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Old West Cambridge as I remember it by George Y. Wellington

As my memory goes back in the history of this Town quite distinctly for 75 years to 1830, I thought it might be interesting to the members of this Society for me to relate some of the conditions, socially and otherwise, which the citizens of that day experienced so that you of the present day might recognize the changes that three quarters of a century have made in our home Town. I think first however that I should give you the boundaries of the old Town, so changes as they are from the present territory of Arlington. The General Court of this State Dec. 27th, 1782, set off a new precinct in the Town of Cambridge of all that section of the Town on the northwest side of Menotomy River, now known as Alewife Brook to be known as the Second Parish in Cambridge: and this section of Cambridge was generally known as Menotomy. This territory remained a part of Cambridge until February 27th 1807 when the General Court incorporated it as a Town under the name of West Cambridge the act to take force from June 1st, 1807. The boundaries of the new town as by this act are as follows: "All that part of the Town of Cambridge, heretofore known as the Second Parish and as described within the following bounds. Beginning at Charlestown line where the Little River intersects the same, and running on the line in the middle of said Little River until it enters Fresh Pond, thence west ten degrees south until it intersects the line of the Town of Watertown, thence on Watertown and Waltham line till it strikes the Lexington line, thence on Lexington line till it strikes Woburn line, thence on Woburn and Charlestown line to the Little River first mentioned. This is the territory covered by the Town of old West Cambridge in 1830 when I first remember it. It may seem strange to many of you that the northeast boundary of this old Town should be the line of the town of Charlestown, but at that time, Charlestown covered what is now Somerville its southwest boundary crossing Little River (now Alewife Brook) a little southwest from where Broadway now crosses it, then in a northerly direction this line crosses Broadway diagonally near River Street, keeping southwest of Warren St. it crossed Medford St southerly from the corner of Mt. Pleasant Cemetery, crossing Mystic Street just south of the house of Geo P. Winn, thence over Turkey Hill until it connects with the Woburn town line, thence within 100 rods of our Town Hall going northeast we were within the limits of the Town of Charlestown, and all that part of Belmont from Concord Ave. to Lake and Spring Streets in 1830 was part of West Cambridge, so in speaking of old West Cambridge it will be concerning the territory of the old town as it was when first I knew it, and from what I state of the old conditions you can in your mind's eye you can see the changes that have been taken place in the past 75 years. West Cambridge was not a suburban town, under present definitions, in 1830; there was no public conveyance between this town and Boston for the benefit of its citizens; to be sure there was a mail stage coach carrying the mails leaving Boston at 6 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and returning to Boston from the town at 4 p.m. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and the fare to Boston was 75 cents, and we had mail three times a week from and to Boston and the

rest of the world. I have stated this was not a suburban town, but it was a farming town, that being its chief industry, real good old-fashioned farming such as you see in the mill towns of this state today, no new-fangled notions had entered into the heads of the farmers of those days such as hot-beds, greenhouses, and the like as our market gardeners now have, but these old farmers were progressive and in advance of the mill town farmers, for besides raising corn, potatoes, cabbage, they turned their attention to fruit and the hill farms in this town were covered with apple orchards and attention was paid to quinces, strawberries and currants; where the rich market gardens farms in the southeast part of the town are now, were known as poverty plain as they said the land was too poor to even raise white beans. The orchards are now cut down, small fruit are no more raised for market, and "Poverty Plain" has yielded under modern cultivation more profit than our old farmers ever dreamed of. Farming I have stated was the chief industry, yet Sucker Brook with its rapid fall of about 150 feet from the Lexington boundary yielded water power in 1830 for several mill sites, but in 1830 there were but three mills in operation the first near Lowell Street known as the Perry Mill, later on as the piano factory of the late Chas Schwamb, the Perry Mill was a brick building, and as a grist and spice mill, this mill was afterward destroyed by fire. The next mill in operation at this time was the Fessenden Mill, a grist and spice mill. This burned down, and J. C. Hobbs purchased the site and built a brick mill for the manufacture of splitting knives; it is now standing and has passed into other hands. The last mill operating at that time was the Cutter Mill, an old fashioned grist mill carried on when I first knew it by Ephraim Cutter, who was deacon of the First Parish Church. This mill is known now as Fowle's Mill and the old mill building owned by the deacon burned down about 40 years ago. The mill on Grove St. where Welch and Griffiths established the first factory for making ice tools ever established in the United States, and the last is the mill on Mill Street, the dam rebuilt by Cyrus Cutter and mill built in 1837. One of the most important industries of this date, 1830, was the Whittemore card factory, which in its day and generation brought more prosperity to this town than any other, and if you will pardon me, I will give you a short history of it.

