

**19. CHATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY -MARGARET KEISLER MEMORIAL
SCHOLARSHIP**

ESSAY: Chatham: My Town by a River. The history of our town is made up of individual, unique stories. Please share your own distinctive story about growing up in Chatham. Your story may become part of the Chatham Historical Society anecdotal history archive.

I have lived on Edgewood Road, at number 27, for my entire life. Edgewood is special, not just to me, but to my neighborhood as well. It is the only road in Chatham with a 15 mph speed limit, pushed for by neighborhood parents long before I was born; there's also a mighty totem pole that sits at Edgewood's bend, carved by another neighbor after Hurricane Sandy to commemorate the falling of an iconic tree; we're cut right down the middle by the town line, under jurisdiction from both the Township and the Borough. My family's the Township, but our neighbor to the right is Borough, and the family across the way has to pay taxes to both the Borough and Township because of historical zoning ordinances, I've been told. You wouldn't know it though, (aside from green garbage bags on only half the street), because everyone on Edgewood helps one another, whether it be on Borough bulk-pick-up days or secret access to the Township dump, we stick together.

Edgewood is in the smack-dab middle of Chatham, in the middle of our *Town by the River*, in the middle of my home.

Which is why, ever since I can remember, I've walked to school.

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Down Edgewood through Orchard Road (to Washington Ave), up Lafayette (to Lafayette), down Lafayette (to the Middle School), or up Lafayette again (to the High School), you can get to just about every school in Chatham on foot each morning, rain or shine.

Which is exactly what I have done for the past thirteen years.

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During my Washington Ave years, walking was always done with a parent, but when I was "old" enough to go it alone, on the first day of fourth grade, I couldn't wait to get out there and explore what I had known like the back of my hand for years already: the streets of my town. However, walking without the established group of parents and neighbors I had known in elementary school proved to be harder than I thought...

In a moment of sheer fourth grade horror (but more-so miscommunication), I was abandoned by the pre-arranged walking group that day after school. Panicked and confused, I walked home alone. Not so impressive for a first day of anything. I guess I had needed some parental guidance after all.

So, after the horrendous first-day-fiasco, my mom decided to take things into her own hands and connected me with an old friend, Molly, who also was without a walking buddy. In need of redemption that second day, Molly and I walked to school and back, no problems, just the roads and ourselves, *together*.

But, little did we know, that second day would lead to more than just on-time arrivals to school and back. It started something bigger: a lifelong friendship and an important lesson in walking to school.

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For the next eight years, through thick and thin, rain and shine, Molly and I continued to walk to school. Up Lafayette, down, and back up again, it was always Molly and I, Molly and me, together.

Countless years on the sidewalk with her has led to countless memories on Lafayette Avenue. On my favorite occasion, Molly and I got caught in the rain. We had one broken umbrella between the two of us and got soaking wet. Funny thing about that morning was, we were still close to her house when it started raining, but refused to turn back. All for the sake of walking to school we braved the rains (and the humiliation of being brought a new pair of pants when we got to class).

Once we were almost late to school because of a broken clock.

Once there was a snow storm.

And one other time, a wind tunnel.

There's even a photo of us snuggled in earmuffs, taken by Mrs. Kraemer, after a chilly morning of walking to school. Which is memorialized in the front of our Lafayette yearbook.

Once we were the middle schoolers who feared on-coming high schoolers walking the shared sidewalk, but pretty soon, we became those same high schoolers, on the cusp of our senior year.

Or so I thought.

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I can still remember the day. I was standing at the edge of a different friend's driveway (I had been getting rides home instead of walking) when someone told me Molly was moving far away to South Carolina that summer. The far off final days we joked about, that we longed for, weren't careless musings anymore. Molly and I didn't have a year, we had a month and change.

She was leaving.

Forever.

And I wasn't there to walk home with her, after what I can only imagine was a long, hard, and bittersweet day.

The end had come sooner than I realized, and I didn't know how to feel.

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As I was digging through old art projects later that day, trying to forget what was looming, I stumbled across some drawings from Freshman year. I had come a long way artistically since then, so the drawings were all but forgotten, sitting in a pile, poorly stored, in a closet. My favorite from that year, a drawing of an old photograph from 1897, sat at the bottom. I remembered that it was part of a project our class completed for a banquet held by the Historical Society; we had drawn old pictures of Chatham from their archive. I hadn't seen the drawing since it was put away when school ended, and I had totally forgotten about it.

I actually began collecting old photographs during the pandemic, so it was a surprise to see my interest in them was rooted long before that year. My curiosity started out with old photos of my family, and later expanded to other photos of unknown faces that were disregarded in antique stores. I looked at my drawing, and, although it was crude compared to what I could complete now, it was a comfort. A blast from the past. That drawing had the power to take me back to the very seat in the art room it was created in. The friends I sat with, the jokes and shared memories we all had. Just one photograph brought all those memories together.

I looked at my photograph again. There was a carriage with a sign that read "1897 Borough Council" and a group of men, no doubt the borough council, who sat inside. The men, shrouded in mystery, are barely seen, but the two drivers, who stopped the carriage, are front and center, smiling for the picture. What struck me most about the photo was not the carriage, but rather the buildings in the background. There was no context for the picture, but the buildings, the storefronts to Whalen & Berry and Colonial Bakery, were unmissable. The shops may have changed hands, but the facades were the exact same as today: this was *our* Main Street on the Fourth of July.

I suppose some things never change, it's tradition!

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Molly and I's final walk to school was bittersweet, the end of an era, but the start of a new adventure. As we reached the crosswalk in front of Lafayette School, the one we've used for ages, it was almost time to say goodbye. However, before we walked into school on the last day, Molly and I stopped. We took a picture, the same one Mrs. Kraemer did all those years ago, in front of the Lafayette sign.

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The powerful thing about photographs, about history, and why I love it so much, is that it's permanent and, quite literally, impossible to forget. For a long time, before I truly understood the power of photographs, I thought history and record keeping was only for the grand gestures and historic milestones we're taught in school. When in reality, history is a lot more than that.

History is Edgewood Road, the totem pole, the 15 mph speed limit, and the curious collection of neighbors and friends that make up the block. It's photographs of people from the past and present and the traditions they both share. It's the roads of my town, our town, their street names, quirks and divots. It's

the roads that will never change but will always remember. Most importantly, it's a path, up Lafayette and down and back again, taken together with an old friend every morning for eight years.

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When Molly and I passed through the threshold of the High School for the last time, it was bittersweet, but not sad. This is because that final day, in its own way, *is history*, but not in the way you might think.

For a long time I wondered how the streets of Chatham could ever be the same without Molly, but I always take comfort in knowing it's *history*! Her and I are remembered, our morning adventures are remembered, and the streets of Chatham will definitely outlast us. Which means: she's not truly gone,

she's just up the road!