

These primitive paintings depict Westford life in the early 1800's

By Gordon B. Seavey

The overall interest in collecting artifacts of early town life for Westford's new museum has brought to light at least two interesting primitive paintings.

One is a scene of the original Westford Academy building and its surroundings, done in watercolor. The artist is apparently an unknown student. The second also is a watercolor, a landscape depicting the setting of one of the very oldest homes in town, the Hildreth farmhouse built prior to 1730.

Life and customs in the early 19th century, according to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, were portrayed by numerous pictures of everyday life, done by a prolific group of amateurs who painted in both watercolor and pastels for pleasure.

These artists were gentlemen dilettantes, women with newfound leisure and especially seminary schoolgirls. We must assume Academy girls were the local artists of these prints.

The Academy scene is made from the upper end of the Common and depicts the 1794 edifice as the central theme. The building is enclosed with a post-and-rail fence

At the left is a small residence and a grouping of outbuildings. In the foreground is an assortment of people, one lady with a parasol and men in top hats. Three cows graze leisurely and for humor the young artist shows a hog, with raised bristles on its back (plus curly tail) being pestered by a dog.

The size of this primitive is 12 by 18 inches, and the artist found it necessary to piece the paper at the top with a two-inch strip to accommodate the size desired. To hide the seam, an extra heavy cloud formation in blue is imposed.

The building itself is in a shade of pink, with a bright red door and brown roof. Here is where the artist used her poetic license, for the previous color of the structure as determined by the trustees was a shade or two of green deeper than Chelmsford meeting house.

The combined woodshed and "necessary" house is dark brown. The elaborate weather vane, which now has been lost has a touch of gold.

The bell in the belfry was not painted in, leaving space for the artist to depict a fellow student peering over the Common. More fellow students are gathered at

one of the rails.

A gaily decorated coach, in red, at the right is being drawn by a tandem of prancing horses with a rider astride the rear animal. The artist has painted the street in green. Today, we know the color is black, but at that time, dirt color.

It is not known whether the frame is original. It appears to be very old. It has brushed on gold leaf with a black border; the back mounting board is rough sawed pine.

A label, only 2 x 2 inches, is pasted on the back and is scarcely discernable. It reads, "C.D. & E.J. Vopp, Dealers in Chrome Lithographs, steel engravings, photographs and picture frames made to order in the best manner Cor. Main and Water Sts., Nashua, N. H."

This primitive was hidden for years in the attic of the late Mrs. Alice M. Wells. The previous owner of her home, Dr. Walter J. Sleeper, probably acquired it during the brief period he lived in this house, at the head of Graniteville Road. He was known to have collected many items of historical value during the period he was a practicing physician and surgeon in town. He was only 48 when he died in 1908 following a



PRIMITIVE BEAUTY—This watercolor painting was done in 1810, probably by a Westford Academy school girl.
(Photo courtesy of Gordon B. Seavey)

lingering illness.

Hildreth Homestead

Present owner of this sketch is Ben W. Drew to whom it has particular significance inasmuch as several of his forebears attended the Academy. His father, George A. Drew, was a member of the Class of 1884 and a trustee for ten years.

The Hildreth sketch is owned by Barbara Hildreth Parkhurst, tenth generation of this old and

numerous family in Westford. It is about the same size as the Academy scene but is more of a landscape.

Main theme is the Joseph Hildreth house, in red with white trim, tucked in among several outbuildings and barns. In the near distance is the Levi Hildreth house, known better today by old-timers as the Sid Wright home. The rolling meadows in the background lead up the high

est elevation in town, Prospect Hill at 465 feet which then was treeless.

There is no signature on this painting, but Mrs. Parkhurst says it was done by one of eight daughters of Abijah Hildreth prior to 1860.

In looking at the two paintings, it would be difficult to ascertain which of these girls had the artistic ability.