

FIRST ELECTED WOMEN BEGAN SLOW INCLUSIONARY PROCESS INTO GOVERNMENT

By Ellen Knight¹

In March 2018, voters approved the renaming of the Board of Selectmen to the gender-neutral Select Board. During the year prior to this, when questions arose about the history of women on that board, a look back into history showed that number is small and that gender preferences or prejudices for Town board members lingered for quite some time in the 20th century.

Once the 19th Amendment came into effect, women were eligible to vote and to run for offices hitherto closed to them. For the years prior to 1920, there were only two exceptions to the exclusion of women on elected Town Boards.

The first was the School Committee, though that opportunity did not last long. In 1874, the Commonwealth passed a law that no person be considered ineligible to serve upon a school committee due to sex. Thus, in that year Winchester's School Committee was enlarged by three, and three women were elected to it. Though they had supporters, they also endured a lot of scorn. In March 1888, Town Meeting reduced the number back to three. Once women got the right to vote, women went back onto the School Committee with the 1921 election of Stella Root and Rho Zeublin.

The second exception was the Board of Public Welfare, formerly the Overseers of the Poor, to which Lynthia Pierce and Emily Symmes were elected in 1890. But charitable works were always viewed as proper and fitting activities for the ladies of the town, and, in fact, women's groups had been much engaged in working with the poor prior to the board being created.

After the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, the next body to which women were elected was Town Meeting in 1929 and then the Board of Library Trustees, with the election of Jennie C. Gates in 1936. Twenty-one years elapsed before another elected board saw a woman join its ranks, with the 1957 election of Evelyn R. Russell to the Board of Health. Ten years later, Stella Aiken was elected a Park Commissioner (a now defunct board). When the Housing Authority was organized in 1970, Mary Murphy was not only an original member but also its first chairman.

Finally, five years later, the Board of Selectmen was next.

FIRST TRY FOR THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN

The first woman to run for the Board of Selectmen was Lorence Munson Woodside (1893-1961). She was a professional woman, an authority on Norwegian folk lore who taught at colleges, translated Scandinavian literature, and became an honorary fellow of the American-Scandinavian Foundation.

She acquired business experience not only while managing a farm in her native Iowa but also by acting occasionally as a manager on the Chautauqua and Lyceum circuits, with which she was first associated as a program presenter. She moved to Winchester after marrying Alonzo Woodside in 1909 and became active in town affairs.

In 1921, she was the town's first woman candidate for the Board of Selectmen, coming in sixth in a field of eight. She did not run again but was nevertheless involved in town politics.

In 1922, Woodside founded and became the first president of the Winchester Women's Republican Club. She was a member of the League of Women Voters, a member and director of the Winchester Taxpayers Association, and chair of The Fortnightly's Civics Committee. According to her obituary, "She was generally a champion of the underdog, speaking out courageously and pointedly for what she believed to be in the town's best interests."

During the Great Depression, an era of civic works projects, Woodside founded and was first president of the Winchester Home and Garden Club, which promoted civic beautification and supported playgrounds and recreation areas.

Woodside was also among the first 34 women to be elected to Town Meeting in 1929.

TOWN MEETING



A newspaper cartoon, which lampooned several aspects of the March 1918 Town Meeting, presented this view of women's involvement at the meeting. Once women got the vote, they were able to participate at Town Meeting, not just watch, and to be elected to any public office.

No one, male or female, was elected to Town Meeting until 1929, since prior to that time Winchester had open Town Meeting. Once women got the vote, the number of people eligible to vote at Town Meeting swelled to about 4,500. Town Hall auditorium had a capacity of 1,008. After a successful petition to the Legislature for a limited Town Meeting, the fall 1928 Meeting voted for representative Town Meeting.

Out of 53 women candidates, 34 were elected. The numbers per precinct ranged from three to eight elected. Also among those elected was Elizabeth C. McDonald, the first woman for whom any Town-owned property was named. (See below for the full list.)

