

Perfect day for library dedication

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The *Boston Herald* and *The Lowell Mail* newspapers had glowing accounts of the dedication of the J. V. Fletcher Library, held on Thursday, June 4, 1896. "The day was one of the 'perfect days in June' that can only be experienced at this time of the year and the townspeople and nearly everybody interested in it by birth or association was present to participate in the activities," according to one account.

Visitors enjoyed a reception, highlighted by an 11 a.m. concert by the Salem Cadet Band. It is interesting to note that the town voted to authorize the selectmen to remove the fence around the common (to help dress it up for the library's dedication ceremonies.)

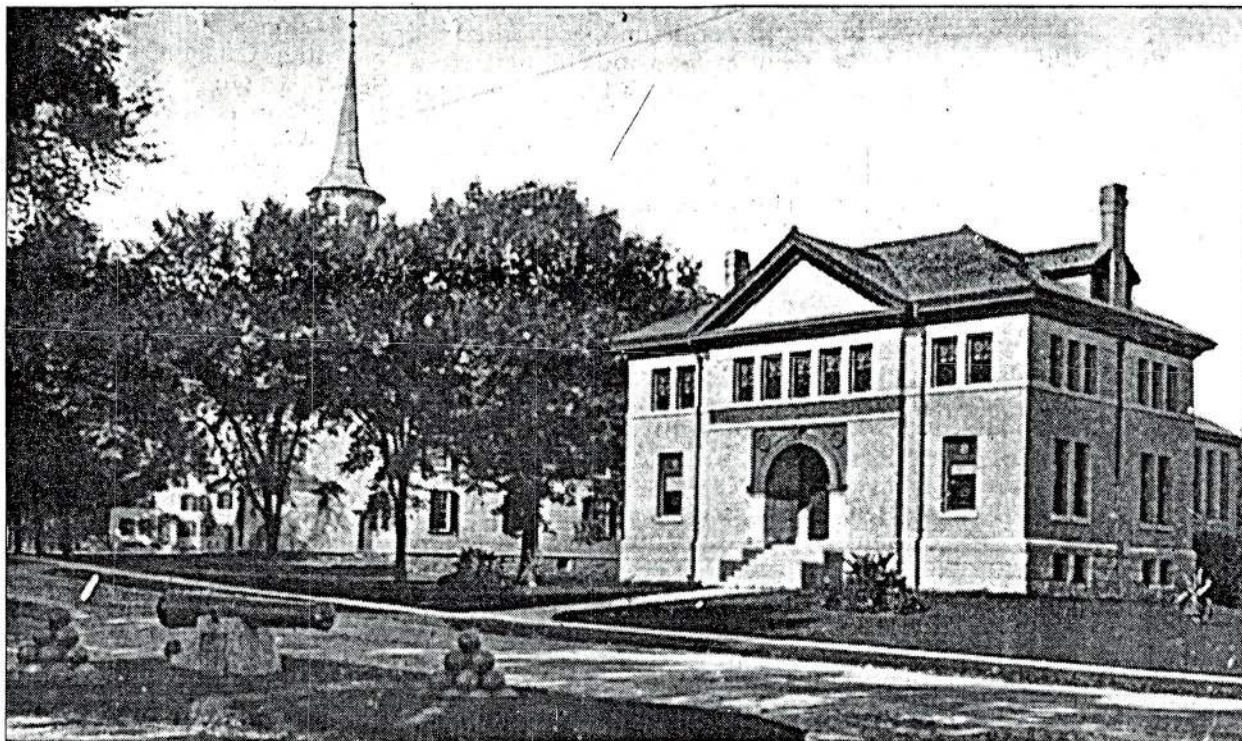
Dinner, served in a large tent on the common under the direction of D. L. Page Co., was the great event of the day. Tickets were sold for 600 plates, and the tent was completely filled. Grace for the meal was offered by Rev. Buck of Groton.

The Rev. L. H. Buckshorn of Westford opened the afternoon exercises with an invocation, and the address of welcome was delivered by president of the day, William E. Frost, followed by many lengthy speeches. Frost noted that the dedication of a library had ceased to be a novel event in the state and county. This was the era of Carnegie Libraries when an "epidemic of libraries" spread throughout the country.

