

Westford Recollections

by June W. Kennedy

"We saved the cellar hole"

By JUNE W. KENNEDY
PART I
With the dedication of the new Fire Station and Police Station for the Town of Westford on July 30, 1974, the town took a great step forward. In order to really appreciate a modern facility of this kind, it might help if one could go back in time to the very beginning of our Fire Department and including the time the old Academy Building was made into a fire station, and the first equipment was motorized. In other words, the period from about 1887 or 1888 to around 1927, equalling about forty years.

The first mention of any fire protection organization in Westford was in 1887 when Edward Prescott was listed as a Fire Warden, and furnishing three men one day in guarding a fire near Poor Farm Hill. This seems to indicate that up until that time one's protection in town from fire was by fire buckets used by neighbors and friends. The telephone was not in common use so that the church bell and word of mouth were about the only way to spread the alarm. "I can still remember a man on horseback, riding up Boston Road yelling, 'Fire, Fire, Fire,' when the Prescott house burned," states Allister MacDougall.

Fire Warden appears to have been an appointive office made by the Selectmen, not an elected office as "Culler of Hoops and Staves," or "Field Driver," or "Surveyor of Wood and Lumber." In listing incidental expenses for the Selectmen in 1890 is found an expense for guarding a forest fire with Julian Wilkinson receiving \$1.50. Apparently the existence of fire protection was about nil. But for the first time, listed under the Officers of the Town for 1891 is found "Forest Fire Wards" with Edward Prescott and George Heywood, the two wards.

During this period on December 5, 1891, a house owned by Edward E. Wright and the Bancroft heirs and located on the present site of the J.V. Fletcher Library, burned to the ground. Mr. Wright who lived in the house burned to death, he was only about fifty years of age. Some late bills came in on the Wright fire listing C.W. Decatur, George Farrar, Gilman Stone and W.W. Johnson receiving \$1.50 each for guarding the fire. N. Vicerel and J.T. Colburn were also listed at \$1.50 each for this same fire, so it must have created a lot of anxiety in the community, being located next to the Meeting House. The house was a fine old central chimney colonial, but it was only valued at the time of the fire at \$500 and contents \$100. Cause of the fire was listed as accidental.

Also in 1891 appears the first written report on forest fires, strongly urging everyone to take precaution to prevent fires of timber and sproutland. "We have been fairly fortunate to have had only two fires of this character during the year, that have been reported to us by the fire wards." Blame was placed on parties from Lowell and others "who hunt and fish through our woods and in our streams, build fires and leave the embers to be fanned by the wind."

In the warrant for the annual town meeting dated March 21, 1892, is found the first article having to do with fire equipment or shelter to house it.

The article was "To see if the town will authorize the selectmen to buy ladders, fire hooks and pails to be placed under a suitable covering in different localities in town for use in case of fire." Action was postponed until the special town meeting April 23, 1892, when it was voted to accept the report of the selectmen in regard to fire apparatus. The sum of \$400 was appropriated. Houses were erected in the center of the town (back of the Town Hall), in Forge Village and in Graniteville. The Fire Wards had charge of the property. Printed notices were to be placed upon the buildings giving location of keys to unlock the doors. The following expenditures were made: "Paid for: 3 dozen galvanized pails, \$13.50; 6 axes, \$4.50; 6 ladder hooks, \$3.00; L.E. Wilkins for lettering pails and

axes, \$1.50; 1 dozen Johnson Force pumps, \$51.00; W.D. Grimes for ladders, \$20.94; J.H. Brown for lettering ladders, \$4.00; W.C. Edwards for building three ladder houses, \$255.00, and 3 Fire Ward Badges, \$3.00."

So, for the first time in 1892, Westford had its three fire houses and equipment, and the firemen had badges at a total cost of \$356.44. The three fire wards appointed were Sherman H. Fletcher, George F. Carkin and Wilbert E. Parsons, with George Heywood and Edward Prescott as Forest Fire Wards. Really, this was the beginning of the Westford Fire Department.