After the close of the Revolutionary War, it was hard times not only in this town, but throughout all the country, so in nearly every farmhouse, one would find the spinning wheel and the loom, one for working yarn and the other for weaving "home spun" as the cloth was named. Mr. Amos Whittemore was a manufacturer of cards, for carding wool and cotton. He had a machine for making the teeth, and another for puncturing the leather, sending the teeth and leather round to different families. They would insert these wire teeth into the leather and make the card. He conceived of the idea of making a machine that would make the teeth and insert them in one operation. He betook himself to a room and it was three years before he brought forth a machine that would accomplish this whole work, and took out June 21st, 1797 a patent on the machine. This was one of the first patents issued from the Patent office and was for the term of 14 years and was patented in England in 1799. This patent was received for a second term of 14 years by Congress on March 3rd, 1809, and then when the matter was up before Congress, John Randolph of Roanoke said he would renew this patent to all eternity "for

it is the only machine which ever had a soul:" In 1799 the firm of Whittemore Brothers (Amos (indecipherable) started their factory in this town with 23 machines and forty persons employed, and in 1809 they had 50 machines, and the Town of Cambridge dates its property from the establishment of this manufacturer. This factory stood in what is now the south corner of the Messers Robbins estate. But the building was torn down in 1832. The only relic left is the small dwelling in rear of the Misses Robbins residence and was used as a repair shop for the card machines. Another factory building was built that stood nearly on the site of the present Robbins mansion, but was torn down about 20 years ago. The manufacture of cards here ceased about 1842. Whittemore Brothers sold their patent and machines to another concern in New York City in 1812, which had a depressing effect on the people here, and as one wrote at that time "West Cambridge was a terribly dull place for several years". At the expiration of the patent or soon after in 1827, all of these machines came back to the town, and the sons of Amos Whittemore built a factory that stood in the rear of "the Florence" on Mass. Ave., and these carried on the business until that factory was burned down in 1862. You can see my friends what good fortune came to this town through the ingenuity of one man Amos Whittemore, who died in 1828 nearly two years after I was born.

The next subject of which I will speak briefly is of the religious societies in this town in 1830. The present 1st Congregational Parish was first organized as the 2nd Parish in Cambridge January 29, 1733 under the act of the General Court. Their first meeting house was opened and consecrated Feb. 1st, 1735, and after much tribulation and disappointment on September 9th, 1739 Rev. Samuel Cooke was ordained as the first pastor of the church where he continued until June 4th, 1783, when at the age of 75 and the 44th year of his ministry. Following Rev. Samuel Cooke on April 23rd, 1788, Rev. Thadeus Fiske was ordained as pastor. He resigned May 8th 1828 having served as pastor for 40 years. Following him May 20th, 1829. Reverend Frederick H. Hedge was ordained as the 3rd pastor of this church, a position he held until March 9th, 1835, and on March 15th, 1835 Rev. David Damon was installed as the 4th pastor of this Parish. The First Parish up to 1830 had worshipped in but two "Meeting Houses" as the old puritans were wont to call their churches, and it is singular that the first building for this Parish, used as such and dedicated Feb 1st, 1735 is now in existence as a fine colonial residence No. 258 Pleasant St. The Meeting House occupied by this Parish in 1830 is in the photograph taken from a painting of the scene made in 1815, and the view is correct as I remember it, with the old buttonwood tree in front – that was the goal for us boys when we played I Spy around the Meeting House. There was no vestry in the basement, but through the foundation walls were open spaces for window frames, through which the winter winds blew freely, and made the auditorium above more uncomfortable. No stoves were used in the Meeting House until 1820 when a stove and furnace were accepted by the Parish. When I first attended service there, the house was heated by two large wood stoves, which were replaced in 1836 by two large cylinder coal stoves, as at that time anthracite coal had come into more general use. Yet with all this during church service in cold winter days the thermometer stood below freezing, and for foot warming charcoal heaters were used, and I remember carrying one for my mother's use: in the

