

Westford youth wide-eyed in Boston

1858 skyline impresses Harvard scholarship candidate

By June W. Kennedy
Staff Correspondent

In this second of a two-part series, the diary of young Albert Davis reveals his impressions as a student from Westford hopeful of winning a scholarship to Cambridge (now Harvard) College.

In the mid-1800s, Davis lived on Depot Street in the home now owned by Peter and Carol Shestok. His father was a victim of the Civil War; his mother supported the family by operating a millinery shop in the Depot Street home.

Albert Davis was a very bright student whose life was cut short by the tuberculosis he contracted from two sisters in Littleton whom he tutored.

"Wednesday, March 24, 1858: I arose with pleasant thoughts of the day, took breakfast and then Uncle harnessed the horse to carry me to Bedford about two miles. The sun shone down upon us in all his splendor and pleasant was the ride.

"At B. took the stage and went to Lexington. As we rode along I was reminded of the lumbering coach and the railroad car. It was a rough ride in

the old stage and roughness of the roads jolted us about in a severe manner.

"At Lexington we took the cars and rode to the 'metropolis.' The view of a swift passage is not very pleasing and does not give interest. Arrived in Boston at 10:30 a.m., and not being acquainted with the wonderful city, I inquired the way to the Lowell Depot and found Mr. Long waiting to see me.

"He looked trim and happy. We passed out [of the depot] and went through the streets, so narrow to my eye and with such high houses, and wended to the State House where my attendance was demanded in order to obtain a scholarship [to Harvard].

"I was pleased with the sights about me and with that noble building where our laws are made. We went to the library and waited, until I should be wanted, in the State Library filled with so many books. We sat down and took our comfort in perusing books.

"About 1 p.m. one of the Board came into the hall and named those who obtained scholarships from their own section. There are beside three

at-large for which there are seven applicants, and, as I'm not in the section, I'm one of the seven. Thus, there is 3/7ths of a chance. We seven were requested to be present again at 2 p.m.

"Now being free we went to a saloon and, having been refreshed, walked back, enjoyed a beautiful walk over to the Common, and retired to the State Library. There we had to wait for examination to take place and, Mr. Long with me, we waited and patience began to fail.

"At last through Mr. Long's influence I only was examined. Oh! what an examination. The gentlemen of Cambridge College called me to a table and asked me what I had read...I read and translated a few sentences of Greek and Latin and that was all.

"I felt at home and enjoyed the pleasant company of those 'big boys' very much. They said that I did very well and told Mr. Long that he might encourage me considerable.

"Now we went out and took a horse car for Cambridge College. Oh, how pleasant and

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cheerful and what a nice ride. At last we arrived at the Square and, leaving the car, went through the college grounds, and he pointed out the buildings where young men cherish a love of learning and roguery.

"It seemed very pleasant and I thought of the happy days when I should be at this place. We crossed the grounds and came to Geo Abbot's room in a large building. We entered but no one was there. [George Abbot was a Westford student.]

"Mr. Long sat down with me a few moments to wait for George, and I liked this cozy room in which all the comforts of life were displayed, but he not coming, Mr. Long wishing to go back, I walked out with him, bid good-bye, and went back to see if George had come. I stayed in his room two hours until 7 p.m. and busied myself with reading.

"When he came, we, not having had supper, went out to an eating house and returned to his room. George sits up late and I sat up with him until 12:30 and I felt sleepy. But he pleased me once in a while with his proofs of spiritualism

which I had no spunk to refute, though I brought-up some arguments. Thus this day closes.

"Thursday, March 25, 1858: George's patent 'alarm' woke me this morning at six, and while he was gone to 'prayers,' I went to breakfast and then stayed with him until 9, when we parted with his promise to be in Boston at 1 p.m.

"I stopped at the Reading Room to glean the news and then walked to Boston, full three miles. Had an excellent view of Boston, towering up above the surrounding towns, and then the distant spires and hills rose up, adding new beauty to the scene, but Boston was beautiful and the houses rose up gradually towards the State House which crowned the whole.

"Foot-sore and with symptoms of a headache, I went to the State House and enjoyed the cool air of its spacious rooms. Went into the various rooms and also to the Senators' and Representatives' apartments where I listened to noisy hum of men talking their ease.

"There sat the Senators talking with one another, reading, or sitting in very comfortable seats and seeming to take little interest in the affairs of State. It reminded of the Grecian and Roman Senate and I thought there might be a great contrast.

"In the afternoon George came over and we went about the House, then went to the Depot where we arrived at 2 p.m. and the cars start at 2:30 p.m. George wanted me to stay, and I was most of a mind to, but concluded to go.... Thanked him for my reception and went on.

"As we were going up, a large mill was on fire near the railroad which created some excitement. Got to Lowell one-quarter to 4, and it being an hour before the cars start for Westford, I strolled about the streets, but how different from Boston. It seemed very quiet and not many were seen in the streets.

"Soon we came to Westford and home I walked. Ah, wish now that I had stayed until Saturday and had a good time with the Bostonians. In the evening, read the news and told or rather answered the many questions about my visit to Boston. Thus I have filled so many pages with scribbles about a Boston visit and how interesting it must be."

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections," a series of historical vignettes and photos.