It is easily understood why it was difficult to have any organized fire department during this period, or earlier, when one considers the poor road conditions and lack of any signaling system. Practically every year bills were submitted to the town for damage to vehicles caused by road conditions. For example, an expense is listed for Feb. 12, 1887, to T. MacGovern, shoepeddler, for damage to his wagon by being upset at corner of road near house of J. Caunter, Graniteville, for \$30. Damage to sleds, wagons, teams and horses was common. In 1888, J.A. Healy got \$3.50 for damages to carriage on highway, E.E. Whidden had a bill of \$4.25 for a spring broken from a defect in road. That it might be worse in winter is shown by a bill from C.M. Hardy, Pelham, N.H. for damage to horse and sleigh at time of snow blockage, March, 1888, on Makepeace Road.

The town reported in 1904 that "during the past 10 years, 1,582 acres have been burned over at an estimated damage of \$1,331.37." During that year Fire Wards were increased to seven and Forest Fire Wards to eight.

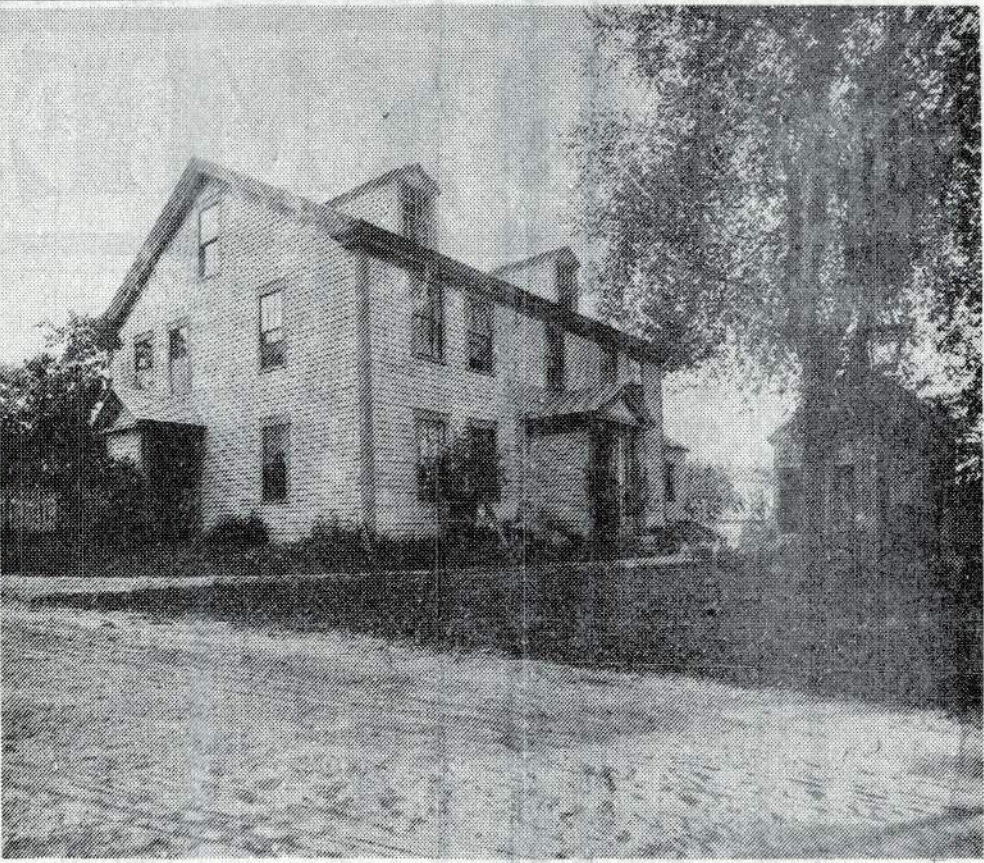
Big Step Taken in 1907
When the Westford Water Company came into being, the Fire Department was able to take a real big step. On May 27, 1907, at a special town meeting, it was voted that "the Selectmen be and hereby are authorized and empowered in the name and behalf of the Town to enter into a contract with the Westford Water Company, a body incorporated, to provide for a term of ten years for protection against fire by installing a system of hydrants in such number not to exceed forty, and to be located as and when the Selectmen may determine, at a fee not to exceed \$40 per hydrant, per year." Expenses were to be paid by the town. At this same meeting, it was voted to appropriate \$250 for a building and fire apparatus at Brookside (Nabnasset). The total cost of the building was \$84 and \$54.30 for equipment, making a total of \$138.30.

