

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of March 15 - 21, 2020

As we celebrate Women's History Month, and look for local people who may have been involved in the women's suffrage movement, it is remarkable to note how many Vernon County women attended and/or graduated from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the 19th century.

These highly-educated women – with their lives of service to community, their experiences as teachers, their positions as leaders in local organizations – may well have been involved in the campaign for women's right to vote. They certainly broke barriers by attending university, and helped pave the way for the female students of today.

At that time, the Madison school was just referred to as “the University of Wisconsin”, because there were not yet UW campuses in other cities. The UW opened in 1849 and originally only allowed male students. Women were first admitted in 1863, but just into the Normal Department, which trained teachers.

In 1865, as the Civil War was ending, the first women graduated from this Normal Department at UW Madison. There were only six students in that first graduating class, and one of them was Hettie M. Rusk of Viroqua.

Hettie was born in Ohio in 1843, moved to Viroqua with her parents in 1857, and, as her obituary says, “attended the University of Wisconsin and graduated in the first class of girls, in 1865.” She married Civil War Captain Marshall C. Nichols and died in Viroqua in 1914.

In the early 1870's, women at last were allowed into all of the UW's departments. Again a Viroqua woman was one of these pioneers: Nellie M. Tate received her Bachelor of Science degree in 1877. She was born in Massachusetts in 1856 and moved to Viroqua with her parents in 1865. Nellie married local merchant Frank Towner and died in Viroqua in 1931.

Sometimes friends or relatives attended together. In the freshman class of 1891, Regina R. Bold of Bloomingdale was enrolled in the General Science Course, as were Sadie M. Bold and Nettie L. McMichael, both of Viroqua. And that same year, May McKittrick of Viroqua was a freshman in the Modern Classical Course.

Clara Glenn graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1898, as did Kate Goodell, both of Viroqua. With these two, we do have proof that they were involved in getting votes for women. The *Vernon County Censor* newspaper noted in 1914 that Kate Goodell was out campaigning locally for women's suffrage, and Clara Glenn ran for the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1932.

It wasn't a quick trip of a few hours on a smooth highway to get from Vernon County to Madison in the 19th century, and the societal pressures to stay at home must have been strong, but these local women of long ago overcame all these adversities to earn university degrees and to improve women's rights.



Hettie M. Rusk of Viroqua was one of the first women to graduate from the University of Wisconsin.