

Old-time state aid had northern exposure

Instead of cash, Academy given Maine parcel

By George Parkhurst
Staff Contributor

This is the second in a series of articles on the history of Westford Academy as it celebrates the 200th anniversary of its founding.

We hear much today about state aid to education. This is not a new idea. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts encouraged and supported the development of secondary schools nearly two centuries ago.

Appreciative of the value of secondary school education, the legislature made grants to the few existing academies, including Westford Academy. These grants were not in cash but rather parcels of uncleared land in northern Maine.

It must be remembered that, at that time, what we know today as the State of Maine was part of Massachusetts, known as the District of Maine.

Westford Academy was the recipient of the southern half of an uninhabited township along the New Brunswick border just south of the present-day town of Houlton. The northern half of this township was given to what is now Lawrence Academy, but was then called Groton Academy. The grant contained 11,520 acres. It is doubtful that anyone from Westford made the long journey to see what they owned.

The Academy Trustees wisely decided that they wouldn't be opening a school in Maine and that the best thing to do was to sell the grant and put the money to good use at the Westford school. They sold

it a few years later for \$6,745.

History tells us, however, that the committee repented, "believing that justice and the interest of the institution required an abatement of the price of said land;" they cancelled the first contract and sold the land to John Hodgdon and Nathaniel Ingersoll for \$5,810 or about 50 cents per acre.

Although this Mr. Hodgdon never became a resident, his son, John, Jr. did settle there and gave the future town its name.

Three sources of water power attracted settlers and, in 1832, the Westford and Groton grants were combined and incorporated as the Town of Hodgdon.

The Hodgdon high school boys and girls basketball teams came down and played their counterparts at both Groton and Westford in 1976 and they have been invited to come south again and take part in the Westford Academy Bicentennial celebration in October.

The name Westford is no stranger to the inhabitants of Hodgdon. The most prominent natural feature in the town is Westford Hill, reached, of course, by Westford Hill Road.

In spite of the reduction in state aid, it is doubtful that today's Academy administration would settle for a parcel of land at the Canadian border.

George Parkhurst is a 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 Westford Academy Class of 1897, the last to graduate from the original building, poses for a commencement photo on the school's front steps with Principal William E. Frost (back row, third from left).