The next big step was taken when the town voted at a special town meeting, January 18, 1908, authorizing the selectmen to purchase and acquire at an expense not to exceed \$2200, such items as lengths of hose, hose carriages, etc. Each village was to be treated the same.

Next came a salary schedule set up at a special town meeting on May 2, 1908, when it was voted that each member of the Fire Department, including the Call Men, would receive a salary of \$1.00 per year. For the services attending an alarm of fire, the rates were as follows: Captains 35 cents per hour, Lieutenants, 30 cents per hour, regular firemen and any call men taking part, 25 cents per hour, time to be from time of leaving fire house until dismissed by the Captain. The Steward was to receive an annual salary of \$25 for care of equipment. In case the Steward needs assistance to clean the hose carriage or hose after a fire, he might employ any firemen at the rate of 25 cents per hour. For the use of a horse, 20 cents an hour was paid.

In 1908, the Board of Engineers made their first annual report. It stated:

"Three hose companies have been organized consisting of twenty men each: The Edward M. Abbot Hose Company No. 1 at Westford Center; the Albert R. Choate Hose Company No. 2 at Graniteville and the John Edwards Hose Company No. 3 of Forge Village. These companies are equipped with a hose carriage, 800



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feet of hose, two fire extinguishers, ladders, pails and tools necessary for fighting fires.

"At the center of town, a building has been leased for a term for the storage of apparatus, with ample room for the men to meet. (The Center Station was the former wheelwright shop of Nelson Tuttle and stands today as a dwelling on Boston Rd.) At Graniteville a part of the carriage house of John A. Healy has been used for the storage of equipment and Healy's Hall rented for the men to hold meetings. At Forge Village a building has been erected at a cost of \$400 which makes a most excellent place for keeping the apparatus, with a nice room for the members.

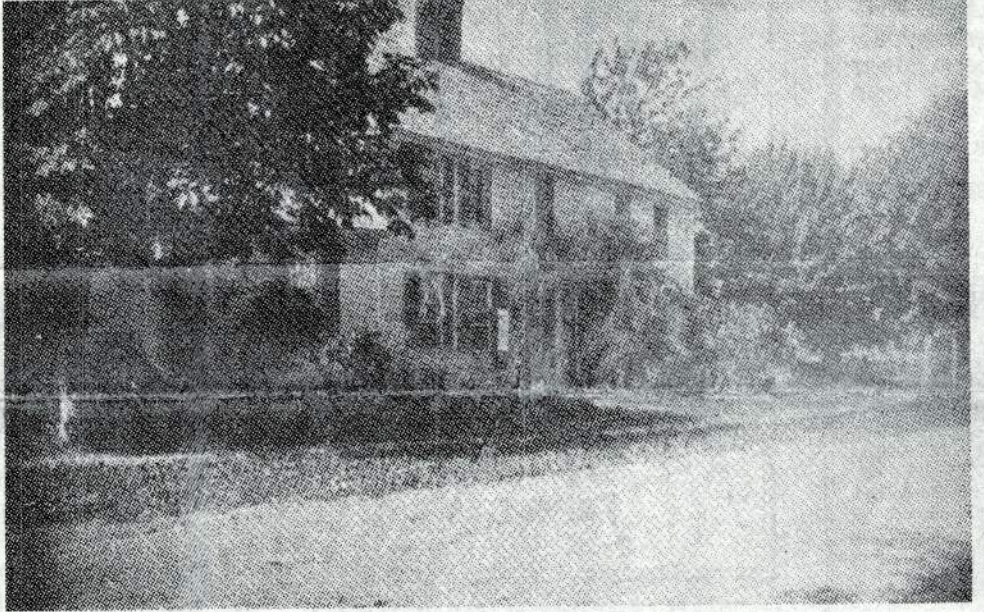
"Practice drills were held once a month by each company, which has done much to familiarize the men in handling the hose in case of fire. The name of Fire Wards was changed to Fire Wardens."

