

# A peaked Emily turns to nature

## Identifying remote plants won her fame

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**A**lthough she never married and was considered a "loner" by many, Emily Frances Fletcher found her niche in flowers and birds. So much so, she was often called upon to identify certain botanical species for outstanding faculty at Harvard College.

Her achievements in the flora field have laid unrecognized for many years until ladies of the First Parish Church decided time had come to recognize famous women of the past as writers have been doing for the men.

This church group, to which Miss Fletcher no doubt belonged a half century ago, has taken upon itself to commemorate Westford women of the past by producing exquisitely tailored dolls costumed in the period in which, say Miss Fletcher, wore.

According to Mrs. George F. Downey, an energetic member of the group, Emily Fletcher was "a most unusual person." She learned about nature as a child, when Doc Benjamin Osgood deemed she was a "peaked" youngster and should get outdoors as much as possible. She developed not only a keen interest in nature, but in life in general.

She worked for beauty in public places and was strong on roadside plantings, particularly trees. Emily Fletcher prepared most of the local species of birds and flowers for local exhibits in glass exhibition cabinets in the Fletcher Library

### Scientific hobby

Born in 1845, Miss Fletcher's studies attracted

many familiar botanists, and knowledge of bird and plant life added much to her personal happiness over a span of 78 years. Her expertise was sought after when a group was compiling a record of flora in Middlesex County.

She centered her studies on "watts and casuals" which she found in various parts of Westford.

Woolen mills were bustling in this area during her life and demanded raw wool from all over the world, mainly Australia. With the wool came sheep manure mixed with seeds of these lands.

Farmers were eager to get the waste from the cleansing of the wool for use as fertilizer to spread over their fields. In time, the seeds developed and new unfamiliar plants found a good home in local fields.

Miss Fletcher left her botanical collection to the Gray Herbarium at Harvard. It includes 630 sheets of specimens, all well prepared and carefully mounted. Noteworthy among them are specimens of her unusual "finds" on wool waste.

Miss Emily left to the N.E. Botanical Club a copiously annotated copy of Middlesex flora which later were frequently cited as being the only representatives of this region.

"Indeed," the report read, "she had in some cases been the sole New England collector of certain species.

### Women excluded

The botanical club has 68 letters written by Miss Fletcher between 1901 and 1922 in the files at the Gray/Arnold Arboretum libraries. It must have been a disappointment to Emily, though for all through the years she was furnishing valuable and unusual data to the scientists in the New England Botanical Club, she was never invited to become a member.

### Why? Chauvanism.

It was only about ten years ago that this "exclusive" organization permitted women to join, according to Anna M. Reid, its librarian.

For many years huge display cases showed off flora and ornithological specimens of Miss Emily's collections. Time took its toll, although she was a self-taught taxidermist; her stuffed birds degenerated and finally were disposed.

With the recently expanded Fletcher Library, these cases were transferred to the town museum on the other side of Westford Common where one holds a collection of the Westford Women Remembered dolls, each with its own history. Included are Sarah E. Keyes who taught and died while teaching freed slaves in Kinston, N.C., following the Civil War; Quaker Eldress Lucy Prescott; Olive Prescott, who created museum-grade woven textiles; Nettie Stevens, noted geneticist; May Balch, a beloved local artist and poet; Marian Winnek, author and philanthropist; Ellen Swallow, who influenced the cause of women's rights and scientific education; and others.

Gordon Seavey recalls as a young boy searching the fields of the Cold Spring Farm with Miss Emily for unusual specimens which might be growing as a result of wool waste fertilization.

