

Westford, circa 1900: a backward glimpse of a simpler time

By Gordon B. Seavey

As we flip the pages of the calendar the beginning of a new year January 1984 is only a matter of a few weeks

And in the course of a dozen or so years a new century the year 2000 will be printed on many millions of calendars Out of habit, we will write 1999 for awhile

When the new century arrives, shall we look back to get a glimpse of Westford and what her inhabitants were up to at the entrance of the year 1900?

Probably but let's go back 86 years for a pre-look

Westford was a sleepy quiet and probably as typical as a small New England town could be Politics were hot but there were few Democrats to present an argument

The streets were dusty in the summer deep mud holes in the spring. A comment in the local newspaper the Westford Wardsman mentioned that the town had plenty of gravel but in the wrong places

Homemakers pumped water from their own wells farmers lucky enough to have water holes ran their animals out to drink Not until 1909 was town water available thanks to a local private water company Although their charges were minimal for each tap some complained it was too much

Captain Sherman H. Fletcher was a big wheel in town government and town moderator Herbert E. Fletcher, the quarryman, had defeated Frank L. Blood of Groton for senator Town officials included firewards, a measurer of grain, fence viewers to settle boundary disputes, and six weighers of coal, all sworn not to put a heavy finger on the weighing bar

The J. V. Fletcher Library was in full operation, the gift of a Westford boy who made it good in the Faneuil Hall markets The detailed plans for the attractive structure of yellow brick on a base of solid Westford granite are still on file

Al Bicknell a veteran of the Civil War was janitor his pay \$100 for the year with an extra \$50 for carrying books, by horse and buggy to Graniteville and Forge Village Carrie E. Read a graduate of the Academy in 1889 was librarian for \$180

Wright & Fletcher to keep the readers warm, sold 16 tons of coal for \$70 plus \$16 for freight from the mines, and \$13 to team it from Pine Ridge railroad station to the library All unloaded by shovelful from the freight cars and then the wagons

Students of high school age were finding the new Academy on Main Street much brighter warmer and larger than the old two-room building (now the museum) at the head of the Common where their older brothers and

sisters had studied Goodbye to the old wood stoves with the long, smoke pipes. The new building had central heating, which could be either too hot or too cold, depending on the skill of the janitor William E. Frost who was principal for 32 years, headed up the teaching staff of two!

The elementary school at Long Sought For has been closed but nine other district schools, one teacher for all grades was still the system Total of all students 505

Sex discrimination

There was discrimination too The ladies were never listed to serve on juries The list drawn up by the select men showed 26 men all supposedly anxious to serve if called Sixteen were farmers Were the women supposed to do the milking when some of the men were called to Lowell or Cambridge?

Not that this has much to do about sex discrimination but the license fee for a female dog was \$5 but only \$2 for a male It can be recalled that there were numerous unlicensed dogs both ering the neighbors

In 1900 the town set aside \$2,000 to care for the poor \$250 for cemeteries Forty births 21 males and 19 females were recorded by Town Clerk Gilman J. Wright Fifteen of the new arrivals were of native parentage the balance were mainly children of recently arrived mill workers

At the end of life's burning candle were 49 deaths In between the life scale were 25 marriages Oscar Spalding to Fannie Prescott and Cornelius Precious to Annie were among those who exchanged nuptial vows.

The Common at the Center was a focal point with its double row of maples elms and pines, holding together the triangle green in the center where baseball games and band concerts were popular

Now a landmark even though many consider it hideous, still stands at the apex of the Common a reminder of wars a Spanish cannon of English make which once stood at the entrance of the harbor at Santiago, Cuba and a cluster of Civil War iron cannon balls No matter that the gun is of 4 3 8 calibre and the balls are 11 the combination has stood since 1900 for ornamental purposes as well as an object lesson to the rising generation of the valor of the American soldiers and sailors

The cannon continues to be useful as a perch for youngster straddle but the heavy balls now welded together no longer are rolled down the street by boys celebrating the Night before the 4th

For social events

The nearby Town Hall was not the center of local government as it is today, but for plays, dances and Grange meetings. The town clerk kept the records at his home the treasurer had a large safe in the bay window of his home on Depot Street where people came to pay taxes, and the selectmen probably met at the post office while waiting for the mail to be sorted

Forge Village and Graniteville had their own post offices, and believe it or not, there was one at Westford Depot Post offices were a common meeting ground for all with many a lively discussion usually taking place The boxes themselves showed no partiality In the museum an old wooden postal case shows Abel J

Abbot the wealthy mill owner, alongside William E. Frost, the beloved educator and True A. Bean, a loveable town character who was buried as a pauper for \$27.50

"Time has no division to mark the passage, there is never a thunder-storm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or new years," wrote Thomas Mann. "Even when a new century begins, it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols."

When the year 2000 rolls around in Westford, there will be no ringing of the big bells as most of them have been removed from their lofty perches or are deactivated Surely the ancient cannon on the common will not roar forth If any pistols are to be fired, who has the permits?