

William C. Roudenbush: Community influence through Westford Academy

By Gordon B. Seavey

For a quarter of a century, Westford Academy Principal William C. Roudenbush was an educational inspiration to hundreds of local young men and women who still remember him with admiration, love and affection.

And for another 17 years, while enjoying his retirement, Roudenbush became a community leader, respected by all.

A native of Leroy, N.Y., he received his college education at Williams, and taught for a period of time in private schools, including Tabor Academy in Marin for eight years.

Bored with the confined life of a schoolmaster and campus life at private institutions, he and his wife, the former Evelyn Marie Rafter (whom he married while at Tabor), chose to fill an opening and start a new life in the colonial town of Westford as principal of its academy.

This was 1912.

The academy, founded in 1792, had become what is properly termed a public high school, although still financed to some extent with trustee funds. Part of his salary was first paid by them.

Community member

Finally having a home of their own, the Roudenbushes quickly settled into the social life of the community. He was then age 40, and often spoke of his new surroundings and activities as "life begins at 40."

Prior to assuming his teaching duties at the academy, the Roudenbushes attended Sunday service in the old First Parish Church at the Common, which turned out to be a bit of an embarrassment.

He had been accustomed to wearing a frock coat and top hat at Sunday services while at private schools, but was never enthused over the garb. He wrote in his memoirs, as follows: "However, the coat and topper came with our baggage that first Sunday, and I appeared in them that first Sunday."

"The only other man thus clad in church was Mr. Abiel J. Abbot [president of the Abbot Worsted Mills, who usually sat in the Abbot family pew at the front]. Then and



FORMER WESTFORD ACADEMY Principal William C. Roudenbush, still sharp at the age of 93, visits with Marjorie Seavey Johnson, Class of 1914, at his Keene, N.H., home in September 1964. Johnson, sister of author Gordon Seavey, will celebrate her 90th birthday April 9.

(Photo courtesy Gordon B. Seavey)

there I decided that this distinguished looking gentleman should have no competition from me as regards the topper; it went into storage and later to a customer in Lowell to be rented out for state and fancy-dress use."

Small town school

Westford Academy (it still bears this name) in 1912 was pretty much a small high school in a country town. Enrollment was never much over 50. Its Victorian home had been erected in 1895 as the second academy structure and looked like a barn.

The second floor of the building was one large classroom where all students gathered at the beginning of the day. It was here that the prin-

cipal, on a dias, conducted opening exercises and afterwards taught classes of his specialty, which were Latin, French and Civics. Students came to the front to recite. Boys were addressed by their last names; girls with the title of "Miss So-and-So".

The two large rooms on the first floor were assigned to two women teachers. An unpredictable hot air furnace heated the structure.

Principal Roudenbush was a quiet but friendly and dignified person, and dressed accordingly. He added many innovations during his tenure.

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His association with each student was a close one. He watched them carefully over their studies; he guided them in their work. He introduced the Pro Merito Society, which gave each senior an opportunity to distinguish himself academically.

World War I was not far away. He urged every student to participate in the war effort in his or her best manner. Later, he joined the State Guard. He worked tirelessly with Boy Scouts.

Roudenbush saw the academy grow from a student body of 50 to more than 200. He was handicapped in that many of his teachers came fresh out of college, stayed only for 1-2 years of experience, and then moved on to higher paid positions. Once in a while, though, they found a local person for a husband.

On his retirement at the age of 67,

the class of 1937 dedicated its yearbook, The Clarion, to the principal, calling him the "Horace Mann of Westford Academy".

In describing their affection for him, the editors used Shakespeare's famous quotation: "His life was gentle, and the elements so mix'd in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, 'This was a man!'"

Mr. Roudenbush was a generous correspondent, and up to his death in 1967 at the age of 95, he was in contact with scores of his former students and townspeople.

It pleased and honored him that when the old building was converted into an elementary school, it was named the Roudenbush School. Today the structure houses the very active Roudenbush Community Center.

Mr. Roudenbush was a library

trustee for 15 years, an academy trustee for the same period. He left a sizeable sum for a yearly scholarship in his name, which started a trend for others to do likewise.

His many years in Westford have left pleasant and well-deserved memories. Each Memorial Day, students decorate his grave in Fairview Cemetery. In modesty, he and his wife chose a secluded spot there near a stone wall. They had no children.

Principal Roudenbush, although the years have passed, is not forgotten.

Gordon Seavey is a graduate of Westford Academy with the Class of 1922, the final member of his family of four to complete their secondary schooling there, much of it under the supervision of Principal Roudenbush. He has been a trustee of the Academy for over 50 years.