

Westford Recollections 1729-1979

By June W. Kennedy



The First Parish Church United of Westford will have a Forebearers Day Colonial Worship on Sunday, Nov. 20 at the 10:30 a.m. service. The occasion honors the 200th anniversary of the third and present meetinghouse on Westford Common.

Families in the parish and community are invited to wear period costumes, turn back to the late 1700s, and experience a religious service in the colonial style. The old tower bell will summon worshipers to the meetinghouse.

From the 1720s until 1830 the First Parish Church and the town were one. The town called the minister. Religious services were held in the meetinghouse on Sunday; town meetings were held on weekdays. So it was when fire consumed the 1771 meetinghouse sometime in December of 1793, it was voted unanimously at a called town meeting on Jan. 13, 1794 to rebuild at once — a contract to be awarded for 1,300 pounds.

The frame was raised in May. By Nov. 1 instructions were given "to dress the Pulpit and Dress itt in Crimson Coler. Voted that the pews be sold on Thirsday the 13th day of November, 1794."

The next month the parish paid "Col. Zach Wright 57 pounds for a note he gave at Boston for a Bell" (Revere bell #4).

Inwardly, the meetinghouse was all one room with a balcony or galleries on three of its sides. On the fourth side a pulpit was raised high so that literally its minister had to be looked up to at least by the people on the floor. It was crimson-curtained behind and overhung from the ceiling with a huge sounding board, designed to increase the volume of the preacher's voice. It was voted that "one pare of stares go into the Pulpit." The pews were squared in form. An original pew door and piece of crimson cloth remain in the church historical collection.

The building was built broadside to the street, its front door on the middle of the street, its tower and spire on the west end, its pulpit on the north side. It might be noted that a "Hoss Stable" was erected behind the meetinghouse in 1797 (torn down circa 1970).

By 1818 the town no longer stored its gun powder in the build-

ing, and so by 1823 it was resolved to build "funnels" (chimneys) so a wood stove could be installed. In 1835 a new bell was purchased by subscription from the whole community. In 1837 a clock was placed in the tower by John Abbot with the stipulation that the church would maintain it.

In order to "conform to the style and finish of modern churches ... the people voted that the large single room ... would be divided horizontally, the upper floor for a house of worship, the lower as a vestry." In the 1850s, an agreement was reached with the town to finish the basement room for town affairs. The town weights and measures and iron safe were kept there. Again, a new bell was set in 1856.

A most ambitious project in 1868 was the turning of the entire building 90 degrees, making the entrance under the tower. The interior was remodeled, the Willcox pipe organ was installed, and improved oil lighting was introduced. In 1916 electricity was installed on the lower floor and to the chandelier of the sanctuary the next year.

It is also interesting to note that Westford Academy graduating exercises were held in the meetinghouse until 1907. Paul Revere's son, John, was a graduate of Westford Academy in 1799.

In 1878 parishioners in this old meetinghouse became divided over the liberal theology of the day. The Unitarians remained in the building and the more orthodox parishioners moved across the common and built the Congregationalist Church. In the 1930s prudence led the churches to seek each other out. Articles for joint work were adopted for a 10 year trial. In 1950 the agreement was extended another five years. In 1955 the merger and incorporation were made complete. The name of the "re-joined" congregation is the First Parish Church United of Westford.

Join in the celebration! Step back in time to witness the tythingman chasten the "larfing and sleepy" in the congregation and the sentries on guard at the meetinghouse. An exhibit of historical artifacts will be on display following the service. A spread of old-fashioned fare and beverage will be served. All welcome!