

Honoring Portsmouth Women 2019

Portsmouth Historical Society
July, 2019

Dorothea Dix 1802 - 1887

Dorothea Dix first came to Portsmouth in 1827 as part the governess for the children of William Ellery Channing. She started the Sunday School at the Union Meetinghouse and came back to visit whenever she stayed with the Channing family. On one visit to the area Miss Dix learned of the plight of a mentally ill man, who was confined to a dungeon in Little Compton. An article in the April 10, 1844 Providence Journal attributed to Dix, illustrates the poor treatment of the insane in Rhode Island at that time. Dix persuaded Dr. Cyrus Butler to donate \$40,000 toward the establishment of a facility for the poor insane as long as matching public funds were raised. Butler Hospital for the Insane was created from that gift.

Ellen Gustin: 1834 - 1924

Rev. Ellen Gustin supplied the pulpit and served unofficially as a co-pastor of the Union Church from 1872 to 1878. Church records show no concerns about a woman taking on such a leading role in the congregation. Ellen was a friend of Julia Ward Howe and shared her work in the Suffrage movement. In 1872 the Executive Board of the church voted to allow a lecture on suffrage at the church. Ellen spoke at major meetings of the Woman Suffrage Association in New England. Rev. Ellen Gustin was an evangelist who had more of a pastoral role in a time when the congregation had lost a strong pastor. When she died at age ninety in 1924, the New York Times carried an obituary that claimed she was the third woman in America to be ordained in the ministry.

Ruth Lunan: 1895 - 1980

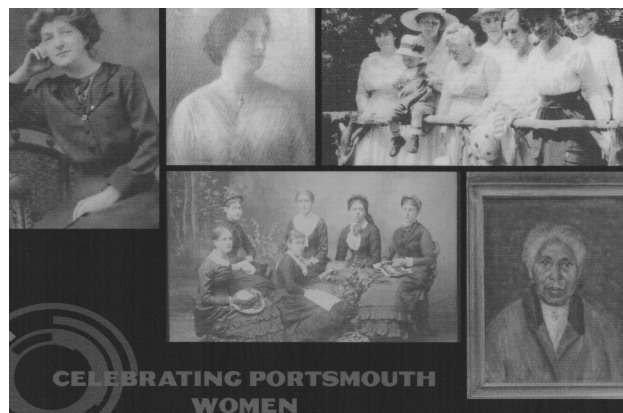
Ruth Coggeshall Lunan served in the key position as librarian of Portsmouth Free Public Library for twenty-three years. Ruth was left a widow in 1934 and it was about that time that she began to serve the community as librarian of the library. During her twenty-three years of service, Ruth presided over many changes at the library. The library lacked funds for many of the years Ruth served, but she was credited with providing the services and improvements needed to get by. Edith Taylor Nicholson became aware of the needs of the library and donated a gift to improve the library. Ruth worked to use that gift wisely for the library and its patrons. Ruth resigned from her duties in July of 1958, but she continued to serve as a Friend of the Library.

Mary Chase Hanks 1923 - 2012

Many of the farm tools in the Old Town Hall exhibit were used on Frank Chase's farm at the bottom of Quaker Hill. Frank's daughter, Mary Chase Hanks, donated the equipment. A 1994 Newport Daily News article gives more information on both Mary and Frank. At the time Mary was growing peaches, pears, tomatoes, peppers, berries, flowers and corn and selling them at her "Stonewall Stand" on East Main Road. Mary was using organic techniques and was quoted as saying, "I like natural things, the natural way of preserving life and doing things that's going to help the other fellow." She didn't use herbicides or insecticides. Mary Chase Hanks was dedicated to farming on her father's side, but she was also artistic like her mother. She earned a degree in commercial art, but didn't use her training for a while. She married and went on to raising four children in California. She became a portrait painter with children as her subjects. Mary returned to the Chase Farm in 1954 in order to help her father and she brought her children with her. As her father aged she would farm in Portsmouth from April to October.

Edna Griffin: 1909 -1994

Edna Griffin was a product of Portsmouth Schools. She was a student at Newtown School and Belle Fish was her teacher in 1918. Miss Fish's school record shows a diverse class with students of Yankee, Irish, and Portuguese heritage as well as black children. Edna Griffin went on to receive a degree from Pembroke College (at Brown University) in 1931. She majored in Greek and Latin and was active in the classical club, college magazine and year book. Edna became a teacher in Portsmouth schools and in her early years she was assigned to different schools - Vaucluse, Anthony School and then Anne Hutchinson. The 1940 Federal Census offers us a glimpse of her life. She earns \$1200 a year for her teaching. The school year for teachers was 40 weeks and in the week prior to the census she had worked 48 hours at her job. From 1941 through 1944, Miss Griffin had become principal of Anne Hutchinson School. She was chairperson for Portsmouth's Rhode Island War Bond and Stamp effort. At the beginning of the 1944-45 school year, Edna Griffin resigned as principal. She would continue teaching in Cranston and Warwick. She represents the diversity and the opportunity for students and teachers in Portsmouth Schools.



