Women in Olympia History

by Shanna Stevenson

Of course women have always been part of Olympia history from earliest times when Coastal Salish women frequented "Stechass" or "bear's place," as the location of the city was known. These Salish were the ancestors of the current Squaxin Island tribal people. Caring for their families, they harvested cattails, steamed clams or dried salmon and berries in temporary seasonal homes and in what is likely to have been a permanent village site near the Deschutes Falls.

After the first Euro-Americans came to the area in the 1840s, Native American women did not disappear. Some married settlers, bridging the cultural divide between old and new residents. Others worked as domestics in the settlers' homes established on Budd Inlet while many continued their traditional lifeways. A descendant of these women, Olympia resident Joyce Simmons Cheeka (1901-1974), was a leader of the Squaxin Tribe who assisted ethnologists in researching Indian customs and languages and preserving culture.

The first non-Native woman to live in what is now Olympia by a family account was Mary Otchin, wife of a retired Hudson's Bay company employee who lived in the area in 1841. Early American women settlers included Lizzie Moses, Mary Ann Kandle Barnes, Waitsill Hale, Lurana Ware Percival, Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow, Margaret Hazard Stevens and Jane Wiley. They enjoyed the Hudson's Bay Company goods at Fort Nisqually and secured provisions at Tumwater although by 1854, there were ample goods coming on ships into Olympia shops.

Women took care of each other during sickness and soon started the task of community building such as raising funds for a school building through a "sewing society" and supporting churches. They raised funds for the first town hall, the first hand fire engine and contributed monies to build the narrow-gauge railroad to Tenino in the 1870s. They organized grand balls with dancing and suppers that would make "the modern 'banquet' look like a hobo handout."

Many women worked as teachers in both private and public schools. When the Olympia School District was formed in 1861, Lizzie B. Smith was the teacher. Eliza Thompson Whitworth and her husband Reverend George Whitworth opened a private school in Olympia in 1855. Similarly Rev. Isaac Dillon and his wife Mary taught at the Puget Sound Wesleyan Institute in 1856. In 1882, local educator Pamela Hale was elected as the county school superintendent. The first elected woman in Thurston county, she served as county superintendent for the next six years.

The first high school course of study was taught by Minnie Freeman and Lottie Brintnall the wife of the school superintendent B. W. Brintnall. The first woman elected to the Olympia School Board was Frances Walthew in 1919 and the second was Esther Knox (1907-1989) who was elected in 1952 and served until 1983. Since that time a number of women have been elected to the school board.

Churches depended on women to provide funding and leadership for their congregations. St. John's Episcopal Church raised funds for a building in 1863. Through sewing societies and other groups, women also outfitted churches, such as the large rose window at the former St. John's Episcopal Church at 900 9th Avenue SW. The Women's Society of the Unitarian Church was

Pamela Case Hale, first elected woman in Thurston County, served as county school superintendent for six years in the 1880s. *Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.*

instrumental in raising funds for land for the church and the organ. Almost every denomination could boast a Ladies Aid and several women were also ministers including Reverend Sarah Whitney in the 1880s. The Hebrew Benevolent Society was founded in Olympia in 1873. Today many of those same organizations survive and several churches are headed by women ministers.

The Sisters of Charity of Providence, a French Catholic Canadian religious order, permanently began their work in Washington in 1856. The order established a boarding school in Olympia in 1881 known as Providence St. Amable Academy which later became St. Michael's School. They founded a hospital near the school on the present Capitol grounds in 1887, which later relocated to west Olympia and currently operates on the east side as a major modern medical center, part of the Providence Health System. Mother Joseph (Esther Pariseau) of the Sisters of Charity (1823-1902) designed the original Olympia hospital, and is one of two representatives from Washington State in Statuary Hall in Washington, D. C. A replica of her statue is in the Legislative Building in Olympia.

