

Town's history relived in preserved buildings

By Gordon B. Seavey

By an agreement in 1660 between Chelmsford, the "mother town," and the Indians, Westford became a separate entity. The first settler ventured onto upspolled land in Westford in 1664; others from Concord, Woburn and elsewhere followed.

Family life centered around the farm and the hearth. Community life was centered around the meeting house, where town affairs and business were conducted as well as where religious services were held. That meeting house is one of the highlights of the town common today, serving as the house of worship for the First Parish church and as a landmark in traditional New England colonial style.

Westford was incorporated as a town on Sept. 23, 1729, the same date as its sister community, Bedford, Massachusetts. It was the 28th settlement in Middlesex County in the order of incorporation. The boundary of its more than 30 square miles has been changed only once.

Less than 100 families lived in the newly-organized community some 258 years ago. Many of them were caught up in the period of staunch patriotism that spread over the fledgling community during the American Revolution. The population then had risen to under 1,200, and about every one of the 250 men and boys carried a rifle in that war.

Today the town's population has exceeded 15,000, but Westford still retains the traditional Colonial form of town meeting, where everyone has the opportunity to "speak his piece."

One of the very earliest of secondary schools in the country, Westford Academy still bears the same name as when founded in 1792. The original frame building now houses the Town Museum near the common.

Another landmark on the common, the J.V. Fletcher Library, traces its roots to the Westford Library Company, formed in 1797. The company was created to promote literature and useful knowledge, and this very

early "social library" became the forerunner of the present library system. The current stone building on the common is about to embark on an ambitious expansion project to better serve the fast-growing community.

Most of the town's thoroughfares are along the same paths laid out by the early forebears. Although overshadowed by a mixture of family names denoting a wide variety of ethnic groups, there still remain numerous

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descendants of first families. Many of the sturdy homes they built have survived the ravages of time and are treasured landmarks in the community.

The town was once a community of separate villages recognized as Parker Village, Forge Village, Graniteville, Brookside, Nabasset and Westford Center. Today Westford is united as one town, with the population in the villages growing steadily outward to join them together.

Most of the mills, farms and orchards on which early Westford residents toiled have disappeared, giving way to new housing and businesses. Now many of the town's residents make their living elsewhere, but return to Westford to enjoy one of its free benefits — the beautiful views toward Boston and New Hampshire from the hill-tops.

For a photographic tour of Westford's history, spiced with anecdotes from longtime residents, read "Westford Recollections" by June Kennedy, available in local bookstores.