

Westford Academy's Chelmsford ties

Recognizing 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 operate 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

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



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 the 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 the president of the Prescott National Bank in Lowell.

Dr. John Call Bartlett, another eminent local physician, was elected 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 what is known today as Bartlett Park; across from the rear entrance to Adams Library.

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 served 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 that it is "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.

And that's the way it's been at Westford Academy.

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