

# Westford school restoration project still needs money

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — Contributions needed to complete the reconstruction of the original Westford Academy building for a town museum are coming in slowly, according to Mrs. Robert Shaw, vice president of the Friends of the Museum.

It is hoped that the goal of \$4,700 will be reached within the next 10 days. The money is needed to purchase additional materials and accomplish other work needed to complete the project.

The structure, said to be one of the oldest secondary school buildings in the country, was built in 1794. It is a copy of an original Phillips Andover Academy structure, long since demolished.

The exterior of the building needs two coats of paint, the driveway has to be rebuilt and graded, the grounds landscaped, water brought into the basement, plus numerous other items.

The idea of reconstruction was started six years ago as a project of the town's bicentennial committee, then headed by Allister F. MacDougall. A member of the Class of 1909, and a past president of the Academy trustees, it was he who initiated the program.

A town museum would bring together under one roof for the first time many irreplaceable historical articles dated from early settlement days to the present.

Participating in the planning were members of the historical commission, a group appointed by the selectmen. Their purpose was to restore the sturdy old building as near to its original condition as possible.

Problems immediately arose. First, the building had been abandoned for 13 years after students transferred in 1897 to a newer structure on Main Street, now the home of the Roudenbush Community Center. It had stood for over a century at the base of the common, adjoining the estate of John C. Abbot.

After he had become the owner, he passed it over to Henry "Tricky" Keyes, a man of all trades, with the proviso that it be moved.

Keyes did just that in 1910. Using horses and a capstan, the heavy structure was moved about 400 yards to a small plot in the rear of the Congregational Church and Feeney's harness shop.

There is stood on pilings, a sorry abandoned spectacle, for several years.

During World War I, the town decided there was a need for a larger fire station in the Center. In 1917, the building was taken over for this purpose, and lowered in place on a new foundation.

The edifice is of two stories, 32-by-44-feet. The face of the ground floor was torn out in order to install a battery of three overhead garage doors; the flooring was braced to hold the heavy fire trucks. Many of the supporting timbers for the upper floor were cut or entirely eliminated.

In use for 57 years, the building was again abandoned for a modern fire station next to the town hall.

The restoration committee then became involved with ideas and plans as to how the building could be reconstructed as near as possible to its original state.

The exterior of the building was pretty much as always. It was soon noted that the interior, particularly the entry way and stairs to the upper floor, had suffered greatly from alterations for the fire trucks.

Also, it was very important to consider that the building had undergone several notable changes during the Victorian period, a century or so ago.

Windows of six-over-six panes of glass had been substituted for the earlier style of twelve-over-



## Original reproduced

A planing mill made special knives to reproduce the moldings used to replace rotted trim on this 1794 Westford Academy building, now being converted into a town museum.

twelve. Windows in the rear had been boarded up and the old style random width pine boards laid horizontally for the wainscoting had been replaced by vertical "machined" match boards so common in that Victorian era.

Replacement windows (an odd size) were made especially in a New Hampshire factory. Wide pine boards to replace the matched maple flooring were milled by the old-time Russell Lumber Company in Chelmsford, as was the material for the wainscoting.

The nearby mill had to machine special knives to produce crown molding to match the rotted trim at the edge of the roof.

Almost all of the work done to date has been by a small army of industrious Nashoba Valley Technical High School students. At least 200 had some part in the reconstruction work, under the direction of Robert A. Adam, instructor in restoration and cabinet-making.

The students came from classes in carpentry, plumbing, painting, electricity, photography and drafting. Under Adam's direction, students had built an early carpenter shop replica, which is now at Plimoth Plantation; worked on the Garrison House in Chelmsford; and also made old-fashioned school benches for that town's restored one-room schoolhouse in the Center.

Thomas Lafonatis, superintendent-director of Nashoba Tech and a devotee of the restoration of old buildings, closely watched the progress of the work which had to be abandoned last year due to a lack of funds.

A handicap was that there were no architectural plans available for the original work, and naturally no photos or drawings. To obtain information and ideas, a group travelled some 300 miles to inspect two century-old buildings, including the meetinghouse on the Common.

Making the excursions were E. Kennard Fletcher, then chairman of the board of selectmen; chairman Edward Chambers of the Historical Commission; H. Arnold Wilder, then president of the Academy trustees; Lafonatis and Adam.