

# Women of substance

## Overcame 19th century sexism

Compiled by June W. Kennedy  
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*This is the sixth in a series of recollections about Westford by Kate Hamlin (1847-1937), recorded late in her life from her home in California.*

"Of the assistants in the Academy — preceptresses — there were at least three women who reached high positions. When I was very young, I heard the name of Margaret F. Foley, an assistant at that time. She was an artist and, on leaving her position in the Academy, went to Italy where she continued her studies in sculpture and produced figures which were favorably noted in the art world.

"If I mistake not, she died early in her career.

"The second of the assistant teachers who made her mark in the world was Harriet B. Rogers. Her work under Alexander Bell, the inventor of the telephone, using his system of visible speech was most successful in the Institute for Deaf Mutes of Northampton. She was specially fitted for the work, having great patience and decision of character, and one whose speech was so clearly articulated that students, after a little study, could easily read her lips.

"Neither of the two women mentioned, however, gained the international recognition accorded Miss Nettie Stevens. Westford has special reason to be proud of her, as she was a long resident of the town.

"After a few years engaged in

teaching, she entered Leland Stanford University in California. Later, her success in biological work resulted in valuable scholarships which enabled her to continue her studies in Italy and Germany.

"For a paper published by her in 1905, she was awarded a prize of \$1000. At the time, the prize had been awarded only three times, and she was the second American to win it.

"Her entire life, not excepting the months of her summer vacations, was spent in research work in various laboratories.

"Miss Stevens, however, was not the pioneer in the march of Westford women toward a college education. It was but a few years after the close of the Civil War, when Miss Ellen Swallow knocked at the Vassar College and was admitted. I think she was the first of Westford's young women to enter college.

"She was graduated with honors and soon after became an assistant chemist in Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Later, she married Professor Richards, and, if I am not mistaken, was awarded a full professorship and she did much valuable work.

"Vassar, as all know, was strictly a woman's college, as it is today. The colleges for men had then not become sufficiently chivalric to allow women to enter their sacred portals.

"Later, however, the bars were removed from some of the doors,



Photo courtesy June Kennedy

Nettie Stevens

and women, one by one, entered. The University of Michigan was one of the first to say, 'Well, come in, if you insist.'

"The first year after the invitation, three young women accepted. The year following, about 20 were admitted, among them another young woman from Westford — my sister, Sarah Dix Hamlin. She was the first from Westford to enter a man's college.

"Now, we know, all but a very few of the colleges and universities in the country welcome women as cordially as they welcome men.

"A large number of high school graduates, today, look forward to four years of college."

With so many colleges so very recently having gone coeducational, it seems that the above statement is even more appropriate today than the 50-plus years ago when it was written.

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