

MARCH 27, 1986

Chelmsford-Lowell bond tightly knit

A century ago, in 1886, the citizens of Lowell celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the City of Lowell (Chelmsford was 231 years old that year) and the 60th Anniversary of the Town of Lowell.

Many newcomers to our town are surprised to learn that what we know as downtown Lowell, was, for 171 years, part of East Chelmsford.

It was not until 1826 that the owners of the cotton mills that were springing up along the Merrimack River separated from Chelmsford and incorporated the area between the Merrimack and Concord Rivers as the Town of Lowell.

Ten years later, the population of the Town of Lowell having grown to over 16,000, the voters of Lowell ratified the new charter on April 11, 1836 by a vote of 961 to 328, making Lowell a city.

It all started when a group of Boston industrialists, recognizing the potential water power, had secretly scouted the area and purchased land and water rights in the early 1820's.

The first cotton mill, the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, was organized in East Chelmsford in 1822, followed in 1825 by the Hamilton Manufacturing Company.

The mill owners, in their paternalism, completely controlled the lives of their employees, who were required by company rules "to be constant in attendance upon public worship, either in this place, or some of the neighboring parishes."

The way
it was

By George A.
Parkhurst



To meet this end, the mill owners hired the Rev. Theodore Edson and erected the stone church on Merrimack Street in front of City Hall in 1825.

Thus, what is now known as St. Anne's Church, was the first Episcopal Church in Chelmsford.

At the time of its incorporation, Lowell's western boundary was a straight line from the Merrimack River near the present University of Lowell south campus to the Route 3 overpass on Chelmsford Street.

However, the City of Lowell acquired about 1,000 acres more from Chelmsford in 1873 when they annexed "Middlesex Village."

This included the area around Alexander's market on Middlesex Street, the land fill off Westford Street and Mt. Pleasant Golf Club.

Although the Town of Lowell would not appear on the map for another fifty years,

several Chelmsford men, who were residents of that area, fought in the American Revolution.

Three of these are of particular note:

Captain John Ford, who led a unit of Minutemen to the Battle of Concord, fought at Bunker Hill (the battle actually took place on Breed's Hill), and commanded a unit that went to Stillwater, N.Y. at the time of Burgoyne's surrender and brought prisoners of war back to Chelmsford and Cambridge.

Benjamin Pierce served from the Battle of Concord until 1783, moved to New Hampshire where he became governor, and was father of President Franklin Pierce.

Barzillai Lew as a free black from Jamaica who served as fifer in Capt. John Ford's company.

So, you can see that the Chelmsford military units were "intergrated" at the time of the American Revolution.

One of his descendantss, "Bucky" Lew, is reputed to have been the first black player on an organized basketball team. Bucky's sister taught school in Lowell for many years.

Although Lowell also acquired parts of its territory from Dracut and Tewksbury, Chelmsford is considered the mother whose daughter became the first planned industrial city and, at one time, the leading textile center in America.

That's the way it was.

George A. Parkhurst is a noted Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.