

Westford Eagle      OCT 8, 1987

# Academy keeps ties with Chelmsford

By George Parkhurst

**R**ecognizing the value of education, a group of public spirited citizens of the neighboring town of Westford pledged donations of money to establish what is believed to be the third oldest private academy in Massachusetts. That was in 1792.

Today, 195 years later, 'Westford Academy' is still alive and well. The difference is that originally it was a privately operated school while now it is the town's public high school.

When the state required each town to have a public high school in the early 1900's, the Trustees of Westford Academy relinquished control of the operation of the school. However, they continued to administer a portfolio of endowment funds, using the income from these funds for scholarships and items of equipment for educational purposes at the Academy.

How many public high schools have sizeable endowments?

From the beginning, the Academy attracted students and administrators from the surrounding communities as well as from Westford. Among the students in the first class (1792) was Master Matthias Spaulding of Chelmsford.

Many Chelmsford residents took advantage of the educational opportunities at Westford Academy during the ensuing years.

There have been nine Academy Trustees from Chelmsford. Col. Ebenezer Bridge, son of the fourth minister of the First Parish

Church, was elected trustee in 1792. Two years later, Rev. Hezekiah Packard, the fifth minister, and organizer of Chelmsford's first library joined the Board of Trustees. He was followed in 1814 by one of Chelmsford's famous physicians, Rufus Wyman, M.D. Rev. Wilkes Allen, the sixth minister, was elected trustee in 1820, the same year he published the first History of Chelmsford.

One of Chelmsford's most prominent citizens, Joel Adams, became a trustee in 1837. He had a law office in town, served as deacon of the church, town clerk and state representative, as well as being president of the Prescott National Bank in Lowell.

Dr. John Call Bartlett, another eminent local physician, joined the Trustees in 1855. His son, J. Adams Bartlett, joined the Trustees in 1873. He served as town moderator for 30 years and donated the land on which the Adams Library was erected. Ten years later, the Trustees elected Charles E. Bartlett who lived at 15 Bartlett Street. It was part of his farm that later became Bartlett Park in Chelmsford Center.

Nearly 100 years passed before another

Chelmsford resident was elected to the Trustees of Westford Academy in the person of Barbara Hildreth Parkhurst. Mrs. Parkhurst was only the third woman to serve as a Trustee and is currently the first woman to be elected president of the board in 195 years.

The original Academy building, now the Westford Museum, was completed in 1794 based on plans of the building at Phillips Academy in Andover. It is interesting to note that the Trustees voted it was "to be painted with a shade or two of green deeper than the Chelmsford meeting house," indicating that the First Parish Church in Chelmsford Center was a light green at that time. This was not the present edifice but its predecessor, built in 1792 and destroyed by fire in 1842.

Of the Trustees listed above, three of them had a natural interest in the Academy having been students there: Joel Adams, Charles E. Bartlett and Barbara H. Parkhurst.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in that town since 1654. He and his wife, Barbara, are new residents of Hildreth Hills in Westford.

## Whitney Playground results from one woman's generosity

Nov. 22, 1987

By George Adams Parkhurst  
Special to the Eagle

**O**ne of the many unique features of Westford is the excellent playground in the center of town. Most Westford residents know it is there but how many are aware of its origin? Who had the foresight and interest to make possible the development of this recreational area for all the townspeople?

It was in 1910 that Mrs. Martha Elizabeth (Leland) Whitney, a life-long resident of the town, offered to finance the grading and landscaping of the unimproved lot of land located between the Frost School and the Academy — the latter being the building known today as the Roudenbush Community Center.

In addition to offering to transform "the rough, wet and unsightly field into a playground", Mrs. Whitney donated \$5,000, the income of which was to be used in maintaining it. She agreed to name two members of a commission, who would select a third member, to supervise the landscaping and administer the fund. Mrs. Whitney appointed Oscar R. Spaulding and Edward Fisher. Herbert V. Hildreth was chosen as the third member.

Under Article 34 of the Annual Town Meeting of March 21, 1910, the town accepted her offer and voted "that such premises shall hereafter be known as the Whitney Playground and the fund designated as the Hiram Whitney Playground Fund as a mark of appreciation of such gifts and as a memorial to Mrs. Whitney and the late Mr. Whitney."

The town meeting also resolved "that a vote of thanks be extended to M. Elizabeth Whitney for her thoughtfulness and generosity in bestowing upon her native town such a munificent, extensive, and substantial gift, whereby the citizens of Westford have secured both a spot of beauty and place of amusement, thus affording a source of pleasure and happiness to all, both young and old, and that the clerk be instructed to send a copy of these resolutions to Mrs. Whitney."

### Additional land purchase

As work progressed the committee found that additional land was needed to provide room for a baseball field. Whereupon, Mr. Donald M. Cameron conveyed about three fifths of an acre of land behind the Academy building. Oscar Spaulding and William L. Woods also donated small pieces of property. Although the acquisition of this addi-

tional land increased the landscaping cost, Mrs. Whitney "encouraged them in providing everything that would make the grounds more attractive and serviceable regardless of cost."

A large stone was moved to the playground and inscribed: "Whitney Playground, 1910." A baseball diamond and tennis court were constructed and "playground apparatus, consisting of a row of swings, eight in number, a seesaw with six boards, and a giant swing" were installed. In addition, several flower beds were provided to be planted and maintained by the school children. Nine large concrete settees and 12 movable settees were added along with a concrete drinking fountain.

Saturday, May 27, 1911 was set aside for the formal dedication of the Whitney Playground. The program included a tennis tournament and a baseball game between Westford Academy and Littleton High School in the morning. The afternoon was given over to children's activities — "Sunbonnet Babies, Mother Goose Shoe, Highland Fling, Crowning of the May Queen, Maypole Dance."

In 1914 the committee found that the income from the fund was not sufficient to pay the bills. Mrs. Whitney very kindly offered to pay the \$2500 to be administered by the Playground Committee with the income to be used for the preservation, care and replacement of shade trees on Depot Street.

Town reports carried reports of the Playground Committee through 1923.

Who was this beneficent woman?

### Elizabeth Leland benefactor

M. Elizabeth Leland was born July 6, 1945, the daughter of Ira and Susan (Prescott) Leland. She was brought up in the Leland homestead at the corner of Main Street and Leland Road — later known as the Whitney Wright house — and married Hiram Whitney of Westford.

In recent years, new playground equipment has been donated and installed along with a bronze plaque that reads: "To the Children of Westford - May you enjoy playing in these grounds as much as he did - Richard T. St. Onge - May 4, 1941 - December 5, 1970 - Gift of Richard T. St. Onge Memorial Fund."

George Parkhurst, a prolific writer with a keen interest in history, recently moved to Hildreth Hills from Chelmsford.