

Westford Recollections

"A guide for the Tourist and You"

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

* For the next several weeks this column will feature a local tourist guide with many "then and now" photos. When possible, Jeff Young of Westford will update and contrast old pictures by photographing from the same vantage point as the originals. CLIP AND SAVE MAP FROM THIS ISSUE!

The Pawtucket, Nashoba and Wamesit tribes were the first residents of this area. Indian shutters in the early homes and shops, an abundance of arrowheads and artifacts, and reference to the caring of an Indian in Hodgman's **History of Westford 1659-1883** all confirm his presence here. Several bodies of crystalline water and the native supply of fruits and berries must have been attractive to both Indian and pioneer. By 1664 Solomon Keyes, first permanent white settler, within our boundaries, had staked his claim on Frances Hill. In 1729 the west precinct of Chelmsford separated to become incorporated as the town of Westford. The following year a small plot of land was annexed from Groton. The boundaries have since remained the same.

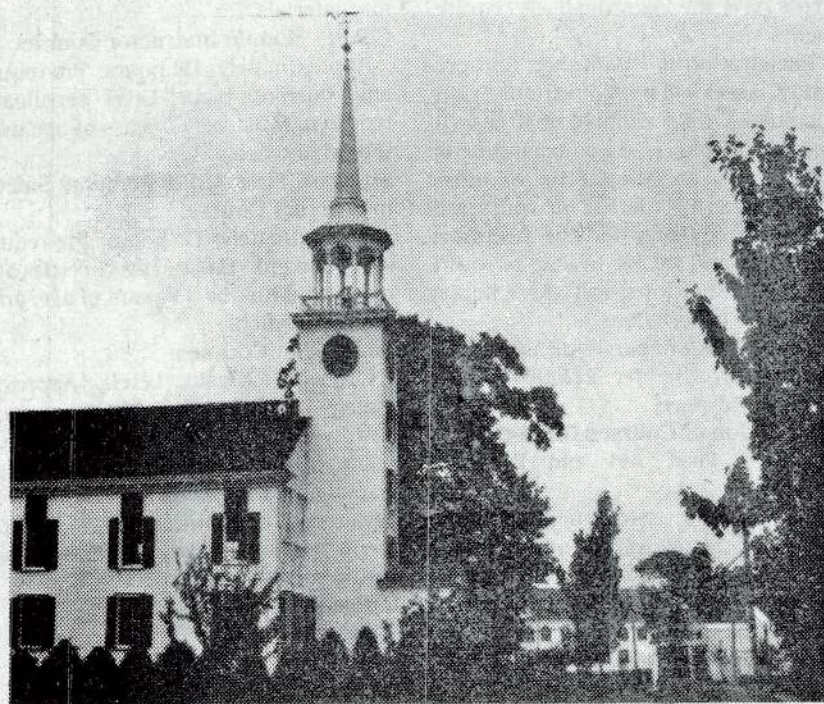
In area Westford is one of the largest in Middlesex County, boasting about 30 square miles. Approximately 70-75 % of this land is undeveloped. Yet we are a fast-growing community. The Symmes Map of 1853-55 indicates the town population then was 1,853. One hundred years later, in 1958, another 5,000 was added to the count. The past 20 years have seen that census double to our present population of over 14,000. The forecast is that it will double again by 1990.

An aerial view of Westford a hundred years ago (if such were possible), would have looked very much like Sturbridge Village -- a typical New England town of self-sustaining farms with pastures outlined by fieldstone walls and framed by deep forests. The Meeting House would grace the central village. Along the Stony Brook would hum the business of local industry. Dotted along the winding roads one would spot numerous blacksmith and cobbler shops, cider mills, country stores, cemeteries and other bits of Americana.

We possess a rich heritage. It is important to take time to appreciate the roots of our unique community, to absorb the "then and now." Designed for school, scout and organizational tours, cyclists and motorists, the Guide will also serve the needs of the arm-chair traveler. And, it should be good summertime fun. It is to be understood that all private homes are for exterior viewing only; public buildings could be opened with advanced permission. Enjoy your tour! Be pleased when you discover and add other points of interest. There are many. This is just one recommended tour guide.

