

RELIGION

History of Westford's first parish is by the book

250th anniversary edition reissued

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY
SPECIAL TO THE EAGLE

Right off the press for your reading enjoyment is the second printing of *A History of the First Parish of Westford*, by its former minister, George E. Downey.

Written for the 250th anniversary of the parish, this popular town/church history has been out of print for several years. Informative, educational, and entertaining it is.

From the unique collection of old records, historical data and leather-bound volumes in the possession of First Parish, Downey has cleverly touched on the life and times which gave the setting for Westford religious life. Complete with vignettes, anecdotes, photos, a pre-1847 line drawing of the interior of the meeting house sketched by the author, and a complete chronology, this 100-page booklet will be of general interest to townspeople. Also, it will serve as a useful reference and resource for students, teachers, and history buffs, as well as the present First Parish membership.

It has been 272 years since the first gathering of a religious society in the parish. For over one hundred years the Parish and Town of Westford were one.

People were called into the "Church-State of the Gospel." Religion on Sunday and politics on Monday was the rule of the meeting house.

Recalling that the Rev. Willard Hall, minister of the Westford Parish at the time of the American Revolution, was a Tory and would not renounce his allegiance to the king, herein is an excerpt from *A History of The First Parish of Westford*: "The political views of Mr. Hall continued to cause great uneasiness among the people, and in September, 1775, the town voted not to raise any money for his support, and in November it voted to dismiss him, mainly because of his attitude toward the Colonial Government and the cause of civil liberty. This was an ordeal administered in more than one town, known as 'humbling the Tories' found to be supporting the Crown. The next year when the town was to prepare a list for the General Court of evidence of 'enemical conduct or Disposition toward this or any of the United States of any of the inhabitants of this town,' their list contained only one person—Rev. Willard Hall 'whose Conduct is voted to be enemical and dangerous to the State, by a great majority.'

"A notable moment in history would most certainly have



Above, the church of the Union Congregational Society, located at the corner of Boston Road and Lincoln Street, as it appeared shortly after its construction in 1829. At right, an 1894 photograph of the First Parish Church on Main Street, as it appeared in the church's centennial celebration booklet.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUNE KENNEDY

been the arrival of the following Order of Council regarding the Declaration of Independence made July 4, 1776:

'In Council, July 17, 1776

'Ordered that the Declaration of Independence be printed and Copy sent to the ministers of each parish of every Denomination in this State, and that they severally be required to read the same to their Respective Congregations as soon as Divine service is ended in the afternoon of the first Lord's Day after they shall have received it, and after such publication thereof to Deliver the said Declaration to the Clerks of their several Towns or Districts who are hereby required to record the same

in their Respective Town or District Books their to remain as a perpetual Memorial thereof.

'In the name and by order of the Council.'

"This document was duly recorded by Zaccheus Wright, town clerk, in the Westford Book. (It may be seen in the town hall, carefully penned in his hand.) Whether it was read before the parish congregation and, if so, by whom is not known. Presumably Mr. Hall would not have been asked to do it, and if he had been, he probably would have refused!"

The first Westford meeting house, built in 1725, was later moved to South Chelmsford as a house of worship for the Baptists; the second Westford meeting house burned in 1793. The third and present meeting house at the town center was constructed in 1794. This building sat broadside to the street with the belfry on the west end. An update in Downey's book states that the Boston Bell set in the tower was indeed bell #4

cast at the Revere Foundry (Unfortunately that bell cracked, was recast, and is no longer in the possession of the church.)

This third meeting house has been described as follows: "Inwardly it was one room, with galleries on three of its sides, and its pulpit on the fourth. The pulpit was an elaborate structure, raised high so that literally its minister had to be looked up to at least by his people on the floor, crimson curtained behind, as if to veil off the eternal mysteries from common eyes; and over-hung from the ceiling with a huge sounding-board designed to increase the volume of the preacher's voice."

Divided into two floors in 1847, the meeting house continued to house town meetings for many more years. Downey tells how the building was rotated 90 degrees in 1868 so that it looked more like a church. And that was the year church women became voting members

of the parish.

A History of the First Parish of Westford tells the story of how the sweep of liberal religion polarized the old town church. In 1828, a majority of its members left to form the Union Congregational Society across the common. A colorful history of the building of this meeting house, its dramatic architectural changes, its charitable good works, and the ministerial duties and family living in the Main Street parsonage all come to life in this readable local history.

Find out why the Unitarians in the old Town Church and the Congregationalists, separated after more than 100 years, merged in 1955 to become the First Parish Church United of Westford.

Books are available at First Parish Church, the Westford Museum, and Drew's Country Store.

June Kennedy is a member of First Parish Church United and a Westford historian.