

Westford First Observed Memorial Day 90 Years Ago

By Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD — As veterans' groups, civic and religious leaders prepare to remember the dead of various wars this Memorial Day, it was seventeen years after the conclusion of the Civil War that townspeople gathered in churches, public buildings and at cemeteries to honor the dead of the "War of the Rebellion," a term then in common use.

Thirty-five Westford men lost their lives in this war between the North and the South, and the women of the community were liberal in the assistance they gave to the sick and wounded. And all citizens cherished the memory of their dead, whose names now appear in black, cut into cold marble, on tablets in the town Hall. During the conflict, Southern women took up the practice of decorating the graves of soldiers of both sides. In 1868, May 30 was set aside by the Grand Army of the Republic to decorate the graves of Union soldiers.

First formal recognition in Westford of the day came in 1882 when a detachment from Post 115, GAR, came from Groton on May 30 to join local veterans in decorating the graves of comrades. In the evening, the Grantville Cornet Band played at services in the Town Hall. An address was given by Rev. E. R. Hodgman, town historian, describing the town's participation in the war, and "Hooker's Battle Above the Clouds" was read with "fine effect." To end the "fitting observance" of the day, a Captain Palmer described the objects and the organization of the GAR, of which the American Legion is its counterpart.

Seven years previously, the townspeople gathered to propose the erection of a monument on the common to commemorate the services of Col. John Robinson and others who participated in the fight at the Old North Bridge in Concord and at Bunker Hill in the Revolutionary War. At the town meeting on May 22, 1875, the sum requested was \$2,000, but the article was defeated 78 to 51. Only within the last few years such a recognition has been made, which consists of a simple boulder with a bronze tablet placed at the head of the common.

Native Son Gives Statue

A proud son, whose dad was to be the first from Westford among the 172 men to answer the call of President Abraham Lincoln for volunteers to "fight for the preservation of the Union," was to present the town with its first war memorial.

This gift was to honor Lt. William Metcalf of the 16th Massachusetts Regiment, Company C, and all the volunteers to the cause. The donor was his son, Edwin, who had graduated from Westford Academy in 1859 and stayed home to run the little Metcalf farm near Minot's Corner, on Route 110, and to care for his mother while the father was away at war.

Edwin C. Metcalf grew to be a distinguished Massachusetts citizen, and later a successful businessman in Auburn, New York. He was elected a state representative from Springfield, then a senator from Hampden County. He was mayor of that city and later assistant quartermaster general for Governor John D. Robinson.

The day came when Edwin was called back to Westford, the town of his birth, to bury his father. To his surprise, he was met at the railroad station by a delegation of old Civil War Veterans.

"They were strangers to me, they came without solicitation and they came without any previous knowledge on my part," he later stated, "but I was so much pleased and so much touched at the spirit of devotion and loyalty of those who had stood shoulder to shoulder, during the Civil War that I then and there resolved that I would do something in Westford to the memory of these veterans."

In due time, the small triangle of land bounded by Boston rd., Lincoln and Hildreth sts., was carefully graded and surrounded by a rounded granite curbing. The life-size bronze figure of a civil war

soldier, cast in Rome, N. Y., was placed atop a graceful and simple granite pedestal some seven feet high. The inscriptions were brief and well chosen.

It was on Memorial Day in 1910 that this gift was to be dedicated. Hundreds of people filled the streets and surrounding vacant spots on lawns and the common. The men wore bowler hats, the ladies gay flowered hats of considerable size. Twenty-three men who enlisted from Westford following First Lieutenant Metcalf's steps were guests of honor.

Ex-Governor John D. Long, who was principal of Westford Academy when Edwin was a student, was the featured speaker. Selectman Oscar R. Spalding was among the town officials to take part in the dedicatory proceedings.

A huge tent was set up on the Common, and according to Allister F. MacDougall of the Historical Society, 500 people sat down to a sumptuous meal.

Just as Edwin Metcalf presented the monument to Westford in memory of those who served his country in time of war, he did not forget his mother, Nancy Elizabeth Metcalf, who with other ladies rolled bandages, made clothing and goodies to send to the troops in the south, during the trying period.

The delicately wrought stained glass window in back of the altar in the First Parish Church, United, is his gift to her memory. Likewise in good taste, the memorial depicts Christ with Mary in a shepherd's scene, in three panels.

The rich, hand-carved walnut choir rail, separating the pulpit from the choir, was included in the gift, all of which was dedicated in a memorial service conducted by Rev. Benjamin H. Bailey on December 11, also in 1910.

And as Memorial Day is observed this year in all parts of the town and its cemeteries, it might be well to pause to reflect that there were and are those who left their native community who still hold and cherish memories of the past and in particular to honor those who served their country in times of stress.



CIVIL WAR MEMORIAL — This bronze life-size statue in full regalia of a Civil War volunteer has looked across Westford Common for over six decades. A tribute to an early enlistee, Lt. William Metcalf and to all volunteers, it was erected in 1910 by his son, Edwin.

Top of building in rear is the former Congregational Church and to the right of the beautifully carved granite pedestal may be seen the belfry of Old Westford Academy, built in 1792, and now the home of the Fire Department.

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