"Of the members of the Fire Department who

Some of the older boys in the Academy were allowed to join the Hose Company with these races in mind, and that was why I was allowed to join."

The practice of the town furnishing Chemical Fire Extinguishers in the homes of interested citizens was started in 1911, with forty-nine extinguishers being placed. The number increased threefold, with the names of those housing them printed each year in the Town Report.

In their report of 1913 the Fire Engineers cited two major problems: Graniteville needed a larger facility, and the Center Station needed a new building in a more central location. Also, an alarm system should be installed. A new engine house was soon erected in Graniteville. However, the question of an alarm was not to be settled for some time. The next concern was the Center Fire Station. Times were changing, automobiles were on the increase, and the



On December 5, 1891, a house located on the site of the J. V. Fletcher Library burned to the ground. An old central chimney colonial, it was valued then at \$500. (From the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

belonged to the original hose companies in 1908, very few remained," claims Allister MacDougall. "As one who joined a little later in that year, and only served one year because of leaving for college, the impressions now are very vague. If one would ask for the most lasting impression, it would have to be the delicious oysters and apple pies served in the old wheelwright shop on a cold winter night at the time of the monthly meetings.

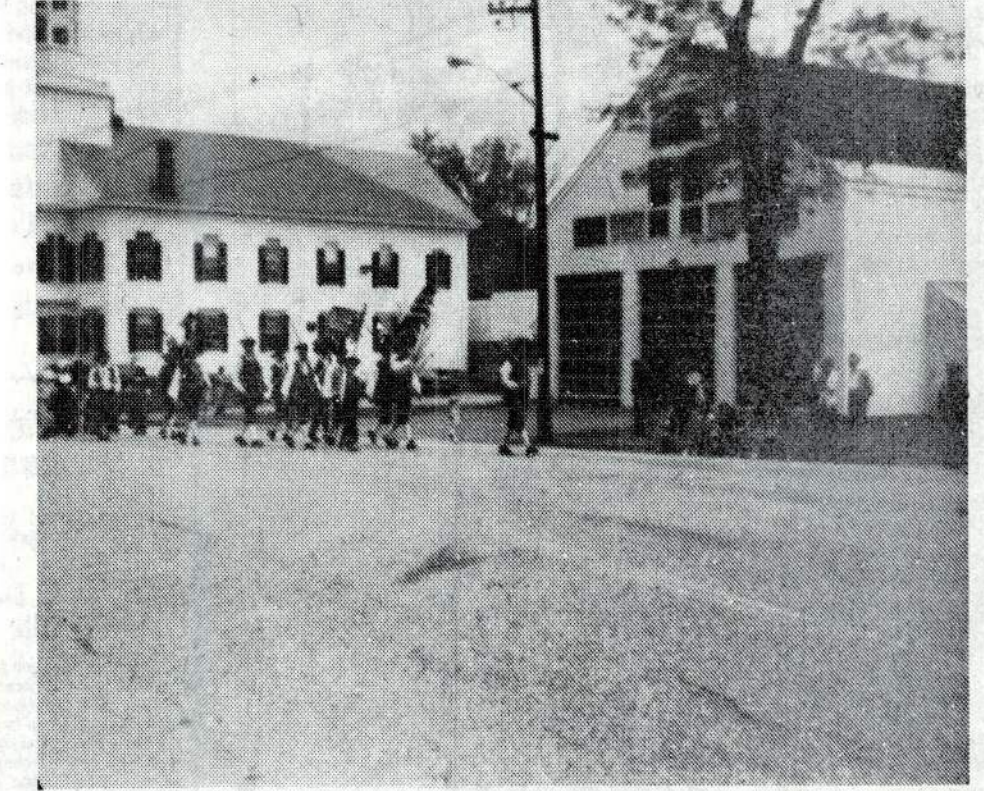
"The next would be the attendance at the Fireman's Ball in Chelmsford. That also was on a cold winter night. The snow was deep, and when I showed up at the farm on Howard Road with an open sleigh to pick up the farmer's daughter, he said, 'My daughter will freeze to death in that sleigh.' He proceeded to get her a fur coat, a heavy shawl, a hood and two large robes. The only time I saw the young lady was on the dance floor, but we had a good time. I kept warm because I wore the red fireman's shirt that was allotted to us. Brush fires were my only actual experience with fire, and our participation in the hose races gave us experience with the firehose, nozzles, and hydrants. The races consisted of laying two lengths of hose, coupling them to the hydrant, attaching the nozzle and turning on the water. The one getting the water to the nozzle in the fastest time won.

