

# Memories of 19th century Westford

Much fewer choices,  
simpler pleasures  
1847-1937

By June W. Kennedy  
Staff correspondent

**K**ate Hamlin grew up in Westford in the middle of the last century. From her home in California late in her life, she wrote her memories of the political, social and religious atmosphere of her hometown. The following is the first of a multi-part series excerpted from Kate Hamlin's memoirs:

"I was a resident of Westford who was associated with the place, either as a permanent resident, or annual visitor, for many years. I have been asked by one, whose childhood and youth were passed in Westford, and who has retained the same affection for the town that I have retained, to write, for the present generation and for those to follow, reminiscences of my childhood and to refer to some of the changes that have taken place since then.

"The years since 1847, when I made my humble and unconscious entrance, have brought many changes; even if they have been so gradual as to be unnoticed or unrealized at the time. From month to month, and from year to year, things seemed stationary. Yet I find 1937 and 1847, in some respects, hardly on speaking terms.

"Much of the vocabulary of 1937 would be as little understood by 1847 as Choctaw or other of the Indian dialects. I refer, of course to those words now in common use because of the many inventions during those years.

"While in those early days we lacked many of the improvements, inventions and conveniences that are now common to all — (I'm sure for a fact that Kate Hamlin is not referring to television, automatic dishwashers, freezers, super highways, etc.) — knowing nothing of them we did not miss them any more than we, of the present day, are conscious of missing those that may be common a century hence, and of which we now have no conception."

## Lighting the way

"You ask what did we have for lights? Well, the ordinary family had tallow candles mostly; the common everyday affairs were dipped candles, while those for special occasions looked a little more elegant having been made in molds. Some whale oil lamps were used, and the fragrance from them was suggestive of an igloo. Occasionally, a family used a species of fluid, but because of its explosive properties, this was not much forward especially where there were children.

"One of the many duties of the housewife, during the autumn, was the dipping or moulding of the candles for the long winter evenings. This was rather an interesting, if laborious, process. For the dipping, a large boiler was used, filled with the melted tallow, and the children were required to keep their distance from it.

