

Academy Teacher Became Noted Sculptress 120 Years Ago

By Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD — A preceptress of Westford Academy for a short period, 1853-1854, made a name for herself in the art world before she died at Meran in the Austrian Tyrol in 1877.

She was Margaret F. Foley of Lowell.

An important work of hers, a plaster medallion of "A Roman Girl," has been hanging in the reading rooms of the J. V. Fletcher Library for many years, practically unnoticed. When it was placed there, no one seems to recall, although the library was not built until 1896.

According to sketchy records, Miss Foley was a New Hampshire girl, entirely self-taught, and began her career in her native town by carving small figures in wood and modelling busts in chalk. Following her brief career at the Academy she

opened a studio in Boston for seven years. She cut portraits and ideal heads (used as patterns) in cameo.

The rest of her professional life was spent in Rome.

Among her works are busts of Theodore Parker, Charles Sumner, famous Bostonians, along with that of Cleopatra and others. She made medallions of Longfellow, Bryant, and Mr. and Mrs. William Howitt, who had a summer home in Meran. Among her statues were those of "Jeremiah," "Excelsior," and "The Young Trumpeter."

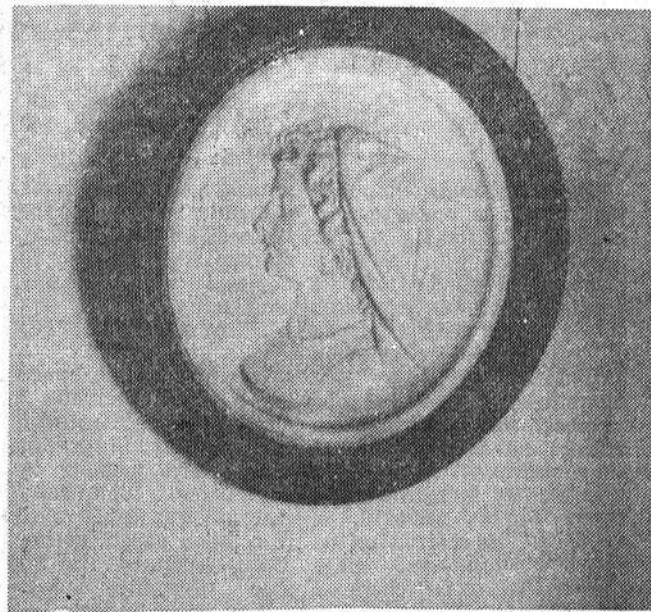
When she was at the Academy, she was an assistant to the principal, then called the preceptor. He was Luther Eastman Shepard, Dartmouth graduate in 1851. He later studied law in Lowell, was admitted to the Middlesex bar in 1863, and lived there the remainder of his life.

It is doubtful that Miss Foley had much time to practice her art work while in Westford as the duties prescribed to her were "too teach the young ladies." She and the preceptor were the only instructors.

As a matter of history, the position of preceptress did not come available until 1819, three decades after the school opened. Her title ordinarily means to be in charge of the school, but in fact she probably rated no higher than a teacher.

The first preceptress was Susan Prescott of Groton, who served just one year prior to opening her own school for "young ladies" in her native town.

Following in Miss Foley's position the next year was Miss Harriet Burbank Rogers of North Billerica. It is claimed that after leaving the Academy in 1863 she became the first in this country to introduce a system of teaching deaf mutes to read from the lips instead of using the sign language. She became principal (not preceptress!) of the Clarke Institution for Deaf Mutes at Northampton in 1867. Later, the wife of Calvin Coolidge, the 30th president, became a teacher at this school.



Westford - "A Roman Girl" hangs in the J.V. Fletcher Library.