

# For whom bell tolls: Matters of death

By June W. Kennedy

3/10/88

Town records show the First Parish of Westford was paid the sum of \$7.50 in 1856 for tolling the bell for deaths and funerals. Kate Hamlin in an Overland magazine article of 1907 entitled "Memories of New England", speaks of the bell in the tower of the old parish church: "Whenever a death occurred, its slow, monotonous sound, as it tolled forth 100 strokes, still echoes in the ear."

"All work ceased, and a hush fell upon all. After a pause came the four or six strokes which informed the listening ones whether it was male or female who had passed away. Another pause, and the age was tolled, one stroke for each year."

"It seemed during the tolling of that bell that all nature rested, that it held its very breath, and it seemed, too, that it was then that the soul really passed from earth."

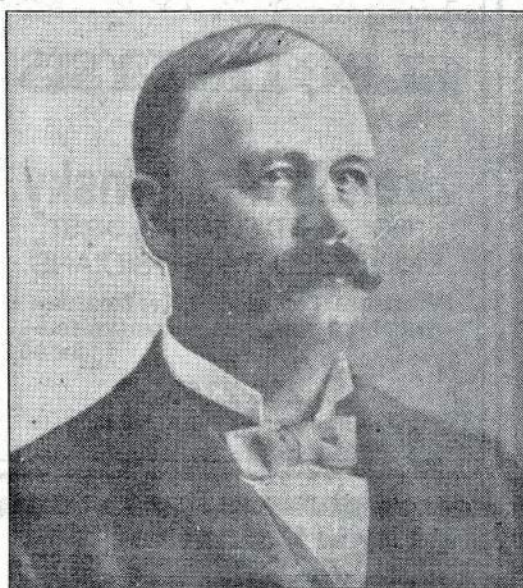
Albert Davis, in his diary of 1857-58, mentions hearing the bell toll one evening and wondering who had died. Again, in 1905, May E. Day wrote: "Went over to Wright's to pick berries. Heard a bell toll while going over."

On the following day she records: "Edith Wright came before I was dressed and said her grandmother died yesterday. That was what the bell was tolling for."

When this custom stopped, I do not know. Perhaps it was the coming of the telephone with its quick communication. Somehow I like the idea of the village bell proclaiming farewell to one of its citizens.

## Funeral affairs

Mr. Gould and Mr. Richardson were early undertakers for the town. There were no fu-



Albert P. Richardson, a turn-of-the-century undertaker in Westford, served as a selectman 1879-91. Born in Jaffrey, N.H., he was educated at Westford Academy.

(Westford Recollections' photo)

neral homes. Just a few dollars covered expenses. In 1858 the Town Report states that for the first time Rev. Leonard Luce was paid \$1 for attending a funeral. Coffins were made for \$2 apiece.

Kate Hamlin pens in the mid-1800's, "Mr. Wright was a cabinetmaker by trade. What he made I do not know, beyond the fact that he made all the coffins required in the town, and, as they were hastily finished for the fu-

neral, the fragrance of varnish was stronger than that of roses.

"His shop was in the yard of his house (Charles Robinson Home on Boston Road), and I remember the fascination it had for children; they would climb up and look through the window, when, seeing a newly-made coffin or one in the making, they would jump down and run as if pursued by ghosts or something worse. The old hearse house, which stood in the rear of the Unitarian Church, had the same fascination for children."

Family and friends participated more closely in the death event than we do today. On Saturday, Nov. 6, 1869, Emma Day writes: "Warren and Ada and I went over to see Mrs. Hosmer; we helped put her in her coffin."

