

Outpost of New England Culture: The Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo, Michigan

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This paper examines the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo, Michigan between the years 1852 and 1892. The association was founded primarily as a subscription library and as a provider of literary and scientific lectures. Neither of these ventures were remarkably successful. The subscription library faced competition from the Kalamazoo Public Library, and the various lecture formats did not draw sustained interest. In 1873 the association created a library club to counter the influence of the public library. The club also served as a very successful medium for lectures. The author examines why the library club was successful, assesses the extent to which it was influenced by feminist thought, and shows how it allowed the association to make a smooth transition from a subscription library to a women's club.

Kalamazoo, Michigan, was a small village of about 2,500 people in 1852.¹ Situated halfway between Detroit and Chicago, the area had only recently been opened to white settlers. Many of the inhabitants came from New England or were "transplanted" New Englanders from New York.² Like immigrants everywhere, they arrived with their physical possessions and their "cultural baggage"—the values and beliefs that would sustain them as they began a new life on the frontier. Part of the New Englanders' cultural baggage was the library. Public libraries as we know them today were rare in early-nineteenth-century New England. Libraries consisted of proprietary and subscription groups. The former were joint-stock ventures that entailed stock ownership by the members; the latter were common law corporations whose members' annual fees purchased services and borrowing privileges.³ In addition to libraries, many of the settlers had been educated in the eastern academies. "Their love of learning," writes one student, "and memories of the 'culture movement' prominent in their home states did not suffer extinction during the hard pioneer years."⁴

In 1852 some of the women of Kalamazoo gathered together to form a Ladies' Library Association. According to Article 2 of its constitution, the object of the association was the "encouragement and maintenance of a library, to afford and encourage useful and entertaining reading; to

furnish literary and scientific lectures; and other means of promoting moral and intellectual improvement in the town of Kalamazoo.”⁵ In broader terms, the association expressed a question that the women asked themselves: “How may we furnish intellectual food for ourselves and our children” in a new land?⁶

This paper will examine the Ladies’ Library Association between the years 1852 and 1894. During this forty-year period, the association had fulfilled or experimented with many of the goals of its constitution. Pragmatism and innovation characterized the early years. The members were not afraid to experiment with different cultural formats. They instituted lecture series and established a subscription library in permanent quarters. Even more importantly, as the Kalamazoo Public Library challenged their own library for primacy within the community, the women moved to a different format, a women’s club which they called the Library Club. By 1892 the work of the association and its library club had settled down to a routine of regular meetings with literary and historical themes. The association and its accomplishments will be examined. The Ladies’ Library Association of Kalamazoo will also be used as a prism to evaluate the extent to which its members were affected by the women’s movement of the nineteenth-century United States.

In her book *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, Anne Firor Scott argues that the number of American women who were influenced by the women’s movement of the nineteenth century was greater than previously thought. While not radical feminists, they disguised their thoughts and emotions in a traditional mantle of “ladydom.”⁷ At times they were devious. Women who presented themselves as models of respectability and traditional values were often more feminist—“women standing on their own two feet and acting in any sphere or where there is important work to be done”—than appearances suggest.⁸ “Contemporary appearances,” Scott further writes, “of achieving women suggest that the less one lived up to the prescriptions of true womanhood in daily life, the more one claimed to have done so for the record.”⁹ Scott supports her thesis first with the biographies of several graduates of the Troy (New York) Female Seminary. “These [biographical] fragments,” she writes,

do bear witness . . . to the beginning of a new personality type, the educated woman who was not ashamed of learning and who would inevitably have a wider notion of what the world had to offer than her sisters who had not been encouraged to read widely or to think for themselves.”¹⁰

