

Closed schoolhouse continues to serve

By June W. Kennedy
The following is the second of a five-part series on old Westford schoolhouses by resident June W. Kennedy, who authored 'Westford Recollections', a series of historical vignettes and photos.

ERected in 1874, this building served as the Center schoolhouse until 1908 when the Frost School opened. Of the district schools that flourished during that period, several are today occupied as homes. Center School No. 1 is presently the Tadmuck Senior Center.

The late Mrs. Elizabeth C. Taylor (then Miss Cushing) taught at the Center School from 1906-1908. She had always wanted to be a teacher. It took

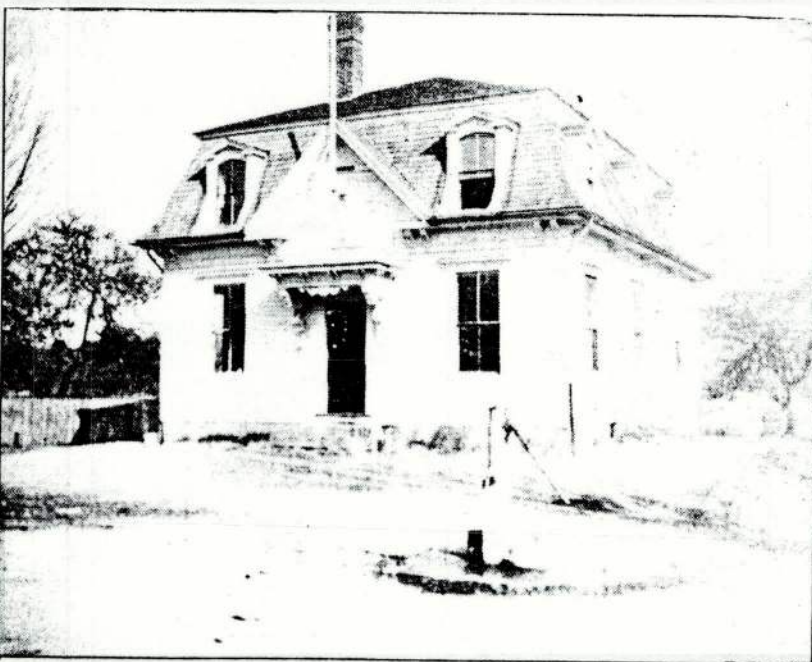
her exactly 21 years, 3 months and 3 days from the time of her birth to make her dream come true.

On a bright September morning in 1906, she arrived at the Tadmuck School very early, quite anticipating her new experience. To her surprise — I guess she never thought to inquire — she found that the well had been condemned, and there was no central heat.

Nevertheless, in her green and blue plaid dress — with additional touches of red, yellow and white — all pleated to the ankles, her common-sense brown shoes and tan stockings, she awaited the arrival of her very first pupil.

Suddenly a little boy

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LONG GONE IS the squeaking pump at Tadmuck School No. 1. Built in town center in 1874, the school closed when Frost School opened in 1898. For many years it served as headquarters for the Spalding Light Cavalry and the Tadmuck Women's Club. Today it is owned by the town and serves as the Tadmuck Senior Center. (Courtesy 'Westford Recollections')

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FANNIE PRESCOTT SITS amongst her students at the Tadmuck School No. 1 in this 1897 photo. The fair-haired young lad standing to her left is Allister F. MacDougall, Westford's town historian who still lives just down Boston Road from the old school. (Courtesy of 'Westford Recollections')

Versatile Tadmuck School

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appeared, wearing a red velvet cap, with curls about his forehead, who proudly announced: "I'm Charles Whitney Miller, 5 years old and vaccinated." She knew right then and there that this little boy knew just how to behave.

One mother wanted a description of this new teacher. A small boy replied that, "she wore a rainbow dress and bean-juce colored shoes."

Mrs. Taylor made \$10 a week for 38 weeks and paid \$5 for board and room in a home nearby. It cost her \$2 a week to go home, so the profits weren't very notable. In order to get home to Fayville she took the Pine Ridge Station freight train, a passenger to Concord Junction and the electric car to Framingham.

For years she had no Sunday dinner because she'd have to start back for Westford at 10 or 11 o'clock on Sunday morning, go to Boston Chestnut Hill subway to North Station where she would purchase a ticket for Westford, catch the train for Lowell and then the train for Ayer, getting off in Westford.

At the Westford Depot she got in to what she called "the Black Maria", a sideseater horse-

drawn vehicle with a door — a cross between a phaeton and barge. The "Black Maria" carried Mrs. Taylor to her boarding house in the center village.

She loved her job; there was a closeness with the children. At this 2-room schoolhouse, Mrs. Taylor taught grades 1 through 4 downstairs; Mrs. Miller taught grades 5 through 8 upstairs.

At Christmastime, Aaron Tuttle carried her in his pung down to the depot where he chopped two trees which the students decorated with popcorn and cranberries.

The children — and she had 35 — brought her numerous gifts. Pupils from the center walked to school, but the Kimball Farm transported those from the outlying district in a barge or sleigh. The horse poked and the children came in to school crying because their hands and feet were so cold.

