

Anne Marie Hickey, "The Celebration of the Furth of July in Westfield, 1826-1853" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 9, No 2 (June 1981).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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The Celebration of the Fourth of July in Westfield, 1826-1853

Anne Marie Hickey

From 1826 to 1853, the citizens of Westfield observed the Fourth of July with many different activities. As one would expect, patriotism was always a theme of these celebrations. As we learn from the local newspapers of the period however, in most years other concerns were also expressed, most significantly — religion, reform, and politics.

In a letter to his wife, John Adams wrote how he felt the anniversary of American independence should be celebrated:

I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the day of the deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. . . with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward forever more. . .¹

The citizens of Westfield managed to celebrate the Fourth of July in almost all these ways at one time or another. Their celebrations ranged from large and elaborate to very simple, to none at all, as was the case in 1848.

A typical celebration involved a procession to the church or to the town green. There would be singing and an oration, followed by the dinner which would include various toasts. For instance, in 1827 the day began with “a spirited display of ringing of bells. . . .” At noon, there was a procession to the church for exercises and singing. Next, “the procession was again formed and moved to the Coffee-House, where they partook of an excellent dinner. . . .” Finally, there were toasts along with the firing of a cannon.² Another similar observance of the Fourth of July, in 1842, included a specially written ode, singing both by the local choir and a distinguished quartet, and a reading of the Declaration of Independence at the Congregational Church.³ That eve-

ning, there was a lecture on temperance. Then, everyone joined a procession, and accompanied by the Westfield Brass Band, walked to a grove for dinner, entertainment by the band and toasts on temperance and patriotism. The only dampers on the day "were one or two slight accidents" and the fact that "... the *orderly* town of Springfield was most too fully represented by a party of rowdy young men. . . ."⁴

In some years, efforts were made to plan much more impressive festivities. In 1828, it was announced that the celebration would be at the recently completed aqueduct over Little River. There was to be a decorated awning, covering the whole aqueduct, under which dinner and other refreshments were to be served followed by a ball. Attendance was encouraged with the promise that "no expense or trouble will be spared to render the novelty and interest of . . . what not long since would have been called, *the wildest vision and a fairy tale.*"⁵

The year 1844 also saw an especially elaborate celebration, which was attended by about two thousand people. When the crowd gathered in the Methodist Church, "not only was every seat occupied, but . . . every avenue and every vacant spot in the interior of the church was crowded with listening auditors." The exercises that morning included prayer, the singing of an original poem written for the occasion, the reading of the Declaration of Independence, an oration, and a performance by the Springfield Band. A procession then led to dinner where the organizers were forced to find a quick solution to an unforeseen problem:

Tables were set for 1000 persons but to the surprise of our citizens, it was found that only about one half of the audience could be accommodated — as there was however no lack of provisions, a system of installments was adopted.

Finally, there were the usual toasts.⁶

In other years very little was done to observe the Fourth of July. In 1845, just one year after the "teeming thousands that thronged the streets" the editor of the *Westfield Newsletter* noted that the day was celebrated with much less display than usual.⁷ Little was done for the holiday in 1847 either — just one or two tea parties and a torchlight procession.⁸ The year 1851 was a quiet one, with only a Methodist Sabbath School picnic.⁹

Occasionally, the women of Westfield would arrange different festivities. In 1842, the ladies of the Baptist Society put on a special fair where they sold a variety of items — from ladies' caps and collars to embroidered shoes, to books and artificial flowers, to pineapples and ice cream.¹⁰ In 1852, the Town Hall was the scene of a "Floral and Musical Entertainment" starring the "ladies."¹¹

Some years, the citizens of Westfield celebrated in other locations, presumably because the other towns had made such splendid plans that would attract a large crowd from the area. That made it pointless to plan any activities in Westfield. In 1847, there was nothing special planned in Westfield and many residents went to Russell for a special temperance festival which was expected to attract over fifteen hundred participants.¹² The group from Westfield left at nine in the morning and arrived in time for the eleven o'clock procession "to a beautiful and pleasant grove. . . ." There they spent three hours listening to music, prayer, and orations and having a picnic which was so bountiful that "after every one had eaten to the full, there were more than twelve baskets of good substantial food. . . ."¹³

Chester, to the west, had an especially big celebration in 1849; one participant reported that the entire population of Westfield must have attended. When the morning train from Springfield, with twenty-six full cars arrived, it was met boisterously with "cheers, mingled with the roar of cannon, echoing and re-echoing from a thousand hills. . . ." A procession led to a grove where there were the expected exercises, a picnic, and toasts. There was also some unexpected excitement when "the staging gave way under its superabundant weight directly beneath where the President of the day (Matthew Ives of Westfield) stood. . . ." Fortunately no one was injured.¹⁴

The most obvious theme of these Fourth of July celebrations was patriotism; the citizens were observing a holiday commemorating the birth of American independence. Editorials in the local newspaper and toasts made at dinners constantly conveyed this sentiment. The nation's fiftieth anniversary, 1826, was considered especially important because both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died that same day. Two of the founding fathers were particularly remembered that year "amid the shouts of millions of freemen whom they willed should be free. . . ."¹⁵ In 1844, when it was felt that "never have we witnessed a stronger feeling of gratitude for the past, inspiring stronger hopes for the future," the day's toasts included the Declaration of Independence, the Founding Fathers, the Heroes of the Revolution and the American system of government.¹⁶ An 1853 editorial in the *Westfield Newsletter* expressed gratitude that "On the Fourth of July, 1776, human liberty received an impetus such as was never before known" and suggested that the day should be spent "in reflecting on the sufferings of our ancestors. . . ."¹⁷

