

# Biographical sketch of library benefactor

By June Kennedy  
Eagle correspondent

*This is the second part of a biographical sketch of J. Varnum Fletcher, donor of Westford's library. It begins with references to Cold Spring Farm, where the Fletcher family spent many summers.*

**J.** V. Fletcher taught all the children very young to drive horses and also to harness them. There was a row boat on the river from which one could catch horn-pout on Stony Brook (provided one ducked under the railroad ties and avoided the black water snakes overhead!) A large ice house stood by the barn.

Fletcher read his Bible every morning. Then, as he was a very early riser, he also assisted others in awakening by moving all the big rocking chairs around on the piazza, making considerable noise, snapping the window shades to the top, and swatting flies with a newspaper. He loved a good time, and his great granddaughter recalled a gay party when the whole house was alive to the sound of banjo, mandolin and guitar, and Japanese lanterns were strung along the piazza and garden with its picket fence.

In the 90s, the Fletchers owned a 9-passenger "mountain wagon" which made one annual trip to Long Sought For Pond for a picnic and swim, and to the Groton Inn where the very idea of mince pie in mid-summer was the lure.

Mrs. Fletcher did not care as much for this farm as her husband did. She would have preferred the nice cool seashore, but he loved the farm. One winter in Belmont J.V. Fletcher inveigled a granddaughter to go on a long sleigh ride with him, and they ended up in Westford at a country funeral.

J.V. was a meticulous man. One year he had the Cold Spring homestead completely redecorated, adding much charm with painted floors and antique furniture. The outside was then painted yellow-ochre, at the suggestion of his grandson Henry.

But within a week, after his return to Belmont for the winter, and as he was dashing for his train to Boston — he was always hurrying — J.V. received a telegraph message with the news that his Westford home had burned to the ground. Rumors were that the incentive for the fire was

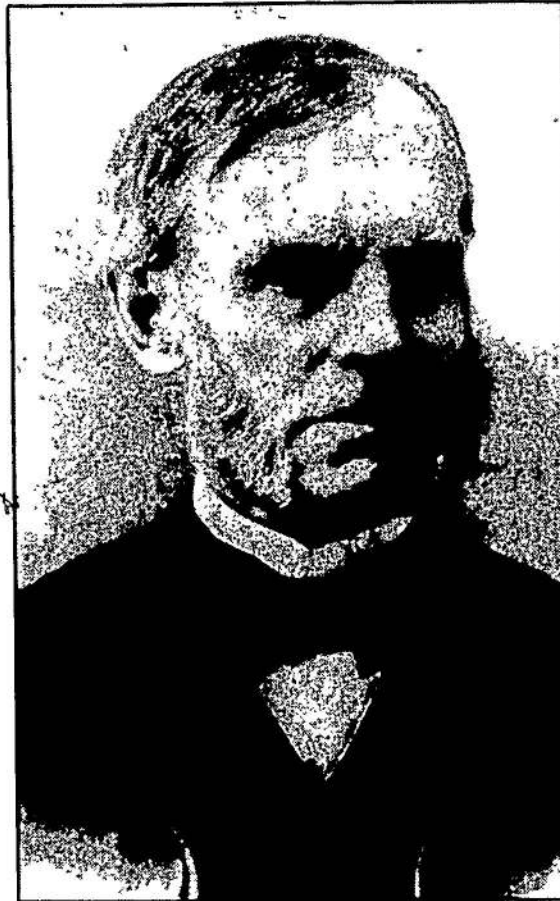


Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

Library benefactor J. Varnum Fletcher

to cover the intended theft of the plumbing (which consisted of a tin-plated copper tub and marble basin).

It must have been a shock to this elderly man, but by the next summer, J.V. Fletcher had a new house built over the same foundation — not a saltbox this time but the large building seen there today. The great barn, however, did not burn. It was torn down in recent years, although still as square and sturdy as the day it was built over 200 years ago.

Fletcher was sentimental, too. He had wooden-handled button hooks made from a tremendous elm, five feet from the house, which was killed by the fire.

## Major library benefactor

Westford's Social Library had become outdated and it was evident that a public library was needed for the town. At the annual Town Meeting held in March of 1895, a letter from J.V. Fletcher was read, offering a donation of \$10,000 toward a library building. However, when it was decided to use buff-colored brick (that, and other improvements, raised the cost to \$13,969), Fletcher covered this cost, too.

In appreciation for his generosity to the town, the townspeople named the library for him. The architect was Henry M. Francis and the contractor, William C. Edwards. The site chosen was, of course, next to the First Parish Meeting House where, a few months earlier, the lovely colonial homestead known as the Wright and Bancroft house had burned to the ground.

No public exercises were held when the cornerstone was laid on Sept. 12, 1895, but in a cavity cut into the granite stone (from Graniteville) was placed a copper box securely sealed, containing numerous articles:

"Many coins bearing 1895 date — penny, nickel, dime, quarter, 50¢ piece, an 1895 silver dollar, an 1895 ½¢, list of voters at 1895 annual town meeting, copy of J.V. Fletcher's letter donating money for the library, list of graduates and program of graduating exercises at Westford Academy June 21, 1895; pamphlet giving account of the Centennial Celebration of the building of the First Parish Meeting House, etc."

The library was dedicated June 4, 1896. This was the era of Carnegie libraries, when an epidemic of libraries spread throughout the New England States.

At 85, J.V. Fletcher's hearing and sight were unimpaired and he was still both strong and agile, but two years later he was dead — two years of humiliating decline, ordered around by his despised male nurse. But he had fought this losing battle every bit of the way.

Certainly the name and memory of the Hon. J.V. Fletcher are deeply rooted in the heritage and progress of the lovely town of Westford.

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections," a series of historical vignettes and photos. Material for this biography was drawn from "Juniper Hill" by Marian F. Winnek & other stories related by her, "Faneuil Hall and Market" by Abram English Brown, "Souvenir of Dedication of J.V. Fletcher Library - June 4, 1896."