was seen when the Great Comet appeared. It is said that even the confirmed atheists trembled at this blazing spectacle. More believers flocked to Millerite camps.

A great camp meeting in nearby Groton drew believers from miles around. It was held "about two miles from the village on the main road from Groton to Keene," on what we know as Route 119.

Story from parents

Westford records show very little information on the activities of adherents in the town. We have stories told from parents to children over the past century which indicate that for the anticipated date of April 3 the believers gathered in the Richard Kneeland house (at that time occupied by a Bancroft) opposite the Common.

This large homestead, typical of many of the old homes still standing in town, had been stripped bare of its contents and it is said the furniture had been broken up to provide fuel for a bonfire on nearby Prospect Hill, the town's highest elevation.

Dressed in long, flowing white robes, the occupants filled the spacious house to capacity, ready to leave at the proper moment for Prospect Hill. There was much praying and singing of hymns while waiting for the "word," which never came.

Instead, long and loud blasts from a horn pierced the night. It came through the lips of a man by the name of Amos, who probably was standing on the steps of the old Academy building then located at the head of the Common, now Westford Museum.

The fervent praying ended abruptly...the time had come! Rushing out onto the Common, they could barely see Amos waving his trumpet. "Hallelujah! Glory to God! The time has come," they shouted.

Now Amos was not Angel Gabriel. He was a town character — reputed to have liked the hard cider and Jamaican rum that flowed freely in those days — who had gained the title of Crazy Amos. Crazy or not, it is said he belloyed this advice:

"You are all fools! Go plant your corn...Angel Gabriel won't do it for you," he yelled.

Crushed

The letdown for the believers must have been great. From his study in his home on the other side of the church, Parson Abbot probably smiled and said, "I did my best to counsel you...See you this Sunday?"

Amos must have had a happy smile on his face as he strolled back home, a half-mile down Hildreth Street. He certainly played



The Millerite House which stood on the site of the J.V. Fletcher Library is depicted in this oil painting currently hanging in the library.
(Photo of painting by Garo Lachinian)

a masterful joke on the Millerites when he appeared at just the right moment to bring members of the cult rushing onto the Common, thinking his trumpet blasts came straight from Angel Gabriel.

Of "Crazy Amos" Kate Hamlin wrote in a booklet published many years ago: "He sings, dances, plays with the boys, promises to make all sorts of toys, bows and arrows, doll furniture — anything asked for. For a few days or possibly weeks, he is good natured, kind — and fond of playing jokes." Maybe the disappointed Millerites had a far different name for him.

Groton had an "ascension" house, too. It was on the property now owned by the Groton School but age took its toll and it had to be demolished.

As for the Kneeland house, it burned in 1891. A sad ending for a pretty old Colonial with flowers and shrubs in the yard surrounded by a white picket fence. At one time, Albert Leighton operated a store in the ell. A painting in oils of the structure by H.H. Robinson now hangs in the Fletcher Library.

J. Varnum Fletcher built the library which he gave to the town in 1895 on this very site. It is an interesting historical note that Kneeland was the first librarian and treasurer of the Westford Social Library and probably dispensed books from his home.

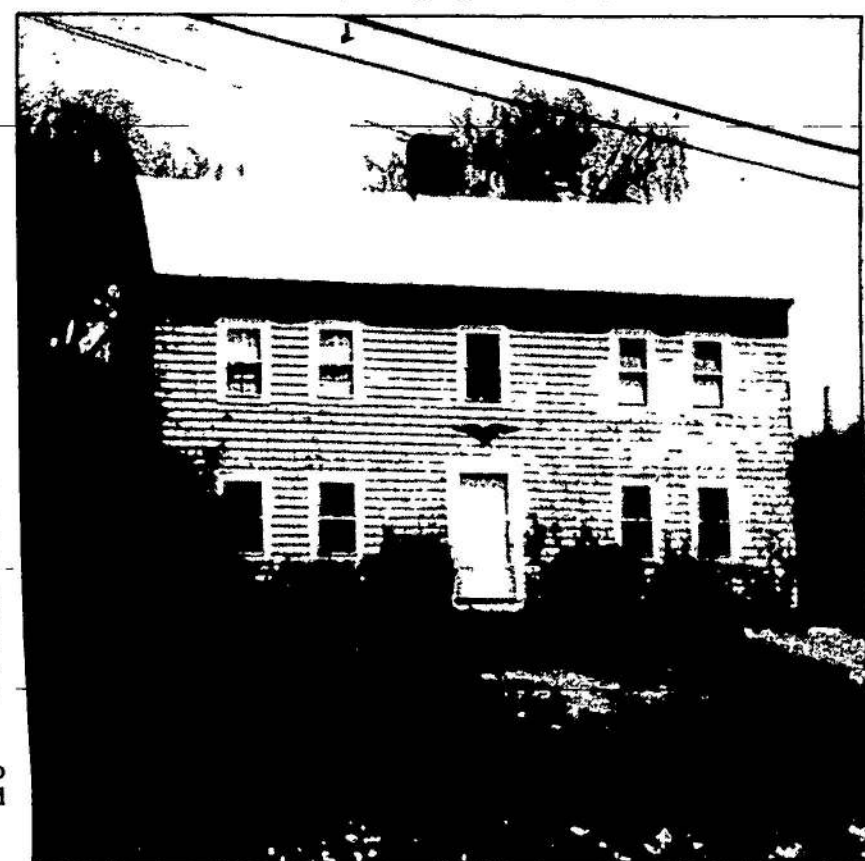
The stronghold of the town's

Millerites, which lasted for perhaps only a few years, has long gone. We never knew Crazy Amos' family name but no doubt he lies somewhere near his ancestors in either the Fairview Cemetery (established 1702) or the old West Burying Ground on Concord Road.

As for Miller, it is reported that he had "a full woodshed and pantry, and his fields and livestock were well tended. Such preparations for the future certainly cast suspicion on the sincerity of a man who prophesied utter oblivion on earth for mankind." Possibly a head injury in 1810 (he fell off the back of a wagon) caught up with him, for in his last years marked mental deterioration and blindness developed into complete insanity. He died in 1849.

We can feel sad for those who lost their spiritual hope...and their worldly goods.

Even though they were greatly disillusioned and misled, perhaps they turned once again to the church of their forefathers, the sturdy First Parish meeting-house which still proudly stands next door to the misguided "ascension house."



The Wright Home, said to have been built in 1736, was the home of Crazy Amos and still stands at 45 Hildreth Street. Around 1915, the barn was used to bottle old-fashioned soft drinks such as sarsaparilla, root and birch beer.
(Seavey photo)