

A failed two-year experiment with a school for young ladies

By Gordon B. Seavey

They gave it a try nearly two centuries ago, a female school just for the young ladies of the town: it apparently worked for two years, and then the preceptress moved on to Groton to start her own female school.

That was in 1819-21.

Written on a scrap of paper was an order, dated Aug. 8, 1821 to "Pay Levi Parker four dollars in full for rent of a room & wood & moving (back) benches & Desk for the female school, and in full of all demands and this be your voucher for so doing."

It was signed Benjamin Osgood, Jr., and Imla Goodhue, for the Standing Committee of Westford Academy.

Thus ended the experiment of a separated school in town for secondary students.

For many years, Nathan Houghton Groce, principal of the Academy, had had his hands full trying to teach at times as many as 60 students single handed. Records show he may have had an assistant now and then, but the first record of a

full-time preceptress came in 1818 when Miss Susan Prescott came to the Academy.

Qualified women teachers were difficult to locate, but Susan had two things in her favor: she lived in town and her father, Hon. James Prescott, was president of the Board of Trustees. She was justly regarded as an accomplished teacher and her instructions were confined solely to the classes of young ladies.

Separated

As the Academy building (1794), now the Westford Museum, has two floors, Miss Susan probably had one of the floors, and Principal Groce the top. The "necessary house" always had been segregated.

Two years later, Preceptor Groce retired to a homestead in town where he farmed until his death in 1856. His 14 years of service was the longest in the then-line of teachers.

In checking the roster of principals from Levi Hedge the first in 1892, all those who followed remained for only a couple of years, more or less. They had been educated in Harvard College and perhaps used Westford's small school to gain teaching experience.

Groce proved that being handicapped physically was no deterrent to success. Hodgman describes him in the "History of Westford" as hav-

ing the "misfortune at the age of 14 to meet with an accident which made him a cripple for life. After years of intense suffering, consequent on this mishap, he fitted for college (Harvard) and by his own exertions and the aid of friends, worked his way through.

Crippled

"His lameness was such as to deprive him of the use of his right foot...It made him morbidly sensitive, perhaps, at times irritable. But he was generally liked by his pupils, to whose instruction he devoted himself with great industry, fidelity and success, being himself master of the branches he professed to teach, and his judgment being clear and penetrating,...and his school was almost always full."

Teachers today, wisely, would throw up their hands if they were to have 60 students in a class, but it is recorded that in those times, older students were often called upon to work with their younger counterparts.

Gordon Seavey is a member of the Class of 1922 at the Academy, where the entire enrollment never numbered more than 60. In addition to Principal William C. Roudenbush, there were in addition to special teachers such as music and penmanship, always two women teachers, sometimes "green" out of college.