

# 'Fugit Hora' evident in Westford's face

By Gordon B. Seavey

**M**any of the cold, grey slate grave markers in Westford's old cemeteries carry the same engraving — *Fugit Hora* or "time flies".

When we recall certain past events — some important, others not so — that happened around town, we have to admit that *Fugit Hora* really occurs.

Here's a test for oldtimers and newcomers; we can hear some saying, "I can't believe it happened so long ago".

Fires were a great hazard in the past, caused by old chimneys, use of kerosene lanterns in the barn, lamps in the house which could be easily tipped over, or primitive wiring which came along around 1911 when the town received its first electric service.

It was a bitter cold night on Feb. 25, 1914, when the Butterfield Tavern next to the First Parish Church caught fire. The Edward Fisher family was living there at the time, in what had been the home of John W.P. Abbot.

Volunteer firemen managed to douse much of the flames but the buildings, except the barn, had to be demolished. Fireman Bill Wright slipped off an icy ladder and broke a leg.

It was during World War I when the Atwood Brothers homestead at the corner of Hildreth Street and Concord Road caught fire, burning to the ground. Townspeople watched with dismay as about ten tons of coal in the basement burned for several days. Coal was a very scarce fuel at that time.

The Atwoods were successful farmers and their homestead was one of the town's finest.

Another grand old farm house, where J.V. Fletcher was born, at Depot and Cold Springs roads, caught fire in 1897 and burned to the ground. The loss (then) was

\$6,000.

The great barn, which had intentionally been constructed across the street away from the house, was saved. A bubbling spring among the giant pines in the rear gave the farm its name, "Cold Spring Farm", also the street.

The Hugh Daniel Gage ice houses on Forge Pond burned to the ground in 1920, with a loss of \$75,000 — a tremendous amount in those days. A smaller version was erected on the same spot (near the town bathing beach) but it, too, succumbed to the vandal's torch in 1931.

## Commentary

Located not far away, the abandoned Forge Village Railroad Station was hit by fire in 1958, 30 years ago.

It was a sorry day when one of the fine old colonial homes, complete with picket fence and facing the Common, burned to the ground, with Joseph Kneeland losing his life. This was in 1891.

Something good, however, came from this event, as the site was ideal when the town and J.V. Fletcher were looking for a site for the new library.

### Intentional demolition

There were demolitions, too, of interesting buildings. The Prescott Tavern in Forge was demolished in 1976 in order to build a small business complex. Other than photos, all that remains of this old hostelry is the granite horse mounting block which stood in front. It now marks the Luther Prescott family plot at the West Burying Ground.

The great white house with a mansard roof, the home of J.C. "Jack" Abbot, was demolished in 1942. It stood at the head of the Common, had 18 rooms and eight marble fireplaces. Allister MacDougall had pur-

chased the property which enabled him to give to the town the site of the original Westford Academy, now marked by its old doorstep.

Tears came to the eyes of many as Abbot Hall at Forge Village, home of many movies, dances and assemblies, was demolished in one day, March 12, 1980.

Julian A. Cameron of the Abbot Worsted Company, which owned the water power rights of Forge Pond, told me long ago that when the dam was raised about 1870, the area of the pond was about doubled.

And the rough granite bridge that carries Stony Brook Road over the brook of that name was built by Atemus Cuming, a local farmer, in 1843 for \$240.

### Noteworthy dates

And here are some dates younger folk will remember:

A freight train jumped the tracks near Westford Depot just ten years ago with 22 coal cars toppled.

Population in Westford in 1895 was 2,418; in 1985, 15,055.

The fire department moved out of what is now the Westford Museum to occupy new quarters alongside the town hall. How long ago? Eight years.

The third Westford Academy building was dedicated Oct. 28, 1973, on Patten Road, moving from what is now the Roudenbush Community Center, named for William C. Roudenbush, Academy principal for 25 years.

Gong back in time, early grade schools covered only seven grades. With the construction pending of the opening of the Roudenbush building in 1897, the school department extended the primary system with an eighth grade, in order that the transition of students into the new building

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would be easier.

The new 8th graders met in the town hall, which incidentally was built in 1870.

The white pine, two-section flag pole reaching 80 feet over the Common and built as a memorial to Civil War vets, finally fell to vandals. It was replaced by a fibre glass pole, only 60 feet high, in 1975.

Town water, through a private company owned by substantial

local citizens, came into use in 1909. For fire protection, the town installed 40 hydrants; the water towers were placed on Prospect and Kissacook hills.

And finally, the post office which had been in Westford Center for generations, was banished to the hinterlands on Littleton Road, not far from the Littleton line and a six-mile round trip run from the Center...April 1, 1987.

Gordon Seavey is a Westford native, an avid historian and a retired newspaper publisher.