



Vermont Women's Historiography by Elise Guyette

When Will Women's History Become Simply History?

In 1977 Leslie Marmom Silko, a writer of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, wrote:

I will tell you something about stories,
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
All we have to fight off
Illness and death.

You don't have anything
If you don't have the stories.

So they try to destroy the stories
Let the stories be confused or forgotten.
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenseless then.

People are defenseless without their stories, without an empowering sense of who they are, where they have been, how they have struggled for rights and dignity – sometimes winning, sometimes losing, but continuing the fight nevertheless. And yet, women and people of color have been denied a usable history – one that helps them understand how people like themselves affected the past and hence can affect the present. According to historian Gerda Lerner (1982), an early women's historian, access to these stories is a deep psychic need which, when left unmet, causes a distorted sense of self and a sense of inferiority based on a denigration or elimination of their group experiences.

Historians, such as Lerner, Mary Kay Thompson Tetrault, and Vermonters Faith Pepe and Constance McGovern have written of various stages in the discovery and writing of women's stories and implored historians to pay more attention to these important yet hidden narratives. This article examines the history of how women have been portrayed in our written histories and how these stories have changed over time.

The initial attempts to add women to the written record mirrored the earliest histories of men. The first American historians, generally white males, defined "importance" in history as the actions of men like themselves who were powerful in politics, economics and the military. With this definition of importance firmly imbedded in the historical landscape, the initial forays into adding women to history were just that – adding women who fit easily into elite political, military and economic realms. These are limited criteria to be sure, and the accounts found through this process became known as "contribution history." The women were often related to individual men from the traditional histories, such as the wives of presidents and philanthropists and others from their economic circles who contributed to the activities dominated by men.

Some of the Vermont women found through this process were career women such as Dr. Clara Gary, writer Julia Dorr and activist Clarina Howard Nichols. Others were not of the higher socio-economic class, but easily fit into the military and political history of early Vermont, such as the Allen women, of course, and Molly Stark as well as Ann Story, upon whom the Green Mountain Boys depended during the American Revolution. Other powerful women were celebrated in the 1980 "Those Intriguing, Indomitable Vermont Women." Such individual stories, however, often offered superficial views of elite, white women in a man's world and avoided the context of their lives and connections to wider societal forces.

As historians from outside elite groups began to write about the women they admired, women from ethnic groups other than Anglo-Saxon made it to the printed page. Examples in Vermont include Abenaki healing women, Molly Ockett & Sarah Jackson Somers and African Americans such as Lucy Terry Prince. These stories illustrated a more diverse society, but were nevertheless based on the lives of individual women with little historical context.



In the 1960s and 70s, the definition of importance expanded and social history became popular. This process attempted to discover how "ordinary" people lived, but still within the political-economic-military framework. Historians showed a new interest, for example, in the lives of soldiers and men working in industry. The women found through the social history process generally showed what women were doing while the men were doing what the texts tell us is important, such as domestic work and the social life of a community. In Vermont, Abby Hemenway, ahead of her time, had already published works including such issues. In the 19th century she had collected and edited histories of Vermont towns and made the editorial decision to

include stories of the domestic work of women and images of their social activities. A male editor might well have edited these out.

Vermont historian, Faith Pepe of Brattleboro focused her work on the unrecognized, commonplace work of women. She wrote a groundbreaking article in 1977 in which she sent out the call to do more social history on women and included a bibliography of sources that would be useful to historians. Through her writings and an influential 1985 photo exhibit, Pepe took a closer look at the broader socio-economic status of Vermont women – not isolated biographies. Such histories helped us to understand women's experiences on a broader scale and began the work of making women's history a part of all histories.

Some of these early attempts, however, often depicted women as oppressed and passive victims of a male-dominated system and did not present their experiences from their own perspectives. For example, mill girls "contributed" to industrialization by working long hard hours and going home to do housework in a life of drudgery. Images of women accompanying their men west on the Oregon Trail often depicted them as victims of male power, being forced away from the east and their families.

Later, as women's historians began to look for women's perspectives on the major issues, they looked for letters, diaries and magazines that illustrated how women thought about their experiences. As historians discovered these perspectives, they revealed that for some mill girls, like Mary Paul from Vermont, the work was longer and harder on the farm, and many a mill girl preferred independent city life to living at home with her parents. [This, of course, changed later as machines sped up and the workday lengthened.] Historians Peavey & Smith illustrated Vermont women who resisted being torn from their communities in "Women in

Waiting in the Western Movement" (1994) and stayed home while their husbands migrated without them.

The new interest in women's lives led some historians to study women's experiences in areas separate from men and defined by women, essentially how women functioned on their own terms. This is commonly known as "bifocal history." Historians began to analyze the social and economic function of the housewife, as well as examine women outside the home, but still separate from men: women's clubs, midwifery and social work, as well as their independent and powerful roles in churches. Historians wondered what women's daily lives had been like over time and how technological changes affected them. They became interested in how women molded their own gender roles, like the "cult of the true womanhood," how these roles have changed over time and how women defined themselves within them. This, of course, left out the many women who had always worked outside the home of necessity.

During this phase, questions were asked about the subordinate status of women and how they resisted a male-defined world. Women in mass movements and doing typical women's work became important topics of inquiry. In Vermont, Bassett's (1946) work on the suffrage movement was ahead of its time. Clifford's (1970s) work on suffrage and temperance movement and Bandel's (1972) work on schoolteachers illustrate this stage. In the 1950-60s the Vermont Historical Society printed works on mill girls and seamstresses, which Pepe characterized as "the first hesitant beginnings of a trend away from an elitist approach to history."

In the 1980s and 90s Vermont historians began to examine the experiences of particular classes and ethnicities other than Yankee. Blackwell's (1992) work on Irish women in poverty and Gallagher's (1999) work on the eugenics movement in Vermont follows in this tradition. For teachers and students, Guyette's (1986) history of Vermont weaving immigrant experiences, abolition and suffrage and Sharrow's (1992) multicultural handbook on immigrants to Vermont are examples. Stories we tell about ourselves have become more diverse as women's roles in many cultural settings became important. There is still much to do on this front, however.

Recently, some historians have begun to connect the work done on female and male history in new, multidisciplinary, comparative ways. There is a weaving of female and male roles together in different ways, not "contribution" history and not "bifocal history," but examining the way lives are lived: entwined in massively knotted ways. Some historians have begun to make every story a gender story – connecting the lives of women and men in realistic, complex, interdisciplinary ways to reveal gender as an important determinant in all areas of life and history. These histories connect the public and private spheres, showing both women and men in both spheres, not separated as in the earlier stages. A good example in Vermont is Gerzina's (2008) *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, an account of one black family fully focused on both Lucy and her husband Abijah and their strategies for survival within a largely white society.

This newest goal is to reveal society as a bundle of complex interrelationships between and among women & men, rich & poor, white & people of color. Of course, this could not have been done without the research of the earlier stages in women's history. At this point in time, a melding of these stories is seen as a reasonable rendering of how society works in order give us good information upon which to make better decisions about our lives. We have little idea of what is yet to come, but if indeed we have nothing without our stories, illuminating the past will undeniably strengthen the future for all of us.