

By Mats Roing: Feb 2007, VFTT.org Post – Life of Kate Sleeper

The life of Kate Sleeper (1862 - 1949)

I've been curious about this woman since I first saw her name on the map. She must have been some important person since trails and peaks were named after her. Cath Goodwin sent me a copy of the April 1995 issue of Wonalancet Outdoor Club's Newsletter which had an article about her. I've also taken some information from the White Mountain encyclopedia: "Forest and Crag" by Laura and Guy Waterman.

I was thinking of writing a short narrative of several prominent women in the history of the White Mountains. There have been a surprising number of hardcore dudettes in this part of the world where you think the early history of the settlers and trailcrews was made by a bunch of burly bearded lumberjacks.

Kate Sleeper (1862 – 1949)

She was the only child to Charles F. Sleeper and Zilpha Thomas and was born in the Greater Boston area. Her grandfather, John Sleeper, had a career on the sea (where he made it to captain by the age of 28) before becoming editor of the Boston Journal, mayor of Roxbury and state senator. At age ten, Kate's mother died and they moved to her grandfather's home in Roxbury with her dad. She got a good education and spent summers up in New Hampshire. She also had relatives and friends in the Tamworth area which she visited frequently.

In 1890, while on a visit to Tamworth, she decided to open a country inn. She started to search for a good place for it. She fell in love with Birch Intervale (later renamed to Wonalancet) during one of her recon trips and decided settle down there. She bought a 600 acre farm which was the property of the early settler Theophilous brown. The house was built in 1814 and Kate renamed it "Wonalancet Farm".

Although Kate was young, charming and energetic, she needed help to run the farm. She asked a young friend (19 years old) and relative (by marriage), Arthur Walden, to help her with the farm portion. They finally married in 1902 after living together for 12 years. Kate was small, blonde, had deep blue eyes, had a high-pitched voice. She was also attractive, sociable, sincere, determined and possessed a rare quality of inspiring others to want what she wanted.

Kate initiated the first service held in Wonalancet Chapel. Reverend Walden, Rector at St. Pauls Cathedral in Boston was a guest at the inn when Kate asked if he wanted to hold a sermon in the chapel. The residents soon thereafter formed Wonalancet Corporation to provide for the chapel which is non-denominational. In 1896 the first tower and bell were added. The tower was rebuilt in 1936 and dedicated to Kate. She and her husband are interred close to the northeast corner of the building.

Kate also formed Wonalancet Out Door Club (WODC). In the summer of 1891 she had four-time AMC president Charles E. Fay and Councillor William Ladd as guests at the inn. She thought that Birch Intervale would become more attractive to visitors if they made Wonalancet an easy access point to Passaconaway. Mr. Ladd and Mr. Fay met with the local farmers by invitation of Kate to form the association (which in 1898 was named Wonalancet Out Door Club) which purpose was "...building and maintenance of paths, to improve the place and develop its natural beauties for the attraction of summer guests". Just a few days later work began on a trail to the summit of Passaconaway. The trail is now called Dicey's Mill Trail. Within the next ten years the following trails were made by members of WODC:

- Nat Berry built the Brook Path to Chocorua (1892)

- Tom Wiggin built the steep Wiggin Trail to Whiteface
- Nat and Mr. Fay constructed Camp Rich high on Passaconaway
- Blueberry Ledges Trail to Chocorua from the north
- Lawrence Trail on Saugus
- The ridgeline trail between Whiteface and Passaconaway

Kate was also the first postmaster in Wonalancet when a post office was established in 1893. This is when the name changed from Birch Intervale to Wonalancet. The Postal authorities feared confusion with Intervale north of North Conway. Kate also brought in the first telephone to Wonalancet.

In 1914, Kate was also pivotal in securing 3,000 acres of forest around "the Bowl", north of Wonalancet to become part of WMNF instead of becoming logged. See also Thw Weeks Act of 1914. She organized a big parade in Wonalancet to celebrate this event. Many locals dressed up as native Americans for the parade.

She was decorated by the French Government for running an operation making surgical dressings and clothing for suffering people in Europe.

In 1947 their home was destroyed in a fire in which her husband Arthur dies. Kate lived for another two years at passed away at an age of 87.

Next time you scale Mount Katherine or one of the Sleepers, you know a little more about this remarkable woman.