

# Westford Academy — the present and its past

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

*(Editor's Note: Gordon B. Seavey is a noted local historian and retired newsman who periodically writes on subjects of historic interest in the area.)*

WESTFORD — Over the principal's desk at Westford Academy is a small, framed receipt dated June 30, 1869, and signed by Principal John D. Long for the generous sum of \$4. It represented the tuition for "M's Helen Tower" for the final term of her schooling for that year.

In those days, the school year was divided into three terms, the first starting in late August. At the end of November, there was a two-week break. The winter term ran to near the end of March when there was another similar vacation. School kept in session until mid-July, allowing for a six-week summer vacation.

Therefore, Eli Tower paid \$12 for daughter Helen's year at the Academy. Today, the cost of a year's education per pupil is in the vicinity of \$1,700 — and the taxpayer foots the bill.

The student enrollment at that time over an extended period was 75, an all-time high. Today, the number is approximately 1,000. For further comparison, Principal Long had one assistant, a woman teacher probably without a college degree. Principal Joseph F. Lisi today has a staff of 70.

As a private school, the Academy's invested funds for general support amounted to \$18,000. These funds now amount to \$350,000 through prudent management and with additions made by private citizens and graduates. The money is entrusted to the Trustees of Westford Academy, operating as a private charitable organization. The income is for scholarships (about \$12,000 annually) plus expenditures for special items to benefit the entire student body.

Another Westford Academy historical document is a diploma dated June 21, 1895, complete with a faded ribbon of the class colors. It's size, 21x17-inches, draws immediate attention because of the amount of space it takes on Principal Lisi's wall.

Huge by today's standards, the document is indicative of the impression in that era of the importance of receiving a secondary school education. Although not artistically beautiful, these diplomas were hung with pride, usually in the parlor. Today the Academy diploma has shrunk to one-eighth the original size; and now usually lands on a wall or a shelf in the graduate's bedroom.

This particular antique diploma, however, is of unusual interest. It was presented to Thomas Richmond Frost, who had completed the Latin Scientific Course of study. His father was William E. Frost, beloved principal of the Academy for 32 years prior to his death in 1904.

Two additional signatures to that of the principal on the parchment makes it worthy of special recognition.

One is that of Rev. Edward Augustus Horton, superintendent of the Academy for many years, and a long-time trustee. He was a noted clergyman in the Boston area and served as chaplain of the State Senate. Horton studied at the University of Michigan and Heidelberg, and was a graduate of Meadville Theological School.

The other signer was John D. Long, 32nd governor of Massachusetts and then president of the Academy trustees.

Fresh out of Harvard College, like many others who

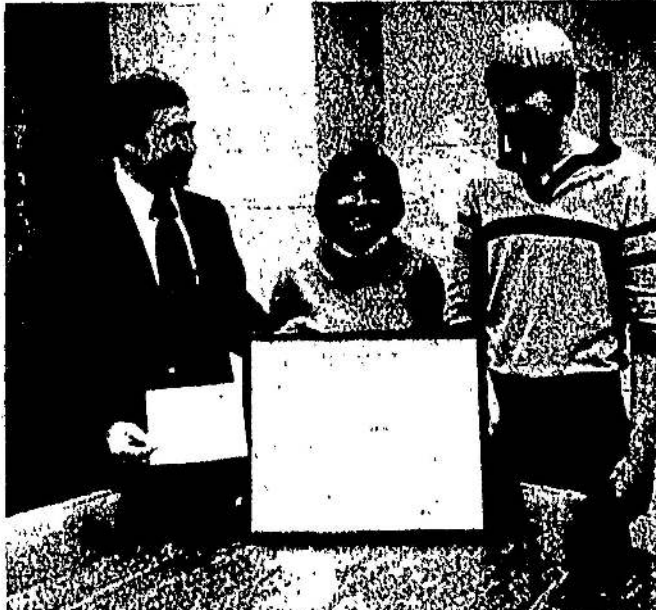
preceded him, Long first came to Westford in 1867 to head up the Academy for two years. Although only 19, he became a favorite of the students and the townspeople, an association which lasted until his death in 1915.

Long presided over many graduation exercises, was the principal speaker at the 100th anniversary observance of the founding of the school, and also at the presentation of the Civil War monument to the town in 1910. At the podium he was eloquent and could be called a "classical orator."

Long was a lawyer, speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives for three years, and governor of the Commonwealth from 1880 to 1882. Elected to the United States Congress, he also served as Secretary of the Navy under Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. While in this office, he procured for the town the ancient Spanish cannon captured in Santiago, Cuba, which stands at the apex of the town common.

Harvard and Tufts granted doctoral degrees upon Long, and he also served as president of the Board of Overseers of Harvard University.

And as for young Frost, he was a gifted pianist and played the organ for graduation exercises. He became a musical instructor at Rio Grande College in Ohio, and later at St. Catherine's School in Bolivar, Tennessee. While living in the South, he died suddenly at a young age and was buried locally in Fairview Cemetery with his father and mother. An older brother, Francis, was a journalist with the New York Herald in that city, as well as London and Paris.



**The new and the old**

Westford Academy Principal Joseph Lisi, left, shows seniors Cindy Ryder and Dennis Dauphinals the difference between the "poster size" diplomas that were issued 85 years ago, and

those issued today. It is expected that 225 of the latter will be presented at next June's graduation of the Class of 1981.