

Westford's historical imperative: Answer combat call

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Memorial Day is the one day set aside each year to officially honor our dead and, in particular, those valliant servicemen who died fighting for the honor of their country.

Over the years, town programs have brought people together for patriotic services, parades and band concerts and even sporting events. Steeple bells were rung at sunrise and nightfall.

Parades would pause at each monument to offer prayers and to place wreaths. The roll call of the victims was read, as it is today.

Veterans, remembering their comrades, placed American flags on each grave, whether the soldier died in combat or later of natural causes.

Revolutionary service

The Revolutionary War took its greatest toll on the struggling early settlers. Population of Westford at that period was about 1,200 mostly young people. One-quarter, or 250 men and boys, from this town are recorded as having served.

Beneath a slate marker, the largest in the West Burying Ground, is the remains of Col. John Robinson of Revolutionary fame. He is considered by local historians as the greatest of all Westford fighting men. How hard it must have been for him to come home to learn that three of his daughters — Mehitable, 8, Betty, 5, and Sally, 2 — died within a period of eight days. Their little markers are alongside his.

Colonel Robinson was at Concord Bridge

alongside Major Buttrick and again at Bunker Hill, where Historian Hodgman wrote: "He stood in the front, 'in shape and gesture proudly eminent,' exposed to instant death, yet doing his duty; now leaping upon the parapet, a target for the advancing foe... showing himself everywhere the efficient officer and the strong-hearted man."

The two men from Westford, Joseph Minot and Jonathan Hudley, were killed in that battle. Minot, 23, was the son of Captain Jonathan Minot. No grave marker was erected for him in Fairview Cemetery until after his sister Joanna died in 1780 at the age of 17. Possibly the family was in such dire straights after the war that it was less costly to have a single slate marker.

Civil War combatants

It was called the War of Rebellion, a cruel war in which American fought American, brother against brother. It was the Civil War of 1861-1865.

Westford went along with the others, supplying 172 men, a surplus of 15 soldiers over and above demands. Four were commissioned during service.

Westford women participated at home. They tended the farm, knitted socks and made bandages and other supplies for the troops. There was great patriotic fervor in town. An 80-foot flagpole was erected through contributions on the Common, its first.

When Lincoln called for troops, 20 young men gathered in the Academy to "sign up." William Metcalf was their leader.

But it was not all glory. In a memorial later placed in the Town Hall, there were 32



File photo

An impressive likeness of a Civil War soldier eternally stands guard atop the monument on Town Common.

names of the dead in black letters on the sombre marble slabs.

Among these names is that of Nathan Bicknell. He was one of 13 children and

born on the Bicknell farm on Carlisle Road, near Minot's Corner. He and his brother Al were in the fierce battle at Gettysburg and became separated.

Nathan was mortally wounded on July 1, 1863. Miraculously Al found the body of his brother among the hundreds of dead Union soldiers lying about. He dug a trench as best he could, and without benefits of any covering, lowered the body into the ground and replaced the soil.

The last of the "long, thin blue line" of local Civil War veterans were Hiram Dane, 93, who died in 1932, and Wayland F. Balch in 1937 at 98 years, lacking three months.

Spanish-American War

The Spanish-American War was brief but marked the emergence of the United States as a world power. The conflict lasted between April and August 1898, mainly over Cuba.

Several young Westford men volunteered for duty, one of them being Fred P. Collins. He wanted to be an army career man but his life was cut short when he died of malaria Feb. 2, 1900, while on duty in the Philippines. Another young man, Philip R. Prescott, died also in the Philippines. His death occurred May 20, 1900, and was a great shock to members of his 1897 class at the Academy.

There also were four others who died in service, and their names are on the octagonal monument opposite the library. In front of this memorial is the ancient cannon which was captured at the entrance of Santiago (Cuba) Harbor by the U.S. Navy, who presented it to the town.

World War I

One of the greatest of Westford veterans in World War I was Sgt. Leroy Bicknell, son of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bicknell. The whole town turned out to welcome him back, wearing the Distinguished Service Cross, Military Medal and Croix de Guerre. His exploits were compared to Sgt. Alvin C. York.

He captured 50 Germans in the memorable Argonne-Manse engagement, and for this and other acts of heroism, he was one of the few in this country to receive all three medals.

With no infantry support, the enemy attacked two days during which time two men and one gun were captured, his record shows. He planned and carried out a counter attack using, in part, captured enemy guns.

Sgt. Bicknell succeeded in releasing his own men, who were pinned down, and captured a nest of 50 Germans.

Names of nine men who died in World War I are included in a bronze tablet on the Common. They are Edward J. Bechard, J. Norbert Brule, Thomas Costello, Adlard Langley, Antonio Lozzie, Antonio Palermo, Charles Smith and Dr. Orion V. Wells.

Lack of space but not thought prevents listing those who made the supreme sacrifice in World War II, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. In each of the villages are monuments indicating those who served distinct neighborhoods.

Gordon Seavey, who lost a grandfather in the Civil War, recalls visiting the ramparts at the Santiago Harbor, where possibly the Westford cannon once was mounted.