

# Westford's old town records show government costs small

By GORDON B. SEAVEY  
WESTFORD — Town records, for the most part, make dull reading. Many of today's problems are not so new. A century ago, the town fathers found it necessary to borrow money from wealthy townspeople to keep afloat; banks were few and perhaps not too accommodating.

We start our recollections during the Civil War period when Westford boys either could volunteer or be paid bounties for entering the service. Then too, it was a drain on many financially, particularly if it were the widow of a veteran with children whose source of income was wiped out.

The town settled its debts the first of February so many of the expenses spread over into the new year:

— 1864.....Treasurer Sherman D. Fletcher reported that 21 persons were owed on "notes and interest." The salary of a selectman was \$5. J. W. P. Abbot was paid \$1.50 for making out affidavits for six soldiers who were evidently seeking bounties. John Dane was paid \$6 for a calf killed by dogs. State aid was given 30 wives and five widows in the amount of \$2,828.

— 1865.....Some of the poor (welfare, if you would) were supported outside the alms house. A Mrs. Kemp received groceries, a bonnet and a shawl, plus a few other items which totalled \$30.34. But there is a sad ending to this with another item: "Fletcher Peckins, for going to Chelmsford with the hearse for Mrs. Kemp, \$1.25." The number of persons supported in the alms house average only four this year. The town made \$63.65 on this operation.

— 1866.....Bounties of \$125 went to Peter Bussey, James A. Graham, Ai Bicknell, Joseph Raymond and Dexter W. Waterman. Men enlisted from Lowell, Concord, Ayer and Groton. Ai lived to a ripe age and old timers remember stopping to chat with him in front of his tiny house at 1 Main Street. Memorial Day parades and whittling kept his interest in later years.

The First Parish was paid \$35 for rent of hall (in basement) and heating of same for the year. Joseph Hildreth was paid \$10 for use of his home and taking care of the assessors "books" for five years. Expenses of the 10 school districts, with a total of 509 scholars, amounted to \$1,482.94. This equals less

than \$3 per youngster. The town paid for the books for some of the poor children.

— 1867.....This was the year of a smallpox epidemic and Dr. D. A. Dow was paid \$7 for various vaccinations. George Keyes was paid \$25 for use of his home as an infirmary ("pest house") which included heat. Willard Damon and James McCauly served as nurses, Sarah M. McIntire was paid for bedding and Lucretia J. Reed for articles and food for the sufferers. Edwin Gould received 40 cents for a screwdriver used in the house.

Dr. Robert Wood was paid \$7 for "post mortem examination of a cow supposed to have died of an infectious disease."

This was the year when the town bought a new hearse for \$550. William Draper was the builder and A. C. Sawyer trimmed it for \$85. While repairing a bridge in the west part of the town, Trueworthy Keyes got \$12.20 for carrying his milk "round-about way" during the time the road was blocked.

— 1868.....The library, in its annual report, stated that 2,318 books were taken out by

414 people. It requested \$100 "for the purchase of new books, that the present deficiency may be supplied, by the purchase of the works of Dickens and other popular authors." Eliza J. Herrick received \$50 as librarian.

— 1869.....If one has a brand new hearse, with black velvet drapes and ornaments on each corner, then there should be a new hearse house. It was built by local craftsmen for \$262. G. F. Snow was paid \$12 for re-setting 200 gravestones.

The printing of 500 town reports for \$40 more than took care of the voters — which then were men only. Maintaining roads and bridges was always a big expense. Makepeace Road, in the north part of town running from Tyngsboro to Chelmsford, always was in trouble. Either that, or maybe the farmers in that rough area (who farmed between the rocks) were "in" with the local pols!

Kilburn and his wife sued the town for something, and the results indicate the town won, but the lawyers' fees amounted to \$400. Mrs. Marcella Ward, for injury on North Plain Road (now Depot

St.), near the North Burying Ground, received \$75 plus \$10 to William A. Webster for medical attention.

— 1870.....This was the year the town clerk began publishing the vital statistics: births, marriages and deaths. Don't forget, people began counting on their fingers in those days, too. Mirian Keyes Fletcher died on her 102nd birthday.

The number of persons supported in the alms house had grown to 18. Until now, mostly self-supporting, it cost the town \$1,124 over and above receipts for wood, milk and other products too numerous to mention here.

— 1871.....Building costs were way down. Items such as 350 feet of pine lumber and 483 feet of chestnut were \$22.50. It was milled at Westford Depot by Heywood and Burbeck. William Agnew received \$23 for 114 hours of breaking roads during the winter. That was 20 cents an hour.

A new school house (which still stands) was built in District 2 on Stony Brook Road, for \$1,800, including equipment.