




**Women's History in
the Hudson Valley**

*Ten Stories from Columbia
and Dutchess Counties*

2020



Dear Friends,

New York's history is rich with brave women who fought to break barriers and make their voices heard – and in 2020, we've watched decades of determination, courage and hard work create real change as more women than ever are becoming the leaders they were destined to be. Yet far too often, the stories of the women who fought to get us to this point are overlooked. Although we may not have learned about these pioneers on the pages of our textbooks, their lasting impact can be seen all around us.



The 2020 volume of **Women's History in the Hudson Valley: Ten Stories from Columbia and Dutchess Counties** includes the stories of Cornelia Skinner, a teacher who opened a boarding and day school for girls in Hudson where they learned how to become pioneering, independent and strong members of their community; Inez Milholland, a strong advocate and public speaker for women's rights who started the suffrage movement at Vassar College; Elinor Morgenthau, an activist who worked closely with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt; and many more.

These remarkable women who fought for justice and followed their passions have inspired the women who follow in their footsteps and helped push our region and state forward in the fight for equality. My office is proud to once again produce and distribute **Women's History in the Hudson Valley** in partnership with the Mid-Hudson Library System as part of Women's History Month. Please enjoy these stories of 10 women whose courage and strength helped shape the Hudson Valley.

Sincerely,



Didi Barrett

Member of the Assembly, District 106

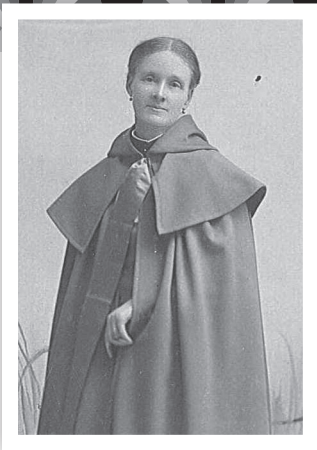




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Sister Emma J. Neale

New Lebanon
1847-1943

Religious Leader and Businesswoman

Sister Emma J. Neale made many contributions to the Mount Lebanon community through both her commitment to the Shaker religion and notable business skills. Neale began living at the East Family of Mount Lebanon in 1855 and, in 1861, moved to the Church Family, where she

lived for the next seven decades. She soon became a leader in the community and was appointed as an office deaconess in 1886 and as a trustee in 1901. It was through this position that Neale's natural talent as a businesswoman became apparent, as her skill helped reshape and improve her community. As a trustee, she was responsible for mitigating the region's financial struggles and managed the production of fancy goods made by the sisters. She worked hard to lift the community out of its financial struggles, and in 1901, formed E.J. Neale & Co., which produced the popular Shaker cloaks. She sold the Church Family property to the founders of the Darrow School in 1930, and moved to Ann Lee Cottage, where she continued selling cloaks and fancy goods.



While Neale remained dedicated to keeping the Church Family going, she also made significant efforts to preserve the legacy of the Shakers by helping Dr. Charles Adams of the New York State Museum and John Williams of the Shaker Museum and Library acquire many Shaker-made and Shaker-owned objects. This foresight has allowed generations of people to learn about the Shaker religion and get a glimpse into their unique history. Later in life, Neale moved to the North Family, where she remained until her death in 1943.



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Judith Backer Grunberg

Chatham
1933-2019

Artist and Community Leader

Judith Backer Grunberg's passion for the arts and commitment to giving back helped make Columbia County a more vibrant and unique place to live. Born and raised in Manhattan, Grunberg's love of drawing and painting led her to pursue an art degree at Bennington College in

Vermont. After graduating in 1955, she traveled to Rome, Italy, where she continued to expand her skills as an artist. She moved to Chatham in 1965 with her husband, Paul Grunberg, where they raised their four children. Judy became involved in the local art scene and served as the first artistic director of the Columbia County Council on the Arts for two decades. She also owned the Blue Plate restaurant with her husband, where they helped bring joy and delicious food to the community.

