

CONNECTING WITH THE PAST IN TODAY'S PRESENT

ABBY MARIA HEMENWAY

Like other remarkable women in Addison County, Abby Hemenway rebelled against the prevailing, centuries-old, androcentric perceptions of her gender. She was a teacher, poet, author, historian and publisher, proving herself with fortitude, independence and great accomplishments. As the contributions Abby and other extraordinary women made were realized, the collective consciousness shifted towards support of more significant roles for all women.

Abby Maria Hemenway was born in 1828, on a hill farm in Ludlow, Vt., to Abigail and Daniel Hemenway. A precocious student, starting at age 14 she alternated between teaching in local area schoolhouses and carrying on her own studies at the Black River Academy. In 1853 she left Vermont for Michigan where she became an underpaid, homesick teacher with thwarted literary ambitions. Abby returned to Ludlow as a 30-year-old unemployed woman, again a ward of her parents.

Abby's love of poetry, trust in her own literary abilities, and ambition to succeed as a single woman gradually gelled into a course of action that would define her life's works. She collected 3,000 poems throughout Vermont, diplomatically narrowed these down to a select 500, and published them as "Poets and Poetry of Vermont." This collection transformed Abby's life, giving her a measure of financial independence, statewide recognition, credibility in literary circles, a personal connection to many prominent citizens, and an expectation of credit worthiness. Its publication was the apprenticeship she needed to defy stereotypes, ignore academic envy, and set an unwavering course to collect stories and preserve history of every Vermont town while those who had made it were still alive.

Abby started by meeting Phillip Battell in Middlebury, a prominent citizen and secretary of Middlebury Historical Society. She convinced

him to give her a list of Addison County residents to contribute histories of their towns. Battell complied but his real purpose was to discourage Abby. Soon after this meeting she received a letter from the Middlebury Historical Society endorsed by professors of Middlebury College stating their academic point of view: "...an impracticality...not suitable work for a woman...how could she expect to do what 40 men have been trying to do for 16 years and could not." Despite her public rebuke, Hemenway remained undaunted in her mission to record the natural history, early settlements, town organizations, prominent citizens, first house, first clergyman, first members of the militia and other details of each town. Hemenway instructed her authors to describe ordinary men and women, not just prominent townspeople.

Volume I of "Vermont Historical Gazetteer" was published in 1868. Its 1,096 pages described the early histories of Addison, Bennington, Caledonia, Chittenden and Essex counties. Completion of Volumes II through IV were also accomplished after much stress and personal poverty. In 1886, after stealing back her manuscripts from a printer who had legally confiscated them as collateral against printing debts, Abby escaped to Chicago. There, among friends, with less pressure from her creditors and renewed energy, she worked day and night on unfinished Volumes V and VI.

From 1885 to 1888, she corresponded with her antiquarian friend Henry Sheldon in Middlebury, soliciting his help in appropriating funds from the Vermont Legislature to complete the "Gazetteers." Along with Hemenway's letters to Henry Sheldon, the Stewart-Swift Research Center of the Henry Sheldon Museum has her "Poets and Poetry of Vermont" and complete sets of both the "Vermont Historical Gazetteer" and "Notes by the Path of the Gazetteer," a small monthly that Hemenway put out for subscribers. The latter contains the fascinating "Autobiography" of the "Gazetteer," including



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her methods of persuading people to write for it and her recruitment of "lady assistants" to obtain subscribers.

Abby's single-minded determination to finish Vermont's early story ended with her death on Feb. 24, 1890, alone in a Chicago boarding house surrounded by documents and copious notes. The task of completion fell to her youngest sister, Carrie Page, a Brandon, Vt., housewife with little or no experience as an editor or publisher. Remarkably, after two years, Carrie was able to get all 1,249 pages of Volume V printed. Lacking money to print Volume VI, Carrie sent the last manuscript to Abby's friend in Chicago, former Vermonter William Portus Baxter, to store along with other trunks stuffed with Abby's life's works. When Baxter died in 1911, all of Abby's possessions went to William's niece, Janet Baxter, in Jackson Springs, N.C. On Nov. 22, 1911, Vermont Historical Society sent her a letter asking to take possession of Hemenway's records and notes. Just days later, on Nov. 27, a fire destroyed Baxter's home, along with Abby's irreplaceable notes, documents, Volume VI manuscript, and personal papers. Despite the horrific loss of Volume VI, the five surviving volumes of "Vermont Historical Gazetteer" provide a detailed and diverse history of early Vermont that is unrivaled by early histories of any other state.

Contributed by the Research Center Committee of the Henry Sheldon Museum. Excellent as the Research Center documentation is, it doesn't include everyone. Which courageous women of the past come to your mind? Who deserves recognition for their part in surviving or driving change? Why? Would you tell us about them? What about the Abenaki and people of color who've been ever present but little recognized? Do you have stories about them? We'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch at info@HenrySheldonMuseum.org.