

## MEMORIES

# Stevens pioneers genetics

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By GEORGE A. PARKHURST

WESTFORD - A few feet back from the street in Westford's Fairview Cemetery on the road between Drum Hill (Chelmsford) and Westford center stand five white marble gravestones.

There is little to distinguish these stones from others in the burying ground; in fact, they are quite ordinary. But one of them memorializes a woman who was anything but ordinary. She was Nettie Maria Stevens, world-renowned biologist and geneticist.

Both Westford and Chelmsford can lay claim to Nettie Stevens:

- Westford, because she spent her childhood there, graduating from Westford Academy with top honors and later teaching at the Academy and serving as trustee of the library.

- Chelmsford, because her early Stevens and Adams ancestors were leading citizens of Chelmsford. Nettie was employed (1893) as the second librarian of the Free Public Library of Chelmsford, the predecessor of the Adams Library.



Nettie Maria Stevens

### Marriage and birth

Back in 1663, John Stevens settled in Chelmsford and, the following year, married Elizabeth Hildreth. The Stevens homestead was located on Stony Brook Way (now Old Westford Road) near the corner of School Street where five generations of John Stevens' descendants were brought up.

Nettie was born in Cavendish, Vt. on July 7, 1861, her parents having been married there in 1854. Her mother died shortly after the birth of Nettie's sister, Emma Julia, and her father remarried. The family then moved to the Free Village section of Westford. Nettie received her early education in the Westford public schools and Westford Academy, receiving her diploma in 1880.



George A. Parkhurst

Today, Westford Academy is Westford's public high school. However, from its organization in 1792 until the early part of the 20th century, it was a private academy that attracted students from the surrounding area.

Following graduation, Nettie accepted a position as teacher of Latin, English, mathematics, physiology and zoology in the high school at Lebanon, N.H. But after three terms at Lebanon, she decided, at the age of 31, to continue her education by enrolling at Westfield Normal School where she distinguished herself academically.

It is reported that she passed a four-year course in only two years in spite of the fact that her courses included physics, botany, zoology, geography, astronomy, chemistry, and

physiology.

### Return to Westford

She returned to Westford following her graduation from Normal School and accepted a teaching position in the District School at Minot's Corner for a brief period before becoming a preceptress, or teacher, at Westford Academy.

In 1893, the Stevens family, consisting of Nettie, her sister Emma, and their father (her stepmother and a baby brother having died) moved to Chelmsford. Nettie cut short her term as trustee of the Westford

Free Public Library, because of this move, but soon became librarian of the new Free Public Library in Chelmsford. She resumed her teaching career in 1895 at the Howe School - a non-public high school in Billerica.

Leland Stanford University, with its reputation as a youthful, innovative school with opportunities for individuals to pursue their own scholastic interests, lured Nettie to California in September, 1896. Her father and sister followed her three years later and established a home in the town of Mountain View, near Palo Alto.

Nettie earned BA and master's degrees at Stanford, concentrating on her studies and ignoring all extra-curricular activities. She then moved to Bryn Mawr, near Philadelphia, with a graduate scholarship in biology but, after six months, her brilliant work was rewarded with a fellowship to