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

THE MARRIED LADIES NINETEENTH CENTURY CLUB

BY SOPHIA WARD BREWER

Bold, brave, brilliant, and yes, bourgeois are all words that I would use to describe the Married Ladies Nineteenth Century Club, later called the Nineteenth Century Club. Formed in 1894, just 29 years after the Civil War, this group of African American women decided to organize, educate themselves, and exercise their social and political power here in Grand Rapids. Their mere name suggests some of their struggles to overcome the negative stereotypes that plagued black women in the nineteenth century. The Married Ladies Nineteenth Century Club and other clubs like them were instrumental in provoking social and cultural change regarding race at the turn of the twentieth century.

The Married Ladies... were bold and brave

The club was formed some 15 years prior to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, and two years before the formation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. With African Americans in Michigan being less than one percent of the population at this time, this was not only bold, but brave. The Civil War had only ended 29 years prior and some of the women in the group had migrated north since the end of the Civil War. Though Michigan wasn't a slave state, there was much resistance to black mobility, black migration, and black progress in this state.

Their boldness was indicated in the fact that there were other Nineteenth Century Clubs all across America. However this club felt it important that they describe themselves as "married ladies." Perhaps this was to combat the negative depictions of black women during this time as un-wed, over-sexualized, and dehumanized. The articles they submitted to the *Grand Rapids Herald* defied this image by showcasing their talents, cultural and literary activities, as well as their homes and ability to entertain. They wanted the world to know that, despite the challenges they faced, they had social status and were living comfortably.

The Married Ladies... were brilliant

In articles published in the *Grand Rapids Herald*, the women reported on what they did during their regular meetings. It was evident early that they were more than a social club. One of the missions of the club was the bettering or the uplifting of the race. They did this by reading, sharing information, promoting literacy, and writing, among other things.

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NORTH UNFAIR TO NEGRO SAYS WOMAN

MRS. MARY TATE CONDEMNS THE ATTITUDE OF THE WHITES TOWARD HER RACE.

BLACKS DO NOT GET CHANCE

She Reads Warm Paper Before the Religion and Life Class in All Souls' Church.

Mrs. Mary R. Tate, president of the Colored Nineteenth Century club, read a paper on the negro question before the Class in Religion and Life in All Souls' church yesterday.

COLORED WOMEN OF THE STATE GATHER HERE

Will Hold Convention in Grand Rapids Next Week.

The convention of Colored Women's clubs will be held in this city July 23, 24 and 25. The meetings will be presided over by Mrs. Lucy Thurman of Jackson, who is president of the State Federation of Women's clubs and is also national president.

Mrs. Thurman is a prominent woman among her people and has done much in their interest. She has been identified with temperance work for 50 years, and is now superintendent of temperance work among colored people.

The meetings morning, afternoon and evening of the three days' convention will be held in Arnett chapel, with the exception of the closing one, Thursday evening, which will be held in Park Congregational church.

At this time the following program will be given: Address of welcome, Mayor Ellis; addresses by Mrs. Hurley Russell, who will represent the Ladies' Literary club; Mrs. Becker of the City Federation of Women's clubs; Mrs. Bodwell, W. C. T. U.

It is expected that on this occasion several speakers of national reputation will make short addresses, including Mrs. B. K. Bruce of Bruce, Ala.; Mrs. Josephine Francis of New Orleans, who has been working for years in the crusade against the convict system of Georgia, and Mrs. Rosetta W. Lawson, of Washington, a prominent W. C. T. U. worker.



MRS. LUCY THURMAN.

Mrs. J. C. Ford is chairman of the local committee, and the organizations which have combined to entertain the convention are as follows: Nineteenth Century club, Mrs. Tate, president; Study club, Mrs. Gaines, president;

Nineteenth Century Club

The ladies of the Nineteenth Century club met with Mrs. E. Hardy last Wednesday. The subject of the day was "Japan." The roll call was responded to by quotations from the recent history of Japan. Some very interesting papers were read on Japan. The house was prettily decorated in Japanese style. The meeting was chiefly a business one. The Misses Grace Craig, Margarette Goings and Eva McConnel were made honorary members. The club will meet with Mrs. George Smith next week.