Besides church-based organizations, women have worked through clubs to build and improve the Olympia community. Perhaps the most famous club is the Woman's Club of Olympia, organized in 1883, one of the oldest women's clubs on the West Coast. Nine women first organized for self improvement and civic betterment. They financed their own clubhouse in 1908 which still stands at 1002 Washington St. SE and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The club continues its philanthropic work in the area. Another early club, Eenati, began in 1899 and endures today. The Civic Improvement Club, organized in 1904, worked for improvements in the appearance of the city. Members urged the city to provide for garbage collection and initiated a project for Maple Park. They advocated outlawing driving livestock down Main Street (now Capitol Way) and built a ladies' bath house at Priest Point Park. By 1920 they had lobbied so well that most of their work was done by the city government. The annual cleanup day in Olympia is a legacy of their work.

The Women's Christian Temperance Union, which campaigned against the use of alcohol, came to Olympia in 1883. Active members included Emma and Mary Page. By 1913 the group had two chapters. Emma Page (1853-1910) is memorialized in Sylvester Park with a WCTU installed fountain in her honor. The memorial fountain also pays homage to Emma's role in promoting kindness to animals. In 2000 the fountain was refurbished through the work of the Page Family, General Administration and Olympia Heritage Commission.

Women worked together in 1913 to form the "Olympia Pure Food Council." Their purpose was to secure a city ordinance for regulation and inspection of the handling and sale of food stuffs. Active women's groups in the city at that time included: Women's Educational Club,

Women workers photographed in front of the Star Hand Laundry on Main Street (now Capitol Way), Olympia, around the turn of the twentieth century. *Courtesy Henderson House Museum, City of Tumwater.*

Woman's Club, Eenati Club, Country Clubs, Rebekahs, Pythian Sisters, Degree of Honor, Women of Woodcraft, Helping Hand, Westside WCTU, Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist Episcopal and Lutheran Ladies' Aid Groups as well as the Parent-Teachers Association, Royal Neighbors and the Civic Improvement Club. Women organized around the turn of the century as the Ladies' Relief Society to provide charitable works and to care for the less fortunate. Continuing their tradition, before her death in 2008, Barb O'Neill provided free holiday dinners for those in need for 38 years beginning in 1971 and her generosity continues through the organization "Barb's Family & Friends."

Signaling changes in the numbers of educated and professional women in the state, the AAUW formed in Olympia in 1925. Exemplifying the service of women to the city is Winnifred Castle Olsen, longtime AAUW member, who is a lifelong advocate for children, libraries and local history. Active area women's groups include the League of Women Voters (founded in 1961 in Olympia), Orthopedic Guilds, PEO's and Altrusa. The YWCA in Olympia was established in 1945 when ten women met to found a local branch to provide a program for the needs of women and girls, particularly the increasing numbers of women who worked for state government. The group bought the house at 220 E. Union in 1948 and continues its work from the more than 100 year old building. Zonta Club of Olympia, established in 1928, is an active service club that works to prevent trafficking of women and children and counts among its community service, scholarships and raising funds for Safeplace. Soroptimists began in 1941 in Olympia at first raising

