



Remembering Deborah Pickman Clifford

The history of women has often been found in long-forgotten diaries about daily life, intimate family letters, and local folklore. That was the favored medium of the late historian Deborah Pickman Clifford of New Haven, Vermont, whose article about Mary Winchester appears in this issue. She died suddenly this summer at the age of 75 after a distinguished career as a biographer and writer. In a story about women millworkers that appeared in *We Vermonters: Perspectives on the Past*, Clifford noted that their letters “open a window into what was once a dark and unexplored corner of Vermont’s history.” The same could be said about her own contributions to the state. In the mid-1970s, Clifford helped open the field of women’s history in Vermont to serious study.

Raised in Boston and graduated with honors from Radcliffe College, Deborah moved to Cornwall, Vermont, in 1966 with her husband Nicholas, a history professor at Middlebury College. While mothering four daughters, she completed a master’s degree in history at the University of Vermont and was soon writing biographies and articles about women.

One of her own ancestors, Bostonian Julia Ward Howe, was Clifford’s first subject. A poet and reformer who created the lyrics to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Howe had a significant influence on nineteenth-century culture. In *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Biography of Julia Ward Howe* (1979) and her second book, *Crusader for Freedom: A Life of Lydia Maria Child* (1992), Clifford recreated the lives of women who participated in the antislavery, woman suffrage, and peace movements. With her “Mother’s Day Proclamation,” Julia Ward Howe called mothers to the cause of peace and in the process initiated an enduring American holiday. The writer and abolitionist Child challenged many of the commonly held opinions about race and gender in her day. “She was just the kind of ‘feisty, independent woman’ I liked,” Clifford remarked, “but it took more than ten years to unravel her inscrutable character.”

When Clifford began investigating Vermont's reformers, she discovered the stalwart members of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the indefatigable suffragists. Her articles appearing in *Vermont History* detailed their efforts to change Vermont law. In their crusade against the "vice of alcoholism," the WCTU's "White Ribboners" hoped to reform male drinking habits and protect families from poverty. As members of the largest women's association in the state, they learned how to organize, to give speeches, and eventually to influence politics. Meanwhile, the suffragists waged a decades-long battle with the legislature to gain equal citizenship with men.

Until the late 1970s, little information about women and their organizations could be found in standard works on the state's history. 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. In 1870, most of Vermont's major newspapers ridiculed the idea of women going to the polls and suggested instead that "woman" should stand clear of the "dirty pool of politics" and "keep her place in the pure, clear mountain air." Claiming that most women simply did not want to vote, they accused suffragists of abandoning both marriage and the Bible.

Deborah Clifford was not just interested in the most active women. She was fascinated with ferreting out the details of women's daily lives and piecing together tiny shards of history from obscure archives. Her pursuit of the smallest detail became essential for recreating the story of her last biographical subject, the formidable Abby Hemenway. In *The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the Making of History* (2001), Clifford faced the daunting task of uncovering a personality who left few records of her life other than her prodigious five-volume history of the state. Against all odds—lack of funds, male critics, fires, and poor health—Hemenway persisted in a quest to gather information about every town in the state, and to compile it as a gift "for the whole people." Clifford retraced her footsteps to understand what inspired and drove her to do it. With little hard evidence about Hemenway's thoughts and feelings, she searched diligently through the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* for clues about her elusive subject. In the process, Clifford not only discovered a wealth of material about local women buried within the *Gazetteer*'s bindings, but also provided historians with the first critical analysis of this monumental work and its author.

Gathering women's stories formed the core of much of Deborah Clifford's work. Often ignored by other historians, folklore about everyday life provided the colorful details that illuminated her historical

narratives. For five years, she put her prodigious research talents to good use writing stories for *Historic Roots*, a magazine designed to make history come alive for adult learners. In her most recent publication, “*The Troubled Roar of the Waters*”: *Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1927–1931* (2007), a book co-authored with her husband, she injected local anecdotes culled from Vermonters who had witnessed the state’s worst natural disaster in the twentieth century. The book was co-winner of the Richard O. Hathaway Award in Vermont history in 2008.

Beyond her publications, Clifford spent countless hours supporting community organizations, from founding the Middlebury Childcare Center to serving as trustee of the Sheldon Museum and the Vermont Historical Society. In 1981 she became the first woman to wield the gavel as president of the Sheldon Museum and took the same job for VHS, a position she held until 1985. Most recently, she served on the advisory board of the Vermont Women’s History Project and was inducted into the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences posthumously.

Although Deborah will be sorely missed by many friends and colleagues, she has left the state an important legacy, including a collection of biographies, *More than Petticoats: Remarkable Vermont Women*, published in 2009. In addition, the VHS has established a permanent endowment, the Deborah Pickman Clifford Legacy Fund, to support her interests in both Vermont history and women’s role in the state’s past. To donate to the fund, contact Jane Campbell, 802-479-8516; jane.campbell@state.vt.us.

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