

Nineteenth century sees berry fruitful Westford

Cultivation came naturally on farm

By June W. Kennedy
Staff Correspondent

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

"Leaving the war and returning to the years of my childhood, as I remember the inhabitants of the town and village, there was no family not of good respectable English descent.

"As far as I know, there was no family who could have traced its ancestry direct to the Mayflower. However, a friend of my sister, speaking to her one day, told her she was the only New England woman he had ever met whose ancestors had not arrived in the Mayflower, and he thought the ship must have been most expansible.

"There were no 'servants' in the families — if assistance in the house or on the farm was needed, sons or daughters of neighbors were found who gladly came as 'help' and were members of the family.

"There were two exceptions. From somewhere, two young colored women, sisters, came to the village. 'Susan' worked for Mrs. John B. Fletcher, and 'Martha' for my mother.

"She was the first negress I had

ever seen and, at first I was afraid of her. I distinctly remember one thing in regard to her. In our kitchen was a large woodbox near the stove. I crouched there, where Martha could not see me, watching her about her work with interest, but with fear. Though before she left us, I had lost my fear and had become very fond of her.

"Soon after this time, the great famine in Ireland sent many Irish to America and a few reached Westford and secured work there. Jerry Sullivan was one of them. As the years passed, the racial character of the people changed, for various causes, until now, there are probably many to be found there, other than those of pure English stock.

"No change in Westford is more marked than the industrial life of the people, particularly in that of the farmers. I remember the farm as a place of little money income. The farmer's trading was largely that of barter: eggs were exchanged at the village store for groceries of various kinds. Milk was made into butter which was also bartered for groceries, except a few pounds that were sold to neighbors.

"Grains were taken to the mill to be ground into meal or flour. Apples were dried for winter use or made into cider, which when it reached the stage of 'hard' cider was one of the worst of drinks; if over indulged in, it made a man 'fighting drunk.'

