

# Academy heads into 200th year on trustees' strong foundation

By Gordon B. Seavey  
Staff Correspondent

**P**reliminary plans for observing the 200th anniversary of the founding of Westford Academy have already started with the formation of a general committee of former graduates, trustees, school committee persons, townspeople and faculty.

Joseph Lisi, principal of the 900-student high school, is general chairman, with Barbara H. Parkhurst, former president of the board of trustees, as secretary.

Possible events may start off with a homecoming day in 1991 and continue through the next year, 1992, 200 years after the first students entered the oldest secondary co-ed school in Massachusetts.

## Academy founding

For the first two years, Dr. Levi Hedge of Harvard College was the preceptor and taught the young boys and girls probably in the meeting house on the Common and in private homes. It was not until two years later that the two-story wooden structure (now the town museum) was erected across from the Common, a spot now marked with the original granite doorstep.

Education in Westford a couple of centuries ago, unlike today, was meager. One-room neighborhood schools provided the basic training for children. As they grew into early youth, many dropped out, particularly the boys, mainly to help run the farm.

A few of the brighter ones, perhaps, were apprenticed to a lawyer, doctor or a specialized craftsman. Few went to college.

There was no secondary educational system in town and little in the country.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, higher schooling in Westford found a real friend in Zachaeus

Wright. Ironically, though, he and his wife had no children to educate.

It was he who sparked the founding of Westford Academy, one of the earliest secondary schools in the newborn country. The pupils of both sexes were to be "taught useful sciences and literature and the principles of morality."

## Financing education

The town was not ready for school taxation. Then, such a project had to be financed by gifts from the local citizens, many of whom were poor farmers. Fifty-seven families, probably a third of the number then, purchased shares at \$2, buying from one to six units as their means provided. This totalled 118 shares.

Joseph Keyes, Francis Leighton and Joshua Read, acting as a committee or agents for the town, collected 120 pounds which bought two additional shares. With 828 pounds gathered, this was sufficient to get the project off the ground. The subscribers then met formally on April 3, 1792, to elect the persons who would be responsible for the operation of the school, the trustees.

There were to be 11 trustees, "a majority . . . to be chosen out of the inhabitants of the town." The subscribers thought it wise also to obtain the services of other outstanding men so they selected four from nearby communities.

## Original trustees

Only four of these original trustees were native sons: John Abbot, Jonathan Carver, Dr. Charles Proctor and Colonel Wright. Three others were living in town at the time.

Colonel Wright, then 54, was elected the first president and was to serve 17 years. He held nearly every town office "in the gift of the

townspeople." Most of the town records of the period are in his handwriting and are stored in the vaults in town hall.

Wright was a person of great reverence toward his fellow man and a staunch believer in the value of knowledge through education and literary works. He was with the 6th Middlesex Regiment in 1776 and served at the battle of White Plains.

He topped off his original donation with an added 360 pounds in real estate. Wright's home still stands on Chamberlain Road.

Captain Abbott, like Wright, was a founder of the town's first library system and was town clerk and treasurer at various times. He is described as "an enterprising and useful citizen." He was a lieutenant in Captain Bates' company at Concord on April 19, 1775.

Dr. Proctor, 37, lived in the Colonial brick-end house on Route 110, near the present post office. He studied his medical profession in Chelmsford and was described as a "kind and benevolent friend, a dignified and upright man."

Rev. Caleb Blake was 30 and had just come to town to be the pastor of the church. He was a graduate of Harvard and was to serve as a trustee for 41 years.

He was a country parson and not very outstanding although he preached until 1826. He was content to do farming on the side and later purchased what is now known as the Day Farm, near St. Mark's Church. The long hill that reaches from the Center parallel to Boston Road to Route 495 carries his name.

James Prescott Jr., at 26, was the youngest of the trustees and a brilliant and loyal person. He was an original subscriber and became president when Wright resigned. He was on the board for 37 years. He practiced law in town for a decade and became chief justice of Middlesex County.

## Balanced board

Going out of town to balance the board, they asked General Joseph Bardley Varnum of Dracut. He was then 42 and served for 28 years. More of a military and political personage, he lent great prestige. He was drillmaster for the Dracut Minutemen and commissioned a captain at 18. Later, he became major general of the state militia.

After being a state representative and later senator, Varnum kept climbing the political ladder until he was elected to the national House. He was president pro tem of the Senate, but the peak of his career came when he was made acting vice-president of the United States on Dec. 6, 1813 for four months. Even though he was heavily involved in other affairs, his love for his "adopted" Academy kept him on the rolls for 28 years.

Gordon Seavey, a member of the Westford Academy class of 1922, a past president and trustee for 53 years, has been named honorary chairman of the 200th anniversary committee.