

Old Westford Landmark Destroyed 64 Years Ago

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD Commanding a choice location in Westford Center alongside the white spired First Parish Church and overlooking the town common stood one of the town's most interesting old landmarks.

It fell victim like many others before and after of fire. This occurred 64 years ago this month.

The building was known then as the John Abbot house and had come down through generations of the family probably starting with Joel. Its imposing front faced Main Street opposite the present Center Post Office. It was a center entrance colonial with four corner rooms on each floor. Over the years it had been substantially remodelled.

At the time of its demise a wide porch ran along the west side, a cupola had been added and modern porticoes over the doors. The white fenced front yard had been removed. On the north side facing the church was a sizeable ell. A large barn and carriage house complete with dovecot attached, set back a bit between house and church. Distance saved this set of buildings.

By chance we have pictures the day before and after the fire taken by Miss Mabel M. Prescott of 32 Boston Road. A junior at Westford Academy she had just received a box Brownie camera. Looking for subjects the Abbot house buried in snowdrifts and with a generous supply of icicles pointing downward from the eaves made a good target.

Little did she know that the next morning the venerable building would be in shambles with the roof gone and the remaining walls scorched by the inferno. Her camera clicked again.

LAWYER'S HOME

Although still in the Abbot family it had been leased to a well known local young man Edward Fisher who was occupying the home at the time with his wife and two children. He was a highly respected citizen and town clerk and had his law office and library in the wing of the home. He also was associated in Lowell with his brother Judge Frederic A. Fisher.

It was a bitter cold night February 24, 1914 according to his daughter Esther Fisher Hosmer and no doubt the fireplaces and heating system had been pushed to the limit. There had been problems with one of the chimneys previously but it was thought proper repairs had been made.

Fire erupted in the middle of the night and the flames and smoke awakened Esther then only five whose cries gave the alarm. Sensing the fire had gained unquenchable headway the father picked up his daughter and gathered his wife Helen with the younger daughter Barbara and dashed safely to the street. Everything else was left behind.

The volunteer fire department did its best but to little avail. Its headquarters was nearby on Boston Road housed in a tiny white building on the property of Alfred and Ruth Little. Yearly rent was \$60. The horse drawn wagon carried ten fire extinguishers, some ladders and hose. The Westford Company was headed by Edward M. Abbot as chief.

It was a case of too little, too late. The fire had already gone out of control when spotted. The volunteer firemen had to be summoned by telephone as there was no central alarm system. Ironically the fire engineers had requested a modern alarm system in the warrant for the year. As customary the church bell was rung to alert the neighborhood.

The house and contents including many valuable antiques were a total loss. Fortunately the ell where town records were kept as well as his clients' files was saved.

There were other aspects to the holocaust too that kept townspeople talking even to this day. Alec Fisher who boasted that he never had missed a fire call didn't learn about his brother's place going up in smoke until the next day.

W. E. Wright slipped on an ice-coated ladder and injured a leg.

HOUSE VERY OLD

As to the time the original house was built it is not known. History of the First Parish Church notes that when it came time to build a third meetinghouse the town voted to do so on January 13, 1794. A week later the assembly voted to buy land of Joel Abbot and that the South Side Sill shall be set in a perril line from the Southeast Corner of Joel Abbot's house. Twenty pounds was the purchase price.

It is also thought that perhaps at one time a member of the Butterfield family which was numerous operated a tavern in the building. Whether true or not it was ideally located for a noontime break for the all day Sunday worshippers.

Other fires of historical importance in this century were the Colonel John Robinson Revolutionary farmhouse in 1917, the Forge Pond ice houses in 1920 and again in 1931 and the Nashoba Farm at the corner of Hildreth Street and Concord Road in 1918.

As a rural community Westford had many forest fires too. On a hot June day the 11th in 1913 to be exact an alarm came in from the Depot area that the huge yard of freshly cut lumber was ablaze. Located alongside the railroad tracks near where the recent train wreck occurred sparks from coal burning locomotive had set the grass afire which quickly spread to the stack of lumber. An entire winter's work for man and beast was consumed in an afternoon. It was choice white pine cut in the vicinity of Burge's Pond by local lumberman Oscar R. Spalding.

The loss probably not covered by hard to obtain insurance amounted to \$11,000, a princely sum in those days. Several acres of nearby woodland were also destroyed.



Ruins of Abbot Homestead Westford Common burned Feb. 25, 1914. (Top photo front view, bottom photo rear view.) Photos compliments of Gordon B. Seavey.