

Service was a big part of Fletcher's life

BY JUNE W. KENNEDY
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Who was the Hon. J. V. Fletcher of Belmont, who donated \$10,000 for the building of a library in Westford?

Head down the hill from the Abbot School to the sharp bend in the road where Cold Spring Road and Depot Street greet each other. On Feb. 28, 1812 at the site of the Cold Spring Farm, Jonathan Varnum Fletcher was born. He was called "J.V." because no one ever pronounced his name correctly.

Descended from Solomon Keyes, the first permanent settler in town in 1664, J.V.'s mother was Frances Grant Keyes of Keyes Hill. She inherited a 1750 fiddle-back chair bearing the name-plate "Francis." This chair was passed down through seven generations - to a Frances in each generation - until 1977. It was at the home of Marian Frances Winnek (1883-1977), his great granddaughter. Her recollections of J. V. Fletcher added much color to his biography.

After attending the local district school, J.V. completed his education at the age of 16 at Groton Academy. He placed his effects in a small pack, he walked the 25 miles to West Cambridge (now Arlington). There, he went to work for an older brother, driving a butcher's wagon for four years.

When Fletcher left West Cambridge, he went into the provision business in West Medford until 1837. His next stop was the Faneuil Hall Market where, for the next 62 years, Fletcher made a modest fortune in the wholesale beef trade.

In 1836 he married Marcy Ann Hill (youngest of 10 children) of West Cambridge, who lived to share their golden wedding anniversary. The couple had five children and lived in Charlestown for 20 years, where J.V. served on the Common Council and as an alderman. They moved to Belmont, building "The Mansion House" next to Mrs. Fletcher's father's home at 519 Pleasant Street (which is still standing today). There were six Fletcher houses on that street which J. V. improved with



J. Varnum Fletcher donated \$10,000 to the Town of Westford for construction of a library.

a half mile of maple trees from Ellsworth, Maine.

While making his living at Faneuil Hall, Fletcher found time to be of public service. When it became evident that better banking facilities were needed by the market men, he organized, and later became director and president of the Faneuil Hall Bank — positions he held from 1851 until his death. He was also first president of the Belmont Savings Bank, president of Quincy Cold Storage Company and a member of the Board of Selectmen in Belmont in addition to being a state legislator.

Having bought a number of houses and buildings in the poorer part of Charlestown, he allowed two or three corner stores to remain vacant for 10 years rather than rent them as saloons.

He also bought the old Unitarian Church in Belmont - only to have it burn down the following week. A settee from this church is in Miss Winnek's home. She also had portraits of J. V. Fletcher

and his wife, a sampler done by Mrs. Fletcher as a girl and the family sampler bearing the birthdate of J. V. Fletcher.

J.V. felt he had to support a good dozen relatives - and he was very nice to them, too. Among them was his grandson Henry, who one day expressed his wish to become an artist. J.V. blew up at his even considering such a feckless (worthless or foolish) idea, and sent him instead to M.I.T. to study architecture. After sticking out two years there, Henry then announced that he had won a scholarship to the Boston Art School. J.V. said, "No grandson of mine could possibly accept a scholarship" (after all, he was a wealthy, prominent man). This time, he paid Henry's way - to art school. Fletcher was always head of the household, in capital letters - at least for the most part.

J.V. never went to the theatre or concerts, while his wife attended all the art exhibits and classical concerts during the

afternoon matinees. However, one time he became stranded with his friends during a Boston snowstorm and was forced to spend the night in a hotel. He joined his companions in going to the theatre. The name of the theatre production was "The Black Crook." His family guessed that it must have turned out to be a "leg show" because he never wanted to talk about the theatre again. Years later, his daughter had to sneak out the back doorway to slip off to a matinee.

The Fletchers were a happy couple - she had a quick sense of humor, he had none. Returning from a trip to the West one time, and sporting a new mustache, he asked his wife how she liked it. She looked and said: "Let me just get the scissors, it's not quite straight." She deliberately chopped off one side. Mrs. Fletcher thought the mustache was hideous.

J.V. didn't think that females could be trusted with loose change in their pockets, but he let his wife have charge accounts in all the stores, where she always bought the best things.

He was very proud of his Morgan horses. However, one day at his Belmont home, just as he was climbing onto the carriage step, they started up, dragging him by the reins the length of the long driveway which, of course, was gravel so that the horses wouldn't lose their footing in winter. The accident lacerated his whole body. His 16-year-old granddaughter, alone in the house, was helpless at the sight of all that blood, so he bathed his own wounds and, sure he would stiffen up unless he kept moving, walked up and down the driveway continually for three days.

From the Westford Recollection Series by June W. Kennedy. This is part 3 of a series of historical articles in honor of The Centennial Gala of the J. V. Fletcher Library, slated for June 1 under a 50-by-100 foot tent on the Town Common at 7 p.m. Music will be by the "River Boat Stompers," followed by dinner and dancing on The Green. Tickets are \$50 per person and available at the main desk of the library.