



Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council

WHO WAS A "SINGLE" WOMAN? COMPLICATING THE CONCEPT!

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*Dedicated to educating
the community and cel-
ebrating the legacies of
local women, preserving
knowledge of their past,
and inspiring visions for
their future.*

**The GGRWHC Annual Reception, Thursday, March 15, 5:00 - 7:00pm
John F. Donnelly Conference Center at Aquinas College**

Join us for wine and hors d'oeuvres at our annual reception as we step off ideas discussed by author Rebecca Traister in *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation*. (See p. 9 on her visit to Grand Rapids on March 13.)

GGRWHC will open up the conversation by complicating the relationship between singledom and progress for women. To Traister's examples we will add vivid anecdotes about Grand Rapids's own "single ladies"—single for so many different reasons. After local researchers present cameo portraits of women who, on the one hand, could be considered quintessentially "single," they will also ask exactly what "single" means in terms of personal histories, various kinds of support networks, age, race, divorce, and widowhood.

Included will be a WWII Red Cross volunteer/second-wave feminist activist, a businesswoman/suffragist/politician, a renowned cultural historian, an educator/suffragist/club woman, a world-class botanist/real estate tycoon, and a little-known nineteenth-century African American women's club, both staid and radical!

Honoring this sampling of women we will also honor our researchers who have brought them back into the light--and lift a glass to some favorite married ladies for their contributions to social reform and massive change in Grand Rapids's history. One will be a GGRWHC founder, Jane Hibbard Idema, also namesake of our host Aquinas College's Jane Hibbard Idema Women's Studies Center.

Finally, State Representative Winnie Brinks will be on hand with a proclamation congratulating us on our 30th anniversary for the work we have done since 1988 uncovering, then covering, the history of local women!

We hope you will join us for this fun, annual event! Please RSVP via email at info@ggrwhc.org or by phone at 616-574-7307



GGRWHC Annual Reception, 2016

A TEAM OF HER OWN: MINNIE FORBES AND NEGRO LEAGUE BASEBALL



Minnie Forbes becomes owner of the Detroit Stars in 1956.

At Taste of Soul Sunday on February 18th at the Grand Rapids Public Library, GGRWHC and the Grand Rapids Study Club co-sponsored the program *A Team of Her Own: Minnie Forbes & Negro League Baseball*. Jaye Beeler, a former journalist with the *Grand Rapids Press*, talked with Minnie Forbes, the last living owner of a Negro League baseball team.

Taught to play ball herself by her uncle, baseball entrepreneur Ted Rasberry, Mrs. Forbes first played at fifteen with Cook's Brown Dolls, a traveling softball team from Grand Rapids. After acting as secretary for her uncle's three baseball teams--the Grand Rapids Black Sox, the Detroit Stars, and the Kansas City Monarchs--she took over the Stars as owner from Rasberry in 1956 when black baseball was winding down because of integration into the American major leagues. In later years she suited up in Grand Rapids to play third base for the Monarchs against the Black Sox, honoring three black women who were actually playing full-

time in the Negro League: Toni Stone, Mamie (Peanut) Johnson, and Connie Morgan.

Mrs. Forbes was the last of several women owners of Negro League teams. During her ten years working in every area of the sport, she got to know famous pitcher Satchel Paige during his visits to Grand Rapids. The only aspect of baseball life that Mrs. Forbes could not share with her players in the 1950s was traveling. It was just too dangerous. Especially in the South, black players often could not buy food, had to sleep on their buses, and were sometimes chased off the fields and out of town. In 2013, however, along with former Negro League players and historians, Mrs. Forbes visited the White House as the guest of President Barack Obama. Every summer the Detroit Tigers sponsor Negro League Weekend, this year on June 9th.



