

Westford Academy 1863 graduate still honored

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD Peter Swallow wished the best education possible for his precious daughter, Ellen Henrietta. But the year was 1859 and there were rumblings of a civil war. And, too, the Swallows lived in Dunstable where reading, writing and arithmetic were about all the classes available in that small community.

Not much of a challenge to an eager student.

He brought his family to Westford, set up housekeeping in a Victorian house near the Common and entered Ellen in Westford Academy. For the young girl, this was an excellent start on a long career which brought her many honors before her death in 1911.

Her fascinating career is highlighted even today but in rather an unusual manner. Her picture, together with a sketch of her scientific record, is being printed on hundreds of thousands of Kleenex tissue boxes.

Kimberly Clark Corporation, the manufacturers, have chosen her to be among those commemorated. They say "All women can be leaders. America needs their influences, their initiative, their contribution. In their series entitled 'Women who changed America,' among others included are Molly Pitcher who fought in the Revolution with her artilleryman husband, and Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross.

"While a student at Vassar (Class 1870)," says the boxes, Ellen Swallow Richards became seriously interested in science. After her graduation, she applied to and became the first woman admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She graduated from M.I.T. in 1873 and that same year received a master's degree from Vassar.

"She married a young professor at M.I.T. Robert H. Richards, and throughout their lives the two supported each other's interest in science.

"As time passed, (she) focused her study on science and economics as they affected domestic conditions. She helped organize what was to become the Home Economics department at Simmons College and is considered the driving force behind Home Economics as a distinct field of study."

She wrote many articles and books on food materials. She was a consultant for Manufacturers Mutual Fire Insurance Company and had much to do with oils. In reference to safety from spontaneous combustion, explosion, etc. She was a specialist in water analysis.

As a Westford student, Ellen and her family lived in a rambling set of buildings which stood opposite the Center fire station. The two-story building next to the J.V. Fletcher Library (not then built), was where Peter ran a country store. It was demolished in 1964. The house was destroyed by fire 25 years previously.

Ellen had a series of teachers, not all at one period. Jacob Abbot was her first preceptor, followed the next year by Addison G. Smith, and soon after Richard Stone. The latter two were just fresh from Harvard College.

During her four years in the classical course, Ellen also had two fine women teachers, one of whom was Harriet B. Rogers. Harriet was the first in this country to introduce a system of lip reading for deaf mutes and later headed the Clarke Institution for the

Deaf in Northampton. The other preceptress was Olive A. Prescott.



While brilliant Ellen Swallow attended Westford Academy, 1859-63, she lived in this home which stood nearly opposite the Town Hall. It was only a skip across the Common to attend classes. Her father, Peter, operated a country store in the building on the left.