

CONNECTING WITH THE PAST IN TODAY'S PRESENT

DEBORAH PICKMAN CLIFFORD (1933-2008)

Deborah Clifford had a passionate interest in 19th Century American history and, soon after she and her family moved to Cornwall in 1966, she began graduate study of Vermont history at UVM with Professor Sam Hand. She quickly became an enthusiastic and tireless advocate of Vermont women's history and significantly contributed to making it a subject for serious study. Soon she was writing prize-winning articles for *Vermont History*; based on widespread research in local sources, they included "Women's War Against Rum," "The Drive for Women's Municipal Suffrage in Vermont, 1883-1917," and "An Invasion of Strong-Minded Women: The Newspapers and the Women's Suffrage Movement." *Vermont History* noted that she "continued to study women as an organized force for social change and the evolving status of women."

During these years she also wrote books. "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Biography of Julia Ward Howe," (1979) discusses the 19th Century abolitionist and woman suffragist who wrote the lyrics to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Her "Crusader for Freedom: A Life of Lydia Maria Child," (1992) presents a novelist, abolitionist, women's rights advocate. Child "brought to mind just the sort of feisty, independent woman I like... There were many times when the challenge of making sense out of this paradoxical, often maddeningly evasive woman tempted me to lay the whole project aside. But since I share something of Child's stubbornness I persisted."

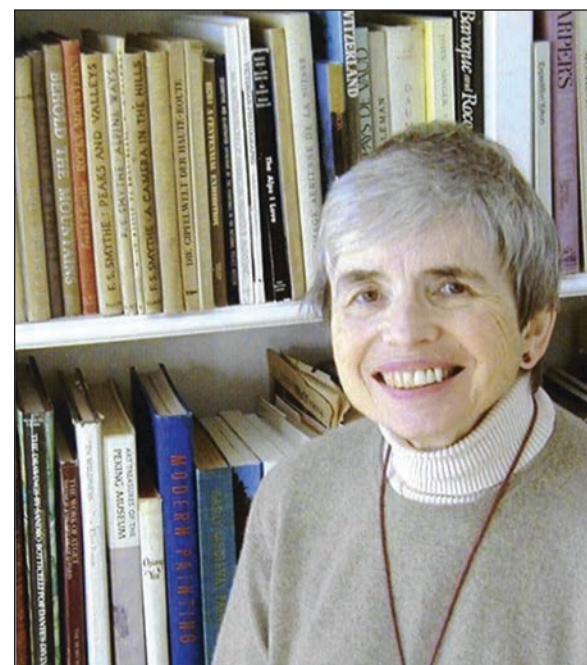
In 2001 she published "The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the Making of History," the 19th Century Vermont historian and another "Remarkable Woman" in this series. She ventured from the 19th Century, and her husband, Nicholas Clifford, ventured from Chinese history, and together they co-authored "The Troubled Roar of the Waters:

Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1927-1931," on the destructive natural disaster and the recovery by Vermonters.

Deborah Clifford studied Vermont women in the battle against the evils of alcoholism, their organizing for the Women's Christian Temperance Union (the WCTU), and their traveling around the state and speaking at meetings. These women quickly realized the need to participate in politics from school board elections to the suffragist goal of equal voting rights in the state. "Until the late 1970s," historian Marilyn Blackwell wrote, "few historians had noted the widespread influence of the WCTU, or the difficulties suffragists faced in a small rural state during their fifty-year campaign." Clifford saw that newspapers asserted that women cannot "stand too near the 'dirty pool of politics' and escape the contagion of its foul vapors," and that Vermont women did not want voting, and that the reform movement came from "agitators," "sensational reformers," and "peripatetic foreign vagabonds" who were "spreading unwelcome doctrines" during their unsuccessful 1870 suffrage campaign.

She did not limit her interest to women activists. She enjoyed finding material about the daily lives of women millworkers in the Sheldon Museum's archives; their letters, she wrote, "open a window into what was once a dark and unexplored corner of Vermont history." Stories about local women in Hemenway's Vermont Historical Gazetteer prompted Clifford to write her biography. Years earlier Clifford's scholarly contributions and contagious enthusiasm led to her becoming the first woman president of the Vermont Historical Society in 1981. She was posthumously inducted into the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Among her many community activities her tireless commitment to the Henry Sheldon Museum left a lasting legacy and was a



place she held dear. In the 1970s Jessica Swift, another "Remarkable Woman," had funded the Stewart-Swift Research Center, and the Museum's extensive collections were transferred to the new building with the task "to identify, sort, and write preliminary descriptions of the manuscripts, then still in chaos." She had relished the research opportunities, and "the breadth and depth of the collections" were distinct when she became the first woman president in 1981. Soon, she dragged the Sheldon into the 20th Century, not an easy task with a reluctant Board. After her term she helped obtain funding for a Historian-in-Residence to assess the collections and Museum. He gave a seminar on "Researching Nearby History," for which Clifford wrote "The Building of St. Mary's Church in Middlebury, 1892-1907." He encouraged the Sheldon to appoint an archivist to prepare a finding guide for publication. Again, Clifford played a vital role, and *Treasures Gathered Here* appeared in 1991. It establishes that her community "is the best documented local area in the northeast."

Deborah Clifford left treasured legacies. She paved the way for our knowledge of the significant role women have played in Vermont history and for us to further our understanding of our community's history.

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.