Mrs. M. Goings

348 Wealthy Ave.

The Only Graduate of Mrs. Cobb's New York School of

Hairdressing, Manicuring and Chiropody.

Treatment of the Skin, Face and Scalp a Specialty.

As early as 1898, the members wrote articles denouncing negative and false stories about black people published in newspapers. Later, in 1907 Mary Roberts Tate, a member of the club, wrote an article about the treatment of blacks in the North titled "North Unfair to the Negro."

Like many social clubs during this time, the Married Ladies Club was also a literary society. During their regular meetings they read essays, poetry and shared information about current events. Their brilliance was evident in an article published in 1905, in which they boasted of a Japanese-themed meeting in which they answered the roll call with a quotation from the history of Japan.

The Nineteenth Century Club, along with the Grand Rapids Study Club, hosted a statewide conference for colored women's clubs in Grand Rapids in 1907. Emma Ford, a member of the Nineteenth Century Club, was the chair of the committee who organized the conference. The conference was presided over by Mrs. Lucy Thurman of Jackson, who was the president of the state association and the national federation. The conference was held in Arnett Chapel, but the closing ceremony was held in the Park Congregational Church.

Among the speakers at the conference were both local and national personalities. George Ellis, the mayor of

Grand Rapids spoke, as did Clara Comstock Russell from the Ladies Literary Club. National speakers included Josephine Bruce of Alabama, Josephine Francis of New Orleans, and Rosetta Lawson of Washington.

The Married Ladies... were bourgeois

Many of the ladies in the club were accomplished in their own rights. They owned businesses; for example, Minnie Goings, who was a member of the club, operated a boarding house and beauty shop. Emma Ford, who was also a member, was married to Joseph Ford, who was affectionately known as "Senator Joe" because he was the cloakroom attendant for the Michigan State Senate and active in the Michigan Republican Party. Minnie Goggins, another member, founded and operated the Richard Allen Home for Girls in the early twentieth century. In articles published in the *Herald* the members of the club boasted about their achievements, talents, and fine homes. Much of their writing suggests an air of sophistication, culture and class.

I'll end this article by saying that I'm "bewitched" by the Married Ladies...and the women of this era. They have captured my heart and my interest. I'm blown away by their determination and all they were able to accomplish.



DESIGNED BY LOUISE GILLES

BY PAMELA VANDERPLOEG

In the 1920s, when women architects were quite rare, Grand Rapids's Louise Gilles was making a name for herself designing beautiful homes, in her Michigan hometown as well as further afield. In fact, several times between 1929 and 1932 her home plans were featured in the *Ladies Home Journal*, the nation's largest circulation magazine.

Myrtle Louise Gilles was born on November 20, 1898. Her father, Clarence, was the head of the printing plant for the *Grand Rapids Herald* and her mother, Gertrude, was a homemaker managing their growing family. They lived at 333 Sunset NW in a lovely Queen Anne-style home built in 1905. The short, dead-end street on which the house stands offers a dramatic overlook to the city's downtown.

As a student at Union High School Louise was already recognized for her artistic talent. The inside cover of her senior yearbook, the *Aurora*, is graced with her illustration of a stylized eagle. Louise was on the staff of the 1918 yearbook, which was dedicated to "our men overseas" during World War I. Each senior was described in the yearbook by a catchy phrase. About Louise, her classmates said, "She fascinates the street with her gaiters trim and neat." She was the class historian and belonged to Senior Sorosis (likely a sorority), the Mask and Bauble (drama club), the Art Club, the Academy of Science, and the Pin Committee.

Like many female students at Union High, Gilles registered for war work on April 27, 1918, when registrar

Marion Jennings visited the school for the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense. Her registration card indicates that, although Louise was a full-time student, she was also a clerk at the telephone company. Louise's sisters, Flora and Winifred, claimed more traditional home skills, but she included "artist" and "draftsman" as well as "experience with metal handicrafts" as part of her skill set. Louise also said that she desired training as an "aviatrix."