MEETING HOUSE

In the mid-1720's when this land was still the West Precinct of Chelmsford, the boundaries of the village having been "centered" by surveyors, a religious society gathered to erect a Meeting House here. Rev. Willard Hall was called as the first minister in 1727. The society was named the Second Church of Christ in Chelmsford. When Westford was incorporated as a town in 1729 the name was changed to First Parish of Westford. Rev. Hall served the town for 48 years, but was dismissed at the time of the American Revolution because he was a Tory and his sympathy lay with the Crown. His hand-penned Church



The third and present Meeting House was built in 1794. The first gathering of a religious society on this property predates the incorporation of the town of Westford. Today First Parish Church United of Westford possesses some of the oldest records of the town. (A Bryant photo from the book WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS 1729-1979)



The old 1713 Fletcher tavern is charming in its classic simplicity. The Edward N. Lamsons are owners of this historic landmark. (A Minuteman photo from WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS)

Book dating from 1727 is a treasure to both church and town.

The Meeting House was the center of religious, political and social activity. For a hundred years the town and parish were one body. The town hired the minister and paid his salary. The Meeting House had no exclusive sanctity, but was used indifferently for all its meetings, worship as well as business. Here one might wrestle to save a soul from sin on Sunday and be charged with the selection of a hogg reeve on Monday. The close relationship between church and government ended in 1828 although town meetings continued to be held here until 1867.

The third and present Meeting House was built in 1794. Originally it had one large room with galleries on three sides and pulpit raised high on the fourth side. The outline of the pulpit window is visible beneath the clapboards. The pews were square in form, with paneled doors. In 1846 the building was divided into two floors. It was here on the lower floor that townspeople held the James Buchanan Ball following his election in 1857. The hall was decorated in bunting and dimly lit with the lamps attached to the poles. In 1868 the broad side which faced the street was turned 90 degrees to face the site of the present town library. In 1975 the First Parish Church United of Westford celebrated the 250th anniversary of its gathering. Today it serves as a community church.

Location: 6G -- Main Street, Westford Common

ORIGINAL SITE OF WESTFORD ACADEMY

Westford Academy, organized in 1792, bought this site the following year and completed the building in 1794. The spot is marked by the original granite front step. Receipts for the actual construction, found in an attic in Harvard, Mass., a few years ago, provide an accurate record of its beginning. Plans were taken from the Academy in Andover. Volunteers who had little education themselves provided a cartload of sand, a day's work hauling lumber or the use of their oxen. When completed, the edifice was painted green with a roof of chocolate brown. A Paul Revere bell hung in the belfry; a wood and necessary house completed the building. For 102 years this Academy served as an institution of higher learning, but schooldays ended here in 1897. Within a few years the building was sold for \$100 and moved by horse and capstan to its present location beside the First Parish Hall. In 1916 it was bought by the town and served as the Westford Center Fire Station until 1975.

Location: 6G--Borton Road, Westford Common

HAMLIN HOUSE

The Hamlin house represents a past that was close to our government. This was the home of a family that included Hannibal Hamlin, Vice-President under Abraham Lincoln and Charles Sumner Hamlin, a member of Cleveland's Cabinet.

Location: 6G--1 Hildreth Street, West-



Westford Academy was built facing the Common on the site now marked by the original front step and flanked by two granite benches. The land for the building was purchased in 1793. (A Seavey photo from the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

ford Common 1713 TAVERN

The Fletcher Tavern is charming in its classic simplicity. Before the days of the railroad, travelers arrived here by stage or more frequently on horseback. Descendant Rev. Elijah Fletcher, although born in Westford, was to become the second Congregational minister in Hopkinton, N.H. His daughter, Grace, married the famous American statesman, Daniel Webster. "The small orchard adjoining the home of Nelson Tuttle on Boston Road (north of Tadmuck Club), was willed to Grace

Fletcher by her aunt," records Kate Hamlin, a later tavern occupant, "and after her marriage, the orchard was bought by my grandfather, and the deed, long in our possession bore the signatures of Daniel and Grace Webster." Kate Hamlin's own Diary 1847-1937 characterizes life in Westford in the mid-eighteen hundreds-- the village folk, religion, schooldays, Civil War days, the Debating Society, Gold Rush Days, etc.

Location: 6G--Lincoln Street, Westford Common.

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK