

Alert tenants foil post office robbery

The date: March 22, 1904

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

What might be a two-liner in today's community newspaper was big news 86 years ago when an early morning break-in at the Westford Center post office was foiled.

The post office at the time was located in a front corner of the Wright & Fletcher General Store located across from the Westford Nursing Home. The date was March 22, 1904.

A large window on the front of the store faced the cash drawer behind the glass front mail box case. With first class letter postage being 2¢, quick mathematics would indicate the price of being jailed down at the Town Farm would not be the worth of a theft.

Nevertheless, about 1 o'clock in the morning,

after a spirited town meeting the day prior, the tenants on the second floor heard strange noises below.

Throwing open a window, they observed two men scampering toward the Common at full speed. In fact, they were in such haste that they left their burglar tools. They consisted of a sledge hammer, a monkey wrench, a pinch bar and a blacksmith's hammer, all traced as being stolen from Mark Jenkin's blacksmith shop at Chamberlin's Corner.

These were discovered the next morning by Sherman H. Fletcher, the postmaster. The burglars, in attempting to pry off the frame of the window, had not counted on the sleeping folks overhead. Being surprised, the two individuals threw away the tools to the side of the building and scampered.

One can imagine that there was much hubbub in town by the time Sherm had completed surveying the dastardly deed. Figuring that Mark's shop was more than a mile away, the men must have had a horse and carriage in order to transport the heavy tools . . . but they were not sure.

Some seemed to think it was a local job, with the culprits planning the theft while they attended the annual town meeting held in the town hall the previous day.

To use modern parlance, it was a good time to "case the joint."

During the mid-day break at the town meeting, often a sizeable group of men (not many women ever attended) would gather at either of the two stores at the Center to pick up some crackers and cheese, cookies and a bottle of locally bottled birch beer, sarsaparilla or root beer to sustain them for the afternoon.

It was reported at the time that perhaps the robbers "were hanging around taking an inspection of the place." Did they mingle with the crowd unnoticed?

And there were lots of other theories brought out which even the postal inspector who arrived later couldn't verify.

This is just one of the many "mysteries" unsolved over years in a small New England town as garnered by Gordon Seavey, a native of the town and former newspaper publisher. He adds that the first post office in Westford was opened in 1804 in the home of John W.P. Abbot, named postmaster. Three years ago, the Center lost its post office to a new location off Littleton Road.



Photo courtesy Gordon B. Seavey

Could that be Mark Jenkins, standing in the doorway of his Chamberlin's Corner blacksmith shop, awaiting the return of stolen tools used in an attempted robbery of the Center post office 86 years ago today?