

# Central Square traffic problems date back more than 100 years

BY GEORGE ADAMS PARKHURST  
INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

The present traffic study for Central Square brings to mind a few of the square's previous problems and solutions.

Quite possibly the first impediment to travel through the center of town dates back to the beginning of the 19th Century when a barn blocked one of the streets. History tells us that the Fiske house at No. 1 Billerica Road was the culprit. A barn once stood where the road now runs between the Fiske lot and the little park and remained there for some time after the road was laid out in 1829, so that it was necessary to drive around or through the barn when heading to Lowell from Central Square. Fortunately, this is one problem with which the present committee doesn't have to contend.

Another 19th Century traffic problem we no longer have was caused by sheep and cows. It was customary to move herds of sheep and cattle to summer pasture and some of these passed through the center of town on their way to such distant points as Peterborough or Hancock, N.H. We can appreciate the frustration of a motorist following a slow moving column of sheep through Central Square. However, this problem solved itself when farmers stopped

moving large herds of animals over public roads.

It is quite possible that many of our residents, including some of the committee members, don't remember when the street up the hill in front of Jack's Diner had two-way traffic. In the 1930's, it was recognized that having five streets come together at one point was a bit too much. Littleton Road, Westford Street, North Road, the street across the head of Central Square and the present one-way street all converged in Liberty Square in front of the First Parish Church.

As a solution (at least a partial solution), travel was limited to one way, going down the hill, thus reducing the problem by one fifth. Immediately another unforeseen problem arose. Motorists who had become used to going up the hill on their way to Nashua and the north (there was no Route 3 super highway then; all northbound traffic passed through Central Square and Vinal Square), as well as local drivers who continued to travel as they had in the past, unintentionally ignored the "one way - do not enter sign."

The local police began an educational program that, in time, paid off. An officer would be stationed at the top of the hill and would stop "wrong-way" drivers and make them back down the hill and go around the little common.

Even before the one-way street was established, the local police were kept busy slowing down drivers who barreled up the hill oblivious to the possibility that others might be passing through the five-street intersection. It was very common to see a traffic policeman motioning a motorist to slow down.

The committee is to be congratulated for its use of the term "Liberty Square" (according to the newspaper) to define the area in front of the First Parish church. Newspaper reports in the 19th Century referred to this street intersection as "Liberty Square" — the town flag pole located here was known as the liberty pole when it was first erected. However, when the committee to officially name the streets and squares in town reported to the 1926 Annual Town Meeting, the center of South Chelmsford was designated as "Liberty Square" and the five-street intersection was included as part of Central Square. Since the area around the South Common has been renamed in memory of Walter B. Belleville, Jr., who was killed in World War II, it is reasonable to revert to the use of the name "Liberty Square" in the Center even though it doesn't have the official sanction of Town Meeting.

*George Parkhurst is a local historian and former Chelmsford resident.*