old meeting house restored in 1804 there was no heat; the second Meeting House was torn down in 1840. A Baptist Society was organized here, with members from this place and Woburn in 1780, but in 1794 the Woburn members built a church in their town, from that time a semblance of organization was kept up, until the present Baptist Society was incorporated in 1816, and organized in 1817, and worshipped in this church building, now standing as a dwelling house on the corner Mass. Ave. and Brattle streets; however in 1828 a new church building was erected on land given the Society by Mrs. Mary Cutter on the site of their present beautiful church edifice; it was to this church I used to attend occasionally with my good grandmother Yates who was a good Baptist in her day. This church had a small vestry in its basement for Sabbath School and prayer meetings, and even was rented for private school purposes where I went for one or two summers; neither of the churches at this time were used for evening meetings as they were not equipped with lighting apparatus. The Baptist Society tore down its church in 1853 and erected a more commodious building, which was unfortunately burned on July 25th, 1900.

That there were more school houses in this Parish and Town it can be stated, and that Rev John Hancock, grandfather of John Hancock who signed the Declaration of Independence wrote than on April 1st, 1733 he baptized Thomas Osborne in the school house in Menotomy, who was the first child baptized in this Parish. In 1830 there were four school districts in West Cambridge the East District Schoolhouse stood in the training field which covers the lots now on west side of Linwood Street. The building was a one story structure, built in 1808, and now with a brick first story it is the second story of the farmhouse of John P. Squire No 110 Lake Street. The school house of the center district stood on the old burying ground on Pleasant Street its front on the line of the street and on the southerly side of the present entrance to this burying ground. This was a one story building built on the Parish Common in 1769 replacing a school house built in 1693, and in 1810 was moved to its location on the burying ground at a cost of \$20. It was in this school house where in 1830 I first attended school. This school house was torn down in 1888. A new school house with two school rooms had been built and the center and East districts were made into one. This school house stood where Franklin Street meets Mass. Ave. and I attended school there for two or three months. Across the street where the residence of Miss. Helen Jarvis now stands stood the Town Pound, and it was quite an amusement to us small children to climb the pound fence and watch the poor animals there compounded. The Pound was on leased land which was sold in 1832 to John Jarvis and the Pound moved near the East District school house on the training field. The south district school stood on westerly side of Pleasant St just north of Brighton Street; this was a one room building; in 1842 the Town erected a two story building on Brighton Street near corner of Pleasant Street, and the old school house sold and is now a dwelling house at 287 Locke Street. In the northwest school district school house one story brick building was erected in 1801 before the Town was incorporated. It was used as a schoolhouse until 1838, when a new two story schoolhouse was erected, and the old schoolhouse and land were sold. It was changed to a dwelling house, and a few years hence on account of widening Mass. Ave. it was torn down.

The schools in these 4 school districts were of the old district school system, a woman's school in the summers, and a man's school in the winter. The salaries were not large, as for instance in 1827 \$60 was appropriate for the schools for 4 masters for winter schools \$110 – 440. 4 female teachers for the summer schools \$40 each for the season. The season was about 1st of Dec to first of April and middle of May to middle of Sept. as in the Spring the children were wanted in planting time, and in the fall to harvest the crops. The first schoolhouse established in this precinct was built on the first parish common, and was in use as I have stated in 1733.

The Fire department of this Town in 1830 had but one hand engine with a short length of hose. The name of the engine was Friendship, and it was housed in a small building that sat on the burying ground just opposite the west corner of the present Unitarian Church. The town made an appropriation for the department, but the members were exempt from poll taxes and jury duty, though the Town kept the engine in repair. The full records of the Friendship engine company from origin to finish are in the archives of the Society. The tub belonging to the engine is preserved in the present William Peirce House. The engine did good service at the fire that burned the Whittemore Card Factory in 1832, a fire that I recollect perfectly as I saw it from the window of my father's house at that time. The water to supply the engine came from some nearby well or pool, and was passed along from hand to hand by a line of persons, the one passing up the full buckets, and the younger persons passing down in another line the empty buckets to be filled. There were four fire wardens the first to arrive took charge of the fire, and decided what should be done. Besides this there was the old West Cambridge Fire Society each member of which had to supply himself with two leather fire buckets in which at all times should be kept a large cloth bag and a bed key for taking down old-fashioned bed ? . These buckets were inspected three or four times a year, and if not in their proper place, or if the bag or bed key was missing, the member was fined 50 cents, the aggregate of the fines generally amounted to enough to pay for the annual supper at Whittemore Hotel. It has been said that the inspector sometimes gave a tip to some friend who would go around and misplace the bucket bag or bed key just before the visit of the inspector, and by doing so the annual fines were much increased, and I think it is true. In 1820 the Town appropriated money for another fire engine. It was called the Good Intent. It horizontally, and had a good strong company to work it in my younger days.

