

Westford Recollections

by June W. Kennedy

Country Store Sampler: Part II

John M. Fletcher ran the store on Lincoln Street across from the Town Common. During a Democratic Administration, the Westford post office was kept here; during a Republican Administration, it was kept at the Wright & Fletcher Store. J. M.'s daughter, Miss Eva, served as postmistress. Her face was always framed by the wearing of her cap; she wore metal rimmed glasses. J. M. was described as always wearing rubber boots. With knees slightly bent, he'd scuff about the place. A cap and metal rimmed glasses were also part of his dress.

Leonard Wheeler tells us a tale about J. M.: "Peanuts were prominent in the store sales. John M. had a habit of whistling a few strident notes when called upon for peanuts. It was dubbed 'John's peanut whistle.' Did you ever see a collapsible 'tall hat?' John M. had not when Henry Hamlin came in one night with one collapsed. He asked John a price for filling it with peanuts. John gave a price which was accepted and turned around after the peanuts. When he turned back, the hat was several times more capacious than he had seen. He filled it!"

John kept an orchard in the back yard. He'd pack the apples on the porch. (This store also had a porch where people would sit and chat.) It was said of J. M. that if he was whistlin' there was a good price for apples; no whistlin', the prices were low.

J. Herbert Fletcher, son of John M., also ran the store for many years. During this time in the late teens, Ben Prescott went to work for him. He shares the following stories:

"It was really an old-fashioned country store; the post office was in one corner of it. Many things happened while I was there that amused me quite a bit. Every night there would be a gathering of old men and boys. They would discuss all the political questions and topics of the day."

J. Herbert used to deal in raw furs in season. Once in a while he would buy some fresh cut or fresh killed furbearing animals. "It was my job to skin them out. I would take them down cellar and skin 'em out and stretch 'em on certain boards that were made for that purpose. Sometimes if you were unlucky, you'd cut one of the scent bags - which wasn't too bad, but it wasn't too good. And then people would come into the store and say, 'What's the funny smell?' We didn't like to tell 'em what it was, but I guess some probably guessed after awhile."

"Mr. Fletcher decided he wanted to get out of the grocery business, but he didn't want to give up the post office so he built a small building further down Lincoln Street across from the common. He moved the post office down there. E. E. Gray, a chain store from Littleton bought him out and I continued working right at the store."

"I can recall when I first went to work at the chain store. They put out a flyer - 3 lbs. of their own brand of coffee for a dollar. The coffee we had been selling in the old store was 59 to 69 cents a pound. Three pounds for a dollar seemed to me like a wonderful buy! In the old store we used to have to grind the coffee by hand. If we had a dozen or 15 lbs. sold to go out on the road, we'd weigh it up in bags - one or two lbs. in a bag. Then we'd get the grinder going and grind it all at once. The chain store used an electric grinder; they also had their own coffee bags which were just a pound good. It had sort of a wire made into the bag across the top for resealing. That saved tying it up with string. In the old store we had to package practically everything - peas, beans and sugar - 2 lbs. and 5 lbs. and 10 lbs., in paper

bags and then tie it up. I think I still have a little gadget that we used to have in the old store that you could cut the string with when you tied up a bundle of stuff. It was a little gadget on the end of the counter about the size maybe of a half dollar. You could hook the string into that, just give it a twitch, and it would cut it right off.

"It was in 1933 that I left the so-called J. M. Fletcher Store and rented from Mr. Seavey the old abandoned store next to the library. Several store owners had come and gone over the years. For a while it housed a shoe-fix and barber shop. I carried the E. E. Gray chain with me."

ELIZABETH BOSWORTH FIELD:

"When I was just a girl, I went over to Ben's store wearing my brushed wool lavender dress. I remember standing against the pot-bellied stove, hanging on one foot, then the other, delighting in being told how pretty I looked. However, I learned a lesson in vanity for I soon discovered that I'd burned a hole in the back of my pretty new dress."

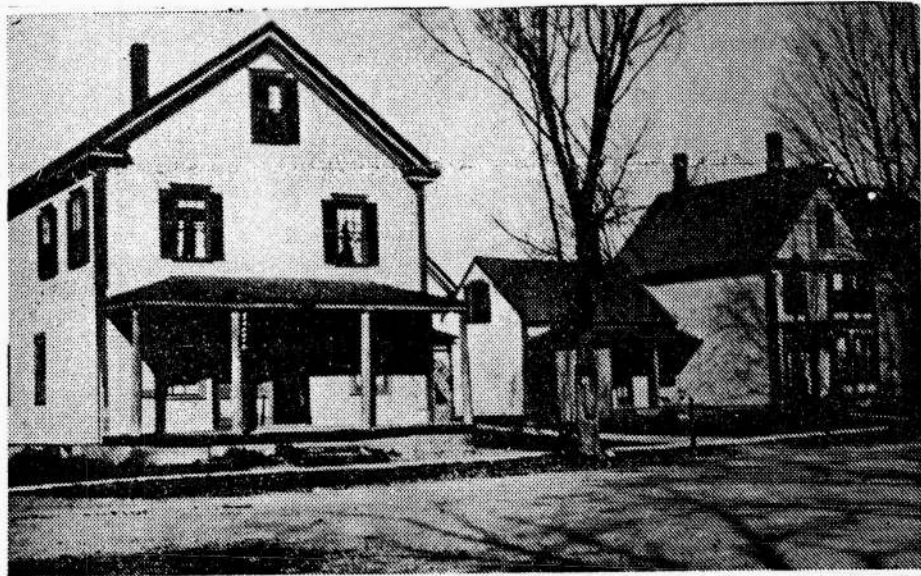
In 1933, Austin Fletcher bought the J. M. Fletcher property and set up the Red and White Store. It operated until 1958. Austin recalls that it was during the depression under Roosevelt's administration that the W.P.A. put in the sidewalk curbing. The store piazza then had to be removed for the sidewalk ran underneath it. In addition to the line of groceries, there was a soda fountain complete with tables and wire-back chairs. Ice cream was sold in bulk and also by the dish; sandwiches were available. Wright Trucking were the biggest customers.

