

# A town, once divided, now united

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The motto of the United States, "e pluribus unum" — 'one out of many,' might well apply to our town, too.

If you moved to Chelmsford within the past 30 years, you probably are not particularly concerned that your house is in South Chelmsford or the Center section or one of the other areas. You consider yourself a resident of Chelmsford, period. This would not have been the case years ago. Even as late as World War II, our town was more like a collection of villages rather than a homogeneous municipality.

There were five distinct villages, the Center, North, West, East, and South. The physical separations were clear and obvious. The roads were not lined continuously with houses as they are today but as you travelled from the residential area of one village you'd pass through a wooded area, by open fields, or one or two isolated farms before coming to the concentration of homes that made up the next village.

Not only were the villages separated but so were the loyalties of the inhabitants. You were a resident of North Chelmsford or of South Chelmsford and proud of it. Until about World War I, police protection was provided by constables — a unified police department was yet to be organized. If the constable from the Center section was chasing a criminal north on North Road, he would do well to stop at Old Westford Road

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## The way It was

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(the precinct boundary) because the constable from North Chelmsford might be more interested in maintaining the integrity of his territory than in catching the thief. Although this is a hypothetical case, it illustrates the strong sectionalism.

Literally, the best way for residents of the Center to ensure passage of a Town Meeting article to provide an improvement for their area was to agree to support an article to benefit the North section. Such trades were not uncommon.

Two other examples will serve to demonstrate the rampant sectionalism. In 1852 the Town built the "Town House" (now known as the North Town Hall) near the center of North Chelmsford although the official Town Hall was in the Center, in the basement of the First Parish Church. For a number of years, the annual Town Meeting was held alternately in the Town Hall in the Center and the Town House at North but this practice was discontinued in 1885.

For several years prior to 1917, Chelmsford had two high schools, one at North Chelmsford and one at the Center. These were combined with the opening of the brick school on Billerica Road (now the Town Building) in 1917.

No mention has been made of the Westlands section (Precinct 6 before the present precinct lines were drawn). Developed mainly in the 1920s, the Westlands had no village center but did have a school and an active Westlands Improvement Association. Many of those who settled in this area came over the town line from Lowell — in some cases to benefit from a lower tax rate. However, a number of these people continued to have interests in the city and it was some time before they became completely assimilated into the Chelmsford population.

A modicum of unification was achieved in 1921 with the organization of a unified fire department under a Board of Fire Engineers representing several areas. Each village, or precinct, had its own Fire District with a fire company under the operating direction of a District Chief who reported to the Board of Engineers. This system continued in effect until 1954 when Allan Kidder was named permanent Chief and the Board of Engineers was eliminated.

Now it is difficult to distinguish one of the villages from the others.

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