

Park yourself, and look back to 1886

FEB. 27, 1986

By George A. Parkhurst

Ample parking spaces. This is one of the things the Planning Board checks before approving a new commercial or industrial complex.

A century ago, this was not a consideration. Nor, as a matter of fact, was a local Planning Board. It was necessary only for the owner of the general store to install two or three hitching posts along side of his emporium for the convenience of his customers.

Churches and public buildings presented a different problem. Residents might leave their horses for long periods of time while the owners attended religious services or town meeting, or a dance.

The animals needed some type of protection against the vagaries of New England weather. To meet this need, horse sheds were constructed.

A typical example was the building located along the edge of Forefather's Burying Ground in back of the First Parish Church.

These sheds remained until 1917, when the proliferation of automobiles obviated their necessity.

A public way (since it had no name, it could hardly be called a street) was maintained along the front of the sheds, passing behind the church and connecting Littleton Road with Westford Street, thus permitting entry from either direction.

There was also a public way that passed a

The way it was



few feet from the front steps of the church, so that churchgoers could leave their carriages without stepping into the mud. This public way was discontinued by a vote of town meeting in 1920.

Several of the other churches in town also had horse sheds.

The First Parish's sheds were removed to the farm of John Wilson at 39 Chelmsford St. in 1917 and stood approximately where the new CVS store is today. Wilson used them as a storage place for his farm equipment.

These horse sheds, which had been in disrepair for some time, collapsed under a heavy snow load and were reduced to rubble in 1972.

In most cases, the animals were protected from the elements in outside buildings but, apparently, there was a movement afoot in 1880 to stable them in the basement of the new town hall on North Road, which was just then nearing completion.

The warrant for the annual Town Meeting that year included an article which read: "At the request of Charles F. Burnham and

others, to see if the town will vote to lay a cement floor in the cellar of the new town hall, and to erect therein horse stalls for the free use of the people of the town, or act in relation thereto."

The idea was not received by the voters with unbounded enthusiasm as "it was voted to refer the matter to a committee of three to be appointed by the moderator — said committee to report at some future meeting."

It appears that the matter never received an affirmative vote because this writer remembers that the basement had a sand floor and was unfinished until the 1937-38 renovations, except for the area under the front hall.

Toilet rooms and coat rooms were constructed there and the present stairs to the lower level were installed in 1888. Only the heating plant and later a pistol range for the Police Department occupied the unfinished area.

In later years, the horse sheds behind Town Hall were converted by the Highway Department for the storage of their heavy equipment and a small office for the superintendent. As part of the 1937-38 modernization, the Highway Department, along with a garage for the police car, were added to the rear of the building.

Times have changed!

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

MARCH 10, 1986