

# Town Meeting: Different picture in 1856

By Gordon B. Seavey

It's annual town meeting time and voters have been dazzled with figures that in many cases run into the several hundreds of thousands of dollars, and millions, too.

When these sessions, including the special meeting, were over, total expenditures for the coming year were in the millions of dollars.

Town meeting time in Westford 130 years ago was somewhat different. People drove their buggies and others walked to the old meetinghouse at the common where the lower floor beneath the sanctuary was used for just such gatherings.

With town report in hand, they studied the various finan-

rather a minor item and, as the Academy was private, it stood on its own

Three selectmen took care of the incidental expenses, "including town officers' compensation." Remember, this was 1856.

Aria Nutting was paid \$3 for mowing brush in the north burying ground which gave him some extra spending money — and besides, he probably did a little trimming around graves of his ancestors.

The hearse was the property of the town and G.W. White was allowed \$16 for painting, varnishing and "trimming" the horse-drawn vehicle. William A. Goodhue received \$23.46 for the use of his pair of black horses and "attending" with the hearse 34 funerals. In those days it was custom to announce the passing of a resident by ringing the bells of the First Parish and its offspring, The Union Society, for which each church was paid \$7.50 for the use and tolling of their belfry bells. Rev. Leonard Luce was paid 75 cents for registering five deaths for the town recorder.

Oren Coolidge, whose sturdy old Colonial homestead (now occupied by Mrs. David Scott at 17 Forge Village Road) still stands, was paid \$3 for "flowing the Poor Farm meadows" the previous year.

Roads and bridges was always a big item in the town's budget. For that year, it totalled \$544.34.

Artemus W. Cummings, who built the double arch bridge which still carries Stony Brook Road over the stream of that name, was chosen to repair the small bridge at Boutwell Brook near the Coolidge farm — apparently a small job, as the cost was only \$1.25.

This was the era when snow storms tied up the whole town until farmers harnessed their teams of horses and "pungs to "break out the roads." Salt and sand was not used. The old-time method was not to push the snow aside but to pack it down hard for sleighs and lumber sleds — also for big and little boys and girls to slide down the nearest hill.

A heavy snow roller, usually drawn by two to three pairs of horses, was also used and it was a great sight to see these animals and men flattening the snow drifts. A picture of this contraption, quite unique, is shown on Page 82 of June Kennedy's history of the town (Westford Recollections). Presumably, every family in Westford has a copy of this wonderful accurate reminder of the olden days. Incidentally, these men with the horses were paid 12½ cents per hour.

Another interesting item we find among the old records shows that D.C. Butterfield, as the "Liquor Agent", was paid \$65.40. He ran the local tavern, then opposite the Center Post Office, but could it be that it had something to do with dispensing spirits for medicinal purposes only?

Ed Symmes, who was always

in great demand as a surveyor in this and surrounding towns, received 75 cents for "looking up bounds of a road" Try this deal on today's map makers!

There were sad notes among these records. Ephraim Wright was paid \$4.45 for making a coffin for Zaccheus Read; Levi Snow charged \$1 50 for digging a grave in Fairview Cemetery which at the time was often referred to a Snow's cemetery; and finally, \$1 for carrying Mrs. Elbridge Neal to the Poor House.

It is quite probable that not a single woman attended these old town meetings. How refreshing it is today to see and hear women present their cases with logical arguments (and persuasive charm) at the microphone at today's town meetings! Women's power at last.

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## Westford Wandering

cial functions of the community which then had one-tenth of today's population — 1,500.

The 10 district schools (which cost a total of \$1,262 to operate) were of one-room size, so none of these could be used for the gathering. The town hall wasn't to be until 15 years later, so a deal was made with the First Parish Church to rent its lower floor for the year for \$33 plus another dollar for the wood used to heat the room. Town meeting was held in February when farmers' chores were at a minimum — and it was good wintertime entertainment.

Sherman D. Fletcher, town treasurer, who used a big oak desk at his nearby home for an office, reported that the balance in the "Treasurer's hands" was \$1,438.04, which included five shares of Stony Brook Railroad stock worth \$100 a share.

Operation of the town was financed by loans from the more wealthy inhabitants so it was stated that John W.P. Abbot had \$815.12, including interest, coming to him and to John Osgood, \$177.33.

Town expenses were divided four ways. Schools seemed to be