

Westford, in post-Civil War period, entered era of growth

By GORDON B. SEAVEY.
WESTFORD — It is 1878, a century ago in Westford, a Colonial village, large in area but small in population.

It was not exactly a sleepy country town and probably each of its 2,000 inhabitants knew of one another. It had grown about 12 percent from the previous decade.

Although the Civil War had ended 13 years earlier, its effects were still much in evidence. Families and friends still mourned the death of 35 men who died on the battlefields or from wounds. Their names were to be engraved later on marble tablets placed near the inside entrance of the newly built town hall.

A century ago was a period of readjustment and reconstruction. It was also a period of building and growing.

Unlike the American Revolution, which left the country destitute, nearly every branch of industry began to flourish after the Civil War. It was the beginning of the industrial revolution in the Merrimack Valley — and satellite Stony Brook Valley had its share in the growth and wealth.

YARN MILLS and machine shops, powered by steam as well as water, hummed at Forge Village, Graniteville and Brookside. Quarrymen worked the great-granite outcroppings along the rich vein which ran from Ayer (then Groton Junction) to Pelham, N.H., and which surfaced mostly in Westford.

Farming had long been the mainstay of the economic life of Westford since Colonial times. Some of these farms, with their wood lots, were well over 100 acres.

Most, however, were smaller homesteads. Including their residence, a barn, several outbuildings (including perhaps a cider mill and an ice house), a dozen cows and two or three horses, these big farms were assessed around \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Besides dairy products, these agriculturalists raised apples (and still do), pears, grapes and small fruits, particularly berries. Shipment by two-horse teams to the Boston market was the usual outlet, with milk going to the cities by train.

The town was divided into ten districts. There was a public grade school in each. Westford Academy functioned as a private secondary school and was 86 years old. Out-of-town boarding pupils mingled with the Westford youth.

TOWN GOVERNMENT was rather simple. The town clerk handled his records at home and was always available, day or night. The same for the treasurer and tax collector. Three men served on each of these boards: selectmen, assessors and overseers of the poor. The school and library committees each had one female board member.

Expenditures were minimum in comparison with today's town budget. The greatest amount spent by the town in 1878 was \$1,871 for roads and bridges; next, \$1,561 for the poor. State aid and aid to veterans amounted to \$900.

The streets, such as they were, were dusty in the summer, snow-filled in the winter and muddy in spring. They were narrow and winding, often shade tree-lined for miles through woods or along farmlands, and a traveler rattling along in carriage or plodding on foot found time to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature.

Three churches cared for the spiritual needs of the Protestants. There were few Catholics — and as few Democrats.

The First Parish Church, established 154 years earlier, had Joseph Moulton as its pastor for nine years. At the Union Congregational, an offspring of the First Parish in 1829, Rufus Flagg was minister.

Graniteville 25 years previously had scarcely half a dozen families. By the 1880 census, there were 105 families consisting of 540 people.

First meeting in the small wooden schoolhouse in 1852, there was regular preaching, mostly by Methodists. It took nearly 20 years for a Methodist church to be constructed, substantially financed by Charles G. Sargent of machine shop fame.

LOCAL OBSERVANCE of the 100th anniversary of the

American Revolution sparked the citizens into patriotic fervor in anticipation of the centennial celebration of the battle of Lexington and Concord, in 1875. Westford sent an official delegation which included the selectmen, its ministers (including Rev. Edward R. Hodgman, then town clerk), and other officers to Concord.

It is to be noted here, however, that Colonel John Robinson and others who "bravely participated in the fight" at North Bridge were snubbed when the town defeated, 78 to 51, the proposition to erect a monument on the common "not to exceed \$2,000, to commemorate the services" of these men.

But the urge to delve into the history of the town continued. Hodgman was commissioned to take on the gigantic task of writing a town history to sell for \$2. A member of the New England Historical Society, it was Westford's good fortune that Hodgman had the interest, the tenacity, and the courage to bring forth, but not until 1883, a carefully-documented 500-page volume.

Wages on the farm and in the mill were low, but it offered opportunities to work. Prices on staples were low, too. The best English hay was \$15 a ton; cider 10 cents a gallon; a chicken 50 cents; lard 10 cents a pound; and firewood \$2.50 a cord, split and delivered.

THE TOWN FARM, which kept many of the poor, had oxen for working on the roads. An interesting item is \$3.75 for four bottles of Centaur Liniment to be used on their necks where the yokes hung. Another, \$4 was spent for driving a pair of oxen to Watertown (for sale) and "keeping while there."

Westford had no alert system to call the volunteer firemen. Each year it was voted to pay \$7.50 each to the two churches for use of the steeple bells to sound the alarm.

William L. Kittredge, janitor in the town hall and also, librarian in the same building, paid 70 cents for a duster. Albert L. Richardson was paid \$27.75 for "attending 18 funerals" with the town-owned hearse, naturally horse-drawn. It was not so expensive to die a century ago.

Despite the lack of tv, radio and telephone, there were many happy times in town. Dances were numerous, usually in the upstairs of the town hall. The janitor received an extra \$1.50 if the party ran past midnight. He also stabled horses in the basement.

The common, a pretty triangle of green lawn with a double row of shade trees around the slides and opposite the old white church, was a gathering place, particularly in the summer.

Often, the Dunstable Cornet Band played waltzes, polkas and spirited marches while little boys hung onto the railings surrounding the bandstand. This band appeared in parades mounted on horseback.

CHURCH SUPPERS and fairs were frequent, a fun gathering for all, except for washing dishes in a soapstone sink with water heated over a wood stove.