

Prominent neighbors served on early boards to govern the Academy

By Gordon B. Seavey

Among the historical treasures in the archives of Westford Academy is a short note, gracefully couched in equally graceful handwriting, from one of its trustees who, at advanced age, tendered his resignation.

It was dated Concord, Aug. 23, 1803, from Rev. Ezra Ripley and hand delivered by the then-Academy preceptor, Levi Hedge, to Zaccheus Wright, president of the body.

Directed to the Trustees of Westford Academy, the message is as follows:

"Having given you notice on the day of the late exhibition [meeting] of my intention, as herein expressed, I do now formally resign my office and charge as a trustee of Westford Academy, being convinced of my inability, in existing circumstances, to be any longer useful in that capacity.

"With the best wishes for the interests of literature and every suitable consideration of respect for the Board, I am, Gentlemen, your very humbler serv. EZRA RIPLEY."

When Zaccheus Wright and others founded the Academy in 1792, for the purpose not only to lend dignity and prestige to the group but possibly to encourage distant students to enroll in the fledgling school, important persons in neighboring towns were selected.

Ezra Ripley was the beloved pastor of the First Parish Church in Concord, 15 miles away.

In his book, "Know These Concordians," Rev. Dana McLean Greeley observed:

"Ezra Ripley influenced his town [Concord] more than anyone else in his history, with two exceptions only: his own distinguished step-grandson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his predecessor, Peter Bulkely, the town's founder and first pastor."

Describing his step-father, Emerson wrote:

"He was a man so kind and

sympathetic, his character was so transparent, and his merits so intelligible to all observers, that he was justly appreciated in this community.

"He was a natural gentleman; no dandy, but courtly, hospitable, manly and public spirited; his nature social, his house open to all...His friends were his study, and to see them loosened his talents and his tongue.

"In his house dwelt order and prudence and plenty. There was no waste and no stint. He was open-handed and just and generous...He subscribed to all charities, and it is no reflection on others to say that he was the most public-spirited man in the town."

The roster of trustees years ago contained men (only) from all neighboring towns at one time or another, as well as former principals such as John D. Long.

Another military man was Joseph Bradley Varnum of Dracut, who at the age of 18, was commissioned a captain in the Colony of Massachusetts Bay. Later he became a general.

Soon after the Revolutionary War, he became a state representative and then a senator. Elected to the National House of Representatives in 1795, where he became speaker, he switched to the Senate, where he became its president.

He was acting vice-president of the United States 1813-14. He continued all during his busy career as an Academy trustee until his death in 1821.

Non-local persons were included in the Academy's managing board until 1955, which saw the deaths of Dr. A. Warren Stearns of Billerica and Prof. Arthur D. Butterfield of Chelmsford.

Today the policy is to select local persons who are preferably Academy graduates.

Gordon Seavey is a graduate of Westford Academy in 1922, whose principal at the time was William C. Roudenbush.