

# Early Industry In Westford

By June W. Kennedy  
**WESTFORD** — Village blacksmith, harness and wheelwright shops were required to keep the horses and wagons in repair in earlier days. The blacksmith shops were active places as blacksmiths were craftsmen in iron doing all sorts of repair jobs besides shoeing horses. One of the most active shops was in Westford Center, located on the same site as the present Fire Station (original Westford Academy). The operator of this shop for many years was Mr. Frank Miller who is seen with his tool box putting the finishing touches on a horseshoe, the horse being named Bess and owned by Julian Cameron and held by Alexander MacDougal. The second horse hitched to the dump cart was owned by Allan Cameron. It is driven by William Whitney. Notice the heavy ox cart which is on the left of the picture and also the round stove on the ground near Frank Healy who used to repair and tighten the tires of wagon wheels. Also notice the pile of discarded horse shoes next to the small door. Inside the door was the forge and anvil — a good attraction to boys.

The second building in the picture was the harness shop, also a necessary shop to make and repair harnesses. The last operator of this shop was John Feeney. The shop was in

operation until just after the turn of the century.

## OLD TUFTS HOME

Many little shops for trades were dotted along the streets of Westford in its former days. Eben Tufts was a skilled mechanic who had a small shop still standing. It was equipped with a metal and woodwork lathe. He was also a carpenter and hunter. The children of the town used to enjoy visiting the shop and looking at the firearms. Eben was given credit for all the devilry done in the village, usually with justice. In close proximity was located a tinsmith, cobbler's shop, store, grist and saw mill and millinery shop.

## WRIGHT AND FLETCHER STREET

In 1839 the Wright & Fletcher Store was built (presently Westford Farms Realty) in Westford Center. — and occupied by Sherman D. Fletcher and his father-in-law, Sherman, under the firm name of S.&S.D. Fletcher. They continued to do business together till the death of Sherman, which occurred in the year 1860. Mr. S.D. Fletcher then carried on the business alone till 1873 when his son, Sherman H. Fletcher, and Nahum H. Wright bought out his interests and occupied it under the name of Wright and Fletcher. They kept a general country store, which was



THIS IS THE Wright and Fletcher Store about 1908 (more recently known as the general store in Westford Center). Teams arrived here daily to load produce for the Boston Markets, the mail and the school Children into the school barge.

supposed to contain nearly everything! Situated so near the cities, it could not be expected that they would keep all the finer goods. They had groceries, dry-goods, boots and shoes, paints, oils, seeds, farming-tools, fertilizers, grain, some kinds of clothing, some hardware, patent medicines, candy, nuts, the inevitable tobacco, a few fancy articles, etc., etc. Their sales amounted upon the average to about \$21,000 per year. They kept a good line of good goods, dealing only in first

class articles. They assured folk they had rather their customers would find fault with the prices charged than with the goods themselves, while it was their endeavor to have no fault found with either. Their large trade and the general confidence shown by the community in the firm testify to their business integrity. "Next to the church and the schoolhouse, an honest country store exercises a civilizing influence in the community."

The opening of the Stony Brook Railroad had much to do with the development of business in Forge Village. The line which ran from N. Chelmsford to Ayer (then Groton Junction) and was officially opened July 5, 1848.

## ICE EXPORT BUSINESS

In 1864 the Excelsior Grove picnic area of Forge Pond was sold to Thomas S. Hittinger of Belmont, who noticed that his ice exporting business in Cambridge could be duplicated at Forge Pond. It was only some 35 miles by rail to Boston and some 212 acres of frozen water to harvest at no cost but for the expense of cutting and storing. And, too, the land was level for a gigantic wooden ice house, built with local rough-sawn pine timbers and boards.

Cost of Hittinger's new ice house, great even in those days, stood him \$65,000. This included the steam engine which powered the endless chain which in turn hoisted the heavy cakes of ice up ramps to whatever level needed during the process of filling the huge wooden structure. Another \$3,000 went for the

cost of tools. Even today, fishermen and skin-divers may locate an old ice pike or chisel which slipped through the icy gloves of an ice harvester into the cold waters many, many years ago.

When Forge Pond was frozen to the proper thickness, usually to 12-14 inches, the harvest was ready. Almost every man and boy in town had a chance to go to work on this specialized crop. It was in the dead of winter, the cakes were heavy, and it was always cold work as a rule. The person who slipped and fell into the water was in trouble. If he lived nearby he would run home in frozen garments for a quick change. Or he could spend an hour or two in the boiler room while his clothes dried over the belching steam boiler.

