

# The need that prompted Westford

AUG. 14, 1986

Towns have been incorporated for many different reasons, but the location of an existing church is not the usual one. By 1702 the original Chelmsford Meeting House (located on the site of the First Parish Church) had fallen into disrepair requiring extensive carpentry "both wtout (sic) Side to keep out rain and snow ..."

Several families had settled in the western part of Chelmsford — in what is now Westford — and they asked that a new church be built nearer the geographical center of the town on Chestnut Hill. This would have been at what is now Old Westford Road at the Chelmsford-Westford line.

It is understandable that they found it to be a hardship to have to travel up to six miles at least once a week, summer and winter, to worship and attend meetings. The older ones might have traveled on horseback. The more hardy ones, no doubt, walked through the fields and along wooded paths. However, the voters did not accede to the wishes of their western brethren and in 1710 voted to build a new meeting house "where the old Meeting House stands."

In 1713 there began a long struggle for the separation of the western part of Chelmsford into a precinct or parish. The Town Meeting on March 2, 1713 "Voted that the town doth not esteme those petitioners that did

petition to be a separate precinct capable at present."

'Capable' meant they had to demonstrate

---

## The way it was

By George A.  
Parkhurst



---

that they could meet the law of the Massachusetts Bay Province, which stated that towns must maintain a meeting house, supply a minister, and provide a parsonage. Also, the inhabitants would be taxed for the support of them.

In the meantime, the town of Littleton was incorporated, and several families in the southwest part of the town were given the privilege, by act of the Legislature, of uniting with Littleton for parish convenience. These families were exempted from paying toward the support of the minister in Chelmsford "so long as they pay to the minister at Littleton."

After failing to get any satisfaction, the

plaintiffs took their complaints "to the General Court (1724), who granted them leave to be erected into a separate religious society by the name of the West Precinct of Chelmsford." The new church was started within a few months but was not finished for several years. It stood near where the present white church stands across Main Street from the Westford Common.

It might be assumed that the people would be satisfied, but such was not the case. In December, 1728, a petition was delivered to the General Court asking that the West Precinct of Chelmsford become a separate township. An appropriate law was enacted and the Town of Westford came into being in 1729.

Before the separation, Chelmsford had a land area of 39,038 acres. The division was made from north to south, right down the middle, giving Westford 19,519 acres and retaining an equal area for the new Chelmsford. The next year Westford acquired from Groton a small parcel of land around Forge Village. Today, Westford has the largest land area of any town in middlesex County while Chelmsford has shrunk in size, giving land to Westford and later to Lowell.

*George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.*