

Westford Academy retains its place in history

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — Gardeners love to boast when their first corn is picked, daughters in the kitchen think their first baked cake is as good as mom's, and historians like to brag about "who and what was first" — but they all have failed to define an old question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

While it is known that Phillips Academy in Andover is the oldest secondary school in the country, Westford Academy grads take pride in saying that their school is right behind. And they like to rub it into neighboring community Groton's Lawrence Academy (founded in 1793), that Westford was founded one year earlier.

For a time last week, we thought a little high school in Hadley, as far as antiquity, had outdone all three of the above. On a one-day excursion to the Connecticut Valley area of Massachusetts, we found "to our surprise" a prominent sign in the center of Hadley, at the high school, which stated "Hopkins Academy, founding in 1664."

WHILE RUMMAGING through the town's unique Farm Museum, the thought kept flashing through my mind, "Is this date really correct?" And at the historic Moses Porter house (1752), the same thought re-occurred. It was here my doubts were answered.

Our guide was a most attractive and vivacious young lady, a junior at Hopkins Academy. Her name was Karen Parsons, daughter of a local farmer, a 4-Her who raised pigs and also played trumpet in the Hopkins Academy band. Inasmuch as she was to be editor of the school paper this coming year, we had many things in common.

Parsons is one of the best guides ever. After a detailed tour of the grounds and the homestead, which has had no architectural changes since 1799 and every item in the house is a century old, and most of it over 175 years, we came down to this "1664" question.

Wishing to be certain about the facts, as she does about this Porter-Phillips-Huntington House, she agreed to write me. This is her summation:

"Hopkins Academy is the fifth oldest school in this state, the seventh in New England, and the oldest in Western Massachusetts.

"It was founded by the first charitable trust in the United States which is still in existence."

EDWARD HOPKINS, she continued, through his will left financial assistance for a school which became known as Hopkins Donation School, founded in 1664. He was a prominent businessman in London who eventually moved to Connecticut, where he served as governor and secretary for 15 years.

When Hopkins died in 1657, he left a large estate, sufficient to organize four grammar schools in New Haven, Hartford and Cambridge, as well as Hadley. Prominent citizens of Hadley and the town donated money also for their school.

Parsons writes that in 1670 the school operated a corn mill, the profit from which was turned over to the school trustees. The Indians burned the mill down, but the trustees still function along the same lines as those for Westford Academy. Accumulated funds over the years now provide some \$7,500 in scholarships at graduation each year for Hadley students. Westford's total funds have reached \$300,000 and provide scholarships and special school equipment amounting to \$12,000 each year.

A FINAL STATEMENT from no less than the editor of Hopkins Academy's newspaper, and we finally get the truth! She concludes: "In 1816, Hopkins Donation School became Hopkins Academy. This is why, we aren't considered as old as Andover or Westford."

Maybe when Westford Academy students read this, they will stand up and give three cheers!

The trip over the beautiful Mohawk Trail to the Connecticut River Valley is an easy one. You will have ample time to see how the University of Massachusetts has grown, re-visit Amherst College (founded 1821), have lunch in the pretty town of Hadley, with its old white church with a towering rooster-topped spire, and the white-pillared town hall, and return home with pleasant memories.

And also if you should talk with Karen Parsons, we are certain she will put you to ease that "Phillips-Andover is No. 1, and Westford Academy no far behind."

And another plug for our hometown. Historian Allister MacDougall believes that the original Academy building, soon to be a town museum, is the oldest building of its kind in the country. Records show that it was copied from Andover's first building, which no longer stands.