

Opinion

19th century town indebted to library, Academy

Institutes of learning leave marks

By June W. Kennedy
Staff Correspondent

This is the fifth in a series of recollections by Kate Hamlin (1847-1937) about her youth in Westford, recorded late in her life from her California home:

"Too much can not be said in favor of the Agriculture College, which has been the means of educating many young men in a scientific and practical knowledge of everything pertaining to the profession of farming, for it is a profession as worthy and dignified as any of the so-called learned professions.

"Prosperity in any business or undertaking is far reaching; and the prosperity of Westford, largely through the improved methods adopted on a farm, have had much to do in enlarging the opportunities of the people. Successful farming has been the means of opening avenues to hundreds of opportunities undreamed of by their fathers.

"In my early years in Westford what were the intellectual advantages? The town, as a whole, to say nothing of the center village, was fortunate in having a good proportion of educated. From circumstances beyond their control, that education may often have been narrow, and the opportunities for advancement were extremely limited. But the natural refinement and basic culture existed.

"As I knew the village better than the outlying sections, I can speak more truthfully of the village itself. An unusually large percentage were cultivated men and women. As I mentioned before, the Academy and library were largely responsible for this fact. It is noticeable that in all

towns where the Academy was established, the rate of intelligence was higher than in surrounding towns not fortunate in having that influential factor.

"Westford Academy was highly favored in its early years in having at its head, from year to year, men of exceptional ability, if the records are true, and the influence of these men on the students who came under their teaching, and incidentally, on the citizens of the village was uplifting."

Long on respect

"The first principal preceptor, as he was then called — whom I remember, was Luther Shephard. I think he was succeeded by John D. Long, a young man of enthusiasm and broad culture. On taking his place as head of the Academy, he immediately gained the respect and love of the students; and the information was, during his principalship, at the peak of its prosperity.

"But the life and influence were not limited to his interest in the students alone. In a way, he became the instructor and inspirer of the whole people. The Debating Society, which he was interested in forming, reached to all parts, not only of the village, but to the outlying sections. Men and women, whose voices never before had been heard in public were interested in questions weekly considered, and took active part in the debates.