Religion was also an important force. Almost always, the morning exercises would be held in either the Congregational or the Methodist Church. Aside from the physical setting though, Fourth of July editorials usually stressed giving thanks to God for freedom and for the United States. The typical sentiment is rendered in a special "Hymn for the Fourth of July" by Reverend J.D. Knowles:

Great God! through who the weak are strong,
The simple wise, the trampled free.
Thy temple gates to day we throng,
To raise our grateful hymns to Thee.¹⁸

The Methodist Sabbath School often held its own celebrations. In 1851, the children had a picnic.¹⁹ However, they had a more formal celebration in 1853, when they gathered in the church for three different orations all of which emphasized morality. The children must have enjoyed it, for it was reported that "Their smiling and happy faces gave positive evidence of the delight of their minds."²⁰

Associated with religion, because of its moral undertones, was another theme — reform. The two major concerns in Westfield, during this period, were temperance and the colonization movement. Temperance was a major interest during the 1840s. In 1841, seven hundred Westfield Sabbath School children gathered to "pledge perpetual hate, to all that can intoxicate" and to form a cold water army. Then the army and a crowd of three hundred sung a hymn that urged "Be days of drinking wine forgot, let water goblets shine: And from your memory ever blot, The days of drinking wine." A parody of the Declaration of Independence was read in which the use of intoxicating beverages was substituted for authoritarian rule.²¹ Finally refreshments were served — with water, of course!

In 1843, the Washingtonian Temperance Society put on a picnic which included songs by a Cold Water Army of three hundred children.²² It was observed that despite "a multitude of people collected all day, we saw no noise, brawls, nor even ONE drunken person," all suggesting the success of the temperance movement.²³ Throughout the decade, there were many pro-temperance comments declaring how good it was to "blend patriotism with morality,"²⁴ and to celebrate "the freedom of a majority of our citizens from the galling yoke of intemperance."²⁵

Slavery was also a concern throughout this period. The Colonization Society used the Fourth of July to advance its cause by arranging for collections in various churches to finance the establishment of colonies in Africa for black Americans.²⁶ A special effort was made in 1830. The Hampden County Colonization Society began planning in September of 1829 "for the purpose of making arrangement for celebrating the next anniversary of American Independence, by a Public Address, and soliciting contributions in and of the objects of the society. . . ."²⁷ The society suggested that clergymen of the various denominations deliver appropriate orations and then take up collections for the society. The support they received is evident from the lists of contributions printed in the local newspaper later in July.²⁸

Politics also played a major role in Westfield's celebration of the Fourth of July; it was not uncommon for the political parties to have separate celebrations. In 1844 for instance, the *Westfield Newsletter*, a Whig newspaper, announced that despite wishes to put aside party differences for one day, "Westfield Locofocoism, true to its own selfishness, ordained otherwise & the Whigs had no alternative but to get up one of their own, or remain in their homes."²⁹ Although the *Newsletter* does not describe the Democratic celebration, it reported that the Whig festivities were amazingly well attended and the abun-

dance of Whig spirit was evident in the toasts to Henry Clay and Whig principles and the negative toasts concerning the annexation of Texas and the Locofocos.³⁰

It seems odd that in 1848, there was no mention of the Fourth of July in the newspaper. Perhaps this can be attributed to politics. At that time, New England Whigs were dissatisfied with the national political scene. It was an election year and the Whig candidate for the presidency was Zachary Taylor, who was distrusted because of his position on slavery — after all, he was a slave owner and a hero of the Mexican War.³¹ Considering their political dissatisfaction, perhaps the citizens of Westfield lacked the enthusiasm to celebrate the Fourth of July in that year.

Westfield's celebrations of the Fourth of July were not simply patriotic holidays. Instead, their themes were also related to contemporary concerns of religion, reform — particularly the Colonization Society and temperance — and politics.

NOTES

1. John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, July 2, 1776, cited in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965), pp. 377-378.
2. *Westfield-Hampden Register*, July 11, 1827, p. 3.
3. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 1, 1842, p. 2.
4. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 8, 1842, p. 2.
5. *Westfield-Hampden Register*, June 4, 1828, p. 3.
6. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 10, 1844, p. 2.
7. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 9, 1845, p. 3.
8. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 7, 1847, p. 2.
9. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 2, 1851, p. 2.
10. *Westfield Newsletter*, June 24, 1842, p. 3.

11. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 7, 1852, p. 3.
12. *Westfield Newsletter*, June 30, 1847, p. 2.
13. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 7, 1847, p. 2.
14. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 11, 1849, p. 2.
15. *Westfield-Hampden Register*, July 19, 1826, p. 3.
16. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 10, 1844, p. 2.
17. *Westfield Newsletter*, June 23, 1853, p. 2.
18. *Westfield Register*, July 21, 1830, p. 4.
19. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 2, 1851, p. 2.
20. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 6, 1853, p. 2.
21. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 7, 1841, p. 2.
22. *Westfield Newsletter*, June 30, 1843, p. 2.
23. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 7, 1843, p. 2.
24. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 8, 1842, p. 2.
25. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 1, 1842, p. 2.
26. *Westfield Register*, June 30, 1830, p. 2.
27. *Westfield Register*, June 9, 1830, p. 3.
28. *Westfield Register*, July 7, 1830, p. 3; July 14, 1830, p. 3; July 21, 1830, p. 3.
29. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 3, 1844, p. 2.
30. *Westfield Newsletter*, July 10, 1844, p. 2.
31. Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The Jacksonian Era: 1828-1848 (New York, 1959)*, pp. 256-257.