Minnie Forbes throwing the first pitch at Comerica Park, 2017

REVIEW: HISTORY DETECTIVES 2018

by Kate Van Liere



Julia Bouwkamp, History Detectives 2018

The GRPL's History Detectives program on January 20 featured two talks by GGRWHC board members that showed how twenty-first century local historians have been unearthing the nineteenth-century roots of twentieth-century social movements in Grand Rapids and in the U.S. Held in the packed auditorium of the downtown Public Library, the popular day-long lecture series featured six presentations on local history topics ranging from neighborhood history to vintage clothing. In the GGRWHC-sponsored talk, Jo Ellyn Clarey and Julia Bouwkamp traced Grand Rapids women's elective history from the 1880s to 1920, connecting their own research with national trends. Later, the GGRWHC's Ruth Van Stee offered a rich panorama of African-American civic life in Grand Rapids that stretched back to 1850.

In "Elective Detectives and Crowdsourcing Grand Rapids Women's History," former GGRWHC president Jo Ellyn Clarey teamed up with newer board member Julia Bouwkamp to update the audience on one of the GGRWHC's longest-running research projects. For nearly two decades, the Council has been working to document women's earliest direct participation in Grand Rapids elections. In 1999 Clarey and retired city clerk Sandra

Wright painstakingly unearthed the elective history of Grand Rapids women office-seekers from the late-nineteenth century to the present without online resources. Over the last year the project has made impressive strides, thanks to digitized historical newspapers and the efforts of two young Calvin College history majors: Angela Chen, who worked as a student intern in the spring of 2017, and Bouwkamp herself, who is expanding on Chen's research.

In the popular imagination, American politics was a male-only sphere until Congress granted American women the vote in 1920, and women began to run for public office only in the 1960s, inspired by the "second-wave" feminist movement. In fact, both conceptions are ill-founded, for both women's suffrage and women in office have deeper roots. The 19th Amendment, ratified in August 1920, was indeed an important milestone; but it capped over seventy years of suffragist activism across the nation. Both Grand Rapids and Michigan played active parts in this "first wave" of American feminism, although that story remains to be fully documented.

To right that omission, as Clarey explained, the Council is working to understand a tangled history. The first legal milestone came in 1867, when Michigan allowed its cities to enfranchise tax-paying women in school board elections. For complicated reasons, however, Grand Rapids women could neither vote nor run for that office until the mid-1880s, when tax-paying women and parents of school-aged children were enfranchised. By combing through local newspapers, election registers, and other records, the local researchers have now double-checked the period before 1920 and compiled the names of forty-seven female candidates who ran for office between 1887 and 1920, fourteen of whom were elected one or more times.

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HISTORY DETECTIVES, cont.

While this research has uncovered the deep roots of women in public service, it has also highlighted the relative scarcity of women in state and city offices today. As Clarey noted, Eva McCall Hamilton, elected to Michigan's State Senate in the landmark election of 1920, remains the *only* woman to have represented Grand Rapids as a state senator. Current State Representative Winnie Brinks has made McCall's legacy the opening theme of her own campaign for the 29th Michigan Senate District. Brinks appeared in the History Detectives audience to acknowledge her appreciation for the Council's work.

Bouwkamp showed how the internet is enabling the GGRWHC's quintessentially "local" research to be integrated into a nationwide research project. Her Hat Was in the Ring, an ambitious endeavor begun in 2008 at Swarthmore and Bryn Mawr colleges, aims to document women's campaigns for public office before 1920 across the whole the U.S., thus taking the Council's aims to a national scale. Although the two projects originated independently, the GGRWHC is now in the process of adding its 47 names of early women politicians to the more than 3,600 now in the Her Hat database. With Chen's and Bouwkamp's help, the collaboration with Her Hat will make the Grand Rapids findings electronically accessible worldwide. Then the Council will turn back to updating and double-checking local women's elective history from 1920 into the present. Clarey noted that she knows of no other U.S. city that has undertaken such a comprehensive elective history, so she hopes this work will inspire emulation.