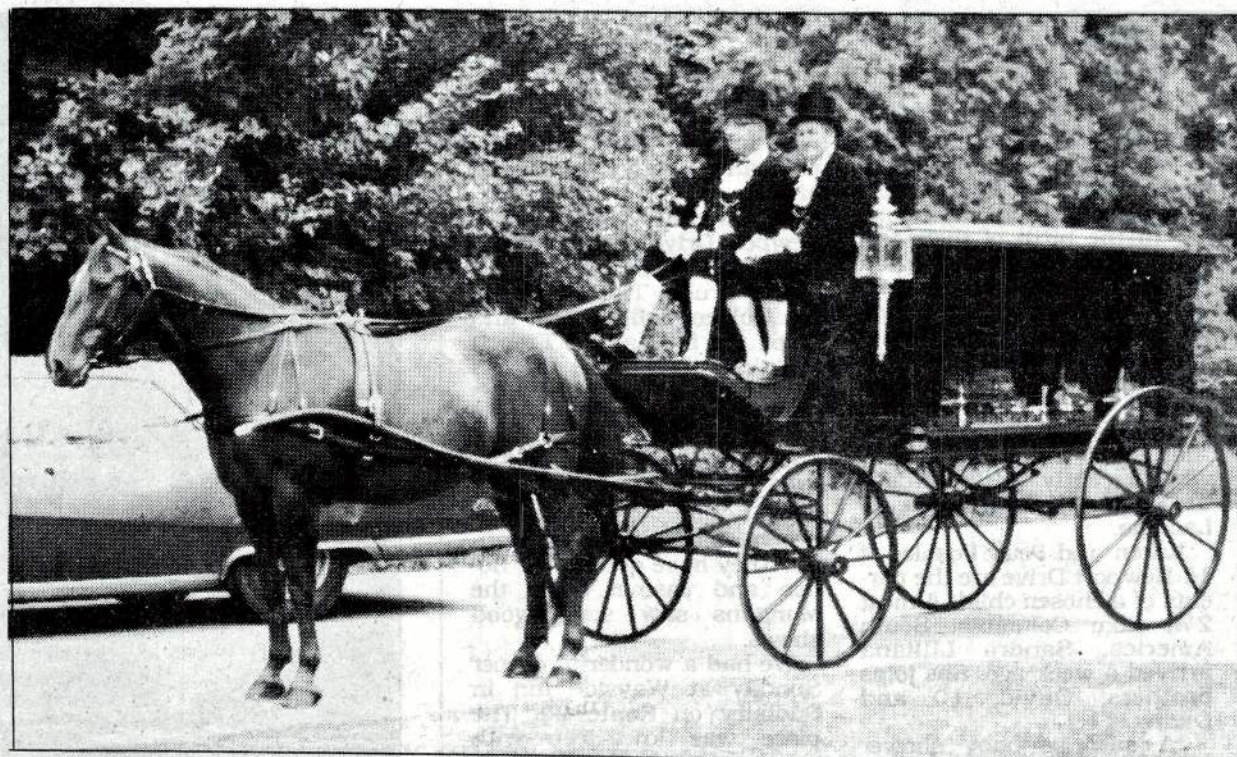
A black crepe with purple ribbon announced a death at one's home. Tom Curley remembered the morning he passed Dr. Draper's Main Street house on his way to school: "The crepe on the door told us the good doctor had died."

At the old Burbeck homestead on Route 110, nieces had vivid memories of drawn curtains in the parlor with mourners seated on a prickly horsehair sofa. The body was laid out on an ironing board placed over two or more chairs.

Frank Jarvis told the following tale: "In December of 1913 when Mr. Collins, a Civil War veteran had died, our teacher from the Parkerville School took us down to pay respects. It was the first dead man I'd ever seen. I wasn't any the worse for it, but my mother thought it was the most horrible thing in all my life to think the teacher had taken us down to see a dead man."

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THIS HORSE-DRAWN hearse with iron wheels, silver ornaments, glass sides and purple velour drapes, owned by Boutwell Museum in Groton, is similar to the vehicle that once served Westford. In this photo taken over 10 years ago, period attire suitable for a funeral is worn by driver Arnold Wilder and his escort, William Badger, sitting up front of the hearse pulled by Wilder's fine Morgan, Laddie, in a holiday parade.

(Westford Recollections' photo)

## The bell tolls in matters of death

□ DEATH, From Page 6

Funeral services were held in the church or home. A hushed solemnity and secrecy prevailed. Eulogies lasted one or two hours, though some were short, sweet and snappy. The body was then taken to the cemetery in a hearse drawn by two black horses with plumes on their bridles, the driver dressed in black. The mourners drove their own buggies.

Everyone proceeded to the cemetery in proper order of relationship; otherwise family feuds or arguments resulted. Much jealousy arose. In some cases one wouldn't speak to an individual because he had been placed one or two carriages ahead of the others.

Closing with a committal service, the gathering went home to mourn in their own way — and complain about position in the procession. Black arm bands and clothing were worn for months.

On a lighter vein, Frank Jarvis continued with another story

of a man's death in South Chelmsford: "There was no undertaker. Following the home service the casket was placed on a square wagon and taken to Hart's Cemetery. When it began to rain, the driver backed the wagon under the shed and said, 'Well, we can bury him tomorrow.'"

### Horse-drawn hearse

The town owned the hearse and kept it in a little building at the rear of the Meeting House until 1870 when it was moved to the new Town Hall. Later, when the town had no use for the hearse house, it was moved across the street.

Of course the hearse was horse-drawn. In the early 1900's, May E. Day wrote: "Mrs. Fletcher's funeral was today; we saw the teams go by. I heard a bell." It was also custom to toll the bell as the hearse paused in front of the Meeting House.

In 1910 the hearse had worn out. The Town got \$50 credit for it, and for \$800 purchased a new one from New Bedford. It

was sent by freight. The town was proud!

On another occasion when the hearse was worn, the issue arose at Town Meeting. Several men recommended that the town purchase a new one. One spokesman claimed that the old one was rickety, rode uncomfortable, wasn't safe — we gotta have a new one!

Alvin Fisher, stroking his side whiskers replied, "Elijah, my esteemed friend, how do you know? Did you ever ride in it?" No new hearse for Westford that year!

Around 1900 when the Catholic population increased in Westford, they wanted their own undertaker. J.A. Healy became the Funeral Director in Graniteville.

The Greigs succeeded Mr. Richardson in the center section. Today, J. A. Healy Sons is the only undertaker in town.

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and the author of "Westford Recollection", a series of vignettes and photos of historical interest.