

Westford wanderings

Westford landmarks chart heritage

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WESTFORD - When the cartographer made a map of the fledgling town of Westford in 1730, a year after its incorporation, little did he realize that many of the old cartwheel roads he traced were to become principal highways of the town today.

Nor did he realize perhaps that although ownerships may have changed many times, a goodly number of the old homesteads would be standing 200 to 250 years later.

On his map each homestead and the name of its then-current owner is clearly indicated. These homes were nestled among the web of roads which crisscross the 30 square miles of what was the old West Precinct of the mother town of Chelmsford. Naming of the roads was to come later.

The Keyes, Chamberlins, Proctors, Prescotts, Wrights, Hildreths and Fletchers, to name the more prominent, are scattered rather evenly over nearly 20,000 acres. This would indicate that most of the families, needing acreage, were engaged in farming.

Atop Tadmuck Hill, about the geographical center of Westford, there shows only a handful of homes, widely spaced. Most important was the first meeting-house, started in 1723, on the north side of the Common, which was used as a training field for the militia.

The map shows no houses between those homes and Parson Willard Hall's, which still stands opposite the Roudentush Community Center.

Ephraim Craft lived beyond Reverend Hall at what is now 3 Depot Street. This house faces south, as most of the old homes did, to catch the sun's rays for warmth in the winter. This home is now the property of the Eston Fox family and bears the name of Running Fox Farm.

Josiah Heald had a home at the corner of Main Street and Graniteville Road, but it was torn

down to make way for the English-style mansion of the Abbot family.

Halfway down the hill on Graniteville Road at No. 11 was the Heywood home.

Allister F. MacDougall, now 91, recalls that as a little boy he helped his grandfather Francis Heywood demolish the house for firewood. The shed to the house, also the sizeable barn, were left standing. The Ayer family now lives in the barn, which was remodeled forty years ago by Philip T. Prescott for his family into a very comfortable home.

The old house stood very near the road. The carriage house, or ell, still stands. Records show that the noted American poet, Edgar Allan Poe, being infatuated with Annie Heywood (the basis of one of his poems) visited Westford twice in 1848. It is said that Poe slept in a small room in the ell to sleep off his alcoholic problems.

The Fletcher Tavern, opposite the Civil War memorial and now the home of the Edward N. Lamsons, does not show on the map, possibly an oversight, as other records show it was built in 1713.

South of the center, Jonathan Cleveland lived just off Boston Road; Eben Spalding lived nearby.

Heading west on Forge Village Road stands the home of Mrs. Agnes Scott, but 250 years ago it was owned by Nathaniel Boynton and William Reed.

Probably the oldest home in town, dated 1858-59, is the Salt Box Farm on Wright Lane, off Hildreth Street.

Its first owner was James Hildreth, a farmer and Indian fighter as well as a lieutenant in charge of a local garrison house. It is occupied by the Charles L. Collins family, who treasure its wide fireplace, corner cupboard and wide boards in particular.

Among the nearly two score old homes of Colonial vintage still standing in town, there is a grouping in the Chamberlin's Corner area of interest. Had the early settlers had their way be-

fore this West Precinct separated from Chelmsford, the center of that town would have been relocated to nearby Chestnut Hill, not in the congested expanse where it now fights a traffic situation.

Here the Keyes (one of the oldest families), the Butterfields and Reeds lived. The chief benefactor and founder of Westford Academy, Zaccheus Wright also lived here, with part of his land spreading into Chelmsford. His old home still stands, occupied by the Aldrich family, on Chamberlin Road. Wright was a successful tanner.

Most of the old homes in the Forge Village area, which are classics, were built by descen-

dants of Jonas Prescott. He was the millwright who came to the area in 1680 to build a saw and grist mill, and later, forges.

One of these homes is the Captain Jonas Prescott brick-end Colonial at the junction of Forge Village and Town Farm roads.

Unusual for that period, it was erected in 1780 as a two-family home for brothers Jonas and Joseph. It has 10 fireplaces and, in the kitchen, old brick ovens. It is said to be on the site of the first Jonas' homestead.

Present owner of this house is Mrs. Alice (Luella) Prescott Collins who in January reached her 96th birthday. She traces her family in Westford back three centuries.

Among her treasures is a "peel," a spadelike instrument used to shovel bread in and out of the ovens. It was forged by one of her ancestors. For several years, Mrs. Collins was regent of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

There are not many descendants of original families still living in Westford. Mr. Collins is one of the very few Prescotts now living in town and the only one in a Prescott Homestead.

The names of the early settlers indicate they were of English stock. They for the most part seem to have been well educated for that period. They founded in 1792 the third secondary school

in the commonwealth, the Academy, and a "Social Library" was available as early as 1797.

They seem to have made a reasonably good living off the land, in spite of the town's numerous glacial outcroppings and boulder-strewn hills. They found good land in the valleys and along the streams. The air was clean, the water pure and bountiful, important for their livestock.

Their produce, such as grains, fruits and meats, were eagerly purchased in cities like, Boston and Salem, a long days trip by oxcart.



Prescott House in Westford (Sun photo by Mark Wilson)