

Pot-bellied stove, lard barrels in store at turn-of-century Wright & Fletcher

By June W. Kennedy

Everyone is familiar with the classic illustration of the old-fashioned country store: men congregated about the pot-bellied stove intent on a heated game of checkers of political debate; womenfolk choosing a bit of calico while gossiping with a neighbor; and children, noses pressed against the glass candy counter, pointing to a penny's worth of this or a penny's worth of that.

It is all very much a part of the history of Westford. Several such stores operated in town.

On the westerly end of Westford Common, the firm of S. & S.D. Fletcher opened in 1839. Bought out by Nahum H. Wright and Captain Sherman H. Fletcher in 1873, it became the much referred-to Wright & Fletcher Store.

Excerpts from the "History of Middlesex County - Westford - 1880" tell us a little about the store and its owners:

"They keep a general country store, which is supposed to contain nearly everything... all the finer goods such as groceries, dry-goods, boots and shoes, paints, oils, seeds, farming-tools, fertilizers, grain, some kinds of clothing, some hardware, patent medicines, candy, nuts, the inevitable tobacco, a few fancy articles, etc., etc."

"Their sales amount upon the average to about \$21,000 per year. They keep a line of good goods, dealing only in first class articles. The writer has been assured by them that they had rather their customers would find fault with the prices charged than with the goods themselves, while it is their endeavor to have not fault found with either."

"Captain Fletcher was about 6' tall and a good old man," recalls Austin Fletcher, a Lincoln Street resident who came to work in the store in 1921.

"I remember he went to Boston every other week to buy goods. He was an outspoken man. One day a fellow came into the store and said to him, 'Vote for me!'"

"'Sorry,' replied Cap, 'but I told the other fellow I was going to vote for him.'"

In later years Dick Wright became

a partner. Cap Fletcher died in 1928.

But let's turn back. A touch of yesteryear comes to life as we turn to first-hand accounts of those who traded here. These interviews were conducted over a decade ago.

Leonard Wheeler: "Preceptor Frost's son, Francis, was a lively, small boy. One day in Wright & Fletcher store his mother missed him. He had got into the back store and roved around over the barrels there. He stepped on the cover of one and when his mother called, 'Francis, where are you?' he had to reply, 'Mother, I'm in the lard.'"

"Being warm weather he was in it and considerable lard went home with him. The nickname 'Mother I'm in the lard' clung as long as he was in town."

Alice Wells: "Captain Fletcher had

a one-horse, high top, covered delivery wagon which Dick Wright used. He'd take orders in the a.m. and deliver in the p.m. Then, it was flour by the barrels and half barrels for breads and pastries, vinegar and molasses by the jug."

Lucinda and Clyde Prescott: "Captain Fletcher was an old man; Dick Wright was a young fellow. Wright & Fletcher was a big grocery store. In those days they used to come around to your house every Monday with the 'hoss' and express wagon, take down your order of salt, oatmeal, sugar, molasses and whatnot. The next day they'd deliver it to you - even a spool of thread."

"They had cloth, cotton calico -

not woollens - farm equipment and groceries. They had some real pretty material sometimes; other times didn't have anything anyone would want. Sure had a line of groceries though, everything that you'd need. Supermarkets don't have any better nowadays."

"That [store] used to be the big swappin' place and hang out place for the men. They had one fellow there, old man Phelps from over Flushing Pond. He used to come up there once in a while. Come time to eat, he used to buy a pound of cheese and a whole pound of crackers, sit on the long settee out on the

