

Library's origin goes back to 1800s

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY
GUEST WRITER

The Westford Social Library existed for a little over 60 years. At one time, it was located at the home of Rev. Caleb Blake, who was the last minister hired by the town and the library's first clerk. His house was located at the juncture of Main St. and Graniteville Roads. In 1895, the house was moved to 4 Main St., where it still serves today as a visible reminder of the Social Library.

In 1851, the state passed a law allowing towns to appropriate money for public libraries. Westford's first attempt to take advantage of this law failed. However, in November 1858, a second committee was appointed to see what measures could be adopted to form a town library, merging the Proprietor's Library (Social Library).

In March 1859, the report of this committee and the Proprietor's committee resulted in the following:

1. The townspeople should spend not less than \$30 a year on books.

2. The townspeople should furnish and keep in good order a suitable room in the middle of Westford with a suitable librarian in charge.

3. The townspeople should have suitable and proper regulations respecting the preserving, keeping in repair and loaning the books in said library.

4. Whenever the townspeople shall refuse to do the aforementioned, the library should revert back to the Proprietors. This report was accepted by the town, and the Social Library of more than 1,300 volumes was given to the town.

During this period, library books continued to be kept in the homes of the librarians, Charles L. Fletcher, Eliza J. Herrick and Amanda Hall. All the buildings are located on Main St. near the center of town and are in good condition today.

Westford voted to build Town Hall in 1870 and, when completed, a small room to the right was home to the free Westford Public Library. The janitor, True A. Bean, acted as librarian, as did the next two janitors, William L. Kittredge and Albert A. Wright. They were followed by Clara M. Wiley and Carie E. Read.

The Agricultural Library of about 100 volumes was donated by the



The Bancroft and Wright House once stood on the site of the J.V. Fletcher Library. The house burned on Dec. 5, 1891 and the town moved to buy the property to build a library.

subscribers to the town in 1873. At that time, three directors or trustees were chosen annually who attended to everything connected with the library. One hundred and fifty dollars was appropriated each year for the purchase of books. The town included a portion of the dog tax to pay for them.

In 1885, the library received a trust fund of \$1,000 for the purchase of new books from Stephen S. Stone of Revere, who was a native son of Westford. Mrs. Augustus K. Fletcher donated \$1,000 in 1887 in compliance with her late husband's wishes.

From Carrie Reed's Librarian's report of 1894, it is learned that the library had 8,071 books, two of which were lost. The number of books "issued" was 9,379.

Among the new fiction books that year were the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *Tom Sawyer Abroad* and *German Fairy Tales*. The library continued to grow with the generous donations from descendants of original subscribers. There were 100 volumes from Hon. C. Hamblin, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, and 15 volumes by M.T. Richardson. Mrs. S. D. Fletcher of Westford gave 100 volumes from the library of her

late husband.

In December 1891, the Bancroft & Wright house on Main St. burned, leaving a suitable lot for a public library building. (Coincidentally, Richard Kneeland, the first librarian of the Social Library, occupied this house in 1794). At the request of the library trustees, the Selectmen took the necessary steps to obtain this land. Total cost, including surveying, labor and \$300 each to owners Edward Wright and Mary Bancroft, was \$603.50.

The library trustees stated in their 1894 report, "We are all being awakened to the fact that the time is at hand when the Library must extend its usefulness by means of a suitable building for the accommodation and preservation of its books, and, also, by means of a general reading-room properly furnished with all conveniences for reading and study.

"Our young people are worth too much to us, and to society at large, to have no better place of common meeting ground than the band-stand or the village store. And, as we look back with pride and gratitude to that band of self-sacrificing men who, a century since, came forward loyally and

organized the 'Social Library,' which, at the present time, has developed into the 'Westford Public Library,' shall we not take steps to carry on that work in such a manner that a century hence our descendants shall look back with pride and gratitude to us?"

At the annual Town Meeting of March 1895, the residents voted to build a library. Before they could vote on the next article which was to fund construction for this building, a letter was read in which J. V. Fletcher of Belmont stated that he wished to donate \$10,000 to help build the library. (The town appropriated \$5,000 to aid in completing the building).

The Selectmen resolved to thank the Honorable J. V. Fletcher and to call the new building the J.V. Fletcher Library.

From the *Westford Recollections Series* by June W. Kennedy. This is part 2 of a series of historical articles in honor of the Centennial Gala of the J. V. Fletcher Library, slated for June 1 under a 50-by-100 foot tent on the Town Common at 7 p.m. Music will be by the "River Boat Stompers," followed by dinner and dancing on the Green. Tickets are \$50 per person and available at the Main Desk of the library.