The highways and public roads were not numerous, and nearly all exist at present. Of course Mass. Ave. was then known as the Main Street. The West Cambridge part of Charlestown Street now Broadway extended to Tufts Street. The present Lake Street was known as Weir Lane, as it led to where the old weirs were located at the outlet of Spy Pond. Medford Street in West Cambridge ended at Charlestown line just this side of the Mt. Pleasant Cemetery. Mystic Street then known as Woburn Road then ended at Medford Street where the Catholic Church now stands, and only from there to where Geo P. Winn's house now stands was it within Town limits. The new end of Mystic Street to Mass. Ave. has been in existence about 40 years. Pleasant Street or Watertown Road is as at present. It began as a way from Watertown to Cooke's new Fowle's Mill. This mill was one of the first, if not the first mill established in the

Massachusetts Bay Colony. From Pleasant Street on the easterly side next south from Weir St Lane came the Brighton Road which is now the same as it was 75 years ago. At Concord Turnpike or Concord Avenue now it struck Watertown Town line. Incoming from Watertown on the northwest side of Pleasant St we come to the lane leading to farm of James Perry on Wellington Hill then so called. It is known now as Somerset St. The next street on that side was a road that led to the top of Peirce Hill as then known (now Arlington Heights). On this road, now known as Prospect Street, lived Geo Prentiss and Mansan W. Narah on their farms, the two men well known in old West Cambridge Town affairs. The next street now known as Spring Street was a lane that led to the wood lots on the side of Peirce Hill. There is a farm on this lane then owned by Abiel Fillsbrown now owned by Edward & Alfred Morton. There was no other highway in that section except what is now Cross St that then led from Weir Lane to the Brighton Road. Spring Valley in rear of the Trowbridge's is about the same now as it was in 1830, only near the pond in Spring Valley stood the powder house. It was placed there so that in case of explosion the contents might be blown into the pond. The next street was the road that led to Ephram Cutter's Grist Mill and to what is now Summer St., as at that time there were no houses on this St. above where William N. Winn now resides. But a mere lane from these to the different cart paths that led to the wood lots on east side of Turkey Hill. The next street above road to Cutters Mill is what is now called Grove Street, then a mere by way leading to Summer Street. On the south side, now Mt. Vernon Street was a lane that led to the farms on the side hill, next above Brattle Street was then a lane that led north to the Turkey Hill wood lots, next above was the north road to Woburn over Turkey Hill now Forest Street. Above onto the south side of Main St was what was in 1775 a part of Main Street part of which is now called Appleton Street and to where it enters Main Street again is called Paul Revere Road; in fact it all should be called Paul Revere Road. For Appleton Street, or the narrow highway known as Appleton St. ended opposite the old house there standing of William Locke; in going up Appleton Street to the top of the hill a lane led eastward to the houses of Thos. C. John A. P. and Ebenezer Peirce, sons of Jonas Peirce, who then lived in a house standing on Appleton St. a short distance from Paul Revere Road. The only other street leading from the avenue was Lowell Street, and it was originally the Lowell Turnpike, and it is southerly end where it joined the Main St., a short distance up this street was a lane (now Bow Street) that connected with the Woburn Road as at present. The only real thoroughfares were Main Street and the Watertown Road, also known as the "Flobend" road now Pleasant Street; as there were no railroads in New England at this time all freight was carried in market wagons and large 4, 6 or 8 horse teams going to and from Boston from New Hampshire and Vermont, so that Main Street was always cut up and a rough road to travel, also there were no sidewalks except where the ground was suitable there would be a foot path; elsewhere people walking took to the travelled highway. As late as 1840 as I walked to school on the Watertown Road, I had to walk in the middle of the road from my father's house to Concord Avenue, and even on this side road the walking at times was quite rough. In those days the man that had charge of the Almshouse and the Town's poor, was superintendent of highways, and the town paupers physically able to work were the employed to take care for them, excepting when any special work was needed it