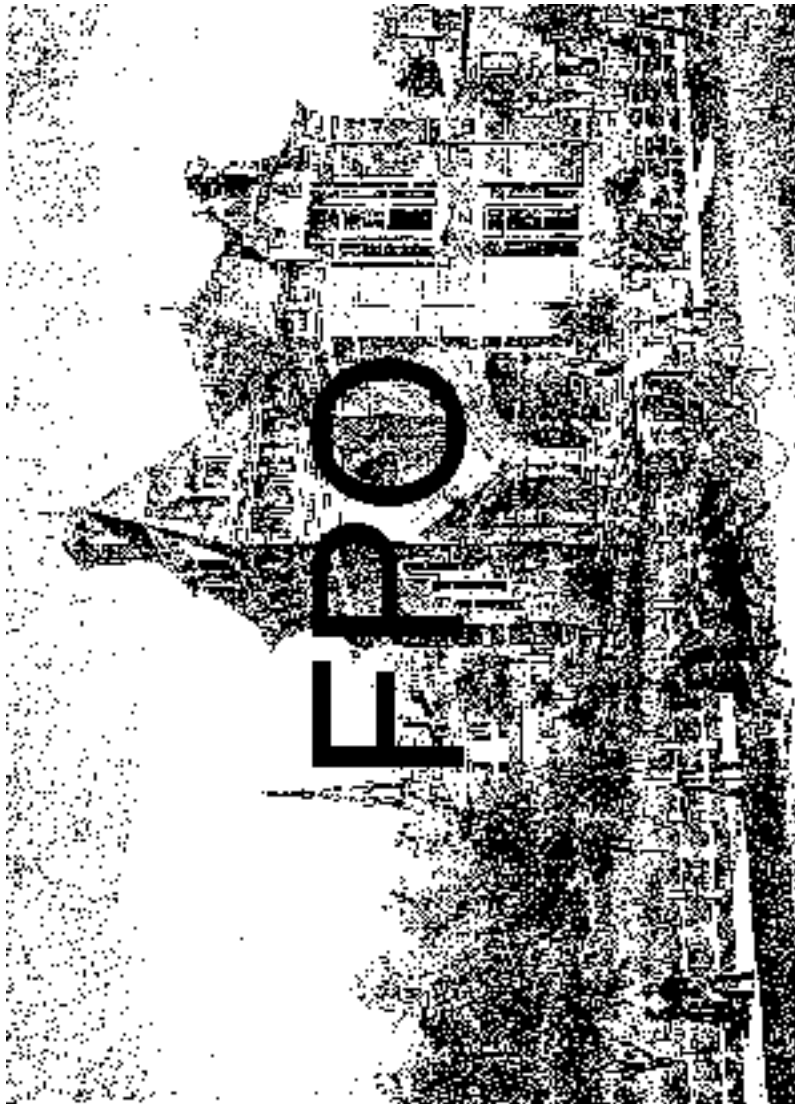
Feminism and the “true woman” found an easy if not somewhat ambivalent coexistence in Scott’s early-nineteenth-century women.¹¹

Scott also believes that women's clubs were another manifestation of feminism. Excluded by custom and law from the male-dominated institutions—church, law, universities, politics, and business—women founded a public role for themselves by their involvement in social organizations that they created and ran.¹² “The voluntary association,” she asserts, “was their principal tool, and with it they changed and shaped nineteenth-century America and in the process changed and emancipated themselves.”¹³

Theodora Penny Martin, in *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, agrees with Scott that women were excluded from participation in public life, but she finds that women used women's clubs not as instruments of emancipation but as “means of adapting to the role society had set for them.”¹⁴ The Cult of True Womanhood, the Cult of the Home, and the Cult of Domesticity influenced both the form and content of women's associations. Martin's interpretation is less apt to have the strong-minded woman or the feminist lurking in the disguise of nineteenth-century “ladydom.” To be sure, she sees some stirrings of emancipation, but they were not “avowedly feminist” either.¹⁵ Altogether, one is left with the image of women who, while not diametrically opposed to Scott's interpretation, were more subdued, more adaptive, less challenging, and less controversial. Autonomy and adaptation, not emancipation, were the goals of Martin's club women.

Breathing flesh and life into the charges of their constitution presented the association with varying degrees of difficulty. Perhaps the easiest and most substantial goal was the “establishment and maintenance of a library”—a “circulating library” according to one chronicler. The first “library” opened to the public on 12 March 1852, at the residence of one Colonel Rice. The library stayed there for but a few weeks before moving into a room over a store. The city fathers later provided the association with a room in the courthouse because of its “influence upon the village.”¹⁶ Between 1859 and 1879, the association's library moved to other locations, including a Baptist church.¹⁷ Location changes could not have been easy on the members. As early as 1863, they considered acquiring a building of their own. “We are passing away,” said one woman. “Every present member of an association will by and by be gone. But if we build a house . . . it will endure with permanency and it will remain to bless those coming after us, when we are gone.”¹⁸

A library building of their own would not be constructed until 1879. During the 1860s and 1870s the association concentrated its efforts on the enhancement of its library collections. Donations were the most common method of acquiring books, and the board minutes are laden with the marginal notation, “Book accepted.” The association also conducted several fund-raisers with the proceeds going to the acquisition of books



and a building fund. For example, in 1856 the women launched a \$500 subscription drive at \$1 per subscription to defray lecture costs and to keep the library open two days per week.¹⁹ In 1859 they presented musicals which included recitals, duets, recitations, and classical music.²⁰ In 1869 they raised \$385 at a "Dickens Party."²¹ Lectures were another way of raising money. One of the more prominent lecturers was Horace Greeley.²² The fund-raisers and subscription drive underscored the women's ability to undertake long-range planning and to achieve their dreams without the assistance of men.

