

RURAL VOICES ON THE PATH TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS

TOWN OF DRYDEN

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN THE GEORGE JUNIOR REPUBLIC



Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt

William Reuben George founded his junior republic in 1895 in Freeville, New York. The economic, civic, and social conditions of his republic reproduced those of the United States, and its citizenship was vested in young people, especially those who were neglected or wayward. George, a native of West Dryden, was a businessman in New York City, who became interested in the urchins on the streets and their gangs and began to organize them into more productive groups who helped, rather than hindered, the police. He longed to give these "toughs" some of the summer fresh air and fun he had experienced as a child on the family farm. In the summer of 1890, he took 22 children to Freeville with funds received from the New York Tribune, the sponsors of The Fresh Air Fund charity. Each summer from then until 1895 the number of children increased. Over these early years, George slowly developed his idea of "nothing without labor" and of a Junior Republic where young "citizens", both male and female, made the laws and controlled the economic system. He believed that, given the opportunity, youth would rise to the responsibilities of self-government and self-support.

In this corner of Tompkins County women's suffrage was legal before 1917. At the Republic, the young residents governed themselves. In its first year, the girls of the community petitioned for the vote, arguing that they should have a voice in creating the laws they were compelled to obey. They were given the vote by a substantial majority, but proceeded to give it up when they were told it was "unladylike" behavior by some of the more popular male citizens. It took the passage of a tax bill which taxed the girls more heavily than the boys for the girls of the republic to petition for suffrage again. The vote was gained and lost several times from 1895 to 1898 under different governments. Women's suffrage, however, became a key feature of the government of George Junior Republic. The girls of the Republic attended public meetings, spoke for campaigns, served on juries, and ran for office. In the early 1900s the vice president of the Republic was usually a girl, and it was observed in *The Outlook*, the paper of the Republic, that female officers were "a little better than the average boy" when it came to enforcing laws, and always very accurate in their work. Some of the girls voiced their indifference to political matters, saying that they did not see why they should be required to vote, and paying more attention to their sewing than to the speakers at meetings. But many girls appreciated their rights within the Junior Republic, and hoped that someday those same rights would be granted in the larger republic of the United States.

Florence Ledyard Cross Kitchelt, a noted social reformer and leader in the suffrage movement, began her career in 1897 as the librarian at George Junior Republic School. This institution provided the Republic's citizens with an inviting setting to read and learn. Kitchelt went on to settlement house work in Rochester, New York and New Haven, Connecticut. She was the Socialist Party candidate for Secretary of State of New York in 1914. She continued in leadership roles in the suffrage movement and the equal rights movement until her death in 1961, carrying with her the ideals of women's equality which thrived in the Republic.



George Junior Republic Library Interior, 1909.
As an educational institution, George Junior Republic housed a large library that was professional, comfortable, and inviting. Here were books, pamphlets, and inspirational reading that supported George's basic beliefs: each human being possessed both a physical and a social body; social ills should be treated in the same manner as physical ills, rather than punished. He listed four forces that would foster successful social bodies—self-government, self-support, recreation, and service.



Group on the Porch of a Cottage Residence at George Junior Republic, 1909.
George Junior Republic stressed responsible citizenship and accountability for one's actions in a participatory democracy. Students lived on the large rural campus under adult supervision. The motto "Nothing Without Labor" was the philosophy; skill, knowledge acquisition, and a fresh start on life were the goals.

FORTNIGHTLY CLUB OF DRYDEN

The Fortnightly Club of Dryden, founded in 1896, was an alliance of women who came together to study and to better themselves. They were, after all, Americans – do-it-yourselfers, true-blue believers in free-enterprise and self-reliance. In short, it was a parlor university, where heavy courses of literature and history, including unflinching accounts of modern warfare, could be served up with tea and the traditional array of dainty refreshments. The women in the fortnightly club primarily lived in the village area and many of them worked outside their homes, either with their family business or on their own. Their ranks included a doctor, teachers, a postmistress, a boarding house owner and manager. They were wives and daughters to owners of a grocery store, newspaper publisher, a mill owner and a builder. Club documents show that the founding members wanted to focus on current events in their research and presentations. Their source of information was the Southworth Library. A column in the Dryden Herald of November 10, 1915 recommended the Southworth Library for:

Books that Women Ought to Read - Also Men! A collection of books of vital interest to every woman concerned about the various industrial, economic, social, and educational problems that confront women today, is to be placed in Southworth Library for a period of two months, with privilege of renewal for one month. These books may be taken by anyone applying to the Librarian and are subject to the same rules and regulations as any public library book.

It was of utmost importance to these founding mothers that they write a constitution, declaring as their aims "mutual improvement and higher intellectual attainment," and they immediately launched a two year course in American culture, each member committing to research and present a single facet of this huge topic at their new club's biweekly meetings. The events of that first year also indicate that recognizing women's achievements and encouraging each other's research was an important value shared by this otherwise diverse group. They wrapped up that first year by inviting their male relations as well as other women in the community, to an evening of club members' own presentations spotlighting notable women in various fields. Even though a club document records that the invited men "slept peacefully" through most of the talks, the event itself spoke confidently about the founders' concerns for women's history and for each other's future lives. By 1909, the group swelled to 19 members with more than 60 present at some of their public presentations.



