

# 325 YEARS THEN

By GEORGE PARKHURST

As early as 1642 the (Massachusetts) General Court had recognized the desirability of a literate citizenry when they passed an act requiring the selectmen to "have a vigilant eye over their brethren and neighbors to see, first, that none of them shall suffer so much barbarism in any of their families as not to endeavor to teach, by themselves or others, their children and apprentices so much learning as may enable them perfectly to read the English tongue." The same act also required parents to "give religious instruction to their children and apprentices."

Five years later, a free school was made compulsory. Towns with fifty families were required to appoint a teacher. If there were one hundred families, they had to have a grammar school of such grade that youth "may be fitted for the University", meaning Harvard. However, for many years the town had relied on Schooldames, who conducted classes in their homes, and on itinerant Schoolmasters. As a result, fines for non-compliance had been levied against the Town on several occasions. The earliest record of a teacher was in 1696 when the selectmen appointed Samuel Fletcher to be a "scolle master".

It was in 1718 that Chelmsford's first schoolhouse was built. The Town granted land for that purpose at "the most easterly corner of the burying Place." This is the same piece of land on which the red brick (1802) schoolhouse stands today. This first school building cost approximately \$100 which was raised, not by Town appropriation, but through the generosity of 21 concerned citizens.

The second schoolhouse in Chelmsford



Students at the "Yellow Schoolhouse", Circa 1887. (Property of George Parkhurst)

was built within a year or two to accommodate families in the north part of town. Although it has not been confirmed, the "North Schoolhouse" may be part of the present house at 19 Parkhurst Road. In 1800 Chelmsford had grown from a frontier settlement to a town of 1300 souls and the taxpayers supported twelve schools at an expense of \$600.

nearly 50 years and it must have served well for among its graduates were many who went on to fame and fortune. In 1851 the "new" wooden Center School was completed on the site of the present Central Fire Station on North Road and was used until 1926 when the McFarlin School on Wilson Street was opened. Miss Susan S. McFarlin was a teacher and principal in this school for many years until it closed upon the completion of the brick building that was to bear her name.

The Center Common was for over 200 years the educational center of the town. In 1825 a group of Chelmsford citizens felt the need for more advanced studies than were offered by the existing public schools so they established the Chelmsford Classical School and erected a school building where the present Central Baptist parsonage now stands on Academy Street. The trustees were fortunate in securing the services of a divinity student at Harvard College, Ralph Waldo Emerson, as the first instructor. The school continued for only a few years.

The Chelmsford Academy, another private school, opened in the former Classical School building on August 29, 1850. Because of the Civil War, the trustees were unable to attract a sufficient number of students or financial support and the Academy closed its doors in 1862.

Academy Street is one of the shortest streets in Chelmsford, yet it has had three private institutions of learning on it. In addition to the two mentioned above, there was the School for the Deaf. This was the first school in America to successfully teach lip-reading and speech to deaf children. Among the pupils at the Chelmsford School was Mabel Hubbard who later became Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell.

No record of what happened to the original (1718) schoolhouse has been found but, after more than four score years, it was replaced in 1802 by the existing brick building in Forefather's Burying Ground at a cost of \$500. This building served as the seat of learning for School District No. 1 for