

From the Archives

A Reflection from Carolyn Powers, Executive Director of Falmouth Historical Society

Although Katharine Lee Bates was born 150 years ago and died in 1929, she dealt with many of the issues we still struggle with today. Through her poetry and journals, we learn of her beliefs and thoughts. She was a pacifist who lived through the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and World War I. In her poem “How Long” Katharine asked,

How long shall bomb and bullet think for human brains?

The daughter of a Congregational minister, she refused to take the Christian oath as a condition of advancement to department chair at Wellesley College. In a letter to her mother, Katharine wrote:

I cannot bind my own beliefs and I do not think it right for a college which is established to seek truth, to dictate its truth at the outset.

In response the college trustees dropped that requirement.

As a child and adult growing up in a post-slavery world, Katharine expressed disapproval in her writing of the treatment of the Wampanoag in her native Falmouth and of African-Americans she met in her travels. As America celebrated the splendor of the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, Katharine drew attention to the economic depression. In her poetry she also supported appreciation and preservation of the natural world. Katharine inspired other women to pursue an education, observing that “the class-room was but the vestibule to education.” She was an independent-minded, rebellious risk taker. And, despite her struggles, Katharine remained an idealist who



Katharine Lee Bates was buried in Falmouth’s Oak Grove Cemetery in 1929. In 2007 the directors of the cemetery reported, “Hardly a week goes by that our superintendent isn’t asked for the location of her grave.” Photo by Janet Chalmers.

believed in the best qualities of people in America and around the world.