

# Connecticut Women: Not Completely Hidden from History:Part II: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Women

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Opportunities for Connecticut women to assume responsibility for their own affairs and to take on public roles increased dramatically during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating with the right to vote in 1920. Advanced and improved education became a reality and better jobs were available. Women could now own property, be guardians for their children, and receive and control their earnings. Organization began on the community level with social, philanthropic, educational, and reform goals providing motivation. Few immigrant and minority women, however, shared in these expanded opportunities. Many women who moved out of their domestic routines into public roles left behind records of their activities that can be of interest to family historians.

**Educational opportunities for women** improved after the Revolutionary War as leaders of the new republic placed greater emphasis on an educated populace. This trend expanded steadily during the century. Many girls, especially in rural areas, continued to attend elementary schools during the summer session only. New schools for girls were often private and urban. Educated women, usually young and single or widowed, opened small elementary schools in their homes where they taught basic skills to local girls. Some schools featured the “ornamental branches” of fancy sewing, music, and dancing. Female academies and seminaries offered more advanced instruction similar to the education college-bound boys then received. Some schools boarded students who came from as far away as the Carolinas and Ohio. During their heyday, private schools in Connecticut educated thousands of girls each year. By the last decades of the century, co-educational public high schools were replacing private academies and seminaries. Girls who went to work at age fourteen began to attend evening classes at public schools to further their education.

Records from some private Connecticut schools for girls survive, possibly even from a school your ancestor(s) attended. You may find school catalogs and yearbooks with lists of trustees, teachers, and students, the school curriculum, lists of alumni with addresses, school programs naming student participants, school publications with student literary compositions, report cards, journals, correspondence, scrapbooks, and photographs.

In Connecticut, school records are kept at the [Connecticut State Library](#), the [Connecticut Historical Society](#), and other local historical society archives. Listed below are selected collections of records from Connecticut girls’ schools.

School/Teacher	Dates in Collection	Repository	Comments
Litchfield Female Academy	1792-1850	<a href="#">Litchfield Historical Society</a> P.O. Box 385 Litchfield, CT 06759 860-567-4501	Miss Sarah Pierce founded the school. Extensive collection of records.
Lydia Sigourney papers from the Hartford school where she taught	1814-1819	Connecticut Historical Society One Elizabeth Street Hartford, CT 06105 (860) 236-5621	Small collection of records.
Hartford Female Seminary	1827-1890	Connecticut Historical Society	Catherine Beecher founded this school. Many records available.
Prudence Crandall School for Black girls at Canterbury, Connecticut	1833-1834	<a href="#">Connecticut College Library</a> 270 Mohegan Avenue New London, CT	Small collection of records.

		06320-4196 and at Connecticut State Library 231 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, CT 06106 860-757-6500	
Miss Porter's School, Farmington, Connecticut	1840-present	<a href="#">Miss Porter's School</a> 60 Main St., Farmington, Connecticut 06032 860-409-3500	Miss Sarah Porter founded this school. Extensive collection of records.
Middletown Female Seminary	1849-present	<a href="#">Wesleyan University Archives</a> 252 Church Street, Middletown CT 06459 860-685-3864	Small collection of records.
Stamford Female Seminary/Catherine Aiken School	1855-1914	<a href="#">Stamford Historical Society</a> 1508 High Ridge Road Stamford, CT 06903 203-329-1183	Extensive collection of records.

**Weekly or daily community newspapers** were very popular and increasingly available during the nineteenth century, and regularly featured articles about local girls' schools. Nineteenth-century newspapers (usually on microfilm) can be found at local libraries, historical societies, the Connecticut State Library, and the Connecticut Historical Society. Many of these microfilmed newspapers can be borrowed from the Connecticut State Library, three rolls at a time. To locate articles, it is necessary to scan the local news pages of newspapers for the years of interest.

**Divorce records** are discussed in [part I](#) of this series. In addition, divorce records for several Connecticut counties have been published:

- Knox, Grace Louise and Barbara B. Ferris. *Connecticut Divorces: Superior Court Records for the Counties of New London, Tolland, and Windham 1719-1910* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1987).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Connecticut Divorces: Superior Court Records for the Counties of Litchfield, 1752-1922, and Hartford, 1740-1910* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1989).

**Church records** usually provide dates for baptisms, marriages, and deaths, yet records of many churches contain additional information, often about female members of congregations and their activities. Records can be found at the churches and at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford. They are also sometimes published separately, as were Stratfield (later Bridgeport) records. See *The Bicentennial Celebration of the First Congregational Church and Society of Bridgeport, Connecticut* (New Haven, 1895) available at the NEHGS Library, the Connecticut State Library, and the Bridgeport Public Library for more information on these records. Published Stratfield/Bridgeport church records begin in 1695 and continue to 1895. The annotated list of members indicates previous church affiliations of transfer members as well as genealogical information. Another annotated list includes names of persons connected with the parish but not designated as members.

Minutes of church meetings may include names of members that came up for discussion. Records of women's societies affiliated with the church may also be included. The following examples are just a sampling of women's society records kept in the Church Records Collection, 1670-1950s, and the Church Records Group 70, 1639-1956, at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford:

- United Church of Chester Female Praying and Benevolent Society, 1814-43; Ladies' Benevolent Society, 1853-1909; Women's Baptist (Foreign) Missionary Society, 1874-1911; and Women's Baptist Home Missionary

Society, 1900-1919

- First Congregational Church of Suffield's Woman's Missionary Society, 1822-1909
- Methodist Church of Hebron Female Benevolent Association, 1837-1871
- Congregational Church of East Haven's Ladies' Benevolent Society, 1846-1870

**Secular women's organizations** emerged before the Civil War as members of a better-educated middle class began to have more leisure time for meaningful activities outside their homes.

