

## Indians, incorporation, celebration

By GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST

Birthdays are always occasions for celebrating and reminiscing, especially when they mark a particularly significant anniversary. This year the residents of Chelmsford will be celebrating such an anniversary—the 325th birthday of our town.

It was on May 29, 1655, only 35 years after the Pilgrims had landed at Plymouth, that the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a bill incorporating the new Town of Chelmsford, along with our sister towns of Billerica and Groton. Two years earlier this same General Court had authorized a group of hardy, adventurous souls from Concord and Woburn to explore the land located between the Concord and Merrimac rivers — an area beyond the existing frontier, occupied only by a few members of the Pawtucket Indian tribe — with a view to establishing an English settlement. They found a combination of rich meadow land and tree-covered slopes with ample water supplies, and began building homes and cultivating the soil. Others joined these pioneers and by 1654 the number of settlers had grown to approximately 20 families, "a number of persons competent for the maintenance of religious ordinances," so a request was sent to the Court for incorporation as a town.

At the same time, Rev. John Elliot of Roxbury, as agent and trustee for the Indians, asked the Court to also set aside an area of land for an Indian plantation in this vicinity. Both partitions were granted. However, within a few years, the Indian population had decreased substantially and, having little use for the land, they sold it to individuals in Chelmsford. Prior to the arrival of the English, a corn field had been cultivated by the Indians on Robin's Hill which they were allowed to keep until such time as the new settlers "shall sufficiently break up full so much land for the Indians in such place as they shall appoint" in the Indian plantation. Incidentally the hill got its name from the Robin family, the Indians who owned it.

Chelmsford covered an area that was much larger in the beginning than it does today. It included what is now Westford (until 1729), downtown Lowell (until 1826), Middlesex Village (until 1874), part of Tyngsboro and a small corner of Carlisle and Littleton.

In anticipation of self-government, the first "Town Meeting" was held at the home of William Fletcher on what is now Crosby Lane. The date was recorded as "the: 22nd: the: 9th month: 1654." This was November 22, 1654 since the year began on March 25th according to the calendar in use at that time, March being considered the first month. Today a granite monument marks the approximate site.

The second Town Meeting, held on March 24, 1655, set the date for the annual Town Meeting, named the officers to be chosen and established penalties for those who might neglect their political duties — "for the first hour's non-appearance twelve pence and a Whole Days Absence two shillings." There probably was no problem in attracting a quorum.

From a frontier settlement of 15-20 families in the mid 17th century, Chelmsford grew slowly but steadily to become an established farming, manufacturing, and residential community during the next 200 years.

By 1760 the population had reached 1000 and a century later it was up to 2500. Growth continued at a moderate pace until after World War II. While there were only 6500 people here in 1930, this figure jumped to just under 10,000 in 1950 and continued to increase at a rate of approximately 10,000 per decade.

As a result of the population explosion of the past 35 years, Chelmsford has changed drastically. Prior to World War II, the town consisted of five separate villages: North, South, East, and West Chelmsford, and Chelmsford Center, including the Westlands with expanses of open farm land between them. The Fire Department of the 1920's and 1930's typified this lack of unity. Each village was designated as a separate fire district and each had its own fire engine manned by a company of "call fire fighters" commanded by a District Chief and operated under the Board of Fire Engineers who provided the only unifying influence.

Nineteen eighty is not only the 325th anniversary of the incorporation of our town; it is also the 325th birthday of the "Church of Christ in Chelmsford," as it was called in the early days.

The first public matter to be taken care of once the settlers had established their homes was to provide for the religious needs of the community. They must have a minister and a church so a committee was dispatched to Wenham, where a small church had been gathered about ten years earlier, and asked their minister, Rev. John Fiske, to remove to Chelmsford with members of his flock. Details were resolved and, on November 13, 1655, Mr. Fiske and seven of his brethren joined with those already here to organize the church which has continued to the present. We know it today as the First Parish Church.

A meetinghouse was erected on the site of the present Unitarian church but, unfortunately, we have no description of the building. (The early Puritan colonists used the term "meetinghouse" instead of "church" which they associated with the Church of England). The present white Greek revival structure with the town clock in the steeple is the fourth meetinghouse to occupy this site.

In those days, the meetinghouse was the social as well as religious center. The minister was an important man who was looked

up to with great respect. His presence was requested at all important occasions. Attendance at public worship was compulsory. All households were taxed for the support of the church and a new minister could not be settled without a vote of Town Meeting. This arrangement continued until 1831 when disestablishment finally took place.

The third meetinghouse (built in 1792), which had, of course, served also as the "town hall", was destroyed by fire in 1842 so the Town built the brick basement of the present edifice as the town hall while the church was located of the floor above. After the new Town Hall was erected across the street in 1880, the Town sold the church basement to the First Parish.

The present writer is not aware of the extent of any official commemorations of the town's incorporation before 1905 when the quarter millennial anniversary was observed with a four day celebration beginning on Sunday, May 28th. A varied program, with events of interest to all age groups, was successfully carried out.

Fifty years later, in 1955, as many remember, Chelmsford commemorated its tercentenary with the most extensive celebration the town has ever seen. Beginning with a kick-off dinner, Wednesday evening, June 8th, held in a large tent erected for the occasion on the First Parish parking lot where the McFarlin Chapel has since been built, a program of activities continued daily through the following Sunday. Probably the high point was the mammoth parade on Saturday which, along with many of the other events, was recorded on 16 mm. film for posterity.

The final scheduled event was a Tercentenary choral concert with a choir of 100 voices on Sunday evening, following which the town could be expected to return to its normal routine. However, almost as a parting salute, Chelmsford Center was visited by a brief but intense electrical storm just before daybreak the following morning. Lightning struck the steeple of the First Parish Church with explosive force, stripping it down to a single mast. Boards that had sheathed the steeple for nearly a hundred years were scattered about the area with some being driven like spears into the ground on the Fiske House lawn. Fortunately no fire resulted.

We can do without such a climax to any celebration this year.

The citizens of Chelmsford can be proud to be a part of this flourishing community that is alive and well in spite of its advanced age of three and a quarter centuries. May it continue for many more.

Happy Birthday, Chelmsford!