

School days recalled at second Academy

By June W. Kennedy

From the 1790s until 1973, there have been four academy buildings in Westford, all standing and being used today. In 1897, the second Westford Academy building opened its door with William E. Frost as principal. Before entering its portals through the recollections of early graduates, take a look at the colorful history of the original Westford Academy building.

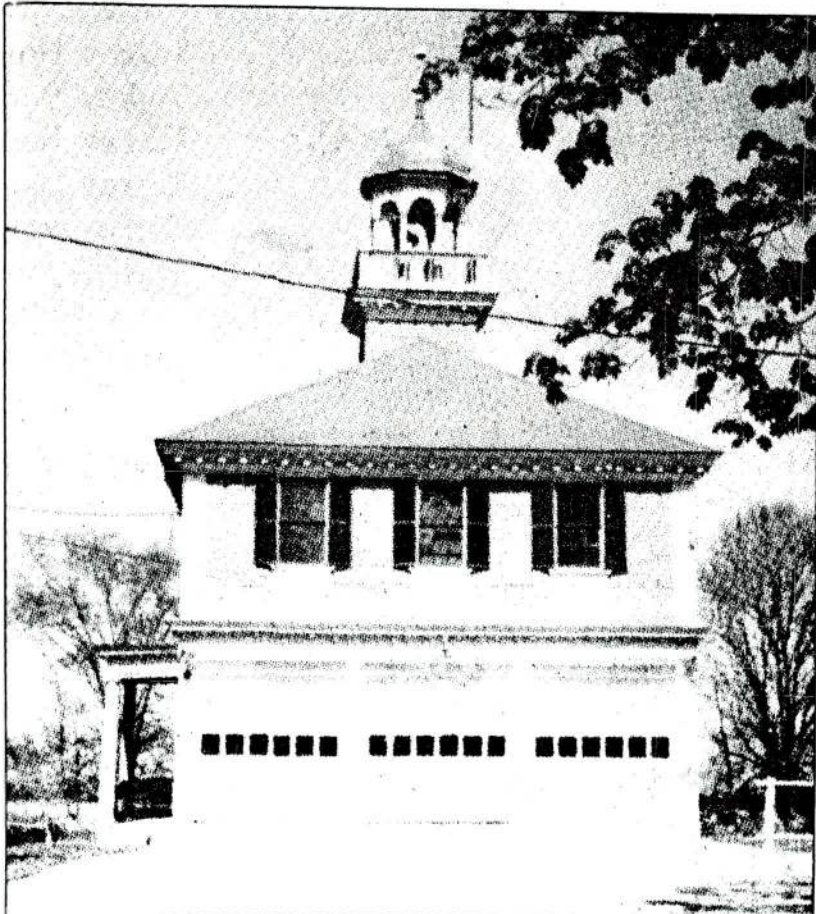
At the turn-of-the century, the empty building was bought for \$100 by a man called "Tricky" Henry O. Keyes, who with a pair

of horses and turntable, moved it to its present location, then the site of the former center blacksmith and harness shops. It was moved with some inconvenience to the town, for it remained in the middle of the road for several days. Horses and wagons had to go around the common.

Just a little bit of spite played a part in the maneuvering. "I like to play with the law," said Tricky.

The building remained on stilts for five or six years. In 1916, the town needed a fire

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THE ORIGINAL WESTFORD Academy building was moved from the common to its present site on Boston Road at the turn of the century by 'Tricky' O. Keyes, who bought the structure for \$100. It served as a fire station from 1917-1975, and in 1939 was the scene of a robbery in which firemen lost their pants and \$96 to four gunmen. Today it houses the town museum.

(Courtesy June Kennedy)

Memories of second Academy

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station larger than the old wheelwright shop it had been using. It bought the old Academy which served as the Westford Center Fire Station until 1975. Today the original Westford Academy building houses the Westford Town Museum.

Around 1912, the Town of Westford started to become involved in secondary education. At that time the School Committee took administrative control of Westford Academy, renting the building from the trustees.

In the early 1920s, complete control passed to the town when the building and grounds were acquired for \$3,000. The invested financial surplus now makes possible grants, scholarships and no-interest loans to graduates of Westford Academy going on to higher education.