During the Civil War the north desperately needed contributions by women, creating opportunities for some to serve as nurses at the front and for those at home to organize Ladies' Soldiers' Aid Societies, auxiliaries to the Sanitary Commission.

Women from Connecticut cities and towns, including Hartford, New Haven, Stamford, and possibly others, organized aid societies shortly after the war began and continued their efforts until the last wounded soldiers had returned to their homes or northern hospitals. Their initial purpose was to prepare, collect, and ship supplies needed by sick or wounded soldiers. Later efforts, directed toward collecting money for the war effort, culminated in major fund-raising events known as Sanitary Fairs. Members also went to local train stations to nurse and feed wounded soldiers who were en route to their homes or hospitals. For Stamford, I once estimated that twenty percent of town women belonged to the local society, an indication of the popularity of this form of wartime service.

Local newspapers routinely featured articles about Ladies' Soldiers' Aid Societies in their areas, listing names of members and group activities, especially during 1863 and 1864, their busiest years. Look for articles in newspapers from your ancestor's town to determine whether she was involved.

Other local women's organizations whose activities were described in newspapers include evening clubs for working girls, federated women's clubs, hospital aid societies, literary societies, ethnic lodges, children's aid societies, and exchanges for women's work. You may find your ancestor(s) names included. Examples of records you might find in historical societies and libraries include:

Organization	Dates in Collection	Repository	Comments
Norwich Ladies' Literary Society	1800-1805	Connecticut Historical Society	
Charitable Society of Vernon	1814-1892	Connecticut State Library	
Daughters of '53, New Haven	1853-1972	New Haven Colony Historical Society 114 Whitney Avenue New Haven, CT 06510	Pertains to an independent Jewish women's club that is still active
United Order of True Sisters, New Haven No. 4, Jochebed Lodge, New Haven	1863-1972	New Haven Colony Historical Society	Pertains to a national Jewish women's organization involved in civic, social, and charitable activities.
Ladies Library Association of the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library	1872-present	<a href="#">Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library</a> 2 Library Lane Old Lyme, CT 06371 860-434-1684	

If your ancestor was reform-minded and interested in public issues, she may have been a member of one of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's groups organized to achieve political goals. While Connecticut women were not very involved in the anti-slavery movement, they were extremely active in the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) and suffrage campaigns after the Civil War era.

Records of reform groups include:

Group	Dates in Collection	Repository
Female Anti-Slavery Society of Brooklyn, Connecticut	1813-1824	Connecticut State Library
Connecticut Woman's Suffrage Association	1858-1921	Connecticut State Library
New Haven Woman Suffrage Association	1871-1876	Connecticut Historical Society
Women's Christian Temperance Union of Guilford	1878-1904	Connecticut State Library
Women's Christian Temperance Union of Hartford	1881-1931	Connecticut State Library
Young Women's Christian Temperance Union of Rockville	1882-1889	Connecticut State Library
Hartford Equal Rights Club	1885-1925	Connecticut State Library
Long Ridge Women's Suffrage Association	1904-1912	Stamford Historical Society

A detailed account of the suffrage campaign in Connecticut that includes biographical information about its leaders can be found in Carole Nichols, *Votes and More for Women: Suffrage and After in Connecticut* (New York: Haworth Press, 1983).

### **Native American Women**

Records concerning Native American women can be found in superior and county court records kept in RG 3, Judicial Department, at the Connecticut State Library.

### **Immigrant and Minority Women**

Most urban immigrant, minority, and young rural women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries received an elementary education at best. They often began working by age fourteen, usually married early, and then raised large families. Some who lived in cities were able to continue their education in the evenings and participate in the working girls' clubs that were sponsored by civic-minded members of the community. There they would be taught English, basic skills, and domestic arts, while engaging in various social activities.

Finding information about specific women can be challenging. Information from city directories and censuses may give addresses and workplaces. Many young immigrant and minority women worked in factories or as domestic servants. Local historical societies may have business records from the workplaces of your ancestors that will provide information about salaries, working conditions, and employees. The Connecticut Historical Society in particular has a huge collection of business records from all over the state. Census information may also suggest something about their lives.

### **Diaries, Journals, and Correspondence**

The Connecticut State Library and many local historical societies have diaries, journals, and correspondence of nineteenth-century Connecticut women from all walks of life that provide information about their daily lives and activities in their neighborhoods and communities. Even if your ancestor is not included, you might find that someone else in her community did keep a diary in which she described local events and people she knew.

## **Voter's Lists**

Beginning in the 1890s, Connecticut women were permitted to vote in school elections. Some town clerks still have early voter registration lists that will include names of pre-1920 women voters.

## **Additional Sources of Information About Connecticut Women and Their Activities**

[Connecticut Women's Hall of Fame](#)

[Connecticut Heritage Gateway's Bibliography for Women's History](#)

Moynihan, Ruth Barnes. *Coming of Age: Four Centuries of Connecticut Women and Their Choices*. Hartford: Connecticut Women's History Project, 1989.

Hinding, Andrea, Ames Sheldon Bower, and Clarke A. Chambers, editors. *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States*, 2 volumes. New York: R. R. Bowker, 1979. [See index in Volume 2 for list of individuals and Connecticut section in Volume 1 for holdings of many libraries and archives.]

James, Edward T., Janet Wilson James, Paul S. Boyer, editors. *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971. [Contains biographies of individual women.]