engineers reported buying two attachments for pulling fire wagons behind two auto trucks of Perley Wright. In 1916 it was decided to remodel the Academy for use as a station and here in December or 1917 the E.M. Abbot Hose Co. No. 1 moved into its new quarters in the Center.

In the report of the Fire Engineers for 1919 they stated that "it has now reached the point that to have an efficient department, the town should purchase a piece of motor apparatus." They also reported they ordered on trial one electric siren that could be blown from the telephone office or the captain's house. On July 16, 1920, the double-tank motor chemical, mounted on a Reo Chassis, was delivered to the town. There were two trailers, one loaded with hose, the other with 20 (2½ gal.) hand fire extinguishers, pails, can, shovels, etc., for fighting forest fires.

The siren was finally satisfactory, but the fire engineers did not recommend any more until the present siren was given further trial. The cottage beside the Center Station having been repaired and painted, was then occupied by Clarence Hildreth, who was to look after the motor apparatus.

Salary rates were to change in 1920. The Captain was to receive 65 cents per hour. Lieutenants, 60 cents per hour, regular firemen



The dedication of the new Fire and Police Station for the Town of Westford was held on July 30, 1974. Westford has come a long way since the days of homemade ambulances, fire buckets and horse-drawn fire pumpers. (From the WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS Series)

and any call men taking part, 55 cents per hour. Salary of Steward remained the same, \$25 per year. For use of a horse, 50 cents per hour, and now was added the use of an automobile, \$1.00 for attending an alarm.

In 1922 Alonzo H. Sutherland became Chief of the Fire Department replacing Edward M. Abbot, who had served so many years. In their report of 1924 the Fire Engineers stated: "As the horsedrawn hose wagons in Forge Village and Graniteville are practically useless, as there are no horses to haul them, it is recommended the town purchase a combination chemical and pumping engine to be placed in the fire house in Westford Center, and two, two-tank chemical equipments on Ford chassis, one to be placed in Forge Village and one in Graniteville Fire House. This would take care of all parts of the town for a number of years hence."

At the annual town meeting held February 15, 1926, the town voted \$10,800 to purchase one combination motor truck for Westford Center, one Chemical Ford truck for Graniteville and one chemical Ford truck for Forge Village, thus motorizing the three villages. Also, a sum of \$2,900 was appropriated for the Fire Department, putting them in an efficient operating condition, in keeping with the demands of the time. The active firemen who stayed with the three different companies for years are the ones who built the foundation for the wonderful protection we have today.

*Credit to Allister F. MacDougall for this article.

This is article No. 32 in the continuing WESTFORD RECOLLECTIONS — 250th Anniversary Series