

A NEW GENERATION REFLECTS ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

By Marie Coady

Although Woburn has never had an official Fourth of July celebration, the Fourth of July did not pass unobserved. For the most part Independence Day celebrations were private affairs held on private property but the hosts of those celebrations made room for anyone who wished to join them.

In 1853 a private display of fireworks went off without incident at the Charles Choate Estate on top of what was then Academy Hill and is now Warren Avenue. From their vantage point those present remarked that they were able to view fireworks displays in Boston, Chelsea, Roxbury and Cambridge. Some even claimed they could see “rockets and fireballs” as far as two hundred miles away.

Winchester ushered in the day with the “ringing of bells and the discharge of artillery”. That noisy display was followed by a parade that began at 10 a.m. and proceeded to the “Orthodox Church” where the Declaration of independence was read aloud by C. P. Curtis Jr. Esq.. The procession then regrouped and proceeded to the “beautiful grove of John H. Bacon Esq.” where everyone “gathered under the shadows of the old oaks and the elegant pavilion prepared for the occasion” and enjoyed five hours of public entertainment and camaraderie.

In 1858 Woburn's Fourth of July began at 8 a.m. with a Children's Floral Procession that included some seven hundred children who marched through the streets and “repaired to Lyceum Hall where the Reverends Stebbins and March regaled them with eloquent speeches. Those speeches were intended to remind those young people that they were the stewards of America's promise and that it was up to them to carry on the traditions of democracy and freedom for the benefit of the generations to follow.

As the years passed waves of immigrants came to America's shores and each succeeding generation learned the value of American's promise. They too became the stewards of democracy and passed along that same dedication to their offspring. All had come seeking a better life, and for the most part found it. Those early lessons were so well learned that today's generation of young men and women are just as eager to keep America's promise of democracy alive.

Rob Nigro is one today's new generation and he understands his responsibility well. In his civilian life most know Rob as Executive Director of New Horizons, an independent and assisted living facility for seniors that now dominates Academy Hill just as Charles Choate's estate did in 1853.

But more importantly Rob is also known as Major Rob Nigro, U. S. Army and in that capacity he is keeping the covenant of democracy alive by serving his country. So it is with great pride that I present to you Rob's thoughts in his message sent to the residents of New Horizons entitled: REFLECTING ON THE FOURTH OF JULY:

“Although relatively diluted from the "just off the boat" category of immigrants who have been coming to America for hundreds of years now, I often find myself consciously reflecting on the immense value of my American heritage.

“My family originally settled in Boston from Italy in the late 1800s, shortly before my great-grandparents married in St. Leonard's Church in the North End. I guess they became the very first patriots of my clan. In just over 100 years, their descendents have branched out into virtually every corner of this country. In essence, we have fully embraced the concept of manifest destiny, freely wandering the United States to quench our individual goals and desires.

“The Fourth of July has always been a very special holiday for me. Thinking back to my early days as a Cub Scout, I recall portraying Uncle Sam atop a massive red, white, and blue float in a Bicentennial Independence Day Parade in 1976. The visions of hundreds of Americans of all colors, shapes, and sizes waving to my fellow Scouts and me as we rode through South Florida's sunny streets, embedded in me the profound concept of national unity. That was my first experience feeling that I represented something much larger than just myself.

“When I joined the Army upon entering college in 1985, my parents were likely stunned with their son's desire to dive into something so disciplined, unknown, and risky. For me, it offered the most defined path toward investing myself into my country and becoming an ambassador of sorts on behalf of America. In the past 17 years, I have traveled to several continents as an Army soldier, working with fellow world citizens on a myriad of missions.

“I have administered medical treatment to impoverished Third-World villagers, led 34 Estonians on a NATO exercise in Iceland, served as part of the U.S. forces in occupied Germany, and aided a general at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. In every case, I have worn my uniform proudly, yet always been able to express my individual beliefs and values. That is my American right, and it is, indeed, a privilege.

“One of the most meaningful experiences of my military career was walking down a dirt road in Guatemala in 1994, with a group of young native children running after me to take their picture. "Hey mister. Mister America," they called. And every time I look at the picture we did take, all of us together, I smile thoughtfully as the warmth of my American blood flows through every fiber of my being. No matter where I am, America is always inside me.

“Now I find myself back on active duty once again, albeit temporarily, to serve in support of the defense of our tense nation. While the challenge of leaving my family, friends, and civilian work is very real, I recognize that being activated is something I respect and honor as the call of my country. For all that it has given me in 35 years, I am fortunate to be able to give something back. Indeed, it is a mutual give-and-take, serving my country in appreciation for the vision our forefathers had back in 1776, and for the passionate resolve they had in transforming that vision into reality.

“Today, 227 years later, I wish our still young country a very happy birthday. Despite our troubles, there is no better place to be, to live, to think, to love, or to die freely. No matter where I am, America welcomes me home every day of my life.”