

Westford happenings and recollections 100 years ago

By GORDON B. SEAVEY WESTFORD — Town records, for the most part, make dull reading. Many of today's problems are not so new. A century ago, the town fathers found it necessary to borrow money from wealthy townspeople to keep afloat, banks were few and perhaps not too accommodating.

We start our recollections during the Civil War period when Westford boys could either volunteer or be paid bounties for entering the service. Then, too, it was a drain on many financially particularly if it were the widow of a veteran with children whose income was wiped out.

The town settled its debts the first of February so many of the expenses spread over into the new year

1864 - Treasurer Sherman D. Fletcher reported that 21 persons were "owed on notes and interest." The salary of a selectman was \$5. J. W. P. Abbot was paid \$1.50 for making out affidavits for six soldiers who were evidently seeking bounties. John Dane was paid \$6 for a calf killed by dogs. State aid was given thirty wives and five widows in the amount of \$2,828

1865 - Some of the poor (welfare, if you would) were supported outside the Alms House. A Mrs. Kemp received groceries, a bonnet and a shawl, plus a few other items which totalled \$30.34. But there is a sad ending to this with another item "Fletcher Peckins, for going to Chelmsford with the hearse for Mrs. Kemp, \$1.25." The number of persons supported in the alms house average only four this year. The town made \$63.65 on this arrangement

1866 - Bounties of \$125 went to Peter Bussey, James A. Graham, A. Bicknell, Joseph Raymond and Dexter W. Waterman. The men to enlist went from Lowell, Concord, Ayer and Groton. A. lived to a ripe age and old timers remember stopping to chat with him in front of his tiny house at #2 Main St. Memorial Day parades and whittling kept up his interest

The First Parish was paid \$35 for rent of hall (in basement) and heating of same for the year. Joseph Hildreth was paid \$10 for use of his home and taking care of the assessors "books" for five years. Expenses of the ten school districts, with a total of 509 scholars, amounted to \$1,482.94. The town paid for the books for some of the poor children. This equals less than \$3 per youngster

1867 - This was the year of a small pox epidemic and Dr. D. A. Dow was paid \$7 for vaccinations. George Keyes was paid \$25 for use of his home as an infirmary ("pest house") which included heat

Willard Damon and James McCaully served as nurses. Sarah M. McIntire was paid for bedding and Lucretia J. Keed for articles and food for the sufferers. Edwin Gould received 40 cents for a screwdriver

Dr. Robert Wood was paid \$7 for post mortem examination of a cow supposed to have died of an infectious disease

This was the year when the town budget bought a new hearse. William Draper was the builder for \$550 and A. C. Sawyer trimmed it for \$85. While a bridge was being

repaired in the west part of the town, arduous Keyes got \$12.50 for carrying his milk a round-about way during the time the road was blocked.

1868 - The library reported that 2,318 books were taken out by 414 people in their annual report. They requested \$100 "for the purchase of new books, that the present deficiency may be supplied, by the purchase of the works of Dickens and other popular authors. Eliza J. Herrick received \$50 as librarian.

1869 - If one has a brand new hearse, with black velvet drapes and high posts on each corner, then there should be a new hearse house. It was built by local craftsmen for \$262. G. F. Snow was paid \$12 for resetting 200 gravestones.

The printing of 500 town reports for \$40 more than took care of the voters - which were men only! Maintaining roads and bridges was always a big expense. Makepeace Road, in the north part of town, running from Tyngsboro to Chelmsford, always was in trouble. Either that, or maybe the farmers in that rough area (who farmed between the rocks) was in with the local pols!

Kilburn and his wife sued the town for something, and the results indicate the town won, although the lawyers fees amounted to \$400. Mrs. Marcella Ward, for injury on North Plain Road (now Depot St.) near the North Burying ground received \$75 plus \$10 to William A. Webster for medical attention.

1870 - This was the year the town clerk began publishing the vital statistics, births, marriages and deaths. Don't forget, people began counting on their fingers in those days, too. Miriam Keyes Fletcher died on her 102nd birthday

The number of persons supported in the alms house had grown to 18. Until now, mostly self-supporting, it cost the town \$1,124, over and above receipts for wood, milk and other products, too numerous to mention here

1871 - Building costs were way down. Items for 3250 feet of pine lumber and 483 of chestnut was \$22.50. It was milled at Westford Depot by Heywood & Burbeck. William Agnew received \$23 for 114 hours of breaking roads during the winter