

Sarah Keyes: Teacher of freed blacks 1-14-88

By Gordon B. Seavey

In an isolated area in a Kinston, North Carolina, cemetery lies the remains of a young Westford woman whose courage and dedication to freedom, education and religion at the conclusion of the Civil War brought her to this southern community primarily as a volunteer teacher of the newly emancipated blacks...and to an early death.

On a small, ornate marble headstone, typical of the period, is this wording:

Sarah E. Keyes
of Westford, Mass.
died June 5, 1866
Aged 27

A Teacher of Freedom

Although Sarah Elizabeth Keyes' deeds are described in Hodgman's "History of Westford" in much detail, it is Main Street resident Jean Downey who has brought attention again, after more than a century, to the commendable work Sarah did among the newly freed blacks, under most trying teaching conditions.

It was perhaps, too, from overwork, improper medical care and marginal living conditions that this determined young lady from Westford was brought to an early death in a strange community, 750 miles from her home and old friends.

Sarah was born July 4, 1839, in Westford, the youngest child of Imla and Hannah Fletcher Keyes. She entered Westford Academy in 1852.

Jean Downey surmises that doubtless Sa-

rah did some teaching in area schools up to and during the Civil War.

What caused Sarah Keyes (pronounced "Kize") to leave her family and young friends in Westford to make this arduous journey that surely must have seemed a far distance?

Perhaps it was the teachings of the Westford Freedman's Aid Society prior to and during the Civil War days. Perhaps it was her older brother, Edward, a Civil War veteran who had died two months prior to Sarah's leaving.

And what inspired this idealistic fervor in Westford, in particular, with the struggle to end slavery?

We are reminded by Mrs. Downey that Sarah Keyes was not born in 1837 when the noted abolitionist, Angelina Grimke, lectured in Westford and surrounding towns.

Perhaps Sarah's mother took her older children to these lectures. Edward would have been ten, a ripe age to be impressed with the horror stories of the evils of slavery.

Hodgman reports that Sarah left her home "for the scene of her toils the last week of October, 1865, and in a few days...entered immediately upon her work.

In a letter home, she reported: "The colored school was first opened in a building formerly an academy. Our number of colored students increased so rapidly...we now have over 300 students and another hundred in the evening.

"Some of those who scarcely knew their

letters are reading nicely in words of three and four letters. When I had them spell out the name of our beloved Lincoln, their eyes would sparkle with delight."

Hodgman continues: "She and her associates encountered much opposition. The southern planter ejected them from his premises and they were obliged to take up with such conveniences as they could find for their schools. One night evil-minded men entered their schoolroom, broke up the furniture and threw out the stove." This was the beginning of the Ku-Klux Klan activities.

Sarah persevered through the winter and spring but in May was seized with a "bilious fever" so common in that climate, and died in Kinston, June 5." A memorial service was held 15 days later in her own church, the First Parish in Westford.

In searching the records of the church, of which her husband, George, is pastor, Mrs. Downey said: "Surely the collective heart of this close-knit village was broken. Her name is not chiseled on the tablets in the Town Hall like those of the Civil War soldiers who died, but we celebrate her life and her courage with these memories of her today."

Four years ago, Mrs. Downey contacted Mrs. Helen Dail of Gordon Street Christian Church in Kinston regarding Sarah. She and a friend located the grave site, cleaned the weathered headstone and sent a photo of same. The work of Sarah Keyes is described in a 1976 historical booklet on Kinston, including Lenoir County.

□ KEYES, Page 13

□ KEYES, From Page 6

Should one be interested in the short career of one of Westford's notable women, her grave is in Maplewood Cemetery in the city of Kinston, population about 26,000. For some reason, it is in an annex to the graveyard.

Kinston lies about 70 miles southeast of the state capital, Raleigh, the latter on the main route to Florida.

Jean Downey is to be commended for her interest in reviving the memory of this brave and capable young woman, a

descendant of one of Westford's first families. Indeed, Sarah is honored by being chosen as one in a series of character dolls of famous and well-known Westford ladies of the past. Mrs. Downey has been heading a group interested in making these carefully detailed figures, a set of which is being included among the artifacts in Westford Museum at the Common.

Gordon Seavey is a native of Westford, retired publisher of the Belmont Citizen, and resides on Depot Street. His grandfather died in a southern army hospital during the Civil War.