The trustees annually vote thousands of dollars in loans and scholarships. Under the terms of the fund, only Academy graduates may benefit; thus it is that the town's public high school will always be called Westford Academy.

Tales of school days

What were school days really like in the early years of this century? What were the joys and sorrows of the students? The following tales were shared some years ago by those who were there.

The Academy schoolhouse was still shiny and new when the late Alice Prescott Collins entered its portals in 1901. She recalled: "When I was through with my schooling here in Forge Village, I went up to the Westford Academy. I didn't have to walk then. I had a horse, a horse named 'Yankee'. He'd been a race horse and had never been used to having any woman near him. He used to show his teeth and I was afraid he'd bite me so I slapped his face and he never did it again. We became fast friends.

"Before classes began, I'd put Yankee in a nearby barn — my father had made negotiations or something. At noon I'd go over and put his feedbag on and go back to class. Sometimes I didn't have very much time for my own lunch. At the close of the day Yankee and I went home together.

"In 1905, the year I graduated, there were seven girls in my class. Four had taken the 4-year Latin course; three had

taken the 3-year English course. I attended the Lowell Normal School following graduation."

Miss Lucinda Prescott entered the Academy in 1904: "There were two teachers in the high school; see what they have now! If we had five in the class, that was a lot. There were four in ours when I graduated. I took the English course so as to get out quickest, only a 3-year project. I still have the book we used when we studied and pressed wildflowers. I imagine they are pretty well curled up now.

"Somehow I knew the day the 'Jolly Jumper', our nickname for the electric car that ran from Brookside to Westford Center, would make its first run. I was looking out the high school window. Mr. Perkins, the principal, questioned me. 'What are you looking at? Why didn't you tell us; we'd all have gone.'

"Our class of 1907 was the last one to hold exercises in the upstairs of the Unitarian Church. The next year they held them in the town hall. The alumni had a graduation ball and dinner right after graduation and that was in the town hall. It was free to graduates. Then you were supposed to sign the book and become an alumni. Come to think of it, I'm the only one left."

Lucinda died in March of 1976.

"I went to the eighth grade at the Academy when I was 12 years old," recalled Otis Day. I had long pants on for the first time, and of course we walked to school — no buses. Heavens alive, if these folks today walked to school, they wouldn't have so much ambition to get in the dickens."

But boys will be boys! Otis continued, "We had a teacher in the 8th and 9th grade — Ellery Newcomb. We were in one room. First day of school she announced, 'We're here for business, not for pleasure!' And that's what she was, I guess. Our motto for that year was: *Hippity Huss, Hippity Huss, What in the world is the matter with us? Nothing at all, nothing at all, Newcomb trained us, that's all.*

"If kids did something in a hurry she'd always say, 'Haste makes waste.' One morning I was late. She wondered why I was late. I said, 'Haste makes waste, so I didn't hurry.' Well, I lost my recess!



PRINCIPAL WILLIAM E. Frost poses on the steps of Westford Academy with student Elsworth York in September 1897. The high school was in the building which now houses Roudenbush Community Center. (Courtesy June Kennedy)

"I liked football, baseball and basketball. We used to play indoor football in the gymnasium with a basketball...no rules, no nuthin'. We had two teams and we'd play on the top third floor. It was a terrible place. You'd bump your head and the ball would jam into the corners, but that's all we had. We called it indoor football. Other than that we were angels."

In her diary dated Nov. 30, 1904, the late May Day penned: "This morning about nine o'clock, those that were downstairs heard a loud thud and then the girls came running. It was Mr. Frost. He had fallen out of his chair and the doctor said he died instantly. There will be no more school this week."

"Sunday, Dec. 4: Mr. Frost's funeral was today. All the scholars went down to Miss Thompson's and marched up to the church. It lasted a long time."

The next principal of Westford Academy was Mr. Perkins who arrived in early January of 1905. He introduced Astronomy to the Academy. "He really made it interesting," remembered Otis Day.

"He'd take three or four of us over to Hildreth Street in the evening to point out the constellations — Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Aquarius, Orion, Libra, Capricorn, Pisces — oh boy, I've forgotten them all! What a thrill to go out in the evening with the horse and bobsled. The sky was always so clear."

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