

# Old Westford Recollections

By Mrs Charles S. Kennedy

## The Meetinghouse

Our story starts 240 years ago - 66 years after the people first settled here (1658) and 5 years before Westford became a town. For it was in 1724 - after 13 years of petitioning - that the west part of Chelmsford was granted leave by the General Court that it might become a separate religious society, by the name of the West Precinct of Chelmsford. It is reported that this action was opposed by the Chelmsford Parish.

On May 5, 1724 the first meeting house was started. The land, near the present location of the First Parish Church United in Westford Center, was given by the Chelmsford Parish.

It was not until Nov 27, that Rev Willard Hall was ordained as minister and the church established as the Second Church of Christ in Chelmsford. As was usual in those days, Mr Hall became the proprietor of a small farm which he cultivated with great care and success.

This church was to last as a church until 1771 and Mr Hall was to prove even more durable for he served until 1775, a period of 48 years, by far the longest pastorate of any in the history of the church.

When the church was established, and for more than a century thereafter, towns were required by law to maintain a meetinghouse, supply a minister, and provide a parsonage, and the inhabitants were taxed for its support. Church attendance was compulsory under penalty of a fine even as late as 1835.

Twice every Sunday the whole house gallery and floor, was filled with the hearers of its long sermons. Its singing, limited in tunes, rasping in melody, and horrible in words, was entered into with an enthusiasm undreamed of by the modern congregation with all the excellence of its choir.

But all the people did not always attend all the services any more than they do now, there being 1500 reprimands for absenteeism during the ministry of Rev Mr Hall.

The latter part of Rev Hall's pastorate was rather stormy, for during the hot days preceding the Revolution, he took the Royalist side. His patriot parishioners at once arose and preached to him liberty's more royal truth. He conscientiously and courageously told them that he was too old to change his principles, and would not, for the sake of keeping his pulpit, become a traitor to his kind. And so the venerable man was set adrift. During his ministry, however, 274 persons were received into full church communion, 334 admitted to its half-way covenant and 1535 were baptized - no doubt a goodly percentage of the population of Westford at the time.

In the latter part of his pastorate, a bell was installed (1762) in a free standing belfrey built at some distance from the church. It was paid for by public subscription. During the lifetime of the original building, it underwent many changes and repairs. But in 1768 the members of the town Parish voted not to repair the old meeting house and also voted to build a new one. It was eventually sold to the Baptist church in South Chelmsford, where it served as a meetinghouse for many years. It ended its days either as a barn or as a hearse house, or

perhaps at different times it served as both.

The site for the ill-fated second church building or meetinghouse was in back of the original. It was damaged by lightning in the late summer of 1771, even before it was completed. It probably went into use in December of 1771. It was 63' by 44' with three porches. But it had no belfrey. In 1793 it was voted to build a belfrey at the west end of the meetinghouse, but before this could be accomplished the building was burned, for our next information is that on Jan. 8, 1794 the nails which had been salvaged from the ruins were sold. So ended the second meetinghouse.

During its short existence the Rev Hall had been dismissed, the Rev Jesse Reed served from 1776 to 1778, the Rev Matthew Scribner served from 1779 to 1789 and the Rev Caleb Blake was called in 1792 and was to serve until 1826. Just after Mr Hall was dismissed, a Joseph Thaxter served for a year and was extended a call by town and church. Evidently Mr Thaxter declined and went off to war, being present at the fight at Concord Bridge and at the Battle of Bunker Hill, then was elected chaplain in the army in January 23rd, 1776.

When Rev Mr Scribner was called it was voted to "support him decently as long as he shall carry on the work of a gospel minister for this town, to provide a suitable dwelling house, keeping for a horse and two cows, and twenty cords of wood yearly, and also to give him L90 for his support the first year". Mr Scribner and the town had various disagreements so he resigned in 1789. Several years after this in 1789. Several years after Mr Scribner removed to Tyngsborough, where he took up a lot of wild land just over the land from Westford. This he began to clear up and cultivate, and then he tried an experiment in raising Merino sheep, having bought a few animals at almost fabulous prices. The experiment failed, but he continued to reside on the farm until his death. Scribner Hill was named after this minister.

It was during Caleb Blake's pastorate that the church burned and the third and present meetinghouse which graces the common was built. During the entire times of the first two meetinghouses and a good many years of the present one, the town and parish being the same body, the meetinghouse had no exclusive religious sanctity, but was used indifferently for all its meetings, those of business as well as those of worship, prayer on Sunday and politics on Monday, now the choosing of a minister and anon the election of a hog-reeve, today the wrestling of a soul with sin, and tomorrow the squabbling of a citizen over a dog tax. It was a mixture which continued for the whole house down to about 1845, when it was divided horizontally, and then for its lower half down to 1867 (town house built in the autumn of 1870).

The close relationship between the church and town was to start to end in the 1820's. Early in 1828 the church voted to give Mr Carpenter a call to become the pastor of this church, and to choose a committee to request the selectmen to call a town meeting to see if the town will concur in the call. But the town voted NOT to concur, and this proved to be the last effort to settle a pastor over the church and town together. It was not, however, until a few years later that the privilege of belonging to any religious society, or the liberty to refuse to be connected with any, was granted by the Legislature with restriction or impeachment.

The last of the town meetings were held in the church in 1867. The third building and present meetinghouse, First Parish Church United, was built in 1794. Look for the history of this New England meetinghouse next week.