

## Opinion

# Looking back at quaint town traditions

## When Parish Hall, Meeting House were more than a Common apart

By June W. Kennedy  
Staff Contributor

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

"In the early history of Westford only one church stood in the village, not dignified, however, by the name 'church', for that would have been too suggestive of the religious tyranny of England, from which the Puritans had fled.

"Instead, it was called the 'Meeting House' and was used not only for religious services but for secular meetings. Under Channing and other liberal and advanced thinkers, a split occurred among the members of the congregation. The Meeting House remained with advanced, or liberal, members and the conservative left and built the orthodox church, now standing on its original site at the southeast angle of the Common. [Now the First Parish Church United Hall.]

"The date of building must have been in the 1820s. [The actual date is 1828.] Later, the term 'orthodox' was gradually dropped and replaced by 'Congregational'.

"In the front of the auditorium, and almost touching the ceiling,

was a gallery where the choir sat. This gallery faced the pulpit, and during the singing of the last hymn at the close of the afternoon session, the weary audience rose and turning their backs on the minister, faced the singers.

"A special feature of the service always interested me. If a member of a family of church members had died, on the Sunday following the funeral the family was publicly prayed for. The custom was old, and, for aught I know, is still continued.

"Whittier, in his poem 'Mary Garvin', referring to the custom, says: 'Uprising, the aged couple stood, And the fair Canadian also, in her modest maidenhood,' while the pastor earnestly prayed for them.

"One instance stands out in my memory: a young boy had died, the only son in a family where there were three daughters. On the following Sunday, before the sermon, the pastor announced, 'Mr. and Mrs. . . . with their daughters, desire the prayers of this congregation, that the death of their son and brother may be sanctified to them for their spiritual good.'

"The family then stood while the pastor gave voice to long and earnest prayer. I have a suspicion that



Photo courtesy of June W. Kennedy

Kate Hamlin's home stands as it has on Hildreth Street with a window on Town Common, today occupied by the Laurence Benedict family.

some went to church that morning chiefly to witness the ceremony, and to see how the family would 'take it.'

"I wonder if the custom of tolling the bell on the death of a resident of the town is still continued in Westford?

"Beyond the church was the house of John B. Fletcher [the home presently of Mike and Ellen Harde] and a few rods away was the large house of Dr. Benjamin Osgood. [This house was razed in

the late '60s or early '70s.]

"What a dear old doctor he was! In his earlier practice he had made his rounds on horseback, carrying his medicines in his saddlebags. [The house to which she is referring was more recently remembered as the Sullivan property, the house and barn of which was razed in 1971. Originally it was a classic example of colonial simplicity and charm.]

"When he became too old for that

method of travel, he used a two-wheeled gig; this consisted of an arm chair set on an axle with springs. He continued to carry his remedies in the saddlebags.

"I remember standing at his knee while he measured out his powders on the end of his pocket knife and carefully wrapped them in papers. In my presence, also, he rolled his pills, and I wondered what they were made of. Pinkroot and senna seemed to be his universal remedies, for no matter what the ailment, those words were always in the directions to my mother.

"Dr. Osgood stood high among the physicians of those days. But, what changes in medicine and surgery have taken place since then! Before the days of the discovery of ether, a brother of my grandfather, living in Maine, had an infected leg. To save his life amputation became necessary. And the question was a most serious one.

"When the physicians were ready, the man, who was not a drinking man, was plied with liquor until he became unconscious and 'dead drunk.'

"The case was considered so serious that prayer meetings were held in his and the neighboring villages during the operation. A case of this kind makes us realize the wonderful relief that ether and other anesthetics have brought to thousands of sufferers."

*June Kennedy lives in Westford and is the author of "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos.*