After attending Kalamazoo College for two years, it appears that Gilles was putting her claimed skills into practice. The 1920 U.S. census lists Louise as a draftsman at the Furniture Temple, and the Grand Rapids city directory lists her as an architect. Then between 1921 and 1923 she trained as a draftsman in the office of registered architect Alexander McColl, whose home designs were as highly popular then as they are now. McColl's renderings and floor plans were often featured in the *Grand Rapids Herald*.

In 1922, McColl began designing homes for a new Ottawa Hills development on the site of a former golf club. The earliest homes in the development were built on Iroquois and Pontiac streets by Blakeslee Brothers Builders. It's extremely likely that Louise was involved in the drafting of those plans. In 1923 Louise left her position as a draftsman at McColl's office and began working as a staff architect at Blakeslee Builders. Perhaps having worked closely with her on building projects, the Blakeslee Brothers recognized Gilles's talent

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GILLEO, CONT.



and hired her away from McColl; or perhaps she recognized that it was time for her to become an architect in her own right and a good opportunity presented itself. What is known is that Gilleo designed homes on Manhattan, Maplewood, San Jose and Locust in East Grand Rapids, as well as apartments at Grand and Fulton in the East Hills area.

The trajectory of Gilleo's Grand Rapids career changed course when she began traveling during the winter to Florida, where the *Tampa Times* records her attendance

at social events. According to the newspaper, in 1925 Louise was apparently still working for Blakeslee Builders at the time she began designing architectural ornamentation for a Tampa cast-stone company and creating "original designs in stone for South Florida's finest homes and schools." Also around the time she left McColl's studio, the *Times* reports that Louise had been working for Chicago architect John Eberson, a builder of opulent movie palaces such as the Tampa Theatre which was recently restored to its former glory.

On February 2, 1929, the *Times* reported that Louise surprised friends by marrying Tampa native Benjamin L. Sharpe, who worked in "mercantile." Gilleo and Sharpe had been married in December in the parsonage of a Clearwater minister in a small ceremony including only family. At first they shared a bungalow with Sharpe's parents, the home that eventually became their own in what is today an historic Tampa neighborhood.

Louise did not give up her career when she married. Besides gaining nationwide attention in the *Ladies Home Journal*, her work was regularly featured in the *Grand Rapids Herald*. On Sunday April 27, 1930, it printed exterior and interior photos of a Gilleo-designed "English type" home at 900 San Jose Drive, highlighting such features as a "unique living room balcony" with a wrought iron railing and a "hand-carved fireplace."

Another was described in a 1927 edition of the *Herald* as an "attractive English style" house standing on the corner of Mackinaw Road and Iroquois Drive in the Ottawa Hills neighborhood. The newspaper featured a rendering of this upscale home, built by Blakeslee Builders, showing an exterior of Chicago common brick and white trim. Interior details included a center entry with a colonial staircase, a library with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and a modern kitchen.



Ottawa Hills, 936 Iroquois

In May of 1929 a *Ladies Home Journal* article published a two-page spread highlighting Gilleo's designs entitled "Eight Distinctive Homes." It features styles ranging from English Tudor to Colonial and from a French style to a quaint English cottage. Home sizes vary from small to "commodious," with predicted building costs between \$5,000 and \$8,000. Plans could be ordered directly from the magazine. Louise continued to design homes in Grand Rapids at least through 1930 and saw more home plans published by the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1931 and 1932; but here the trail of Louise Gilleo's career grows cold.

Research so far suggests many threads that can still be pulled to reveal a fuller story about the intriguing life of this early woman architect. An interesting footnote to the history of Louise Gilleo is the marriage in 1919 of her brother Avery to Eleanor Alten, the eldest daughter of well-known painter Mathias Alten. The year after Louise's graduation from Union High School in 1918, Avery had returned home from World War I, honorably discharged after being wounded and cited for valor at the Battle of Juvigny in France. His and Eleanor's daughter, Anita Gilleo, remains a source of important information on her Aunt Louise.