"I think the women took no part in debating, but they edited the 'Lit-

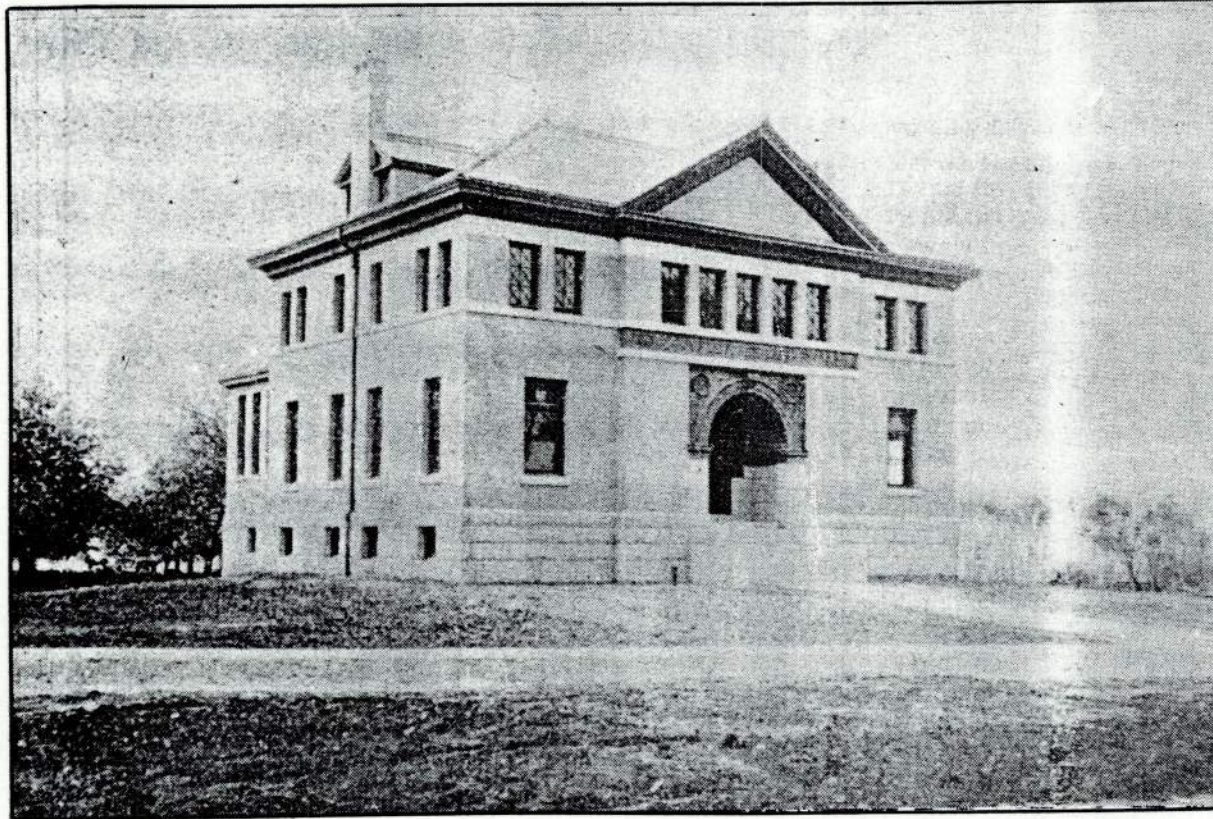


Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

A photo in the program for the 1895 dedication of J.V. Fletcher Library depicts the newly-erected building bare of landscaping.

ery Gatherer,' varied in interest, depending on the ability of the editors and also on that of the contributors.

"Able principals followed Mr. Long, but no one succeeded to the high government positions in which he was honored. At the time of the Spanish War, he was Secretary of the Navy with Theodore Roosevelt, assistant secretary. He was also a governor of Massachusetts. During the campaign for his election, was heard everywhere, 'We want but

little, but we want that little Long.'

"To the end of his life he kept his interest in Westford and, especially, the Academy."

Whitman as bird lover

"A few words of Mr. Whitman, who preceded the loved and honored Mr. Frost. Mr. Whitman may not have been a success as a disciplinarian, but he was a very able man in his specialty of biology. All who knew him must remember his scientific interest in the study of

birds and also know of his collection of many varieties.

"He would go out before dawn to look for migrating birds that were not native to his locality but had rested in the neighborhood during the night. By going out before dawn, he often found birds that were native to places far distant.

"Later, as is probably known by his Westford friends, he became Professor of Biology in Chicago University. Thirty years ago when I was in Chicago, I spent a day at his

home. He was then married and living near the university. He had kept up his interest in birds and at that time was endeavoring to trace the genealogy of the native dove.

"In his yard, and even in some of the rooms of his house, were cases in which were pigeons he had gathered through bird dealers from many parts of the country. Mr. Robison, an extensive dealer in birds in San Francisco, told me that he had orders from Professor Whitman to send him any bird that came to him, that might in any way belong to the pigeon family, and he sent him several rare birds.

"At Mr. Whitman's home was a Japanese artist who painted the birds, and the paintings were such exact reproductions of the live birds that one could almost fancy a bird could coo to him. Mr. Whitman told me that only a Japanese artist had the patience to do the work with the exactness required.

"The artist would take the bird to his studio and study it in the most meticulous detail, and spend a whole month on his work before he called it finished. At that time, he had completed the painting of two birds. But sad to relate not long after, Professor Whitman died, and the work was never finished.

"Of the work of Mr. Frost in the Academy, I need not speak. Many of those now living were students of his, and knew him better than I, who have been away so many years. I am sure his influence for the good of the Academy, and town, will be long felt.

"Perhaps few realize what a large number of professional men of the past generation were prepared for college in the Academy. Many years ago, I met a prominent lawyer who told me of his student days in Westford."

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.