

Library evokes tales of colorful namesake

By June Kennedy
Eagle correspondent

Follow me down the hill from the Westford Academy to the sharp bend in the road where Cold Spring Road and Depot Street greet each other. We find ourselves at the site of the Cold Spring Farm, where on Feb. 28 1812, was born Jonathan Varnum Fletcher — called "J.V." because no one ever pronounced his name correctly.

Descended from Solomon Keyes, the first permanent settler in town in 1664, J.V.'s mother was Frances Grant Keyes of Keyes Hill. She inherited a 1750 fiddle-back chair, bearing the name-plate "Frances". The chair has been passed down through seven generations — to a Frances in each generation — and up until a decade ago, was in the great brick-end home on Main Street of Miss Marian Frances Winnek, his great-granddaughter. Her recollections of J.V. Fletcher have added much color to his biography.

After attending the local district school, J.V. completed his education at the age of 16 at Groton Academy. Then, placing his effects in a small pack, he walked the 25 miles to West Cambridge (now Arlington). There he went to work for an older brother who had preceded him, and drove his butcher's wagon for four years.

When he left West Cambridge, he engaged in the provision business in West Medford, which he continued until 1837. He then entered Faneuil Hall Market where, for the next 62 years, Fletcher made his way to a modest fortune in the wholesale beef trade.

In 1836 he married Marcy Ann Hill of West Cambridge (youngest of ten children), who lived to share their golden wedding anniversary and who bore him five children. They resided in Charlestown for 20 years, where Fletcher was on the Common Council and Alderman of the city; then moving to Belmont, erected a residence, "The Mansion House" next to Mrs. Fletcher's father's home at 519 Pleasant Street. (Number "519" is still standing there.)

In fact there were six Fletcher houses on that street, which J.V. Fletcher improved with one-half mile of maple trees from Ellsworth, Maine.

Great public servant

While making his living at Faneuil Hall, Fletcher found time to be of public service. When it became evident that better banking facilities were needed by the market men, he organized, and later became director and president of the Faneuil Hall Bank, which positions he held from 1851 until his death. He was also first president of the Belmont Savings Bank, president of Quincy Cold Storage Company, on the Board of Selectmen in Belmont, and a representative to the General Court.

Truly, he was both a philanthropic and public-spirited man.

Having bought up a number of houses and buildings in the poorer part of Charlestown, he allowed two or three corner stores to remain vacant for ten years rather than rent them for saloons.

He also bought the old Unitarian Church in Belmont — only to have it burn down the following week. A settler from this church was in Miss Winnek's Main Street home, as well as portraits of J.V. Fletcher and his wife, a truly handsome couple; a sampler done by Mrs. Fletcher as a girl; and the family sampler bearing the birth-

date of J.V. Fletcher himself, tenth child of Joseph Fletcher born 1767.

On a more personal note, J.V. Fletcher felt he had to support a good dozen relatives — and he was very nice to them. Among them was his grandson Henry, who one day expressed his wish to become an artist. J.V. blew up at his even considering such a feckless (worthless or foolish) idea, and sent him instead to M.I.T. to study architecture.

Family pride

After sticking out two years there, Henry then announced that he had won a scholarship to The Boston Art School. This time J.V. really blew up, stating: "No grandson of mine could possibly accept a scholarship." (After all, he was a wealthy, prominent man.)

This time he paid Henry's way to art school. I might add that Fletcher was always Head of the Household, in capital letters, at least for the most part.

J.V. never attended the theatre or concerts, while Mrs. Fletcher attended all the art exhibits and classical concerts during the afternoon matinees. However, one time he became stranded with his friends because of a Boston snowstorm and was forced to spend the night in a hotel and joined his companions in going to the theatre.

The name of the theatre production was "The Black Crook". His family guessed that it must

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have turned out to be a "leg show", for he never wanted to talk about the theatre again. Years later his daughter had to sneak out the back doorway and drive in order to evade his sharp eyes as she slipped off to her matinees.

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J.V. Fletcher didn't think that females could be trusted with loose change in their pockets; but he let his wife have charge accounts in all the stores, where she always bought the best things they had.

He was very proud of his spanking Morgan horses. However, one day at his Belmont home, just as he was stepping onto the carriage step,

they started up, dragging him by the reins the length of the long driveway which, of course, was gravel so that the horses wouldn't lose their footing in winter. The accident really lacerated his whole body. His young granddaughter of 16, alone in the house, was helpless at the sight of all that blood, so he bathed his own wounds and, sure he would stiffen up unless he kept moving, walked up and down continually for three days.

Cold Spring Farm summers

During all these productive years in Belmont, J.V. Fletcher still had a love for Westford in his heart, and at the age of 60 he purchased his old homestead and birthplace, the Cold Spring Farm, where his family spent the entire summer from the Fourth of July to Labor Day, and where he returned each weekend from Belmont.

His children and grandchildren (and even great-grandchild) then would drive down the sandy Cold Spring Road to the Littleton station to meet him. The mist on the meadows and the "part-singing" as they drove home remained a memorable picture in the eyes and mind of his great-granddaughter, Marian Winnek, into her later years.

Twenty-one members could live in the house; there was also a cook, a second maid, and someone to drive the horses, plus the farmer's ell beyond the woodshed. Picture, if you will, on this 200-acre farm — cows and sheep grazing, berry patches, cornfields, even a rough 9-hole gold course, and a lovely pine grove extending down Cold Spring Road where annually under the pine trees the family had an elaborate dinner on trestle tables, with the best linen and china.

It was in this grove, not far from Stony Brook, that an octagonal oriental-type building housed the continually bubbling spring of water. Cold Spring Water was actually bottled and sold for a short time.

Fletcher was definitely a gentleman farmer. Actually, he knew nothing much about farming, and he was convinced that his farmer knew next to nothing either. J.V. too often bought the latest farm equipment, which then was only left out to rust all winter. While the farm ran at an excessive loss, it was self-sustaining, producing eggs, pork, lamb, vegetables and berries.

But the 4-year old western beef came out from Faneuil Hall Market on the train each weekend in J.V.'s own hand.

The sometimes six-course dinners at this homestead were quite sumptuous. Sunday morning breakfast would consist of: a half orange eaten with a spoon, scrambled eggs, baked beans and toasted brown bread, deep-fried fish cakes, applesauce 365 days a year, and coffee with thick cream, skimmed from a 12-inch pan in blobs too heavy to pour.

A typical Thanksgiving menu would consist of: soup, consommé, fish baked in a scallop shell, turkey, three or four vegetables (hubbard squash and creamed onions), pan-roasted potatoes, biscuits, pies (mince, squash with brandy and rose water, latticed cranberry pie), nuts and raisins, and fruit (apples and pears he raised himself).

Pies for Thanksgiving and plum pudding for Christmas all were served on the lovely Royal Worcester dinner set which had been taken from the china cupboard and washed for the occasion.

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