

HISTORIC ROOTS

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CLARINA HOWARD NICHOLS, CRUSADER FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery. It did so in 1777. But it was not so advanced in its treatment of women.

Today no one would stare at a woman wearing pants in public. But in the early 1850s, when Clarina Howard Nichols and her daughters did just that, they attracted a lot of attention. The proper attire¹ for women in those days was a dress with a long, full skirt down to the ground. What Clarina wore was a much shorter skirt that stopped at her knees. Under it was a pair of pantaloons that were tight at the ankles.

Critics, both men and women, thought that such clothing was not only daring, it was unladylike. In fact some thought it threatened the entire structure of society. Clarina liked the outfit because it was comfortable and gave her freedom to move. More than that, it was symbolic² of something she fought for all her life, freedom for women to control their property and their lives.

¹ Attire means clothing.

² A symbol is something that stands for something else. Uncle Sam symbolizes the United States, for instance.



This cartoon in the August 1851 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine shows that men (and many women) saw bloomers for women as masculine and, somehow, immoral.

Clarina had always been interested in freedom. Her grandfathers had both fought in the Revolution. Her father, Chapin Howard, had served as Overseer of the Poor in Townshend, Vermont, where she was born in 1810.

Clarina's family was well-to-do, and she herself received a good education. But even in wealthy families, most women were expected to stay at home and take care of the house, their husband, and their children. Women did not



Vermont Historical Society

Clarina Howard Nichols

go to college. They did not have the right to vote. Once they married, any property they had belonged to their husbands. Even the clothing they wore belonged to their husbands.

Poorer women, as Clarina saw through her father's work, were worse off. In addition to everything else, any money they earned belonged not to them but to their husbands. And, no matter how badly they were treated, it was not easy for them to leave. Divorce was frowned upon and not easy to obtain.

Clarina was determined to change this. When she moved to Brattleboro, in the late 1830s, after ending an unhappy marriage, she became a reporter for the *Windham County Democrat*. Soon after that, she married the paper's publisher, George Nichols, and became the paper's editor. When George became too ill to work, she took control of the entire operation.

The *Democrat* was a popular and respected newspaper, and Clarina used it to work for women's rights. In 1847, she published a series of articles on women's lack of legal rights. These articles got a lot of attention. They influenced the state legislature to pass a law giving married women the right to own, inherit, and bequeath³ property. In 1849 and 1850, other laws allowed women to own property jointly with their husbands. New laws also

³ Bequeath means to leave property to someone else.

broadened widows' rights to inherit property.

But Clarina, along with other women in Vermont and elsewhere, realized that unless women had the right to vote, they would not really control their lives or property. Here the Vermont legislature was not so cooperative. If men felt that different clothing threatened the American way of life, imagine how they felt about giving women political equality with men.

Knowing how little chance of success she had, Clarina decided, as a first step, to ask that women be allowed to vote at school meetings. After all, everyone accepted the fact that women were interested in their children's educations. Why shouldn't they vote on educational issues?

In 1852, Nichols sent a petition to the state legislature, asking for the right of women to vote on school issues. That fall, speaking in favor of her petition, she became the first woman ever to address the Vermont legislature. She was a good speaker, and her audience was impressed. Many years later, she recalled "the profound⁴ hush" at the end of her speech and the "muffled thunder of stamping feet" that followed.

But it didn't work. The lawmakers decided that the "other sex can best discharge their duties as educators, at the fireside or in the schoolroom."

⁴ Profound means deep.

Despite Nichols' efforts more than a half century earlier, in 1917 women in Vermont were still fighting for the right to vote. They didn't get it until 1920.

Two years later, Clarina Howard Nichols moved with her family to Kansas. She felt that "I could accomplish more for women, ... with less effort in the new State of Kansas, than I could in conservative old Vermont..."

She did accomplish more in Kansas. Nichols became famous throughout the country for her work there. And when the new state entered the union, in 1861, its constitution

contained several women's rights clauses, including the right to vote on school matters.

Back east in Vermont, women would have to wait until 1880 to vote in school meetings. It was 1920 before they received the right to vote in all elections.

Rooting Around

Reformers understood how important the right to vote is for all citizens. Every vote counts and every election matters. If you are 18 or older, you can vote in all elections — town, state, national. Your town clerk will help you register and tell you what you need to know about the process. There are also programs that help people learn about elections and how to look at all sides before deciding how to vote on an issue or candidate. If you are interested, ask your town clerk or librarian to help you find one.

If you are younger than 18, you can talk about election issues with your own friends and with people who *can* vote, such as your parents, teachers, other family members, and older friends.

Pick an issue that people are talking about today — Act 60 or school choice, for instance. What can you find out about it? Try talking to people with different points of view. Read the newspapers. What does the issue mean to you and to your town? How would you vote on that issue? Why?