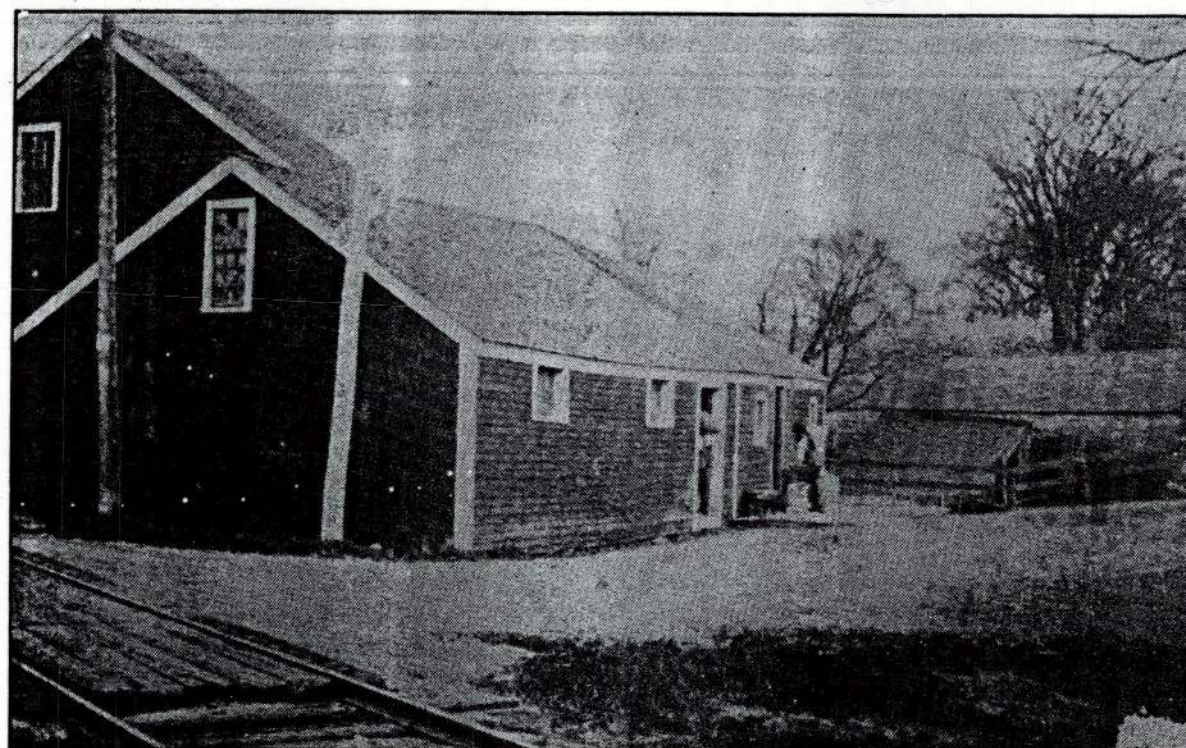


Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

The Heywood and Burbeck Grist Mill at Westford Depot on Sotny Brook received grain from farmers in 19th century Westford, when land was valued for its produce.

"A few things, like potatoes and other vegetables, were sold outright for cash. How the New England farmer ever got sufficient money to pay his taxes and clothe and educate his family is a mystery. Fortunately, life was simple and luxuries were almost unknown."

Berry important crop

"Later, times and conditions were to be changed. A few intelligent and far-sighted men looked over the country and their eyes were opened to the fact that fruits and berries, all about them, were growing wild; and they realized that the soil was naturally fruit producing soil, and suitable for the cultivation of many varieties of fruits.

"First, a few farmers put out strawberry plants and found a demand for the fruit in the neighboring cities. The first berries marketed were sent without the hulls, and beautifully packed in quart boxes.

"After the Concord grape was produced and the vine found to be a hardy one, small vineyards were planted, here and there, as favorable spots were found. To be sure, once in every five years, or so, the frost came just before the time of gathering and claimed the whole harvest. But, unlike the western farmer whose sole dependence is too often on one thing only, the eastern farmer had a dozen others: a patch of corn, marketable vegetables, some potatoes, peaches, plums, apples or pears, which were not injured by the frost.

"Perhaps another year, the warm February sun started the peach buds, and a few days later came a severe freezing spell, and good-bye to all peaches for that year. But the philosophical man said, 'Well, I expect this every few years and of course, I am disappointed but the other crops are promising.'

"Perhaps no one fruit had done

more for the prosperity of the Westford farmer than the blackberry. Some years ago, an article appeared in the *Boston Herald* entitled, 'Westford, the Home of the Blackberry.'

"During the years I have been away there may have been many changes; but I am very sure the fact remains that, because of improved methods in agriculture, and the increased number of varieties of vegetables and fruits demanded by the cities, the New England farmer, particularly the Westford farmer, enjoys a greater degree of prosperity than his ancestors enjoyed.

"He is fortunate in being so near the Boston market that his fruits can go by truck, from the orchard, direct to the market in a few hours without rehandling, thus avoiding all injury by change from truck to train, and again from train to truck. The fruit reaches the market in as

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Great Comet

"It was during the Civil War that the Great Comet appeared, and for many nights it was a wonderful sight among the host of stars. The comet was visible for so long a time in the heavens. From Prospect Hill, where the view to the horizon was almost unbroken, the firmament, with its countless stars, the full moon in all her majesty, and comet riding gloriously among the heavenly hosts was a never-to-be-forgotten sight.

"Not the least of the pleasures was the pleasant drive, some Sunday morning in June, to visit the Harvard Shakers, a religious sect.

"In regard to wild game, all that was left in my childhood of great abundance, was a few wild pigeons. My grandfather, in his youth, had been an enthusiastic hunter, and when he was quite old he was fond of trapping pigeons.

"He had a place, not far from home, which he kept baited with grains of buckwheat. One morning, he returned home beaming with joy, for he had trapped in his net a flock of 150 pigeons. I think that was the very last of the wild pigeons in our section of the country."

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