Following her husband's passing, Grunberg continued to share her positive energy and talents with the world through her many business and charitable endeavors. In 1999, she founded PS21 (Performance Spaces for



the 21st Century), a nonprofit dedicated to the growth and success of the performing arts scene in Chatham, as well as ReWraps and OPTIONS, two regional clothing stores. Grunberg served on many local boards, including the Crandell Theatre in Chatham, Time & Space Limited in Hudson, The Columbia Land Conservancy, Close Encounters with Music in Great Barrington, Chatham Area Business & Arts, Chatham Real Food Market and WAMC Northeast Public Radio. Grunberg also showcased her artwork at numerous local venues and curated and designed the “Close But Not Art?” show in 1998, which was awarded third place in Metroland’s Top Ten Shows of the Year.

As both an artist and an active member of her community, Grunberg touched many lives and inspired others to pursue their passions. The impact she made on the local arts scene and the joy she brought to us all will carry on for generations to come.





Cornelia Skinner

Hudson
1835-1917

Educator

Cornelia Skinner believed in the value of a quality education and helped give many girls throughout the Hudson community the opportunity to learn and grow. A Hudson native, Skinner was born in 1835 to parents H.P. Skinner and Phoebe Bailey Hathaway. She graduated from the Hudson Female Academy and began her

teaching career in Fox Lane, Wisconsin.

In 1867, Skinner returned to Hudson to open a boarding and day school for girls with her sister, Sarah Skinner. The sisters started the school in their childhood home on Warren Street, but eventually had to move to a larger facility due to its tremendous success. The school accepted as many as 75 students and helped girls attain the skills and knowledge they needed to begin the next chapter of their lives, whether that was attending college or taking on duties at home or in business. Skinner helped students become more confident and served as their role model. She retired in the 1890s and moved to the Home for the Aged with her sister, where she was visited by many relatives and



friends. Skinner was a valued member of the Hudson community and beloved by all who had the chance to know her.

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Regina Schmidt Mesick

Ghent
1922-2012

Educator

For more than 40 years, Regina Schmidt Mesick helped foster young minds and taught them the importance of hard work and treating people with kindness. Mesick was born in West Park in 1922 to parents Gustav and Hazel Schmidt. She studied education at New

Paltz College and went on to become a teacher at Ghent School, where she worked for the entirety of her career. She strived to not only teach her students academics, but also important life lessons, and wanted each of her students to know that their voice mattered. Mesick's decision to retire in 1985 was prompted by the school's closing, and she was later quoted as saying, "I probably still would be teaching as long as the school was open. Every year was different and every year was good. We had very nice children and nice classes."

Mesick and her late husband, Beebe Mesick, attended the kick-off of the Ghent School bell restoration project in 2005. A dedication ceremony was held a couple months later,



where Mesick was awarded the first membership card for the Ghent School Alumni Association. She was also an active member of her community, serving as a charter member of the Ghent Volunteer Fire Company Ladies Auxiliary and as a communicant of St. James Roman Catholic Church in Chatham.



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Norma Millay Ellis

Austerlitz
1893-1986

Actress, Singer and Advocate for the Arts

Norma Millay Ellis' life revolved around the arts, as she not only pursued her own creative passions but also helped aspiring artists reach their full potential and achieve their dreams. Ellis was born in 1893 in Rockland, Maine, and was the daughter of Cora Lounella Buzelle and Henry Tolman Millay and

sister of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. Ellis was a talented actress and singer, performing with the Provincetown Players and on Broadway. She went on to marry the late actor and painter Charles Ellis.