STORE-PAGE 9

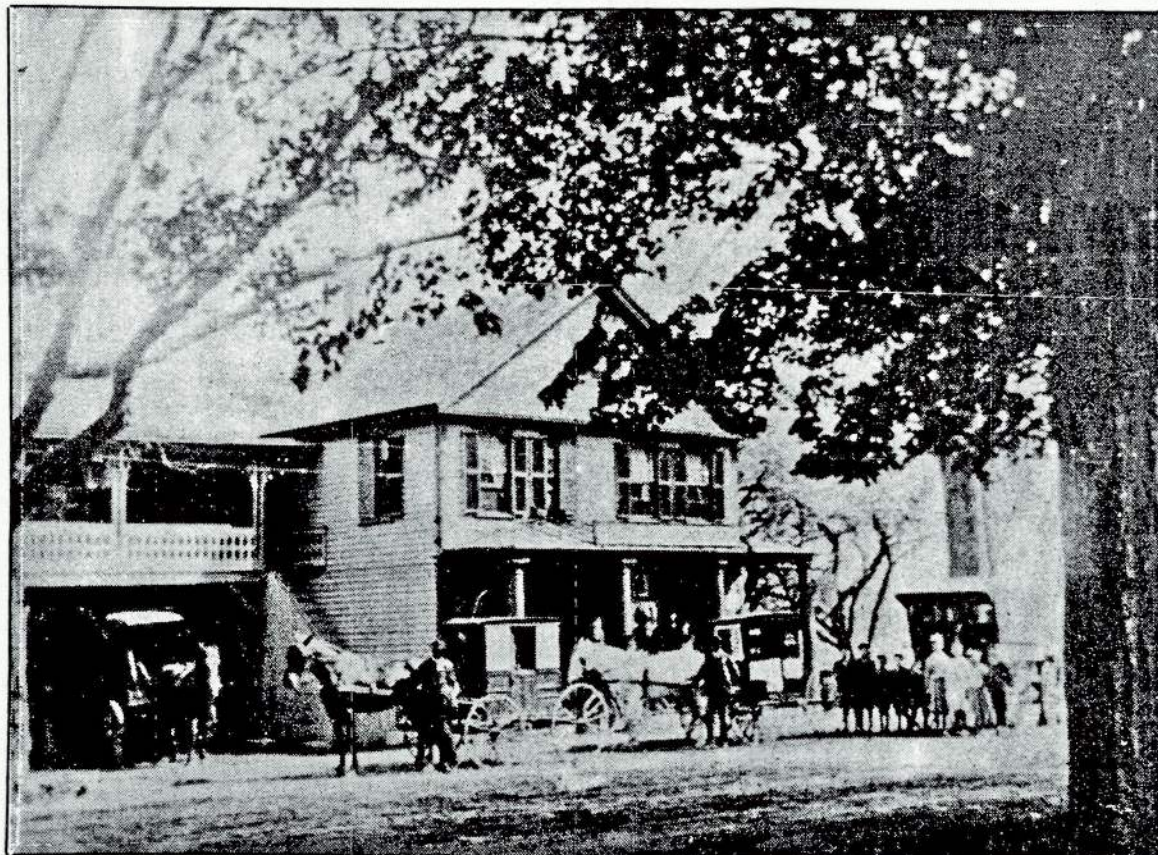


Photo courtesy of June Kennedy

An early 1900 scene at Wright & Fletcher Store on Main Street (across from the nursing home) shows a delivery wagon backed into a shed to load up groceries, RFD mail wagons parked in front, and children posed beside their old school 'bus'. During Republican administrations, the grocery store also housed the post office.

Wright & Fletcher sure to have goods in store for most needs

STORE-FROM PAGE 5

plazza, and eat it all."

Fred Fisher: "Grandfather Alvin Fisher gathered with the men at the Wright & Fletcher Store on evening to await the election returns. Everyone was all fired up. Choices were made and bets were laid."

"Well, grandfather's candidate lost, and so too the bet... with lantern in hand, he walked home in his long underwear - past the common, the church, and down home to Depot Street. Grandmother was embarrassed!"

May E. Day (in her 1906 diary): "Mamma stopped at the store to change some dyes she got last Wednesday. She stayed a long time and then didn't get

what she wanted. We were quite late to prayer meeting. Stopped at store to see if they had any Pratts poultry food. Had some just as good they said."

Elizabeth Carver McKay: "Back in the early twenties 'Uncle Dick Wright' was my father's dearest friend. After school I'd go in to the back of the store and sit on the high chair next to the accountant's desk against the wall. He'd help me do my arithmetic. I remember that as you went into the front door, at the left front, were the ribbons and the silk threads. On the right side were the candy and groceries. Beyond that was the chicken wire, pails, hose, shovels, bulk seed and the bins. A round iron stove was towards the back."

Bernard Wilder: "When brother, George,

Arnold and I helped with the farm chores, Father would sometimes say, 'Hustle and turn to and I'll treat come Saturday night.' This meant a 5¢ ice cream cone at the Wright & Fletcher Store. Father traded fruit and vegetables for groceries."

Huntington Wells: "In the twenties there was a tall thermometer on the outside of the Wright & Fletcher Store advertising Dr. Mile's Pills (or something like that). It was a landmark that had been there probably when the store first began. One morning on our way home from Sunday School, Edgar Peterson and I lit a match and I busted it. I remember the blue or red ran all over my new suit."

"He confessed but I walked way around the store for days after that. It always

bothered me, especially because they'd give me a piece of candy everytime I picked up the mail."

Austin Fletcher: "It was my job to take care of the foodstuffs - pack rolled oats and rice in the bins. Molasses came in a barrel and had to be pumped out. I remember one time buying some S.S. Pierce molasses. It was a cold January day; I slipped comin' into the store."

"Well, the bung bursted and we lost more than a third of the barrel on the back room floor. And I had to clean it up. Everyone knows what molasses on a cold day in January is like!"

June Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.