Eunice Greene 1843-1921

The ladies of the Portsmouth Temperance Movement led by Eunice Greene, fought for their cause by organizing, petitioning the Town Council and General Assembly, praying, educating the young, reaching out to soldiers and sailors and working for Women's Suffrage. They were the "church ladies." The Rhode Island chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union formed in 1875, just two years after the national chapter began. In 1886 a statewide prohibition referendum had passed, but there was a vote for repeal in 1889. In the 1890s the organization regrouped to work on a national prohibition. Once National Prohibition passed, the cause faded away in many areas, but the Portsmouth group kept meeting. Even with national Prohibition laws, the "evils of alcohol" still impacted local men and their families.

Lillian Collins Borden (1869-1933) became President of the Portsmouth WCTU when Eunice Greene became ill. She was the wife of Alonzo Borden and the couple were very active in the Christian Union Church. This church (now the home of the Portsmouth Historical Society) hosted many temperance meetings throughout the years. Lillian was active in the community and served on the Portsmouth School Board.

Fannie Brent Scott: 1854 -1926

The Portsmouth Historical Society received a portrait painted by Sarah Eddy. The subject was Fannie Scott. Who was Fannie? Her 1926 obituary in the Newport Daily News provided a wealth of clues. Around 1870 Joseph Macomber brought a group of sixteen former slaves from Virginia to Portsmouth. Fannie Edna Brent came as a young woman. Her sister, Matilda Ayler came with her husband and children as well. They became a well known farming family in the "Cozy Corners" area of

Portsmouth around Turnpike Avenue and East Main Road. Fannie lived with the Ayler household and eventually married another of Macomber's group, Robert Scott. Fannie was active in the Friends Church.

Elizabeth Trout: 1879 - 1975

Ada Trout: 1881 - 1934

In 1918 Elizabeth Trout and her sister Ada came to work at the Friends Church. Three years after they came to Portsmouth, Ada and Elizabeth reached out to establish a mission at the Coal Mines. At first they established a summer mission in a tenement, but the cold prevented them from holding winter meetings. Three years later they established a year round mission at the old school house at the Coal Mines and continued that mission until Ada's death in 1934. Education was important to the Trouts, so in 1925 they established a primary school in the basement of the Quaker Meeting House. Both women alternated the work of the church until Ada died in 1934 and Elizabeth continued on with the work by herself and finally retired in 1950. She died in 1975 and is buried at the Friends Cemetery – close to her place of ministry.

Alice Anthony Webb - 1886-1960

When Alice, the daughter of prominent seed farmer Henry C. Anthony married department store owner Frederick Webb (of Cherry and Webb) in 1910 it was one of the highlights of Portsmouth's social year. Alice was active in Portsmouth life. She was a delegate for the Republican party and she served on the board of St. Michael's School in Newport. She was especially active at St. Paul's Church in the Guild and the Ladies Association. She was president of the Girl's Friendly Society which was an Episcopalian society that sought to help girls – especially working girls. Alice was part of a dedicated group of women who worked to make St. Paul's an active church.

Gertrude Macomber Hammond: 1884 - 1978

Gertrude Macomber Hammond was the founder of the Girl Scouts in Portsmouth. She was leading the "Bluebird" Girl Scout troop in Portsmouth as early as 1921. Thirty-five girls regularly attended the weekly scout meetings. Under the auspices of "Captain" Gertrude Macomber, the Girl Scouts engaged in some creative activities - a Circus, a chariot race between two girls in kiddie cars and a band of homemade musical instruments made from curtain rods, funnels and frying pans. In 1926 the Girl Scouts had grown large enough to have two patrols in the troop. That same year Gertrude opened "The Quaker Hill Tea Room and Craft Shop" in her home. In 1931 Gertrude became the bride of Noel Hammond. She continued with her Tea House and lived a long life in Portsmouth.

Edna Brophy 1875-1966

Miss Brophy was a principal of Newtown School for 45 years and a teacher for over fifty-two years. In a time when Portsmouth had trouble retaining good teachers, Edna Brophy's long career demonstrates her dedication to teaching. A 1973 "Gristmill Column" letter in the Newport Daily News tells us a little about Miss Brophy and Newtown School. Laura E. Wilkey wrote: "In 1923 I was in Miss Edna Brophy's classroom in Newtown School. Miss Brophy (remembered for the fancy aprons she always wore) was principal and taught first and second grades."