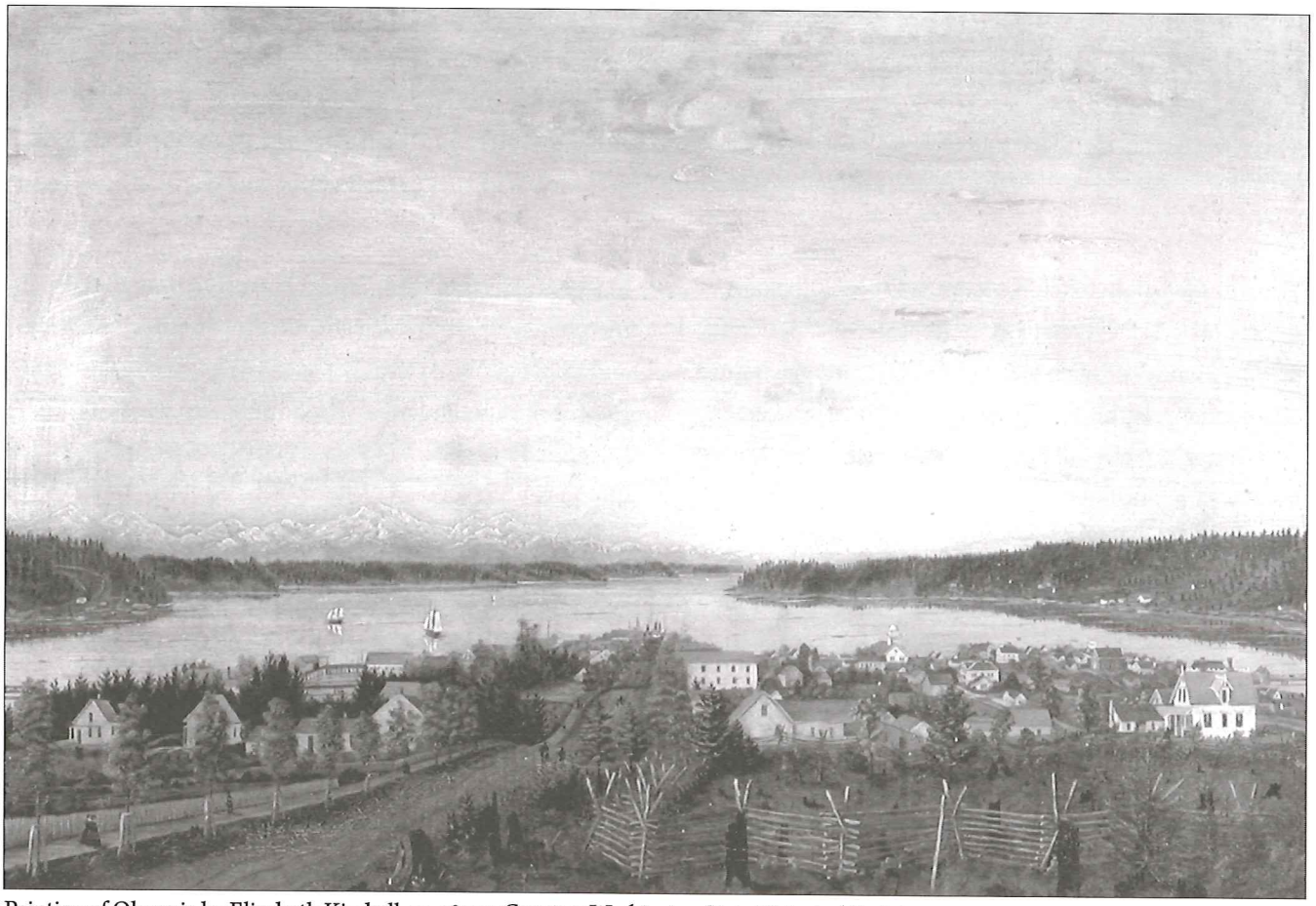
funds for the Red Cross and war work and continues supporting scholarships and other philanthropy.

In 1987 Olympian Rex Derr, then president of Olympia Kiwanis, which already included women members, offered a motion at the International Kiwanis Convention to admit women which passed, opening the door for membership for women in the formerly all-male club. Rotary, Lions and other previously all-male organizations also have women members, greatly strengthening the mission of the organizations.

The Sacajawea Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution was organized in Olympia in 1905 and chartered a year later. Their influence is felt around the county in the many historic markers they placed, including ones for End of the Oregon Trail in Sylvester Park, the first Governor's Mansion and the first State Capitol. More recently the group, partnering with the Olympia Heritage Commission, has marked the second legislative meeting site in the city at 8th and Capitol Way, and the temporary legislative site used during the 1903 session at 7th and Adams.

Women spearheaded cultural activities in Olympia. Early on women formed dramatic clubs. In the 1850s Mrs. M.A. Hamm gave vocal lessons and conducted a concert. Elizabeth O. Kimball was an early artist who painted Olympia scenes. Ida B. Smith was a noted woman photographer in the late 19th century. Georgiana Mitchell Smith Blankenship (1862-1936) was an important Olympia author who documented pioneer stories in *Tillicum Tales*. Ada Woodruff Anderson (1860-1956), a descendant of the Crosby family, was a noted author who wrote such bestsellers as *The Rim of the Desert* and other adventure romance novels.