When her sister passed away in 1950, Ellis acquired the 650-acre farm in Austerlitz known as Steepletop. She moved to the estate with her husband and became president of the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society, a group dedicated to honoring the life and writings of her sister and the preservation of Steepletop. She also served as editor of *Tamarack*, the group's literary magazine. In 1973, Ellis founded the Millay Colony for the Arts in Austerlitz, which aimed to nurture and promote the vitality of the arts by supporting writers,



painters, sculptors, poets and dramatists and offering rural retreats and workshops. It also helped art students expand their skills through a range of free programs and mentorships. The colony welcomed its first students in 1974, and to date, has offered residency to more than 3,000 artists. Ellis passed away at the age of 92 at Steepletop in 1986.

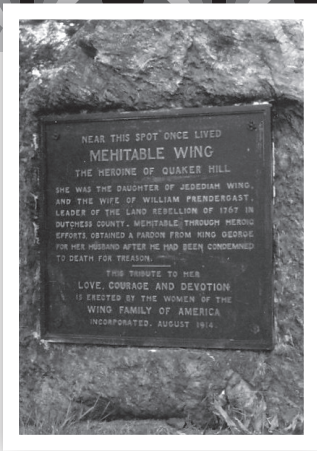
A central graphic element consisting of a light gray outline of a shield-like shape. Inside the top part of the shield is the text 'Women's History in the Hudson Valley'. A banner-like shape is attached to the middle of the shield, containing the text 'Ten Stories from Columbia and Dutchess Counties'. The bottom part of the shield contains the year '2020'.

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Mehitable Wing Prendergast


Beekman
1739-1812

Historical Figure

Mehitable Wing Prendergast embodies what it means to be a hero. She was born in 1738 to Quaker parents in Beekman. Her husband, William Prendergast, was born and raised in Ireland before coming to Dutchess County, where he rented a few acres of land from

Lord Frederick Philipse. Mr. Prendergast faced many hardships, as his crops were failing and he was behind on rent. He was also outraged by Lord Philipse's treatment of his tenants, and encouraged the other farmers to fight this injustice and march against the manor lords.

When the English militia began taking the protesting farmers as their prisoners, Mrs. Prendergast was determined to protect her husband and persuaded him to plead for mercy from the governor. At the age of only 28, Mrs. Prendergast fiercely argued for her husband's life at his trial, but despite her brilliant defense, her husband was deemed guilty and sentenced to death. Mrs. Prendergast refused to give up and rode 80 miles to the governor's home, where



she successfully implored him to set her husband free. Because of Mrs. Prendergast's unwavering persistence and strength, she was able to overcome the obstacles placed before her and save her husband's life.



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Inez Milholland

Poughkeepsie
1886-1916

Public Speaker and Women's Rights Advocate

A skilled public speaker and natural-born leader, Inez Milholland was a strong force in the suffrage movement and helped establish New York State as a trailblazer in the fight for equality. Known by her family and friends as "Nan," she was born and raised in Brooklyn and attended Vassar College,

where she was suspended for organizing a women's rights meeting. Despite this, she continued to advocate for women and was responsible for starting the suffrage movement at Vassar, enrolling two-thirds of the student body and teaching them the principles of socialism, as well as serving as president of the school's Intercollegiate Socialist Society.

Milholland graduated from Vassar in 1909 with the dream of becoming a lawyer. Because of her gender, she was denied from numerous law schools before finally being accepted to New York University School of Law. As a lawyer, she handled criminal and divorce cases and had a strong interest in prison reform. Her advocacy work continued outside



of the courtroom as well, as she passionately fought for world peace and to advance the rights of African Americans. Her role as one of the most powerful public speakers in the suffrage movement took off when she stopped a campaign parade for President William Howard Taft, speaking through a megaphone from a building window and capturing the crowd's undivided attention.

Milholland went on to organize many suffrage parades and tour the West, speaking out for women's rights as a member of the National Woman's Party. She was also a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Women's Trade Union League and the National Child Labor Committee, among many others. In 1913, she proposed to her husband Eugen Jan Boissevain while on a cruise to London. Sadly, Milholland was diagnosed with pernicious anemia and, in 1916, collapsed while giving a speech in California and passed away about a month later. Her husband later remarried poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, the sister of Norma Millay Ellis. Last year, an Adirondack mountain was renamed Mount Inez to honor her legacy and impact on the suffrage movement. The peak is located near her family home in the town of Lewis, which was where Milholland was buried.





