

Bicentennial previewed with look back at WA

Westford Academy is among the state's first secondary schools; founded in 1792

By George Parkhurst
Contributing Writer

Westford Academy is preparing to celebrate its 200th anniversary. This is the first in a series of articles on the history of the school, founded in 1792.

Westford has its Westford Academy. Other towns in the area have their high schools. Why is Westford different?

To find the answer to this question, one must go back two centuries to the 1790s when there were very few secondary schools in Massachusetts. Governor Dummer Academy at Newbury and Phillips Academy at Andover were among those already in existence.

A group of Westford gentlemen met in 1792 and agreed "to form themselves into a society by the name and Institution of Westford Academy" for the education of both young ladies and young gentlemen.

John Abbot, Abel Boynton and Zaccheus Wright were the first of the 54 subscribers to the fund established for the school. The town purchased 20 shares at six pounds each. Col. Zaccheus Wright, a soldier in the Revolutionary War, Westford's Representative in the state legislature and one of the town's prominent citizens, spearheaded the project and made the largest donation, 300 pounds in real estate.

It was proposed that an Academy building be erected in the center of town near the meeting house. A parcel of land for the original building

was purchased from Levi Parker in 1793. It was located on what today is Boston Road at the head of the Common near the beginning of Hildreth Street. (The site is now marked by a granite slab that was formerly a step to the door of the original school.)

On Sept. 28, 1793, the Academy was incorporated by a vote of the legislature.

The first preceptor of the Academy was Mr. Levi Hedge, a graduate of Harvard College. He was hired in 1792. Of the first 25 teachers at the Academy, 1792 to 1850, all but four were Harvard graduates.

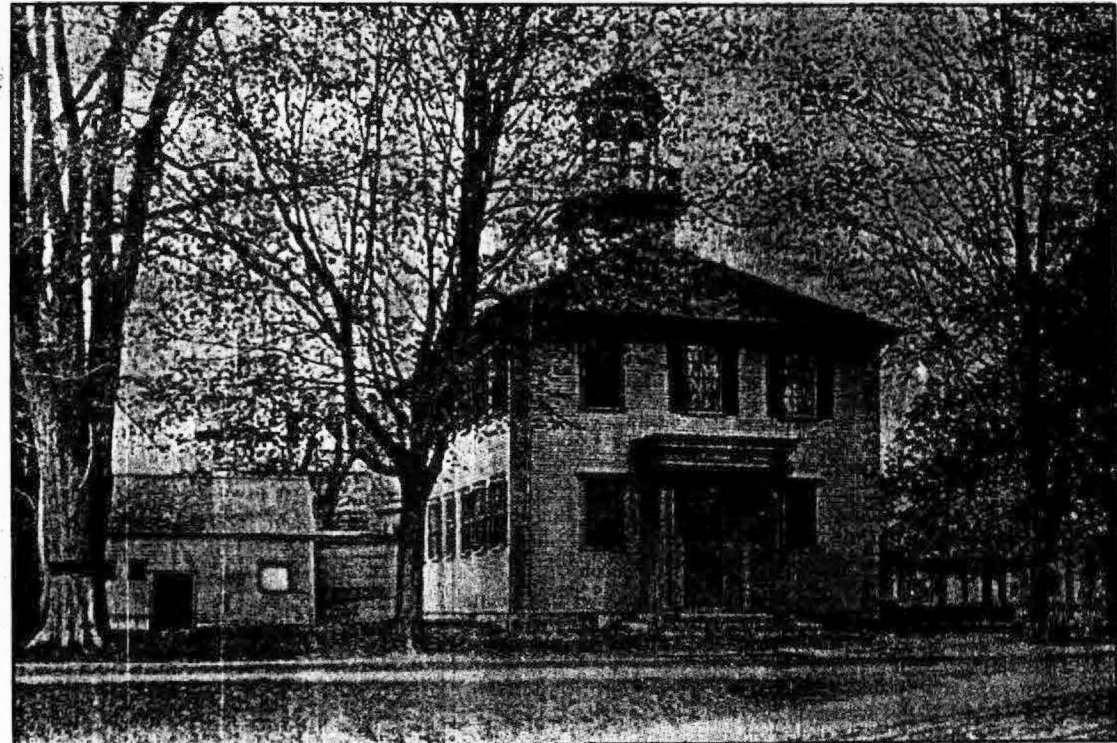
With the arrival of Mr. Hedge, classes began, possibly in the meeting house since the Academy building, (now the Westford Museum), was not completed until the spring or summer of 1793.

Word of the establishment of a secondary school in Westford soon spread to neighboring communities, attracting students from several towns at the very beginning.

Of the 32 members of the first class, Groton, Chelmsford, Townsend and Concord provided one each. There were two students from Lexington, two from Stow and two from Carlisle, while three were residents of Billerica. Five Westford girls and 14 local boys completed the roster.

Thus was our venerable Westford Academy launched 200 years ago.

George Parkhurst is an author, historian and Chelmsford native who serves on the Academy Bicentennial Committee. He is married to Barbara Hildreth Parkhurst, a Westford Academy graduate and Academy trustee.



The original Westford Academy was erected on this site facing the Common. Now serving as the town museum, the building has been moved across the street to Boston Road. The front step, engraved at the time of the Academy's 150th anniversary in 1942, now marks the original site.



CHELMSFORD — The First Parish of Chelmsford marked the 150th anniversary of its Meeting House with a combination celebration and fund-raising event on Saturday.

In 1655, the Rev. John Fiske moved to Chelmsford to establish the First Parish. As the first and, for many years, the only church in Chelmsford, its history is inextricably connected with that of the town. Town government and parish affairs co-habited in the meeting house for over two centuries.

When the first meeting house was built in the 1660s, the people were seated according to age, rank, and estate by a dignified committee of citizens. By 1712, when the second meeting house was erected, privately-owned pews began to supersede benches.

Dedication of this fourth meeting house on the present site on Central Square was held in April 1843 after the third building was destroyed by fire and rebuilt at a total cost to the church society of \$4002.40. The church used the upstairs of the meeting house, while the basement of the building was used as the Chelmsford Town Hall until 1879 when a separate town hall was built across the street. The basement was paid for by the town at an additional cost of \$1426.06.

Because of its historical significance, the church building retains the wooden clapboard siding which now needs a costly repainting. Proceeds of the June 12 celebration will help the church raise money for cost of labor and expenses.

Seventy-five gallons of paint has been donated by Hancock Paint and Varnish Co. of Norwell; American Steeple, Tower and Chimney of Salem; has donated \$1,500 for paint supplies and \$3,300 toward painting for the Sesquicentennial.