

After 242 years, Common question emerges

Is its pristine beauty becoming cluttered with good intentions?

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

It's only a "half acre, more or less, around the Meeting House," but it is a major part of Westford's priceless heritage. It is the Town Common.

Purchased for 20 pounds in 1748 from Joseph Underwood, a large landowner, this triangular plot of land sits almost in the geographical center of the town's 30 square miles of territory. This common, or public ground, has been a focal point ever since Westford broke away from its mother town of Chelmsford in 1729.

Only one other location in town, the nearby meeting house, has more historical importance. It is the adjacent First Parish Church, "gathered in 1725," which for over a century served as the seat of local government and a religious society in harmony. Gunpowder, town weights and measures and records as well as the Bible were stored in the same edifice.

The Common has had its good times as well as bad. As it was common land, as the name implies, nearby farmers would sometimes graze their animals on the green. Colonial troops, State Guardsmen and even Boy Scouts used the grounds for drills. Academy students found it a convenient place for outdoor activities. Although small for a ball field, it was used constantly until Whitney Playground was made a gift in

1910 to the town, complete with a standard-sized diamond and a tennis court.

Improvement Society

In the late 1800s, the newly-formed Village Improvement Society took an interest in upgrading the Common. Members erected a fence around the triangle, planted a double row of trees (some still standing) and kept the grass mowed. A bandstand and flagpole had been erected during Civil War times.

For easy approach, platform scales for weighing heavy wagon loads, such as hay, were placed at the apex of the grounds, just about the location of the present World War I monument.

Westford Common is a setting of natural beauty. Some would say it looks like an old-fashioned quaint New England scene. It was originally chosen as a "slightly spot" for the all-important meeting house. It is a picture postcard scene of the village green surrounded by historical homes, the facade of a country store, attractive town office buildings all enhanced by a 200-year-old impressive Colonial meeting house whose golden Paul Revere weathervane pokes 120 feet into the sky above the tree tops.

With careful scrutiny, however, some concerned citizens have decided that their precious common is too cluttered. For example, a hideous black cannon, cherished by all youngsters who ever sat



Courtesy Gordon B. Seavey

An old drawing shows the Common as it appeared circa 1900, when the population of Westford was 2,148. It is seen in this drawing as heavily forested.

astride it, is right at the apex of the Common. A Victorian cast iron watering trough, installed just as the flivver was replacing old Dobbin, is now more attractive by plantings. These and others may never be eliminated for sentimental reasons, but now's the time to study what should be added and what should be eliminated from the grounds.

Too many trees

Is the Common to become a forest with ornamental trees scattered willynilly here and there... or should it be open in

the center as it was when the Minutemen drilled or the Academy students played hide and seek or tag?

They say take a lesson from the Lexington Green, a hallowed triangle bordered with a few trees, a pulpit in the center and a marker showing the line of fire where the British met the local farmers.

A knowledgeable person could stand in the center of the Common and point out some 50 areas of historical local history on and about the Common... if he could dodge the forest of trees.

There are some things which could be added without overburdening the grounds. A well-known local family would like to underwrite the cost of a permanent, small "trail" map locating some of the more important historical features in the vicinity. It would be mounted on the back of the lighting control panel which initially never should have been placed dead center on the grounds. But now that it is there, it would be a saving gesture to mount this chart for inquiring visitors.

Why not a small plate identifying

the donors? Look across at the library... the \$1,000 flagpole was just such sort of gift.

Top honors

In the library there is a book "On Common Grounds" in which Laurie Halderman, an architectural historian, ranks Westford Common as one of the best preserved in all New England. She shows horrible examples of towns whose commons have been encroached on by playing fields, parking, pavement, and too many monuments.

All through many generations Westford has been fortunate that she retains her half-acre of revered soil. We do not wish to intentionally downgrade our good neighbors, but for comparison, take a look at the centers of our adjoining communities and compare commons: Chelmsford, Acton, Littleton, Groton, Tyngsboro and Dunstable. Westford can beam with pride!

A study group to control the destiny of Westford Common might be a good idea. There must be a halt to the proliferation of home-made signs placed on the Common which with the rush of traffic are never read... and hardly ever taken down by the person placing them. Superfluous trees in the heart of the Common should be removed, opening up spaces for folks to move about. And perhaps most important of all, consider very carefully any attempts to add more monuments.

Gordon Seavey was born in a home which stood opposite the fire station. He has witnessed many changes to the Common, some good and some definitely out of place, he says.