

Distant from Civil War front, town not unscathed

Reminiscences of one who was there

By June W. Kennedy
Staff Correspondent

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

"The first important social affair that I remember was the James Buchanan Ball. As it was given after the election of Mr. [President] Buchanan, it must have been in the winter of 1856 or '57.

"There was great excitement and all the Democrats of whatever age were interested. Mr. Fisher and Mr. Nathan Hamlin were going, and were 'going to dance too,' they said, although they had not danced for years.

"The ball was held in the town hall, which was then the lower floor of the Unitarian Meeting House [First Parish Church United of Westford]. As the hall was lighted only by oil lamps attached to the various posts, the brilliant colors of the American flag and of the bunting, which decorated the hall, were not very distinctly seen.

"The costumes of the ladies may have been up to date but of those I do not remember. I had the previous winter attended a dancing school and was 'crazy' to dance. But this wonderful Buchanan Ball was not for children. However, my father took my sister and me to watch the dancing for awhile.

"But what a delightful surprise! It happened that a cotillion had been formed and one couple was lacking. All the ladies were on the floor, and yet, the set was incomplete. Just then, a tall man — as I looked up at him he seemed eight or nine feet tall — and, wonder of wonders, he asked me to dance with him.

"I was rather small for my age, and it must have been exceedingly funny to have seen this tall man — I remember he was William Hildreth — leading by the hand such a little girl. I can see him now leaning down to take my hand when the call, 'All promenade' was heard. No

picture of my young days is more vivid in my mind than that dance at the Buchanan Ball."

Leading up to Civil War

"As all know, the years of the Buchanan Administration were years for great excitement throughout the country, and Westford was not immune. Even if a child had no comprehension of the meaning of it all, she could but realize the tenseness of something unusual in the air; so when she heard the excited voices of disputants, she felt a thrill and knew that some great matters were somehow at stake, although she had no idea how great they might be.

"Indeed, how few older people fully realized the tremendous seriousness, and no one visualized four years of horrible war. The town was divided in its sympathies. While many were strongly opposed to slavery, there were few, if any, active abolitionists; and the enthusiasm upon the election of Lincoln was far from unanimous.

"My immediate family, and most of their friends, were anti-slavery and rejoiced in his election and naturally, I too, was for Lincoln.

"The great blow, which stirred all, was the news of the fall of Sumter. Immediately, some said that meant war, but even if it came, it would be short.

"When the President's proclamation came, calling for volunteers, the call was for three months (or was that first call for nine months?).

"Now we know that men could not be satisfactorily drilled for service in that time. But from all parts of our little town, men rushed to answer the President's call. And the air resounded with the song: 'We are coming Father Abram, three hundred thousand more.'

Anxious to enlist

"The recruits had no idea of the tragedy before them. They were confident they would soon return, leading a band of captive Southerners, and the war would be over.

