

Westford Academy still among oldest

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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 egg or the chick?" *2 and*

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 Lawrence Academy in a neighboring community that Westford was founded in 1792, and Groton's a year later.

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 River Valley section of our commonwealth we found to our surprise a prominent sign in the center of Hadley at the high school stated "Hopkins Academy, founded in 1664."

While rummaging around 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 reoccurred. It was here my doubts were answered.

Our guide was a most attractive and vivacious young lady, a junior at Hopkins Academy. Her name is Karen Parsons, daughter of a local farmer, a 4-H'er 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.

Karen 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" founding question.

Wishing to be certain about the facts, as she does about this Porter-Phelps-Huntinghouse 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.

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 came to Connecticut where he served as governor and secretary for fifteen 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.

Karen 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, but the trustees still function as they still do for Westford Academy. Accumulated funds over the years now provide some \$7,500 in scholarships at graduation for Hadley students. Westford's funds have reached over \$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, 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 and Westford."

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

The trip over beautiful Mohawk Trail to the Connecticut River is an easy one. You will have ample time to see how the University of Massachusetts has grown, revisit 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, we are certain she will put you at ease that for age Phillips-Andover is No. 1, and Westford Academy not far behind.

And another plug for our home town. 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.