June 6th! GGRWHC at the MHA Conference

RECOVERING GR WOMEN IN WWI HISTORY

GVSU'S Downtown Campus, 7PM, DeVoS 109D



WOMEN IN WARTIME

Our 7:00 pm Midwestern History Association session will offer our second report on women's WWI initiatives in urban Grand Rapids and rural Indiana to create a home defense by guaranteeing wholesome food sources, raising healthy children, and protecting women in the industrial work force.

When in 1917 one third of US draftees failed their physicals, women were mandated to ensure the future fitness of the nation. Integrating local histories into the national story, our panel will discuss the pioneering efforts of midwestern women. This year Melissa Fox, Jayson Otto, and Sue Caldwell will report on 1918 "Children's Year" initiatives on the care of babies, the uses

of recreation, the consequences of mobilizing children, and more.

*** Courtesy of GVSU's Hauenstein Center, admission will be open to the public and free, including a complimentary lunch! On their website, click on RSVP and also find the entire day's schedule.

Before 6:30pm, park in the Seward Lot; after, all GVSU lots are open. More at www.ggrwhc.org--or contact us at (616) 574-7307!



**Greater Grand Rapids
Women's History Council**



LOCAL HISTORY AWARD 2018

BY RUTH VAN STEE



At a time when we are reminded daily of the importance of listening to women's voices and their stories, this recognition by the Kutsche Office seems especially fitting. - Peg Padnos, March 2018

At the annual Kutsche Office for Local History Roundtable event this spring, Jo Ellyn Clarey accepted the Gordon Olson Award for 2018. The award is given each year to recognize individuals whose work embodies the Kutsche Office's mission, "Using history to give voice to diverse communities."

Peg Padnos of the Kutsche Office Advisory Council presented the award noting that Clarey has been a sustaining member of GGRWHC for more than 20 years, serving as both a board member and president of the board at times. "She provided guidance to amateur historians to ensure integrity in their research and telling of women's stories. She has championed the use of under-utilized local resources, introducing members of the Women's History Council to tools available and fostering skills. She has partnered with organizations such as the Grand Rapids Study Club to preserve mar-

ginalized voices and promote awareness in the larger community. Her view of history is inclusive and grounded in scholarship and creativity."

Council members have benefited from this guidance that Padnos mentioned as well Clarey's persuasiveness, urging us on to further research a select woman or an event. And, captured in Peg's word "creativity," we are all witnesses to Clarey's creativity in programming, pulling together two presenters, or six as at our March reception this year, to form an interesting, informative, and timely program.

In 1999, after planning a re-enactment of the 1899 national women's suffrage convention at St. Cecilia, Clarey received the Baxter Award from the Grand Rapids Historical Society. Indeed she served a term on that board as well (on the programming committee, needless to say) and on the Grand Rapids Historical Commission.

Congratulations Jo Ellyn!

And thanks for bringing greater recognition to the GGRWHC through this award.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The GGRWHC announces the following programs on local women's history, all free and open to the public except the September conference sponsored by Historical Society of Michigan. Check for fuller information and updates on our website (www.ggrwhc.org), Facebook, and Instagram, or at (616) 574-7307. Sign up on our website to receive electronic and/or hard copy newsletters or to support our mission financially.

Wednesday, June 6th, 2018 - GGRWHC at MHA, 7:00 pm

Midwestern History Association, Fourth Annual Conference

Ralph W. Hauenstein Center, Grand Valley State University downtown campus

Midwestern Women, the WWI Council of National Defense, and 1918 Children's Programs—For the fourth year the MHA will meet in Grand Rapids. This year's GGRWHC-sponsored program is our second in a three-year project illustrating women's WWI 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 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 in urban Grand Rapids and rural Jasper County, Indiana. Admission is open to the public and free, including a complimentary lunch, if you RSVP. More on our website.