For the year 1881, records indicate that 175 were employed during the ice harvest, with 50 horses brought in by local farmers and from stables. These animals pulled heavy saw blades that scored the ice into sections 2x4 feet, making huge chess boards of rectangular pieces, not squares. Then a foreman would set me to work with hand saws with long, coarse blades to cut through to the bottom of the ice in order to free larger section or floats.

Horses drew these floats to the channel, near the entrance to the endless chain. Workers with flat bars would first break up the floats into long strips and then as the strips reached the submerged end of the endless chain, the strip would be barred into cakes. Up the ramps would go each cake where men with sharp hooks on wooden poles would swing each cake into another wooden channel where they would eventually be stacked side by side, and then layer upon layer. They swished to their positions like a rollercoaster car.

Some years, when the weather was unusually cold, areas previously harvested would re-freeze to the proper thickness. This was beneficial because not only was the new ice closer to the operations, but usually it did not have the usual amount of soft snow-ice on top which always had to be scraped off. This scrapping procedure was done as each piece, carried upwards on the incline chain, passed beneath a cutter bar set at 12 inches.

In one year of harvest, Hittinger sent some 35,000 tons of ice to Boston for John P. Squire marketing division, and some 50,000 tons more of Forge Pond

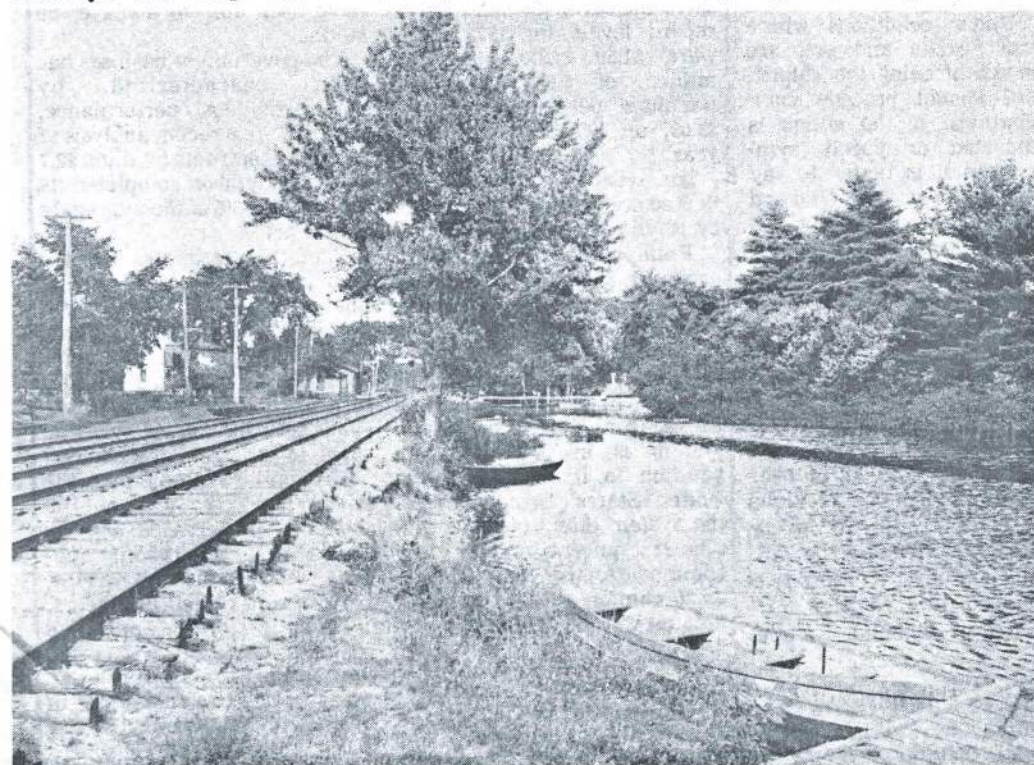


VILLAGE BLACKSMITH and harness shop, located in Westford Center at the turn of the century, depicts a necessary and common trade of early New England Days.

ice found its way southward. In the summer, as needed, the ice was loaded in box cars from the back end of the ice house, in

somewhat a reverse manner as it was harvested. Often cakes would break, then discarded. From this huge pile of waste,

villagers and campers alike would fill their ice boxes at home, courtesy of the ice company. \*Material on Forge Pond ice exports courtesy of Gordon Seavey.



AS MANY AS 175 MEN were employed in 1881 in the ice business run by Thomas S. Hittinger at Forge Pond. Ice was moved to Boston and down South on freight cars.