Elizabeth and her daughter Helen Lord deeded the Lord Mansion to the state in 1939 for use as a museum. Ida Yeager Burford, a founder of a wide variety of civic



Painting of Olympia by Elizabeth Kimball, ca. 1870s. *Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.*

and educational projects, helped create the State Capitol Museum Historical Association and worked with the Daughters of the Pioneers on collections for the Museum, which became part of the Washington State Historical Society in 1993. During their lifetimes, Mary Ann Bigelow (with her husband Daniel) preserved the Bigelow House in Olympia as a private and now public museum. The house, Olympia's oldest, is now owned by the Bigelow House Preservation Association. The Evergreen State College brought noted women academics and authors to the area after it opened its doors in 1971.

Active Olympia women including Vivian Bower, Eleonore Price and Marguerite Agnew headed the efforts for a performing arts center in the city in the 1970s. Lynn Brunton was the chair of the fundraising committee for the Washington Center at the site of the Liberty Theater which opened in 1985. Junior Programs, which provides cultural presentations for school children, was started in 1940-41 when it was underwritten by ten women's organizations and fully incorporated as a separate organization in 1947. Famous recording stars from the 1950s and 1960s were Gretchen Christopher and Barbara Ellis who formed "The Fleetwoods," along with Gary Troxel. Their gold records include *Come Softly to Me* and *Mr. Blue.*

Olympia women were pivotal in the campaign for equal rights in the Territory and State. Mary Olney Brown (1821-1886) who came to Olympia in 1852 after traveling over the Oregon Trail was a notable voice for women's rights. A midwife, poet and articulate writer, she was also the mother of eleven children. She and her sister, Emily Olney French, masterminded a famous vote in 1870 where 15 women, assured by their status as citizens and empowered by the post-Civil War amendments related to voting, went to the polls in southern Thurston County and successfully cast their ballots. Unfortunately, four women in Olympia including Mary Olney Brown were turned away from the polls at the Thurston County Courthouse (still standing at Union and Adams Street in Olympia). Brown did not give up and continued to campaign for equal rights. She died in 1886, three years after women temporarily gained the vote in Washington Territory.

Noted eastern suffragist Susan B. Anthony came to Olympia in 1871 along with Oregonian Abigail Scott Duniway. Anthony gave a lecture at Olympic Hall [sometimes called the Tacoma Hall] and worked with local women and men to form the Territory's first suffrage group—the Washington Territory Woman's Suffrage Association, which held their first convention in the city in November, 1871. Anthony also had dinner with Ann Elizabeth and Daniel R. Bigelow at the Bigelow House. Many Olympia women, including Clara Pottle Sylvester (1832-1917), wife of the city's founder, hosted visiting suffragists in their homes who came to the city to lobby the legislature. Washington women gained the right to vote from 1883 to 1888 by action of the Territorial Legislature but the right was overturned by the Washington Territorial Supreme Court. A renewed campaign was centered in Olympia during the Constitutional Convention for Washington State in 1889 but suffrage failed on the ballot as it did in 1898 when a constitutional amendment was put to male voters.

By 1909, a renewed suffrage campaign brought activist women to lobby the legislature (meeting in the Old Capitol). The legislature authorized a vote on a constitutional amendment to empower women to vote which passed the next year, making Washington the fifth state in the union to enact women's right to vote and the first in the 20th century. Washington women voted a full ten years before the federal amendment passed in 1920. Leading Olympia suffragists in the 1909-10 campaign included Bernice Sapp, Lena Meyer, Georgiana Blankenship and Libbie Lord. In 2009, the Washington State Society, Daughters of the American Colonists headed by State Regent, Carole Holt, marked the site at the Old Capitol where the vote was authorized by the legislature in 1909. Groups such as the Thurston County branch of the National Organization for Women, the League of Women Voters and others continued the campaigns for equal rights legislation during the 1970s and continue those efforts today.