Elinor Morgenthau


Hopewell Junction
1892-1949

Political Activist

Elinor Morgenthau was a political activist who had a significant influence on our country's history at a time when women were rarely given the opportunity to do so. She was born in 1892 and grew up in a Jewish family in New York City. Morgenthau studied theatre at Vassar College and graduated in 1913.

She became an acting teacher at Henry Street Settlement, where she met her husband, Henry Morgenthau. She proposed to him in 1916, and the couple settled in Dutchess County and operated Fishkill Farm.

Morgenthau later became a close personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, and their relationship prompted Roosevelt to resign from the New York Colony Club in protest when the group refused to admit Morgenthau due to her Jewish descent. In 1941, Morgenthau became Roosevelt's assistant in the Office of Civilian Defense. This agency was established to coordinate state and federal measures that protect civilians in case of a war emergency. She was also influential in convincing President Franklin D. Roosevelt



to take a more active role in supporting World War II refugees through the creation of the War Refugee Board. Morgenthau passed away from a stroke in 1949.



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Margaret Fettes


Millbrook
1926-2016

Legislator and Community Leader

Margaret Fettes dedicated her life to making Dutchess County a better place to call home. Fettes was born in 1926 to parents Wilbur and Susan Good VanTassell. She received her education at Millbrook High School and SUNY Delhi, and after marrying her husband, the late Robert Fettes, she

returned to her roots to serve her community. For 26 years, Fettes worked tirelessly as a Dutchess County legislator, representing the towns of Union Vale, Washington and the Village of Millbrook. She served on numerous committees including Human Services, Legislative Judiciary, Educational Services, Community and Family Services, Environment Services, Public Works, Public Safety and Budget and Finance.

Along with her legislative contributions, Fettes was an active member of her community. She was a member of Grace Episcopal Church in Millbrook and the church vestry, and sang in the church choir her entire life. She also worked as an Avon representative for many years. Fettes



was a strong voice in advocating for the needs of local firefighters and emergency medical services workers and worked closely with Union Vale Fire Department. In 2012, Assemblymember Didi Barrett presented her with the Outstanding Contribution by a Senior Citizen Award. Fettes passed away in 2016 at the age of 90. She is remembered as being a pillar of the community who was devoted to helping others and moving the county forward.



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Grace Hopper

Poughkeepsie
1906-1992

Computer Pioneer and Naval Officer

Grace Hopper was an innovator, naval officer and educator who is best known for her work in the development of computer languages. Born in 1906 in New York City, her curious and clever personality was apparent at a young age, as her mother remembered her dismantling alarm clocks to discover how they worked when she was just 7 years old.

Hopper graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar College with degrees in mathematics and physics in 1928, and went on to receive her master's degree in mathematics from Yale. She returned to Poughkeepsie to teach mathematics at Vassar College and was promoted to associate professor in 1941.

Following the United States' entry into World War II, Hopper was determined to join the war effort. Although she was initially rejected due to her age and size, Hopper persisted and was sworn into the U.S. Navy Reserve in 1943. She joined the Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation in 1949, where she designed an improved compiler, a program that translates a programmer's instructions into computer



codes. Her division was also responsible for developing FLOW-MATIC, the first English-language designed data-processing compiler. While she retired from the U.S. Navy with the rank of commander in 1966, she served again the following year to help standardize the Navy's computer languages. Hopper received many accolades for her incredible technological contributions, including being elected as a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers and receiving the Data Processing Management Association's first Computer Science Man of the Year Award and the National Medal of Technology. In 2016, Hopper was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.







Courtesy of

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