Lighting was so poor (no electricity) that on dark days singing or oral work was common. As noted before, the well was unfit, so two students would volunteer to take a pail up to the Town Hall to work the pump there.

One had to put on his hat and coat and run around the corner in order to use the outhouse —

which had two doors, one for boys and one for girls.

Clothing represented the fashion of the day. Girls wore below-the-knee dresses covered with aprons, white guimpes or blouses, and high buttoned shoes. Fleece-lined leggings buttoned over the knees. There was a strap over the instep which made them difficult to get on. Boys wore Russian blouses with wide belts. Hamburg and lace ruffles were popular.

Lessons of day

Mrs. Taylor began each day with the 23rd Psalm and the Lord's Prayer. She commented that although there was a flag inside the room, it was not common practice to salute it. A flag and pole also graced the schoolyard.

The 1891 Town Report states: "Our schools caught the enthusiasm of other places and through efforts of teachers and liberality of citizens, four schools: Center, Graniteville, Stony Brook and Minot's Corner, were adorned with beautiful flags and staffs."

The Commonwealth was in favor of flags, for they were thought to help develop loyal, law-abiding citizens, and also to

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Tadmuck School history

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make them realize that the blessings they now enjoy have been obtained at the cost of great sacrifice. Nowhere could this be taught better than in a public school where democracy is practiced and no one is excluded. The State desired to foster the sentiment of patriotism by requiring the session of school preceding Memorial Day to be set apart "for patriotic or commemorative exercises."

The 1891 Report also states that vocal music was added, putting Westford in line with Pepperell, Littleton and Concord. Both music and poetry were highlighted.

In literature, patriotic poems were assigned to several grades for memorizing and reading. Popular were: "America", "Barbara Frietchie", "Hail Columbia", "Paul Revere's Ride", Longfellow's "Hiawatha", and Whittier's "Snowbound". Hans Christian Anderson and Grimm's Fairy Tales were also favorites.

The single desk and single chairs at Tadmuck School faced the street. Mrs. Taylor, quite fearful of thunderstorms, would sit at her lift-top desk pretending to the children that she was not afraid. (Her desk is now in the Westford Town Museum.)

A board fence surrounded the schoolyard. At recess a loose plank proved to be a good baseball bat. Miss Ruth Tuttle, a schoolteacher in Westford and herself a student at this school, said that it was common for the pupils to walk on top of the fence too. Perhaps this accounts for the numerous fence repairs listed in the Town Reports for all the schools.

Picture, too, if you will, a tennis court in the yard where lawn tennis was played.

Absence of a fire escape provided concern, but the building still stands with a heart full of memories. A gala 100th anniversary celebration honoring its schoolhouse years and its ownership by Troop F, Spalding Light Cavalry, was sponsored by the then present occupants, the Tadmuck Women's Club. Chairing the October 1974 event was Mrs. Austin Fletcher, who as Eleanor Colburn, attended the old school for one year.

The story of how it became a clubhouse might be of interest.

Spalding Light Cavalry

When the school closed, it was purchased by a well-known area military unit, Troop F, First Squadron Cavalry, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, which had been functioning since Civil War days. In its ranks were men from not only Westford, but Chelmsford and Dunstable.

By 1907, the unit had degenerated into mostly a social and sporting group. As it had "fallen

below the standard of efficiency", it was ordered disbanded by the Adjutant General of the state. Undaunted by the dismissal, the group incorporated to "foster, develop, and perpetuate the bond of friendship and encourage the spirit of good citizenship."

For a name they chose Troop F, Spalding Light Cavalry, and for headquarters they purchased for \$750 the just-abandoned Center Schoolhouse. The association equipped the building with electricity and a one-pipe heater. Pool tables and spittoons decorated the upstairs rooms.

The next few decades witnessed many a fancy dinner, ball, parade, clay pigeon shoot and outing by this lively group — of the men of blue in their "dress uniform with black shoes, white collars of medium height, russet belts, khaki leggings, white gloves, haversacks and canteens, and armed with carbines."

As members grew older, their need for the building grew less. It was no accident that Mrs. W. Reuben Taylor, who had taught as Miss Cushing at the Center School, and was serving as vice-president of the women's club, was delegated to approach Captain Monahan of the Spalding Light Cavalry Association to see if they might acquire the building.

Tadmuck Club

The Tadmuck Club started in the home of Mrs. George T. Day as a reading circle to review books. Organized in 1905, it met for many years in the library or the church building. When approached by Mrs. Taylor for the building, the thinning ranks of cavalry men were agreeable, but imposed the following conditions on the club:

The women were to prepare and serve the annual dinner each year for the Cavalry (which at that time included a troop from Townsend as well as one from Pepperell and Billerica). Other requirements were that the Tadmuck Club was to "keep the building and grounds in good, habitable and presentable conditions for thirty years", at which time the building and land would become their property.

In 1962, all conditions having been met, the deed was passed and the Tadmuck Club, Inc. became the owners.

New incentive then arose among the membership of this social women's organization so that its affiliation became district, state and finally national. The effect of this gift to the women of the town, in addition to becoming a home for the Tadmuck Club, was to create a memorial to the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia.

The Town of Westford bought the building for the Senior Center in the early 1980's.

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