Because of Olympia's position as county seat and

territorial and state capital, many women have served in government from staff to elected positions. The first woman to work at the legislature in 1868 was Libbie Peebles, who came with the Mercer Expedition of 1866 which brought a number of women to Washington Territory. Libbie and her sister Anna Peebles stepped into non-traditional roles in Olympia. Annie was collector of internal revenue and Libbie worked as the first woman clerk of the legislature. June Fowles was the first woman to serve as a Washington state assistant attorney general in 1939. Latest figures show that more women than men are employed in the county, 54.4% compared to 45.6%. The first women legislators, Frances Axtell and Nina J. Croake began their service in 1913. Since that time, over 230 women have served in the legislature. Josephine Corliss Preston (1873-1958) was the first state wide elected woman when she took office in 1913 as the Superintendent of Public Instruction and was a longtime resident in Olympia. Women legislators from the Olympia area include Mary Stuart Lux, the first to serve from 1965-1968, Jennifer Belcher, Cathy Wolfe, Sandra Romero, Karen Fraser, Jolene Unsoeld, and Lela Kreidler. Jolene Unsoeld also served in Congress from 1989 to 1995 representing the 3rd Congressional District encompassing Olympia.

Amanda Benek Smith was Olympia's first woman mayor and the first woman mayor of a capital city in the United States. She served as mayor and Commissioner of Police and Fire from 1953 to 1960. Holly Gadbaw was mayor from 1988 through 1989 and council member from 1982 to 2001. Other Olympia women city council members through 2009 include Mary Stuart Lux (1982-1995); Joan Kelly (1982-1988); Cora Pinson (1988-1992) who was the city's first black council member; Sandra Romero (1990-1993); Nina Carter (1990-1994); Margaret McPhee (1993-2001); Jeanette Hawkins (1994-2004); Laura Ware (1996-2007); Karen Messmer (2006-); Joan Machlis (2008-); and Rhenda Strub (2008-). Women stepped into city government roles as well. In 1980, Barbara Greene became the city's first woman firefighter. Several women have served in county wide offices and in 2009 Thurston county boasts three women county commissioners—Cathy Wolfe, Sandra Romero, and Karen Valenzuela.

From earliest American settlement, many women were entrepreneurs and business owners including Rebecca Howard (1827-1881), a black woman who was the famous proprietress of Pacific House hotel at Main and 3rd Streets (now Capitol Way and State Avenue) beginning in the 1860s. Women were milliners, ran rooming houses, worked in laundries, labored as dressmakers and owned restaurants. Lim Shee Kay, a Chinese immigrant, with her husband Locke Suey Kay operated Kay's Café in downtown Olympia. The business was later owned by her son and his wife Bill and Toy Kay. Women have long worked in professions including Jocelyn Dohm (1918-2003) who built her own print shop, The Sherwood Press, on the Westside. Women worked at the Olympia Knitting Mills and the Olympia Cannery. Many Japanese women worked in the oyster opening industry in downtown. Anna Blom was a noted bookseller in downtown Olympia for over 40 years beginning in 1935. Women business owners continue to flourish in the city.

Notable Olympia professional women included the state's first registered woman architect Elizabeth Ayer (1897-1987) and Julia Waldrip Ker (1881-1949) who was the city's first licensed attorney and later city Treasurer and Police Judge. Although several women including Mary Olney Brown practiced as midwives, Flora Chambers Mustard was likely among the first women physicians in the city when she began her practice after graduating from medical school in 1907. Lola Cassidy Maxwell, a nurse from Iowa, had her own maternity home in the city during the 1920s and 1930s. Today, there are over 400 women attorneys in

ACTIVISM

Noted mushroom expert, educator and environmentalist, Margaret McKenny (1885-1969) spearheaded saving both Sylvester Park and what became Watershed Park from development and with Flo Brodie (1915-1992), another Olympia activist, helped preserve the Nisqually Delta in the 1960s and 1970s.

Margaret McKenny, noted naturalist and environmental activist, with students, ca. 1965. *Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.*

the city as well as many other women professionals.

The tradition of activism of Olympia women continued in the controversial life of Olympia resident Rachel Corrie who was killed by a bulldozer in the Gaza Strip in 2003 at the age of 23 while serving as a member of the International Solidarity Movement.

Of course women's history is everyone's history as Olympia women have worked in homes, schools, churches and public life to shape the city, build community and advocate for a better Olympia over the past 150 years.

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