In another contribution to History Detectives, GGRWHC board member Ruth Van Stee brought to life the deep history of Grand Rapids's original African-American community. Through years of research in city directories, census records, newspapers, and local archives, Van Stee has traced this small but vibrant community back to 1850, when it comprised just 17 souls. From then until

the late 1920s, the city's Black population hovered around 1%, surpassing 5% only after 1950, and reached 15% in the 1970s. Van Stee engaged listeners with stories and photographs of men, women, and families from the city's prewar Black middle class and the many civic organizations they created—from churches and literary clubs to fraternal organizations and baseball teams. Many were involved in civil rights work long before the "civil rights era," whether as leaders in the NAACP or in their individual capacities as outspoken citizens, teachers, soldiers, or civil servants. This brief summary cannot do justice to the richness of Van Stee's many stories or the men and women behind them.

Readers who missed one or both talks should take note: All three of these GGRWHC researchers will be speaking further about these ongoing projects in February. Bouwkamp and Clarey will talk on Wednesday, February 21, at 1:30 p.m. at the Kirkhoff Center on GVSU's Allendale Campus, sponsored by the Kutsche Office of Local History. Van Stee will join Cynthia Bailey as part of the GRPL's Black Family History Series; their joint talk on "African Americans in Grand Rapids, Pre-Civil War and Post-Slavery" will be held on Saturday, February 24 at 1:30 p.m. in the VanderVeen Room on the fourth floor of the Grand Rapids Public Library.



Ruth Van Stee, History Detectives 2018

CONFERENCE PROGRAMS

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MICHIGAN: LOCAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

Friday and Saturday, March 23 and 24, Wyndham Garden in Sterling Heights, Michigan

At this annual two-day conference sponsored by the Historical Society of Michigan, the GGRWHC's Ruth Stevens and Jo Ellyn Clarey will present ***Untangling Legalities and Legends in Michigan Women's Suffrage History***; and the GGRWHC will be part of the largest local history exhibit for the state's largest local history audience of 600-700 registrants. See the full conference offerings at <http://hsmichigan.org/conferences/local-history-conference/> and join the GGRWHC on Friday, the 23rd, at 1:45pm. Our program will lay out the history of legislative initiatives and court decisions and reveal the crucial role played by nineteenth-century school board elections. These elections were a testing ground for women's suffrage and a launching point for women in elective office. Once again, we will evaluate the effect of local and state history on the national story, illustrating the importance of full and accurate research about local women throughout the nation. Conference registration required.

NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY 2018 FAMILY HISTORY CONFERENCE

Wednesday, May 2, 5-8:00pm, Society Night The national gathering of over 2000 family historians and genealogists will open its conference in Grand Rapids with "Society Night," where the GGRWHC will join other groups showcasing their organizations on the Center Concourse of the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. This event is open to the public, as will be the huge exhibit hall during the conference. Check the Society website for details: <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/home> **Saturday, May 5, 2:30pm, Bringing Your Female Ancestors to Life with Archival Resources, DeVos Place Conference Center** Featuring unique collections at the Grand Rapids Public Library and the ambitions of the GGRWHC, this session will focus on the building of and identification of unusual archival resources. It will highlight materials long available but unused when researching women as well as materials recently sought out and donated or purposefully created. Librarian Julie Tabberer will illustrate how to think beyond the usual records and to identify sources with unexpected information. Women's historian Jo Ellyn Clarey will discuss how disparate data can be collected and shaped for easier access and analysis. They will highlight the recently finished database featuring 23,000 Kent County women war registrants in 1918. Conference registration required.

FOURTH ANNUAL MIDWESTERN HISTORY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

Wednesday, June 6, 2018, Ralph W. Hauenstein Center, Grand Valley State University downtown campus

The GGRWHC will offer a panel presentation for this day-long conference in Grand Rapids: **The Long Reach of Midwestern Women into the WWI Council of National Defense and 1918 Children's Programs.** Admission will be free, including a complimentary lunch, and is open to the public. The program is the second in a three-year GGRWHC project illustrating women's initiatives to create a home defense by guaranteeing healthy food sources, raising healthy children, and ensuring the health of women in the industrial work force. This year the GGRWHC will demonstrate how women's programs benefited children, ensuring the ongoing health of the nation. Melissa Fox, Jayson Otto, and Sue Caldwell will integrate local histories into the national story by reporting on a variety of 1918 "Children's Year" initiatives.

