

Westford History Ready For Sale

At Anniversary Fair, Sat. Nov. 15

By June W. Kennedy

WESTFORD — Right off the press and highlighting the Historical Centre of the 250th Anniversary Fair at First Parish Church on Saturday, November 15, is *A History of First Parish of Westford*, by George E. Downey. Informative, educational and entertaining it is! From the unique collection of old records, historical data and leather-bound volumes in the possession of First Parish, Mr. Downey has cleverly touched on the life and times which gave the setting for Westford religious life. Complete with vignettes, anecdotes, photos, a line drawing of the interior of the Meeting House pre 1847 sketched by the author, and a complete chronology, this 100 page booklet will be of general interest to townspeople. Also it will serve as a useful reference and resource for students, teachers and history buffs, as well as the present First Parish membership.

It has been 250 years since the first gathering of a religious society in the parish. For over a hundred years the Parish of Westford were one. People were called into the "Church-State of the Gospel". Religion on Sunday and politics on Monday was the rule at the Meeting House. Recalling that the Rev. Willard Hall, minister of the Westford Parish at the time of the American Revolution, was a Tory, and would not renounce his allegiance to the king, I quote the following excerpt from *A History of First Parish of Westford*: "The political views of Mr. Hall continued to cause great uneasiness among the people, and in September, 1775, the town voted not to raise any money for his support, and in November it voted to dismiss him, mainly because of his attitude toward the Colonial Government and the cause of civil liberty. This was an ordeal administered in more than one town, known as 'humbling the Tories' found to be supporting the Crown. The next year when the town was to prepare a list for the General Court of evidence of 'enemical conduct or Disposition toward this or

any of the United States of any of the inhabitants of this town', their list contained only one person--Rev. Willard Hall 'whose Conduct is voted to be enemical and dangerous to the State, by a great majority.'

"A notable moment in history would most certainly have been the arrival of the following Order of Council regarding the Declaration of Independence made July 4, 1776:

'In Council, July 17, 1776

'Ordered that the Declaration of Independence be printed and Copy sent to the ministers of each parish of every Denomination in this State, and that they severally be required to read the same to their Respective Congregations as soon as Divine service is ended in the afternoon of the first Lord's Day after they shall have received it, and after such publication thereof to Deliver the said Declaration to the Clerks of their several Towns or Districts who are hereby required to record the same in their Respective Town or District Books their to remain as a perpetual Memorial thereof.

'In the name and by order of the Council'

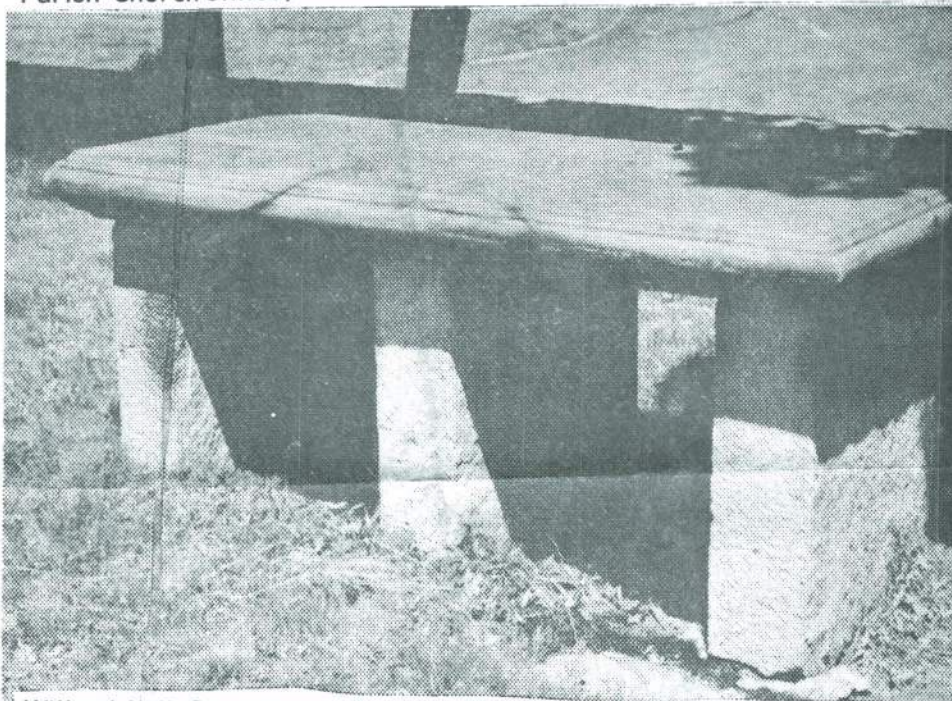
This document was duly recorded by Zaccheus Wright, town clerk, in the Westford Book.--(It may be seen today in the town hall, carefully penned in his hand). Whether it was read before the parish congregation, and if so, by whom is not known. Presumably Mr. Hall would not have been asked to do it, and if he had been, he probably would have refused!"