WOMEN SELECTMEN

In 1968, after a gap of 47 years, the second woman to try for a seat on the Board of Selectmen was Clara Hewis. A member of WHS Class of 1958, she was the daughter of a well known Town Meeting member. In 1968, there were two open seats on the board and three candidates. Hewis came in last.

Her campaign was not helped by the editor of *The Winchester Star* putting Woodside in a bad light and then likening Hewis to her, particularly in her “strong stands against things.” With scorn he noted Woodside’s opposition to the railroad overpass, saying if she had had her way the trains would still be crossing the center of town dangerously at grade. Yet the fact is many residents in the town, including the then editor of the newspaper, objected to the “great wall,” preferring, not doing nothing but rather choosing an alternate solution.

Three years later Hewis was elected to Town Meeting and was appointed chairman of the Charter Commission in 1974. In 1975, Hewis announced that she would once again be a candidate for the Board of Selectmen, but, although she fared better, coming in second, there was only one opening and that was won by another woman candidate, Barbara Hankins.

Hankins came to Winchester after getting a B.S. from Cornell and an M.B.A. at Boston University. She served on PTAs and was vice-president of the League of Women Voters (1966-67). She joined Town Meeting in 1964. Her first Town appointment was to the Town Government Study Committee.

“I believe,” Hewis wrote during her 1968 campaign, “the unwritten policy of ‘no women’ on the Finance Committee should be revised.” In 1970, the policy was changed with the appointment of C. Rita McGonigle. Two years later, Hankins was appointed to that same Committee. In 1975, she entered the list of local firsts by becoming the first woman to be elected to the Board of Selectmen and again, in 1977, by becoming the first woman to chair the board.



Hankins remained on the Board of Selectmen until 1980 when her husband relocated his business to Austin, Texas, after 20 years in Winchester. At a farewell gathering after 20 years in Winchester, State Rep. Samuel Rotundi said, “Her sense of fairness and measured thinking really impressed me.”

Women subsequently elected include Judie Muggia (1985-1991), Carol Mullin (1993-1998), Priscilla McPhee (1998-2004), Elizabeth Cregger (1999-2005), and Jennifer Wilson (2012-2015).

MORE TO THE STORY

The Board of Selectmen was not the last to gain women members. Not until 1979 did the Planning Board get its first with the election of Marion Crandall. Even later, it was 1993 when a woman, Susan Lippman, was elected to the Board of Assessors. The one remaining elected position without women on its list, as of 2018, is Town Meeting Moderator.

The history of the elected boards does not tell the whole story of inclusiveness in town government, since women held appointed board and staff positions earlier than they were elected to some boards. A more thorough examination would also consider how early and often women presented themselves as candidates for board positions other than selectmen. Nevertheless, a look at women’s firsts in local elections illustrates that gender inclusiveness came slowly to town government.

¹. This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb 12, 2018. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

FIRST WOMEN TOWN MEETING MEMBERS, ELECTED 1929

PRECINCT 1

7 of 9 women candidates elected

Margaret M. Copeland
Anna V. Cullen
Helen M. Jordan
Anna W. Lochman
Mary A. Smith
Lillian W. Snyder
Lorence M. Woodside

PRECINCT 2

5 of 8 women candidates elected

Margaret S. Blaisdell
Alice E. Carr
Frances G. Fitzgerald
Lilla J. Ryan
Frances R. Williams

PRECINCT 3

8 of 15 women candidates elected

Sarah J. Apsey
Inez K. Blaisdell
Elizabeth R. Dennett
Martha B. Drisko
Helen A. Hall
Harriet C. Hildreth
Martha S. Mason
Gertrude S. Nash

PRECINCT 4

3 of 7 women candidates elected

A. Natalie Jewett
Marion I.S. Lowell
Dorothy B. Worthen

PRECINCT 5

6 of 6 women candidates elected

Josephine D. Abbott
Ethlyn B. Brown
Mary W. Carpenter
Caroline S. Fitts
Grace M. Hamilton
Alice C. Smalley

PRECINCT 6

5 of 8 women candidates elected

Frances T. Conlon
Jennie King
Elizabeth C. McDonald
Katherine F. O'Connor
Nora O'Melia

TOTAL: 34 or 17%