

The head count goes on

By Gordon B. Seavey

Following an annual procedure, four census takers are now making the rounds, checking the number of persons in each household and also checking on the number of dogs in each home. The latter procedure is for the purpose of taxing each canine.

Such a procedure has been going on for over two centuries.

Westford's first census was taken in 1776, 47 years after the town was incorporated. This, the first and only Colonial census, showed the population to be 1,193.

For the next 100 years the population growth was minimal. By 1890 it had not even doubled, being just 2,000.

Last year, however, the census takers counted 15,051 persons, give or take a few.

And how about the number of dogs, many of whom do not understand the terms of the leash law? They numbered 1,666, or about one to every human. No record was made of the sales of dog food in this vicinity, so dear reader, figure this for yourself.

Zaccheus Wright, whom seemed to be the town's #1 citizen in those early days, headed the first census takers. They were Zachariah Hildreth, Jonathan Keep and Francis Leighton, all entrusted to "number

the people." They did this work traveling from house to house on horseback.

Local census takers today are veterans on the job. They are Dot and Bill Healy, Edie and Bill Vaughn. None of these have horses to leave tied to a stone hitching post in the yard while they knock on your door.

It is interesting to compare the population of neighboring communities during this early Colonial period. When the Indians burned the shire town of Groton in 1676, its estimated population then was 300, maybe 350. By 1780 the population had grown to 1,840 persons, Littleton 854, Pepperell 1,132, and Shirley, 677.

Have fun with these population figures from the Westford Census: 1776 - 1,193; 1810 - 1,267; 1820 - 1,409; 1830 - 1,329; 1840 - 1,436; 1850 - 1,473; 1860 - 1,624; 1870 - 1,803; 1880 - 1,933; 1890 - 2,000; 1900 - 2,148; 1910 - 2,851; 1920 - 3,179; 1930 - 3,600; 1940 - 3,830; 1950 - 5,377; 1960 - 6,361; 1970 - 10,368; 1980 - 13,630; 1985 - 15,051.

May I suggest you cut this out to save for reference, and to compare these figures with those that are bound to increase in the next decade.

Gordon Seavey, a Westford native who lives on Depot Street, is the retired owner-publisher of the Belmont Citizen.