

Westford's library one of first in region

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
WESTFORD — Two centuries ago, Westford was a community of farmers, but some of the seeds these men of the earth planted were for things other than vegetables, grains and fruits. The town was an early leader in education and culture.

Its Westford Academy, one of the first in the country, was founded in 1792. The name still adorns the present \$5 million high school, which now is public.

Its library system, from a small beginning, has kept pace with the growth of the community, now totalling nearly 14,000 persons. It all began in 1797 when Westford was one of the earliest towns to establish a free public library. The first books were purchased when the facility was founded by a "respectable number" of citizens, who bought shares for \$2 each and who each year contributed 25 cents per share.

The library was kept in a private house, at small cost, and in one house for 13 years

at \$6 a year, with the librarian acting also as clerk and treasurer.

THE SMALL TAX per share, plus fines accruing (always faithfully collected) paid the expenses of the fledgling library system. The books were of sterling value in history, travels, biography, etc. It is noted in its list of books, it catered to the public taste by admitting one of the very few novels then known, "The Vicar of Wakefield."

As the library increased, its patrons appreciated the advantage it would be to Westford to have a town-owned library and to give up the current system. It was voted in 1854 that the idea be accepted provided that the "town should pay all expenses connected with the library, and appropriate not less than \$30 a year for the purchase of new books." The shareholders then presented the town with 1,300 volumes. The famed Boston Public Library had been established only six years earlier.

The system of keeping the library in private homes and later in the newly built town hall prevailed until a generous philanthropist appeared on the scene. He was J. Varnum Fletcher, a Westford farm boy who made a small fortune in business at Faneuil Hall Market in Boston.

REMEMBERING his old home town, although he was an outstanding figure in his adopted community of Belmont, Fletcher built opposite the Common a very substantial building of yellow brick and slate roof, with the finest of trimmings in oak for the interior. The highly-detailed plans of the architect are on file at the library today

Although remodeled somewhat with a children's room in the rear, donated by Fletcher's great, great granddaughter, the late Marian Winnek, the exterior appears very much the same as when it was dedicated in 1896.