

# Westford trees working on the railroad

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WESTFORD — A century ago railroad locomotives in this area depended on wood to fuel the hungry fireboxes — which, in turn, developed the steam to turn the wheels and pull the cars.

Westford, with its 30 square miles or 20,000 acres of land surface, was covered mostly with woodlands, particularly those sections not suitable for cultivation.

The common species of trees growing then and now are pine, both white and “hard” pine, maples, birches, ash, and especially

oaks. The chestnut was a most useful variety, both for firewood and construction, but the blight decimated the species many years ago.

The Boston & Lowell and Nashua & Lowell Corporations purchased great quantities of cordwood to feed their locomotives. This was stashed away at the terminals and also along railroad sidings.

Sale of wood to the railroads was important as a ready cash crop to the farmers. Cutting it occupied their time during the quiet winter season and when the stifling summer heat had gone from the woods. Also, snow

provided a much easier roadbed over which to haul timber over the rocks and stumps from the cutting area.

## Wood buying deal

An interesting document has just come to light, supplied by Harvey B. Adams who lives in the 240-year-old Tower-Prescott homestead at 46 Lowell Road.

It covers an agreement by Noah and Nathan Prescott with the railroads to provide the latter with about 200 cords of “good merchantable wood” to be delivered to Westford Station at Stony Brook by April 1, 1871.

The hardwood could be round but no larger than 4 inches or less than 2½ inches in diameter at the smaller end. The soft wood was to be all split, and from sticks of 4 inches in diameter and upwards. All was to be “cut in 4-foot lengths and free from rot.”

For every 50 cords stacked at the railroad yards, the company would pay in cash. The agreed price was just over \$5.12 per cord. Compare this with today’s charge of around \$120 per cord.

To assure the fireman of well-seasoned, free burning material, the contract insisted that if any wood had not been delivered by May 1, it would have to be split and piled so as to allow time to be properly cured.

White pine then and now is our most valuable commercial timber. The woodsmen, therefore, were required to “reserve” this species if larger than 8 inches in

diameter, measured at breast height.

As the Prescotts were one of the larger families in town, and custom called for naming youngsters after their parents or other ancestors, it is not known if “N&N Prescott” was a father-son team, or made up of brothers or cousins.

Noah Prescott was an enterprising person and in the winter also manufactured granite paving blocks, cutting them from huge boulders or exposed ledges. These were shipped to Lowell and Lawrence for street surfacing, transported by rail with possibly N&N Prescott wood firing the locomotives.

There were no power saws in those days so that a tree could be leveled and cut up in minutes. If the timber was large, a two-man cross-cut saw was used. The ax was the weapon needed to fell the trees in those days. It was also used to mark the logs for cutting into the required 4-foot lengths.