

Watering troughs: refreshing pauses

By George Adams Parkhurst
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The Jan. 12 story in the *Independent*, "Keeping history on solid ground," (page 3) raises an interesting question. A schoolboy or girl in 1995 might ask, "What's a watering trough?"

To answer this, we have to go back many years to what has become known as the "horse and buggy days." In the 19th century, before the advent of gasoline powered automobiles and trucks, horse-drawn vehicles were the only means of local transportation for both people and merchandise.

It is understandable that the horses needed a drink of water from time to time. Of course ponds and running brooks were excellent sources, but these were not always available. Within recent memory, there was a short cart path off of Billerica road, just beyond the intersection with Golden Cove Road, where old Dobbin could be driven down to the shallow brook for a drink.

Communities installed one or more horse troughs to meet this need. Chelmsford had at least five of these gargantuan "tea cups," each hollowed out of a huge granite block. The first one (the one that was recently relocated in Town Center) stood at the upper end of the little park in Central Square. It had been presented to the town by a generous citizen and bore the inscription, Presented by Mr. N. M. Thresher - 1880.

There must have been a large number of imbibing equines, because a second watering trough was installed in Central Square on Aug. 19, 1891 in the point at the foot of the little park. It was a gift to the town from Louis A. Young, who lived on High street.

Other granite troughs were installed by the town in South Chelmsford and West Chelmsford in 1900 and in North Chelmsford in 1903. The trough in South Chelmsford was located in the point at the end of the Common, opposite

Liberty Hall but, in order to accommodate the widening of the street several years ago, it was moved across Acton road where it stands today. The year of its original installation, 1900, is chiseled into the granite.

Each of these troughs had a wooden pump beside it to furnish a supply of water. There was no municipal water supply system in Chelmsford at that time. Turn-of-the-century picture postcards show the L.A. Young trough and the one in South Chelmsford, each with its pump.

Some time after the installation of water mains by the Chelmsford Water District in 1914, town water was piped to the original "horse trough" at the head of the park in Central Square, eliminating the need for the pump. A bubbler with a white porcelain bowl was added to assuage the thirst of human animals.

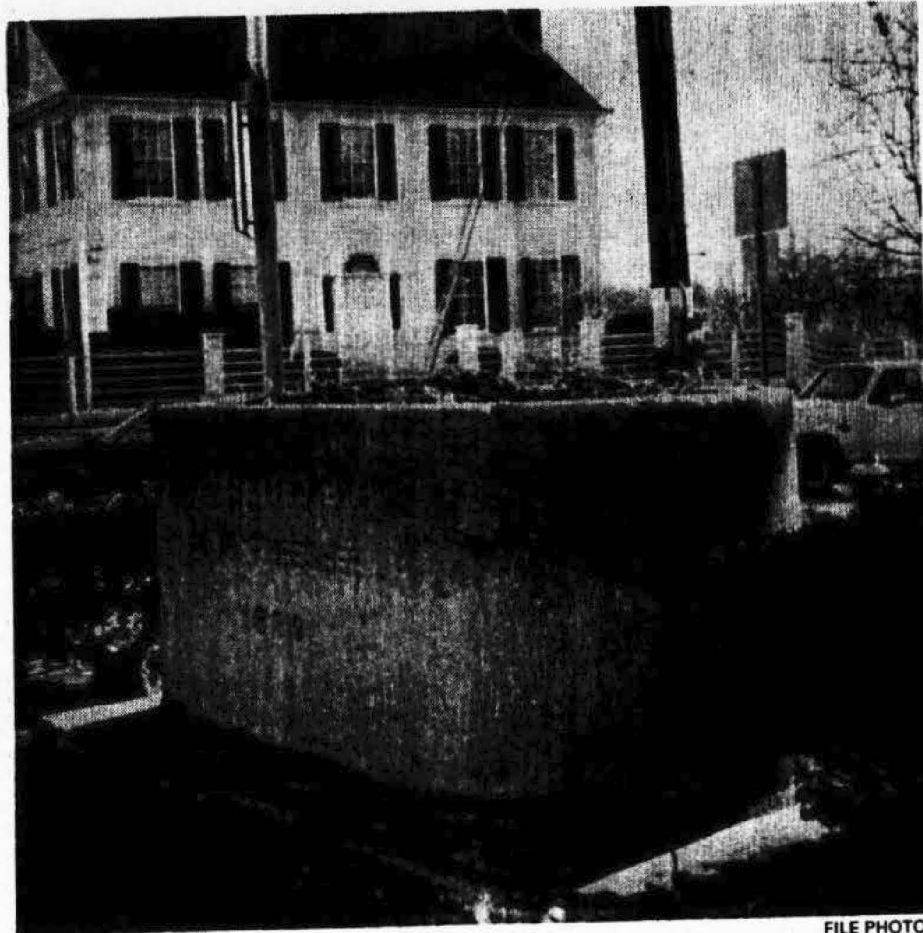
I remember that the municipal drinking fountain was a favorite stopping point for school children on their way to and from the yellow schoolhouse on North road, where the Center Fire Station stands today. While a drink of cold water was enjoyable, it was even more fun to turn on the water and deflect the stream toward the face of a friend.

It was necessary for the water to be shut off, of course, to prevent freezing during the winter months. The water supply to the trough was disconnected several years ago.

The question might well be asked, "What is the use of the watering trough today?" The answer: Like all the other monuments and historical markers in town, it serves as reminder of a very important period in the development of our town, a time when life moved at a much more leisurely pace, before the arrival of fast food restaurants, supermarkets and interstate highways, a part of the foundation on which life in Chelmsford as we know it has been built.

George Adams Parkhurst is a well-known Chelmsford historian and author.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 1995



FILE PHOTO

The 1880 watering trough faces the McHugh law offices in Town Center and is shown here across from the Fiske House.