To illustrate the unusually perceptive leaders of our town during this same period, I quote another excerpt from Mr. Downey's book. It is one more expression of the progressive outlook of the people: "In 1779 a communique was sent from the General Court asking the town's voters to consider a set of 'Resolves' for a new constitution and form of government for the state. The next year a draft of a Declaration of Rights was submitted for the

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Meeting of the ladies' Missionary Society at the home of Mrs. Roudenbush, 1925. Many a missionary barrel was sent from this town by various women's societies. In 1847 some little "Pollyanna" was the recipient of the wardrobe of the departed little Sabbath School girl -- Lucy Day, eleven years old, given as her dying legacy to some dear missionary child. (Photo Courtesy of First Parish Church United)



Willard Hall Gravestone, Fairview Cemetery. *A History of First Parish of Westford* tells us that at the time of the American Revolution Mr. Hall was a Tory, remaining steadfast in his loyalty to the king. When the order came in 1776 requesting that the Declaration of Independence be read in every church, presumably Mr. Hall would not have been asked to do it, and if he had been, he probably would have refused! (Photo by Edna MacDougall)

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town's consideration. The first and second articles were accepted, but 'After long debating on the 3rd article of the Declaration of Rights, it was moved and seconded to see if the Town would accept the said 3rd article, and 21 voted in the affirmative; the negative being called by the moderator 68 voted in the negative.' The people 'Voted to object against the 3rd article of the Declaration of Rights, and that the following Reasons, viz: that it is asserted and taken for granted in the premises of said article--'that the Happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially Depends upon Piety, Religion and morality; & these cannot be generally diffused through a Community but by the Institution of the Public Worship of God and by publick Instruction in piety, Religion; &c.'--

When both antient History and modern authentic Information concur to evince that Flourishing civil states without the Legislature's Instituting the Public Worship or Publick instruction in piety and the Christian Religion; but rather, whenever such Institutions fully executed by the civil authority, have taken place among a people, instead of promoting essentially their Happiness and the good order and preservation of civil government, it has, we believe, invariably produced impiety, irreligion, Hypocrisy, and many sore and oppressive evils....

"We recommend the 3rd article thereof to be superceded by the following as a substitute, viz, All men have a natural and

inalienable right to worship Almighty God according to their own conscience and understanding, and no man ought or of right can be compelled to attend any Religious worship, or erect or support any place of Worship, or maintain any minister contrary to or against his own free will and consent..."

"This sincere judgement did not prevail at the Constitutional Convention. The new government took effect on October 25, 1780; Article Three passed as originally written; and it remained on the statute-books until 1833 when it was changed to embody the principle first set forth in town meeting in the old meeting house in Westford."

The exciting news is that this history is not about another New England town. It's about our town, Westford, Massachusetts! There was a story to be told and here it is! Pick up your copy at the Historical Centre at the Meeting House on November 15. It will also be for sale at all the 250th Anniversary Celebrations or may be purchased by calling the church office at 692-8350. Price for the booklet is nominal. Mail orders will be accepted in the church office for an additional fee per copy, for packaging and postage.

Tickets for the 250th Anniversary Dinner on Friday, November 21 and for the "Silks, Satins, and Sentiments" 19th Century Fashion Show scheduled for 2:00 p.m. Saturday, November 22, may also be found at the Anniversary Fair Historical Centre on November 15.

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