

Nearly 200 years of history at Academy

By June W. Kennedy

is the first in a series of articles chronicling the history of Westford Academy.

Westford Academy was started in 1792. By individual subscription, the town appropriation of 120 pounds, and volunteer work, 918 pounds were raised. Articles of agreement and subscription were drawn up and signed by 54 persons. At the head of the list stand the names of Zaccheus Wright and John Abbot.

The subscribers met and organized a board of trustees. The proprietors, as they were called, appointed a committee to secure an act of incorporation, select a building site and prepare the academic curriculum.

The story has usually been told that the only proof that Levi Hedge came to Westford as the first preceptor was the record of his trip from Concord on Aug. 7, 1792: "To cash paid Mr. Wheler for his hors & chas that Mr. Hedge rode up from Concord in (L 0-6-8) to taking the hors and chase back to Concord (L 0-2-4)."

Note that this ledger was just prior to the period that money changed from pounds,

shillings and pence to dollars and cents.

Thirty-seven students were accepted the first year the Academy opened. Of that number, 28 were boys and nine were girls. With the exception of one student from Littleton, all students were from Westford.

By 1793 the Academy's reputation must have been good, for that year 37 boys and 17 girls attended. Besides those from Westford there were two students each from Chelmsford, Bedford, Littleton, Dunstable and Woburn and one each from Billerica, Concord, Boston, and Hollis and Pelham, N.H. Students attending the Academy boarded at various houses, including the three-story brick-end house at 24 Main St.

The subjects taught included English, Latin and Greek languages, together with handwriting, arithmetic and the art of public speaking. If desired, instruction in practical geometry, logic, geography and music would be included.

Eligibility for attendance was available to students of any nationality, age or sex provided that the pupil was able "to read from the Bible readily, without spelling."

The first Academy building

Because the Academy was not erected in

1792, it seems logical to conclude that the Meeting House may have accommodated the large number of students those first years.

The land on which the building was first located was purchased in 1793. The Academy was built facing the Common, on the site now marked by the original front step and flanked by two granite benches. It was built by volunteers.

Most of them had no education themselves, but wanted it for their children and their children's children. If they didn't have the money themselves they gave a cartload of sand or logs, a days work, or volunteered to take their oxen over to Tyngsboro to bring back a load of things.

Much time and material went into the building. The actual records for its construction were found in an attic in Harvard in 1967 and kindly returned to Westford. The old, folded and worn receipts, 23 recorded by Allister MacDougall in "More Yesterdays of Westford Academy", make interesting reading:

"To a Journey to Andover to take dimensions of Andover Academy which served for the outlines for building ours (L 0-6-8).

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Academy dates back to 1792

□ ACADEMY

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Feb. 1793, Paid for one stove for the Academy (4-4-0), 250 feet of timber for the octigon (-1-10-0), Dr. for 1 day fetching glass (-0-7-0), Dr. for 850 squares of glass (-17-0-0), For one barrel cider for raising (-0-22-0), To two days carting sand and the pillars (-0-18-0) For a bell (-14-15-0), To bringing said Bell from Boston (-0-6-0), To Levi 3 days making mortar (-0-15-0), To Amoziah with the team to carry water (-0-9-0), Meser Pike & 6 oxen - 1 day (0-10-6), Half a day hauling timber - Halls (-0-2-0), One day waiting on the Cooper and gittin the rope to Raise the Cupolow (-0-5-0), To 26 bushes of hare (-0-13-0), to 154 Feet good white pine boards (-0-6-9), To a lock for the front Door (-0-3-0).

The final days for the completion of the Academy Building arrived in the Spring of 1794. On April 1, it was reported: "That the Academy be painted with a shade or two of green deeper than Chelmsford Meeting House. That the blinds to the

lower windows of the Academy colored green. That the shavings under the Academy be got out, that handsome doorstones be hewn and laid at the door and that the Academy be properly wharfed up with stone and gravel. That the roof of said Academy be painted a chocolate color. That the said committee shall also build a wood and necessary house."

Albert E. Davis of Westford was a student at the Academy. His handwritten diary dated Nov. 1857 tells us that it was so cold and smokey in the classroom that it was difficult to study.

During the spring term of 1859 he refers to his preparation of the salutatory address at the encouragement of Mr. Long, preceptor. It is interesting to note that Mr. Long later became Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Also, Albert Davis graduated from Harvard and became preceptor of Westford Academy. His diary offers a colorful account of the



A LINE DRAWING of Westford Academy depicts the school when it was sited at its original location at the head of the common. The building is now home to the Westford Museum.

academic, religious and social life of this town and days at Harvard College during the years of 1857-1858.

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