July 1909: The Fortnightly Club
Miss Anna Mineah
Mrs. Grace Goodrich
Mrs. Emma Cole
Mrs. Ethel Cooper
Miss Sarah Edwards
Miss Eva Deuel
Mrs. Elizabeth Wyant
Miss Mary Montgomery
Mrs. Minnie Space
Miss Carrie Kennedy
Mrs. Mary C. Brass
Mrs. Winifred Ross
Mrs. Anna D. Webster
Mrs. Edith M. Edwards
Miss Jennie Marlon
Mrs. Georgianna Rockwell
Miss Fannie M. Phillips
Miss Mary Fitch
Mrs. Grace Lupton

On November 7, 1913, Miss Carrie Kennedy led the meeting with a focus on the suffrage issue. Mrs. Burch opened the program with a presentation on the History of Women's Suffrage. She told of a suffrage school recently opened and read two poems by Ella Wheeler Wilcox which seemed most favorable to the subject. She noted that:

'the foreign world are somewhat ahead of America as Norway, Germany and England have long been discussing this subject. England has the distinction of producing the "Woman Moses" in Mrs. Parkhurst. United States has ten states, namely California, Idaho, Wyoming, Oregon, Utah, Kansas, Colorado, Arizona and Illinois which have women's suffrage while Michigan, Wisconsin and Ohio lost in their recent effort owing to the liquor question. The Governor of Kansas has the distinction of wanting women in the legislature and in many places the women have aided in making educational laws.'

Mrs. Weyant gave a brief comparison of English suffragettes and American suffragists otherwise known as 'hikers'. She spoke of the damage recently done in England by the English militants. She noted that in the U.S. over 4,000,000 suffragists have formed a 'plan of attack' upon Congress.

Mrs. Space gave a review of Anti-Suffrage. She noted that the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage was formed in 1892 and such organizations are numerous in all parts of the country (as well as New York). She noted that that there is only a small advance in temperance in states where women vote and that there is not 'a stampede of suffragists' to the states where women have the ballot.

The members responded to the roll call where a majority expressed positive response to the question 'Do I Want to Vote?' if the opportunity was made. In 1919, over 50% of these women appear on the Dryden voter registration rolls.

One hundred twenty years later, members still meet fortnightly in each other's homes; they still cap their membership at the twenty who can fit comfortably on their sofas and their best (and second-best) chairs; they still begin each meeting with a social, a tea; they still settle down to business with the same formalities (roll call, treasurer's report, reading of minutes, etc.) established at the founding, and continue to assume their annual responsibility to present a body of research or demonstrate an important – or fun – skill to the rest of the group.

SOME NOTABLE WOMEN OF DRYDEN

DR. MARY BRIGGS

Mary Briggs was born in 1848. When she was seven years old, her father, Dr. Isaac Briggs, went west with the Ithaca and California Mining Company to serve as company doctor in the gold fields of California. Here on the frontier Mary first served as her father's assistant. On their return to New York, she finished her regular education and attended medical school. In 1876 Dr. Mary had set up her own medical practice on Pleasant Street in Dryden where she specialized in women and children's medicine. She was a member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and registered to vote in 1918.

DR. MARY MONTGOMERY

Mary Montgomery was the third "Dr. Montgomery" and second "Dr. Mary" in the village of Dryden. Born in 1855, she attended Union Free School #8 on West Main Street before attending medical school. Her father, Dr. James Montgomery, or "Dr. Jim," practiced medicine in Dryden for nearly 57 years, while her brother, Dr. John, served as a medic in the Union Army before joining his father's practice. Mary was a lifelong member of the Presbyterian Church and played the church organ for about a quarter century, beginning in 1884. She participated in concerts, talent shows, and plays at the Dryden opera house, performing as pianist and actress. A member of the Order of the Eastern Star and the Fortnightly Club, she also donated towards such community endeavors as the erecting of the fountain on the village green. She registered to vote in 1918. Mary Montgomery hosted the Fortnightly Club for its first four years of meetings. After her death in 1933 she expanded her hospitality to the whole village, donating the land behind her home to the village to serve as a park. Named in memory of her brother, Montgomery Park still welcomes the people of Dryden.

HATTIE DUPEE WILSON

Among the most important influences for education and civic involvement in any rural community was the library. Dryden's Southworth Library, created by the generous gift of Jennie McGraw Fiske, opened in 1883 with a collection of 2,000 books. The librarian tasked with organizing and overseeing this collection was a young woman named Hattie Dupee. Born in 1859, Hattie grew up on East Main Street, across the road from the grounds of the Dryden Fair. She attended the Union Free School and the new Dryden School on James Street. In 1874, the Dryden Weekly Herald noted her participation in the school exercises: "A selection, "Woman's Sphere" by Miss Hattie Dupee, was right good. Her piece was full of humor and served to keep a smile on the faces of her audience." Hattie graduated in 1879 from the Dryden School on James Street. She taught school in Virgil and attended Cornell University, graduating in 1883 with a degree in library science. She was hired right after graduation as the first librarian of the Southworth Library. Hattie served as Dryden's librarian for six years. She resigned in January of 1889, after her marriage to Jesse Wilson, the secretary of the Dryden Agricultural Society. She continued to work as an assistant for the Agricultural Society for many years, even after the birth of her two children. She maintained membership in the Women's Christian Temperance Union as well, serving for a time as the corresponding secretary, and was involved in the in Dryden's centennial celebration in 1897. She died unexpectedly of shock in 1909.

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