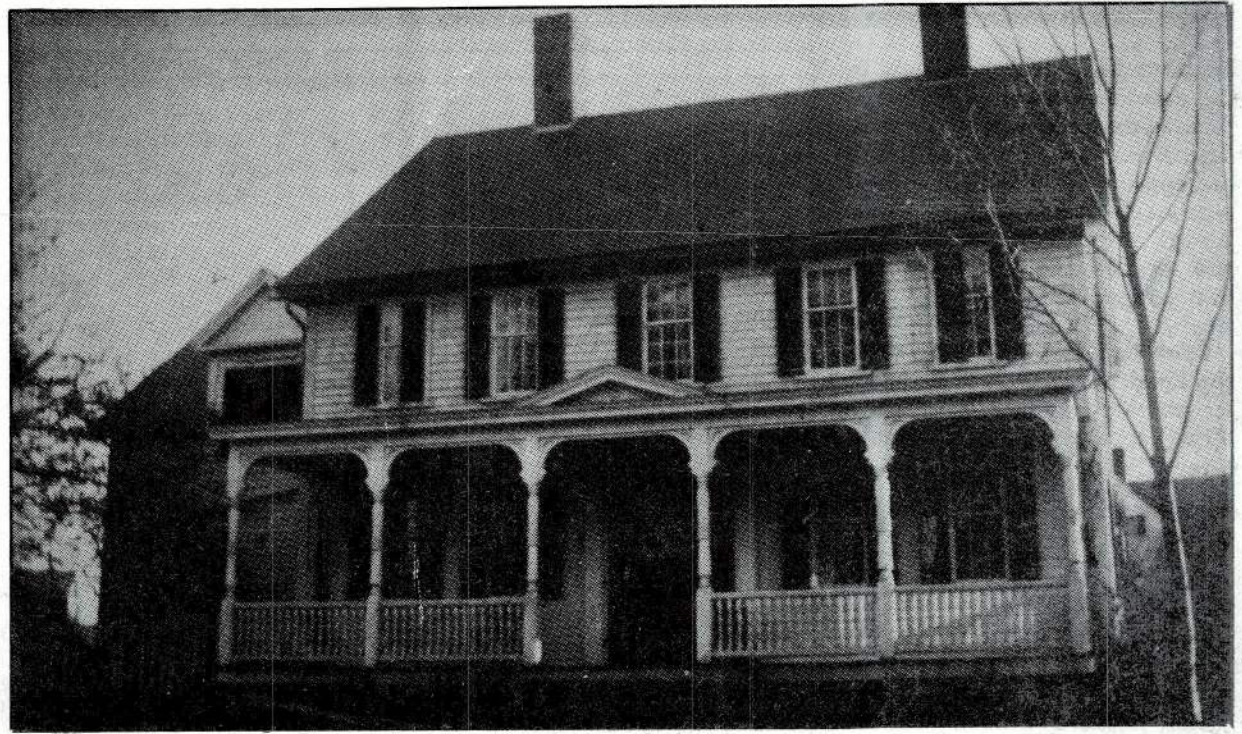


Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

The Westford Center home where Kate Hamlin lived after her birth in 1847 currently is owned by George and Elizabeth (Fletcher) Glenn. It straddles the corners of Hildreth Street and Boston Road.

"Rods, perhaps a dozen, were in readiness on which hung candles. The dipper would carefully take up one rod, plunge the wicking carefully in the hot tallow, taking it out, the hot tallow would quickly harden, and putting the rod on a place prepared for it, the dipper would continue until all had been dipped, when the process would be repeated and continued until the candles had reached the desired size. Of course the larger the candle, the longer it would burn when lighted.

"Moulding was much less interesting, and also less laborious. The hot tallow being simply poured into the moulds, in which had been placed the candle wicking; but fewer candles could be made in the same time.

"Other essential occupations of the autumn, in preparation for the winter, were making soap and cider apple sauce. As there were none of the many canned fruits on the pantry shelves, as there are now, the housewife must have a quantity of dried fruits.

"The drugstores being unknown in the country, many herbs must be gathered and kept for winter use. Among those that I remember, were wormwood, camomile, sarsaparilla, sage, pennyroyal, peppermint and spearmint. After drying, these were hung on the attic rafters ready for use.

"A few of the older women were expert at the spinning wheel for the spinning of wool. The flax wheel had passed out of use, but in a few of the attics might still be seen the small flax wheel.

"Yes, we had the district school but not graded as most of the schools are today; and, as the teachers were often changed, the work, from term to term, was far from continuous. I don't know how

many times I went over the same pages of geography as a new teacher, for some reason, would think it best for me to review.

"For games, we were rather limited. We had handball and beanbags, but not tennis or golf, and croquet came in only years after we had left the primary class. I must confess, however, that if I compare the children's faces, as I remember them, with the faces of children I see today, those of my childhood were as happy and joyous as those I see now. After all, it is not what we have, but what we are that brings happiness."

## Keeping the Sabbath

"Sunday was rather a dull day. We could go to church in the morning and after that, to Sunday School. In the afternoon we could go for walks which were decidedly limited. A favorite one was to the top of Prospect Hill. Another, to Snow's Burying Ground, where we wandered among the old tombstones searching for old epitaphs.

"But if our pleasures on Sunday were somewhat restricted, we were far from unhappy. There was little of the old Puritan strictness in our family, but I remember two or three families where the children were not allowed out of the house on Sunday, except to walk in the most orderly and dignified manner with their parents to and from church. At home they could only read the Bible, and Sunday School books issued by the American Tract Society.

"During the week, we did have a certain amount of recreation. In summer we enjoyed the freedom of the country pastures, gathering wildflowers, or picking the luscious

berries which abounded everywhere. In the autumn we gathered nuts and the brilliant forest leaves.

"The winters, too, were far from dull. We had coasting, snowballing, skating, etc. Now Californians go with delight to Yosemite or to Lake Tahoe for those same pleasures which were at our very door.

"For evening amusements we had the singing and dancing school, and semi-annually, a ball. And what a treat that was! Our evening pleasures ended on Friday.

"In earlier times, the Sabbath began Saturday at sundown and ended at sundown on Sunday. Later, the hours were changed and Sunday began, as now, on Saturday at midnight and closed Sunday at midnight. Although for a long time after the change a few continued to keep Sunday according to the former way. Therefore, influenced by the old custom, no parties or entertainment of any kind were planned for Saturday evenings.

"The two great days of the year were the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving Day. Christmas was not celebrated to the extent it is now. To be sure, we hung up stockings and had a few presents. On the Fourth of July we got up before dawn and rang furiously the two church bells and that of the Academy, and then fired off our harmless torpedoes or firecrackers.

"At school, we could choose whether we would have Christmas or New Year's Day for a holiday — we could not have both, so we usually chose Christmas, because that came first."

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