was done by outside parties. I mean parties outside of the Alms House. The town in those days was very economical in all things, but one, and that was “refreshments” of this the town officers seem to have had an unlimited supply at all these meetings. It was in 1834 that the town turned its attention to sidewalks, and then in a small way in the center of the town; at the present time no street is complete without its sidewalk.

I will now call your attention to the burying of the dead and as it appeared to a small boy at that time. I have stated in its economy the town had placed a school house and fire engine house on the burying ground (we had no cemeteries in those days) but there was one other building on this burying ground and that was the hearse house – it was built by the first parish in 1806 and located about half way between the school and engine house. The Parish however sold this building with the hearse and other implements used in the burying the dead to the town in 1830 for \$90; previous to this time and afterward the sexton of the first Parish Church acted as undertaker; in fact if not in name, for undertakers and funeral directors were unknown at this time. Zephaniah Stetson was the Sexton of the 1st Parish, a carpenter by trade, he was the town constable and full police force of the town, and a terror, if not to evil doers. he was such to us small boys; he lived in the house that was formerly Gersham Swan chair shop and stood exactly where the Savings Bank building now stands, but there was no entrance from either Main or Pleasant Street. The front door opened into the side yard. On Pleasant St about where Mrs. Holt’s house now stands was his carpenter shop; at that time there were no coffin factories, and no burial caskets. The coffins had to be made to order and right quick. As soon as a death occurred, Mr. Stetson was notified, and at once took the necessary measurements, and made the coffin in the old forms broadest the shoulders tapering toward the head and feet; coffin was of Pine and as there was no time to paint it Mr. Stetson stained his with Venetian red mixed with turpentine, and at all funerals in those days there was a strong turpentine odor through the house; the hearse looked more like a modern rack wagon painted black; it had a frame floor fence posts about 4 feet long on each side with slats up about 3 feet and no top; the coffin was secured in the body of the vehicle which rested on leather through braces (springs were not used then) the coffin covered with a fringed black velvet pall. There was no seat for the driver, but the sexton solemnly led the horse with the hearse the funeral procession, and the four bearers in the rear of the hearse arriving at the gate of the burying ground the coffin was transferred to the beer, with the pall to cover the same and the bearers bore it to the new made grave then where the friends had gathered round; the bearers not only lowered the coffin into the grave, but their next duty was to fill the grave piling the earth above it, and when their work was completed and not till then did the company depart. During this time the bell of the first parish was tolling with a blow about once every half minute made by a son of Old Stetson, who in the belfry with a rope around the tongue of the bell, tolled it. I know as a boy, it was a delight to me to be delegated by Joe to perform this task, which I did several times. Perhaps a sketch of “Old Stetson as he was known to us boys might be interesting, as at that time he was the whole of the police force in Arlington. He was not a native of this Town, but the first record concerning him is that he owed a covenant to the first Parish Oct 13, 1813,