GGRWHC MEMBER BENEFITS: AASLH

by Julia Bouwkamp

The Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council is now an institutional member of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). Organized in 1940, the AASLH at present assists and provides services for over 5,500 institutional and individual members.

While we're happy enough to support an organization expressly dedicated to promoting state and local history, there are also numerous membership benefits that we now have access to. And, as an institutional member, we can offer AASLH benefits to up to 99 of our own members at a time. Needless to say, if you're interested in an AASLH resource, don't hesitate to let us know.

Our membership includes, among other benefits, deep discounts on online courses and webinars, prioritized consideration in entries for AASLH's official blog, and discounted rates for AASLH's Annual Meeting and Online Conference. Explore more benefits at <http://about.aaslh.org/institutional-memberships/>.

The quality of AASLH membership benefits has already been tested by our newest board member, Julia Bouwkamp, who recently enrolled in and completed their online Basics of Archives Course for half of the original fee. The clearly laid out course offered a step-by-step methodology for archival best practices with useful readings and worksheets. Additionally, all materials were downloadable and will be useful for reference well beyond course completion.

We're off to a promising start with this new membership. Please help us take advantage of everything AASLH has to offer by looking through the benefits for yourself and contacting us at info@ggrwhc.org with any requests.

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

Rediscovering Emma Cole's 19th-Century Grand Rapids Flora



Monday, March 19, 6:30 - 8:30 pm
Bunker Interpretive Center at Calvin College
Organized by River City Wild Ones

In 1901 Emma J. Cole published *Grand Rapids Flora*, a catalogue of plants growing without cultivation in the vicinity of Kent County. Enormous changes have taken place since those "horse and buggy" days, yet her book remains the most complete account of plants specific to our area. Who was this remarkable high school teacher, world traveller and Kent Scientific Institute botanist? Where were her favorite spots for wildflowers? Do they still exist? Answers will be surprising as speakers don their "sleuthing" hats, grab their hand lenses, and observe the changes over more than 116 years.

GGRWHC's Julie Stivers will speak about the life of Emma Cole; Professor Garret Crow will describe the work that he and Dr. David Warners are doing with Calvin students to rediscover Emma Cole's haunts and assess their natural quality today. More at <http://rivercity-grandrapids.wildones.org>

GGRWHC RESEARCH QUERIES: FINDING MRS. SMITH

by Ruth Van Stee



Helen Griffith Smith Powell

Like other historical organizations GGRWHC is regularly contacted to help with research queries on individual women or historical events, which often uncover persons and associations that only add more detail to the rich history of women in our city. As a recent example of such a query, Peg from New England wrote asking what we might know about one Helen Smith.

Peg's knowledge was limited to an 1890 letter from Mary Wilkins Freeman addressed to Mrs. Smith. A friend had found it tucked inside a book written by Wilkins Freeman, a prominent 19th-century author from Massachusetts. We have no idea just how her letter to a woman in Grand Rapids found its way back to the site of its composition; but it ap-

pears from the contents of the letter that Mrs. Smith had requested an "autograph," by which she meant a letter to be read to a club audience of 500!

This clue suggests that Mrs. Smith might have been a member of the Grand Rapids Ladies Literary Club; and, indeed, she was president from 1886 to 1888. We speculated that Mrs. Smith became aware of Wilkins Freeman because the club would be discussing one of her books and that the club made a practice of collecting authors' "autographs." We found no mention of Wilkins Freeman in LLC year-books in the Grand Rapids Public Library's archive, but did find that they conducted review programs of "Recent Works of Women."

Wilkins Freeman must have been a subject for one of those discussions, for which Smith requested information because they knew so little about her "personally." In her four-page letter Wilkins Freeman tells about the conditions under which she wrote back in her hometown, where she was living with a childhood friend. Smith's request was sent extremely early in the 38-year-old author's long writing career, which took off the following year in 1891 with both *A New England Nun* and "The Revolt of Mother," a famous short story about the frustrations of rural women in New England, her common theme.

