

Historically Speaking - Women of Lunenburg

Editorial by Amory Phelps, Historical Commission member

In this era of equality for women, we must not leave out the women of Lunenburg. It is said that behind every successful man is a woman and not only did Lunenburg women serve in this manner, but they were outstanding in their own right. All the wives of Lunenburg's first settlers should be on the list, headed by Lois Whitney Bellows who dared to stand up to British soldiers to protect her home while men folk were away at war.

Another early settler who must have been a strong and courageous woman was the widow Jane Boynton, born in 1661 and died in 1761, only a few days less than 100 years. She came to Lunenburg about 1725 from Rowley, already a widow with 14 children. Benoni Boynton, her oldest son, settled a mile north of the North Cemetery, and another son, Hilkiah, was involved in town affairs, and connected with several land speculations. Among her daughters, one married John Grout, another early settler, who was a selectman for several years, and another, Priscilla, married David Page, son of Samuel.

In 1734 Priscilla Boynton Page rode on horseback over a blazed trail with her husband David to the westerly part of Lunenburg which is now Fitchburg. In 1741 three of their boys died from what could have been typhoid fever. Undaunted, they left their remaining children and set out for Petersham. David Page later had land grants in Haverhill, Massachusetts, Lancaster, New Hampshire and then in Lunenburg, Vermont, which is along the Connecticut River. Priscilla certainly must have been hardy women to make livable homes in the wilderness, as she moved about with her husband.

Perhaps one of the first of our present free thinking liberated women was Caroline Stearns, who not only believed in independence, but certainly against the institution of marriage, if we may judge by the stipulation in her will. Caroline M. Stearns was born in 1831, in Leominster, the daughter of Thomas and Polly Brigham Stearns. Her father was born in Lunenburg in 1794, and conducted in Leominster a “currier’s” shop, for the dressing and paring of leather. Caroline was one of his workers and carried on the business after his death. She frequently wrote letters to her lady friends advising them to remain single. Her desire to encourage this and to assist women in need, “provided they did not take unto themselves a husband,” was shown in her will, disclosed after she died at Worcester State Hospital in 1911.

According to the will, she left \$500.00 in trust for the maiden ladies of Lunenburg, and after leaving the rest of the estate in trust for relatives, she directed that on their death the residue should be paid to the maiden ladies of Leominster. Lest all the maiden ladies of the town start laying claim to these funds, the will was contested by several cousins, and the court declared Caroline was not of sound mind and the small estate was divided among her heirs.

Prior to the breaking of the will the Selectmen of Lunenburg headed by John Wooldredge, chairman, planned on making an effort to collect the money and invest it, in order that the worthy maiden ladies might receive the benefits intended. How the eligibility of these maidens was to be determined was not disclosed. Sad that Caroline’s plan never came to be, but it must have caused an interesting stir at the time.

Another “maiden” lady, Susan Howard, in 1903, left her native Lunenburg a legacy of \$2000 to be used for the poor; \$500.00 for the benefit of the library,

\$800.00 for the cemetery, and an even larger sum to the Congregation Church. She was the sister of Luther Howard who established the town sidewalk fund.

Elizabeth Ann Arnold Estin Moulton, whose parents were from Lunenburg, was born in Braintree in 1804 and became known as the “greatest female orator” ever to address an audience. She joined the then new sect of Methodist at the age of sixteen and saved her money to go to Wilbraham Academy. Whispers soon started about her “unfeminine ways of prayer and taking the lead in religious services.” Her first marriage in 1831 was to Rev. Horace Moulton in 1832 and they travelled a Methodist circuit, with Elizabeth winning converts all along the way. She died in Oxford in 1843 and is buried in the family plot in Lunenburg.

Lunenburg lays claim to some of Lydia Pinkham’s 1819-1883 fame. The concoctor of the patent medicine vegetable compound for “women’s troubles” said to have “a baby in every bottle” lived for a short time on Northfield Road in the former Arnold Dickinson house. Lydia started the manufacture of her compound from roots out of Mulpus Brook. The city of Lynn now takes all the credit for Lydia Pickham and it was there that the factory for the bottling of the compound was in operations for 87 years, closing its doors in 1973. The preparation may occasionally still be found on drug store shelves.

