

Westford Recollections

Town Support Needed For Museum

By June W. Kennedy

One of the most significant Bicentennial contributions to the Town of Westford is the restoration of the original Westford Academy Building for use as a Town Museum. Never before has Westford had a safe and central place in which to assemble and display its wealth of historical memorabilia. The makings of a museum -- costumes, pictures, scrapbooks, dolls, china, documents, tools, and furniture are presently scattered in attics, cellars and barns of the town. A well-catalogued collection of Town History will be of great value and of great service to school children, historians and to the townspeople.

The ground work has been laid. Through the efforts of the Bicentennial Commission, the Westford Historical Society and private individuals, work has begun at a great pace. The antique restoration department at Nashoba Technical High School has been at the site for two weeks now. They anticipate having the exterior of the old Academy restored before school is out in June. What then? If this dream of a Town Museum is to become reality, townspeople need to be made aware that their support is needed. Fund raising projects and volunteer help sponsored by the Westford Historical Society, Historic Commission and hopefully other local organizations in the town, will make possible interior restoration and operation of the Museum. Town-wide interest and participation is necessary to complete the task.

The preservation of the original Academy is in itself a valuable restoration. Its history bears repeating. In 1792 Westford Academy was started. Thirty seven students were accepted the first year. Of that number, 28 were boys and 9 were girls. With the exception of one student from Littleton, all students were from Westford. By 1793, 37 boys and 17 girls attended. Besides those from Westford, there were two

students each from Chelmsford, Bedford, Littleton, Dunstable and Woburn, and one each from Billerica, Concord, Boston, and Hollis and Pelham, N.H.

The story has usually been told that the only proof that Levi Hedge came to Westford as the first preceptor was the record of his trip from Concord listed as follows:

Westford, Aug. 7, 1792
"To cash paid Mr. Wheeler from & chas that Mr. Hedge rode up from Concord in - L O - 6-8 To taking the hors & chase back to Concord 0-2-4"

Note that this ledger was just prior to the period that money changed from pounds, shillings and pence to dollars and cents. The subjects taught were English, Latin and Greek languages, together with handwriting, arithmetic and the art of public speaking. If desired, instruction in practical geometry, logic, geography and music would be included. Eligibility for attendance was available to students of any nationality, age or sex provided that the pupil was able to "read from the Bible readily, without spelling." Because the Academy was not erected in 1792, it seems logical to conclude that the Meetinghouse may have housed the large number of students those first years.

The land on which the building was first located was purchased in 1793. The Academy was built facing the Common, on the site now marked by the original front step and flanked by 2 granite benches. It was built by volunteers. Most of them had no education themselves but wanted it for their children and children's children. If they didn't have the money themselves they gave a cartload of sand or logs, or a days work, or volunteered to take their oxen over to Tyngsboro to bring back a load of things. Much time and material went into the building. The actual records of its construction were found in an attic in Harvard several years ago

and kindly returned to Westford. The old folded and worn receipts make interesting reading.

"To a Journey to Andover to take dimensions of Andover Academy which served for the outlines for building ours - L 0-6-8

Feb 1793 - Paid for 1 stove for the Academy L-4-4-0

To half-thousand of penny 0-6-0

Dr for 1 day fetching glass 0-7-0

Dr for 850 squares of glass 17-0-0

For one barrel cider for raising 0-12-0

To two days carting sand and the pillars 0-18-0

For a Bell 14-15-0

To bringing said Bell from Boston 0-6-0

To Levi 3 days making mortar 0-15-0

To Amoziah with the team to carry water 0-9-0

Meser Pile & 6 oxen - 1 day 0-10-6

Half a day hauling lumber - Halls 0-2-0

One day waiting on the Copper and gittin the Rope to Raise the Cupolow 0-5-0

To 26 bushes of hare 6/ 6 0-13-0

To 154 feet good white pine bords 0-6-9

Etc Etc Etc

The final days for the completion of the Academy Building had about arrived in the Spring of 1794. On April 1 it was reported "That the Academy be painted with a shade or two of green deeper than Chelmsford Meeting House

That the blinds to the lower windows of the Academy colored green.

That the shavings under the Academy be got out, that hansom doorstones be hewn and laid at the door and that the Academy be properly wharfed up with stone and gravel.

That the roof of said Academy be painted a chocolate color

That the said committee shall also build a wood house & necessary house " ETC

The building was in use until the 1897 when the Roudensh School became the Westford Academy. A few years later, the

original building was bought by a man called "Tricky Keyes," who with a pair of horses, moved it to its present location, where it remained on stilts for five or six years. In 1916, the town needed a fire station larger than the old wheelwright shop it had been using. It bought the old Academy which served as the Westford Fire Station until 1925. The original Academy is one of the oldest secondary schools in New England. Upstairs it is almost identical to what it was in 1792. Still remains the little cupboard where one opened the door to pull the rope to ring the bell, the platform where the principal's desk was located and the closets. Repairs are needed and the downstairs will require considerable restoration. It will make a fine educational Museum.

To promote interest in the Academy, restoration the Book stack at 13 Depot St., Westford, is fashioning a collector's doll. The doll's name is Sally Carver. She comes with a little wooden covered book. The story of Sally Carver's Little Book is quoted below:

"In the first class at Westford Academy was a little nine year old girl named Sally Carver. She was the youngest in the school, and as students entered upon examination, she must have been a bright little girl. Her father was Jonathan Carver, one of the founders and treasurer of the Academy. It was as a reward that she received from her teacher, Preceptor Amos Crosby, a little book entitled "Entertaining Histories." This little wooden covered book as well as a letter written by Sally's daughter, Mrs. Sally E. Peabody Wells, class of 1825, has been kept by the Trustees and may (someday) be seen at the original Westford Academy

3 April 1975, p. 1