Several other stores dotted the Westford countryside at the century's turn; some dated well into the 20th century. Old Bill Blodgett's Store in Graniteville evokes fond memories for Dick Hall as he recalls the much coveted Daisy Air Rifles and BB guns in the display window - or maybe it was that lead pencil or piece of licorice candy. "Mr. Blodgett came out once a week," reflects Alice Collins. "He'd talk over the happenings in town with Mother or Dad. Always, he'd carry his pencil, paper and books. Mother would tell what she wanted and how much is it? He'd deliver in the afternoon. Folks talk about the hard old days. That was one thing that was good. Mother had soft and easy times when it came to marketing. Now I have to take the horse, I mean car, and go to Donelan's, buy stuff and bring it back."

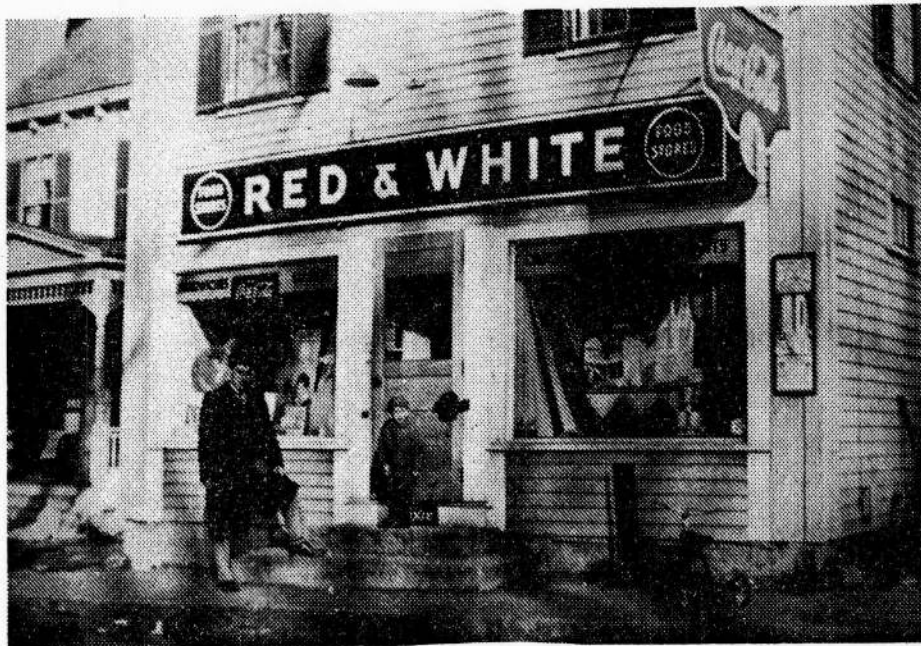
"It was like heaven to walk into Mary Haley's Dry & Fancy Goods," says Vivian Smith. "You could buy things for 10 cents - chickens, lead soldiers, animals." Parker's Market over the line in south Chelmsford had peanut butter weighed and rolled in wax paper. "You took it home just like meat," recalls Ruth Johnson.

Many frequented Spinner's Store in Forge Village. At one point it sported the only gas pump in town, plus small notions, tobacco, ice cream - a good spot to share the village news. Joe LeClere's holds still more tales for scores of Forge Villagers. Hanley's, at the old Forge tavern, offered cloth, yarn, notions and lots of candy for a penny.

When just a lad of fifteen, Allister MacDougall used to pump his bicycle from Westford center down to Chamberlain's Store in Forge arriving at 6:30 a.m. in time to sweep out before the 7:00 a.m. opening time. The store closed at 8:00 p.m., but not till 10:00 p.m. on Saturday. "Customers on the delivery route were friendly people," he recalls. "The Blodgetts, who lived on the corner of Dunstable and Tenney Roads, offered a New England boiled dinner every Thursday. It was 25 cents and boy was it good! This job paid \$6.50 a week."



Farmers brought local produce to this store (once standing on the east side of the J. V. Fletcher Library). From its porch, boxes of apples and crates of small fruits, mostly strawberries, raspberries and blackberries, were loaded on to wagons for the trek to Faneuil Hall Market. (A Day photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)



In 1933 Austin Fletcher bought the J. M. Fletcher property and set up the Red & White Store. It operated until 1958. (Gas, lunch and groceries were on sale here. The old store piazza was removed when the W.P.A. put in sidewalk curbing during the Roosevelt Administration. (A Fletcher photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)



The store and post office in Graniteville at the turn of the century. Today the building serves as the Westford Hardware Store. (A Day photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)