

## **A History of George Stevens Academy,** by Esther E. Wood

The parent-school of George Stevens Academy was Blue Hill Academy, the seventh such institution in the District of Maine and the first in Hancock County. In 1803, John Peters, a surveyor and large landowner, rode on horseback to Boston and presented to the General Court of Massachusetts a request for the incorporation of an academy. His request was granted; he returned home in triumph; a building was constructed in the village; students were enrolled the spring of 1803. The wheels of education turned with rapidity.

The Academy soon employed a preceptor and two teachers. Its course of study included Greek, Latin and navigation. The last was a practical and popular subject for native young men who went fishing on the Grand Banks; who sailed on coasting schooners; who, as deep-water sailors, voyaged to the Indies, to Europe and China. There were four terms of school each year. Young men and women from nearby towns attended Blue Hill Academy and boarded in the homes of local families.

The school was in operation from 1803 to 1898 save for the year 1870 when there was a temporary closing. In 1832 the original Academy building was sold and moved. A brick building of beauty and dignity replaced the old wooden structure. The Duffy-Wescott Post of the American Legion now owns it.

Blue Hill Academy flourished under the guardianship of the Congregational Church. The Rev. Jonathan Fisher of that church gave the dedicatory address that opened the school and became the President of the Board of Trustees. The other trustees were all members of Parson Fisher's church. The first non-Congregationalist to become a member was George Stevens. He chafed under Congregationalist dominance. In 1832 he offered on his decease and that of his wife to give a thousand dollars and a piece of land to the Academy. His offer included this provision, "The institution shall be put on a liberal scale that all denominations shall have equal rights and privileges." The Academy trustees said, "no." Plainly the village leaders were no libertarians. Squire Stevens was not to be defeated. In his will of 1851 he provided that after his death and that of his wife his homestead, one hundred and fifty acres of land and a large portion of his personal property should be used to establish an academy. The will specified, "said Academy shall be located on the one half acre northwest of my dwelling house." The Squire chose the first board of trustees, a self-perpetuating board.

George Stevens was an able man. He was born in Andover, Massachusetts and came to Blue Hill in 1775. He became a ship owner and merchant. He early showed an interest in education. He and Jonah Holt sponsored the first singing school in town. He concerned himself with Colby College, then a Baptist institution. He endowed the local Baptist church with land and money. He gave a start to Thomas Lord whom he hired as a ship's carpenter. Lord became a talented architect, who designed churches for Blue Hill, Brooklin, Brooksville, Sedgwick and Ellsworth. He designed a number of houses, including the Greek Revival Morse House opposite George Stevens Academy.

In 1891 the Maine State Legislature incorporated George Stevens Academy. In 1897 the contract to build a building was awarded to George Butler. In 1898 the Academy opened its doors to students. The "Old Academy" cooperated with the new institution. Their boards merged, but it was not until 1943 that the two groups incorporated under the name of Blue Hill-George Stevens Academy. Officially the name of the institution is now George Stevens Academy and today GSA serves not only Squire Stevens' town, but seven surrounding "sending" towns.

### *About Esther E. Wood*

Esther Elizabeth Wood was born in Blue Hill on September 2, 1905, to John Friend Wood and Lizzie Maddocks Wood.

Wood graduated from GSA and went on to study at Colby College and Radcliffe College before beginning her teaching career at Miss Hall's School in Pittsfield, Mass. The following year, she returned to Maine to teach at what is now the University of Southern Maine in Gorham.

After retiring in 1973, Wood wrote regularly for The Ellsworth American, The Christian Science Monitor, and other publications. She also wrote books related to the history and culture of the Blue Hill area.

In addition to writing "A History of George Stevens Academy," her support for the school included service as a trustee, participation in a 1981 endowment campaign, and financial contributions for the construction of GSA's tennis courts and an expansion of the academy's library.

Wood died at her farmhouse on December 1, 2002. She left a tremendous legacy as an educator, author, community member, and supporter of George Stevens Academy.