Thursday, June 7th, Grand Rapids Public Library, 7:00 pm

Gone Before Spring: A Retro Look at Alger Heights will celebrate the publication of Sheila Shotwell's young-adult coming-of-age novel set in the 1960s. GGRWHC's Melissa Fox will highlight neighborhood history, including businesswoman Mrs. Roshewski, owner of Mitchell's Young at Heart clothing store.

Wednesday, July 4th, 8:30 am, Hollyhock Lane Parade!

Back by popular demand, the GGRWHC will take to the streets to honor parading suffragists from a hundred years ago. Watch for details & join the fun with bands, bicyclists, candy, and placards! To quote a past participant: this event is "oddly exhilarating"!

Sometime in mid-July! The unveiling of the next Legends statue; this summer, of Betty Ford. Stay tuned for details. Joining Helen Claytor and Anna Sutherland Bissell, Ford will be the third woman honored in this project funded by the family of Peter Secchia.

Thursdays, July 26th & August 23rd, 7:00 pm

Holland Museum, 31 W. 10th Street, Holland MI

Coordinating with the Holland Museum's ongoing *Atmosphere of Distinction: Suffrage and Clothing Exhibit*, the GGRWHC will offer two programs. **On July 26th**, Ruth Van Stee will tell the story of a suffrage publicity stunt, the takeover of the *Grand Rapids Press* in May of 1914. And **on August 23rd**, Jo Ellyn Clarey will highlight the colorful 1899 meeting of national suffragists in West Michigan led by Susan B. Anthony. Over the summer the Holland Museum exhibit will be open Wednesdays through Saturdays, 11:00 - 4:00, illustrating how American women's rights movements impacted West Michigan fashion trends and reflected women's changing roles in society.

Tuesday, August 14th, and Saturday, the 18th (rain date August 21st)

The Beyond-Her-Grave Bicycle Tour: Legacies of Women Buried in Fulton Street and Oakhill Cemeteries - Sponsored by She Rides Her Own Way, the Grand Rapids Public Library's GR Reads program, and the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council, a one-of-a-kind bicycle tour will make stops at Fulton Street and Oakhill cemeteries, highlighting remarkable as well as lesser-known local women, who have made a difference in the history of our city.

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UPCOMING EVENTS, CONT.

August 23rd Observance of Women's Equality Day

Check for us at food-truck Thursday on the patio of the Grand Rapids Art Museum! Once again, we will buttonhole passers-by about the 98th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment and remind them of the centennial of constitutionally guaranteed universal suffrage in 2020! We'll have great local history materials.

Friday & Saturday, September 21st - 23rd

Michigan History Conference & Annual Meeting in Sturgis, Michigan

At this annual conference sponsored by the Historical Society of Michigan, the GGRWHC's Ruth Stevens will present ***Southwest Michigan Women and the Fight for Woman Suffrage***, expanding our local suffrage history into its larger state context. While she will allude to familiar state figures, like Anna Howard Shaw, Stevens will introduce little-credited southwest Michigan women's broad affiliations and their role in the fight for women's suffrage in the state. After 1867 they actively participated as voters in school board elections, the precursor to full suffrage, even during defeats at the state level.

Thursday, November 8th, Grand Rapids Public Library, 7:00pm

The GGRWHC is delighted to announce that our entry in the 2018-2019 lecture series sponsored by the Grand Rapids Historical Society will be an out-of-the-cemetery talk by Tom Dilley, author of *The Art of Memory: Historic Cemeteries of Grand Rapids, Michigan*. Elaborating on his previous study and unleashed by the constraints of touring a particular location, Dilley will consider the history of women as exhibited in local cemeteries, a new angle revealing secrets, surprises, and speculations!

Wednesday, March 27, 2019, GGRWHC's annual reception, next year highlighting local WWI women's registration cards and database, honoring the amazing effort to create the latter, and updating our efforts to locate cards nationwide!

Membership / Sponsorship Form

Name: _____

Please Contact me about volunteer work: _____

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I think I would be interested to: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

Email _____

Type of Membership: New _____ Renewal _____

Membership:

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Sponsorship (Membership included)

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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.