"My father was then 46 years old. One morning at the breakfast table

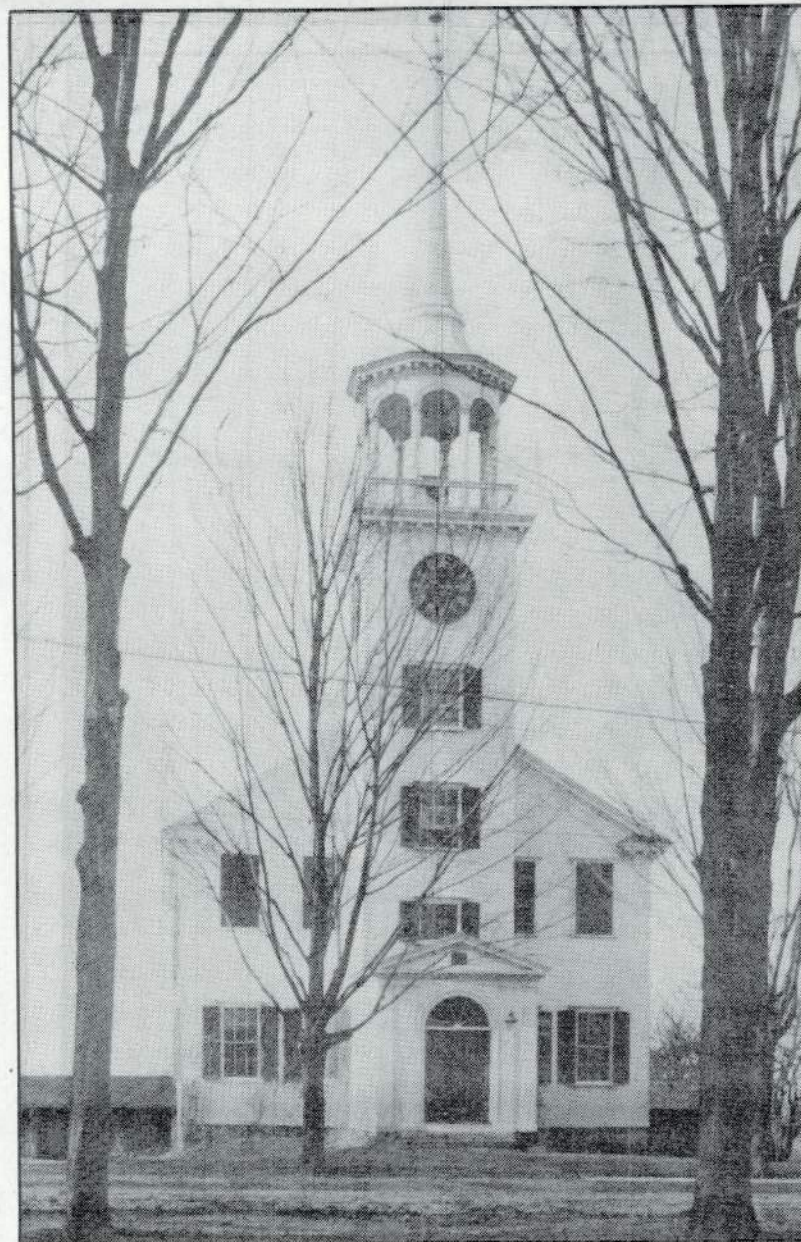


Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

The lower floor of the 1794 First Parish Meeting House was serving as town hall in the winter of 1856-57 when the ball marking the election of President Buchanan took place inside. The building's interior had been divided into two floors only ten years earlier. (Note the horse sheds to the sides and rear of the church in this old photo.)

he said, 'The war must be short, and if I were a younger man I should immediately enlist.'

"The New York papers came to us every evening on the down train from Ayer, and it was the duty of the young people to go to the station for them.

"Company C of the 16th Regiment, to which the first volunteers from Westford were assigned, was in camp at Groton. One day the company, led by Captain King, came to Westford to encourage the enlistment. What a day that was! It stands in my memory as one of the red-letter days.

"The music, the officers with their swords, the soldiers with their guns, and American flag at their head, as they marched through the village streets — all was most thrilling. If I am not mistaken, the ladies had prepared a great repast

for them. Perhaps I am dreaming this.

"These young soldiers, not yet accustomed to long marches, walked to the train for their return to camp. We could not bear to see the last of them, so walked beside them down the hill to the train and cheered them as they left. They had a wonderful day for us.

"It was not long before news came of the attack in Baltimore, as the regiment attempted to cross the city. Whitney and Ledd, two from Lowell, were killed. In a little square in Lowell stands a monument which the city raised to their

memory.

Heavy casualties

"A large percentage of the men who enlisted from Westford were killed in battle, or from wounds, or illness. The young people of the town should not fail to read with reverence the long list of their names on the tablet in the town hall.

"The only military funeral in Westford, for a boy who had died in the war, was that of Harvey Bailey. His body was returned to his home and the funeral services were held in the Congregational Church [now First Parish Hall]. The church was crowded and many stood outside during the services.

"Whether his death was from wounds or from illness, I do not know. He could not have been more than 16 when he enlisted. I remember the sad-faced crowd and the solemn music. The people seemed to realize as never before, the terrible seriousness of the war.

"Soon after the outbreak of hostilities, another youth of the village, Edwin Wilkins, enlisted. When his father learned the news, he said, 'He shall not go alone, I, too, shall enlist.' The two — father and son — came out of the war safely.

"As there is no evil without some good, so it was with the war. Various factions, which previously had never worked in harmony now united in their work with enthusiasm for the Sanitary Commission. Throughout the war the women met weekly at the various homes and made needed garments for the soldiers and for the wounded in hospitals. Knitting was in every woman's hands in all her leisure hours. Funds were raised by fairs and other methods; and at the weekly sewing circles it was the pleasure of children to pass the plate for the regular fee from the members.

Supporting the effort

"The Abbot Worsted Co., was most generous in furnishing all the yarn that could be utilized. As anti-septic bandages and lint were not purchasable at that time, every home was ransacked for materials for bandages and every bit of oil linen scraped for lint. One of the war songs contained, 'Scraping the lint.'

"Judging from the variety of articles I, personally, knit during the World War, I think in the Civil War that most of the knitting was for stockings.

"It was quite common for letters to go with the various articles that were sent, and often a pleasant correspondence resulted. At least one young lady in Westford became engaged to the soldier who had received her first letter, and after the

war, the two were happily married. This case I knew of, and it is probable there were many others.

"It must not be forgotten that much of the interest of the women in their work was inspired by two well known women who gave their services as nurses. One was Miss Emma Southwick, a sister of Mrs. John Weeks, sister-in-law of Rev. George Rice, at that time the Unitarian clergyman. From these women Westford heard of the immediate needs, and much of their work was sent directly to them to use at their discretion.

"It is sad to be obliged to relate that there were some in the town who were not in sympathy with the cause for which so many of our brave men were fighting and dying.

"Prices were so high that many were unable to purchase needed articles such as ordinary cotton cloth that before the war could be bought for ten or 12 cents. When sugar reached the price of 40 cents per pound, my mother ceased using it in her tea. But how little our sacrifice compared with that of the women of the South!

"For four years the army fought and the work of the women continued. The spirits of the people were up or down, according to the news from the seat of the war.

"Finally, word came of the surrender of Lee. Those who recall the joy which everywhere prevailed when armistice was declared (that meant the end of the World War) can imagine the relief and happiness of all when news of that surrender came.

"But how close ever are Joy and Sorrow! A few weeks after the inauguration of Lincoln for his second term, word came of his assassination. All felt a personal loss. The flags that had waved so joyously only a brief time before dropped to half mast, and hung, as though they, too, were in sorrow. The air, no longer, resounded with shouts of victory, but was filled with the moaning of thousands of tolling bells.

"In homes, and on the street, one spoke in softened tones or whispers, as in a house where a loved one has passed way.

Services were held in all the churches, for even those who had been enemies of Lincoln were saddened. The papers appeared in deep mourning and those which had been bitter enemies of Lincoln for four years had the heaviest black."

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