with his wife Eunice, his daughter born about this time, married contrary to her father's wishes and was disowned; the next children a son Algernon Sydney born 1821, another the next Joseph Wyman born in 1823, both of these boys were school mates of mine in the old Center School House. Joseph became a tailor and died as a young man. But Algernon Sydney was a man of some distinction; he went into business and for many years had a large and prosperous store devoted to gas fixtures and lamps on Tremont Street Boston; he was great friend of the W. H. Baldwin and aided him much in establishing Boston Young Man's Christian Union. He was always interested in the welfare of the 1st Parish Church of which his father was so long the Sexton and his interest did not abate as long as he lived; he died 2 or 3 years ago when he was 80 years old. His father I would judge was about 50 years old in 1830, tall about 6 ft 2 in, broad shoulders and a spare thin man with bushy grey hair a square jaw and a stern, determined look out of his eyes so that we boys stood much in awe of him, with his shop and house, so near our school house; he seemed to be omnipresent to us, and I thought he was of the immortals selected for all time for burying the dead, and if he died I wondered who would bury him. If we saw him hard at work early in the morning, we knew that a death had occurred and he was making the coffin and about noon as school was out the product of his labor would be in front of his shop for the purpose of drying. The fresh red stain he had placed upon it, and the color was rather gay for the solemn purpose for which it was used. It was a gruesome place for a School House, located on the burying ground with a hearse house next to it, and the Town Pound opposite, nor was this all – once School let out about 4 p.m. and if there was a funeral, it arrived here just about that time, so we children standing a little distance away, watched the burial ceremony. I early noticed that the head of the coffin was at the west end of the grave, and I was very curious to know why, and at last just after a funeral was over I screwed my courage up to ask "Old Stetson" – the reason – "Boy" he said "have you not read your Bible and do you not know that it says in the last day, the day of judgement, that the Lord will appear in the East to judge the World, so as the dead rise, to rise they should face the Master, which they could not do if their heads were to the East; for then in rising their backs would be toward the Master which would not be respectful." This explained much to me, and I thought Old Stetson took a very practical view of the matter. It was Old Stetson that notified all the Town and First Parish meetings, and besides that if he thought we boys were too noisy in our sports, he would put in an appearance and we would scatter. When we had wood burning stoves in the Church, he always replenished the wood during the singing of the hymn just before the sermon, and the noise he made always disturbed Samuel L. Cutter, the Chorister, for his boots squeaked, and there was no carpet on any part of the Church floors. Old Stetson performed his duties well and at last resigned, and Mr. John B. Hartwell was his successor, and he became an undertaker, until now; his grandson is both undertaker and funeral director; the old sextons have passed away and janitors have taken their places.

The Town Meetings were held in the first parish meeting house until that was pulled down in 1840; after that the meetings were held in the vestry of the new meeting house, known as the Parish Hall. In the Town meetings in the old meeting house, the Selectmen and

Town Clerk sat within a semi-circular enclosure directly under the pulpit; in front of them was a half circle counter of good rise with mahogany top. Here was placed the ballot boxes, and when the meeting was called to order and the polls opened, no-one dared to vote until his name was called, for it was the custom then as soon as the polls were open for the Town Clerk, with the list of voters in his hand to call out, beginning alphabetically the name of each voter twice, and how I used to envy Abbot Allen, the father of the Wm H. Allen had opportunity to cast at every meeting the first ballot, but times are changed and we had to go to Australia to learn new methods.

The war of the Revolution and 1812 left a military spirit in this State, and there was in existence up to 1832 a militia law which not only required the Towns, as at present, to enroll all the names of males from 18 to 45 years old who are able to do military duty, but besides at that time they were ordered out the last of May each year for military drill. I wonder that some of those notices or orders have not been found and presented to our Historical Society. They were addressed to the militiamen, about like this: West Cambridge – Headquarters of _____ Company You are hereby ordered to appear on the Parish Common in this Town on Monday, May ____ armed and equipped as the law directs for military drill, etc. – signed by Capt. _____. The State was supposed to supply guns and equipment, the guns being old flint lock affairs, but generally they was not enough guns to go around, such a motley lot. Jack Falstaff himself would have laughed at; they would gather on the common, form into company line with base drums and fife, march around the pond. The old tune being “All the way to old Well’s Fish House” bangdy bangdy bong. I can remember but one or two of such gatherings, which became such a burlesque that the meetings were stopped by repeal of the law. Old West Cambridge had one organized militia Co. the West Cambridge Light Infantry organized 1811. I do not know as the records of their Co. are in existence, if so they should be placed in the archives of this Society. I recollect two of the annual trainings of this Co with Jesse Buckman as Captain, so believe they went out of existence in 1833. Their uniform was blue coat and white pantaloons, their hats were bell crown shape with a long white plume with red top; their headquarters were in the Hall over Col. Thomas Russell’s store. When out on drill they made quite a respectable show. In 1836 when I attended a private school in this Hall, we boys found the closet containing some of these uniforms. . . .

Note by P. F. Brown: “Rather an abrupt ending, but there is no more of the narrative on file.”

Typist Oakes Plimpton April 19th 2017 (a Wednesday).