Within a span of a year or two, neighboring Groton, Chelmsford, Littleton and Carlisle had been presented with fine libraries. "For us," Frost stated, "this occasion is unique and memorable, and it will always be regarded as one of the brightest and most auspicious in our local history." He alluded to the fact that books were no strangers to the citizens of Westford by paying tribute to the "Social Library."

Frost also honored the library benefactor, J. V. Fletcher, who at the age of 85 presented the key of the library to the town through Sherman H. Fletcher.

"Mr. Sherman H. Fletcher, it is with the most profound satisfaction that I now give you as Chairman of the Board of Selectman of the town of Westford, the key of the library, which is to be held by you, your associates and successors forever as a sacred trust in the strong assurance that it will



This old postcard drawing of the J. V. Fletcher Library, published by Wright & Fletcher, is stamped on the back with a 1931 postmark. It only cost a penny to mail a postcard in those days.

be a treasure house from whence may be drawn by the inhabitants of my native town sources of knowledge, wisdom and entertainment for all time." J. V. Fletcher commended the building committee, chaired by Sherman Fletcher with members George W. Heywood, Julian A. Cameron, William E. Frost, Dr. Walter J. Sleeper, George T. Day, Albert P. Richardson and Herbert V. Hildreth.

As Sherman Fletcher accepted the key on behalf of the town, he expressed his thanks to the architect, H. M. Francis of Fitchburg, and to contractor William C. Edwards of Westford. Fletcher passed the key on to Frost, preceptor of Westford Academy and chairman of the library trustees.

The result of the March 1895 Town Meeting decision to build a public library was awesome. The building had a frontage of 54' and was 61'6" deep. In order that the buff brick might be used for the exterior and other improvements could be made to the original plan, J. V. Fletcher increased his gift to nearly \$14,000, raising the total cost of the library to \$19,000.

The trimmings were of terracotta and granite while the base of coursed ashler of Westford granite came from the H. V. Hildreth quarry in Graniteville.

No public exercises were held when the cornerstone was laid on Sept. 12, 1895, but in a cavity cut into the local granite stone, a securely sealed copper box was

placed containing numerous articles.

Placed in the box were coins bearing the 1895 date (penny, nickel, dime, quarter, 50 cent piece) and a 1893 silver dollar, an 1805 1/2 cent, a list of voters at 1895 Annual Town Meeting, a copy of J. B. Fletcher's letter donating money for the library, a list of graduates and program of graduating exercises at Westford Academy, June 21, 1895, order of exercises used at the Centennial of Westford Academy, a pamphlet giving account of the Centennial Celebration of the building of the First Parish Meetinghouse, history of the Town of Westford, etc.

At the June 4, 1896 dedication, every department of the building received commendation. The arched entry led to a vestibule with marble wainscot. The librarian's desk was at the opposite end of the entrance and set on marble mosaic flooring. The first floor, finished in quartered oak, was divided into a fire-proof stack room with a capacity of 40,000 volumes — (in 1896 there were less than 9,000 volumes).

On the right were the reading and reference rooms. On the left, near the oak staircase, was the Librarian's room and a "toilet room." The conversation room with fireplace dominated the front left-hand side on which Fletcher had placed a life-like portrait of himself painted by Edward Barnard of Belmont.

The second floor, furnished in Cyprus, had a historical room at the head of the stairs. Large glass cases displayed articles of historical interest owned or loaned to the library. Here were located local species of birds and flowers, prepared by Emily Fletcher, honored in the "Westford Women Remembered" doll series. Also, in the upper level was a hall beautifully lit on two sides by windows and overhead panes of glass that flooded the room with a soft light. Many paintings and engravings decorated the walls of this "art gallery."

All the rooms were frescoed. The building was lit by gas, and the windows were fitted with screens.

Outside, the roof was covered with slate and the cornices were copper. A cement walk was made in front of the building and to the library entrance.

Certainly the name and memory of the Hon. J. V. Fletcher were deeply rooted in the heritage and progress of Westford.

This is the fifth in a series of historical articles by June W. Kennedy, acknowledging the Centennial Gala of the J. V. Fletcher Library, which will be held on Saturday, June 1 and Sunday, June 2. Although tickets are almost sold out for the June 1 dinner dance on the common, townspeople are all invited to a free family concert on Sunday, June 2, with music by the Westford Academy Band under the direction of Blair Betten-court. Also *Odyssey*, a female barbershop quartet, will entertain.