Besides learning more ourselves about Wilkins Freeman and the LLC, we were happy to learn more about Mrs. Smith's life and activities in Grand Rapids. We informed Peg that she was born Helen Griffith in Sheldon, New York, in 1849. At 29 years old in 1879 she

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FINDING MRS. SMITH, cont.



August/September 1934 Grand Rapids Mirror, featuring the Ladies Literary Club presidents. Helen Smith is standing, third from the right.

married Henry Smith, thirty years her senior, in Evanston, Illinois. Henry was elected mayor of Grand Rapids in 1878 and died in 1881, just after a second term as mayor and two years of marriage to Helen, who continued to live in his house at 76 Jefferson SE with two step-daughters. In 1891 she married Isaac Powell, with whom she had a son. After Isaac died in 1903, the family remained in the house on Jefferson through 1910, after which the Berton Spring Funeral Home was located at that address.

From a scrapbook in the Isaac Powell and Sarah Kingsley Smith Collection in the GRPL archives, we found pictures of the family, including several of Helen and of the house on Jefferson. When Helen died in 1935, the newspaper lauded her for her work with the

Ladies Literary Club (she was president during the building's construction), as well as for her service with the Welfare Union, Park Congregational Church, and the Grand Rapids Art Association. In her 80s and just before her death, Helen presided over the board of the Salvation Army's Evangeline Home for unwed mothers,, today Booth Memorial Hospital. She was also a member of the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Armed with a full picture of Mrs. Smith, Peg contacted institutions where Mary Wilkins Freeman lived in Vermont and Massachusetts. The library in Randolph, Massachusetts where Wilkins Freeman was born, is very interested in taking possession of the letter she wrote to our Mrs. Smith.

ALL THE SINGLE LADIES AUTHOR TO VISIT, MARCH 13

by Ruth Stevens

You are invited to participate in this year's Community Reading Project sponsored by Grand Valley State University. In this year's selection, *All the Single Ladies*, award-winning journalist Rebecca Traister explores the lives and contributions of single women through both historical and contemporary lenses. Traister points out that single women played a pivotal role in many social movements, including the fights for abolition and for women's suffrage, and examines the current trend towards delayed marriage.

Traister's observations on the importance of allowing women the choice of being married or single, without any stigma attached, echo the rhetoric of 19th century suffragists. Early Grand Rapids attorney Elizabeth Eaglesfield exhorted women to fight for the right to vote so that they could achieve their full potential. Eaglesfield was herself single and a rousing model of determination, persis-

tence, and daring. In a speech at the 5th District Convention of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1888, she argued against restricting women to marriage and motherhood, stating, "What of the ever increasing number of brilliant, bright, capable single women? Have they really lost their chance to a helpful, full, generous life, and must they be relegated to the top shelves of the closets with the broken bandboxes and other trumpery? . . . But if merely bearing children is not the woman's sphere . . . her sphere is what she fits herself to be or do." In *All the Single Ladies* author Traister demonstrates compellingly how the opportunities that Eaglesfield and others fought for have radically changed the lives of women today. Her lecture at the Grand Valley campus in Allendale on Tuesday, March 13 at 7 p.m. is open to all. For more information, see: www.gvsu.edu/read.

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Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council



The Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council was started in 1988 when founder Twink Frey was doing research for a paper on the role of women in the history of Grand Rapids. She found little or nothing either at the local or state levels about the many women who had helped found and shape the city and its surrounding area. Knowing that women had played an enormous role in the development of the region, Frey began to contact others who had a similar interest in systematic research, documentation, and preservation of the lives and contributions of former Grand Rapids and West Michigan women. In the ensuing 30 years many others joined Frey in this work. A great deal has been accomplished and many women who played important roles in Grand Rapids history continue to be discovered.

Visit our website at ggrwhc.org

The Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council is dedicated to educating the community and celebrating the legacies of local women, preserving knowledge of their past and inspiring visions for their future.