The types of books that the association collected reflected the importance that the women attached to the intellect. One secretary articulated the importance of "improving the intellect" as a way of "promoting happiness" by "ministering to the intellectual and spiritual wants of the community."²³ This duty was taken very seriously. Accessions were noted in the board minutes and also in a file folder labeled "Donated Books, 1855-1866." Today the list might be deprecated as confined to canonical works, but to many Victorians, they were the "best" books available.²⁴ So pervasive was the idea of the "best" in nineteenth-century American women's reading habits that one scholar has asserted that "the level of a family's intellectual aspirations was more important than its bank account or social pedigree in encouraging ambition."²⁵ The association's emphasis on the intellect showed an almost uncanny resemblance to the thinking of women in different parts of the country. "Mind hunger" one club woman called their work.²⁶ "We have no moral right to feed the body and starve the mind," wrote another association member,²⁷ and another admonished members to "Take time for reading. Improve the mind, less embroidery."²⁸ "Piety was linked to learning, and education to the formation of moral character," writes Anne Firor Scott,²⁹ and no one believed this more fervently than the members of the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo.

Two factors influenced the club women's emphasis on the intellect, one of which was the ideology of True Womanhood which held, among other tenets, that mothers had to be educated to train the future citizens of the young republic.³⁰ Cultural heritage also reinforced this ideology. With their roots in New England, the members of the association were familiar with libraries and the genteel and uplifting literature contained in them. By 1780 New England alone had fifty-one subscription libraries. Between 1790 and 1815, 532 more subscription libraries had been founded, including the Boston Atheneum, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Massachusetts Historical Society.³¹

Art, science, history, biography, travel, and general literature comprised most of the association collection. Some representative titles included *Life of Alexander Hamilton*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Imitation of Christ*,

*Little Women, and Democracy in America.*³² These served to instruct, to edify, and to transmit the moral wisdom of the past. “Much attention,” noted one newspaper,

has been paid to the selection of books for young people, keeping in mind that that reading . . . will do much towards forming their characters. The Board has been watchful, endeavoring to exercise great care in admitting books upon its accepted lists. . . .³³

“All books,” noted another source, “shall be, if not of a high moral tone, at least such as shall work no injury to morals or good sense.”³⁴ One would think that acquiring “good” literature at that time would have been an easy task. But subscription libraries were confronted with their “trash” too. “It is difficult,” said one annual report, “to select from amongst the garbage of the day nascent fruits and flowers of literature as shall satisfy the Board. . . .”³⁵ For the members, intellect and morality were two sides of the same coin—individual well-being. Fostering a “correct literary taste” elevated the intellect and thereby promoted happiness.³⁶

The circulating library was a modest success. The collection was never large, attaining only about 3,500 volumes by 1889,³⁷ but it compared favorably in size to those of other ladies’ library associations in Michigan. By 1876 book collections of these libraries ranged from fewer than one hundred volumes to 2,500 volumes.³⁸ Annual increments, especially during the 1880s, were meager. One reason for the low level of book expansion was that the association was saving its funds for a permanent building and thus relied upon donations to furnish the bulk of the collection. Still, it was the only library in town until 1872 when a public library was created. For those who used the library, it filled a void.

In addition to founding a circulating library, the association provided literary and scientific lectures. Between 1856 and 1872, the association experimented with several circles or groups, none of which drew sustained interest, before they settled upon the library club format. For example, in 1856 the women created library socials to combine lectures or readings with social interaction. The participants met once a month in one another’s homes—places where they could feel comfortable and inconspicuous—and discussed a variety of topics.³⁹ Some of the lecture titles are especially interesting as they indicate that the members were becoming aware of their status as women. “Should the Sexes Be Educated Together?,” “The Sad Fate of Women,” “Why Are Not American Women as Healthy as the English?,” and “Why Are Women Less Respected by the Other Sex Now Than They Were Twenty Years Ago?”

Another lecture was a critique of Tennyson's poem "The Princess." According to the lecturer,

The great object of his poem . . . seems to be, to show that woman is not underdeveloped man, and that she cannot be false to her nature with impunity. "The Princess" is representative as a woman rightly endowed with beauty and intellect. In her ambition, she plans a remedy for women's wrongs. . . .⁴⁰

A more biting assertion read at one social meeting stated, "That though a woman's province is at home, yet she who is always at home is not fit to preside there."⁴¹

There were enough other lectures, however, that suggested that the members generally adhered to more traditional roles. "How Can the Bible Be Made Attractive to the Young" and "Principles of Etiquette" were two anodyne topics.⁴² "Should Women Educate Men?" was answered negatively. The lecturer acknowledged that women's "intrinsic capabilities" made her able to perform this role but said that women could never exert the same influence over youth that men could.⁴³ "What Constitutes a True Woman?" listed four attributes: active goodness, true politeness, modesty, and intelligence.⁴⁴ One adviser on catching a man wrote, "It was assumed that helpless dependence in young ladies however much to be deplored is after all more attractive to young gentlemen, and the demand will insure a supply."⁴⁵

The lectures dealing with traditional gender themes, particularly those on the "sad fate of women," were something of an anomaly. Theodora Martin has noted that few clubs touched on women's issues before 1873.⁴⁶ If Martin is correct, the Kalamazoo women certainly appear to have been ahead of their time. The lectures were less an expression of feminism or a cry for emancipation than they were an awakening to women's status as women with all that their status entailed legally and socially. An overview of their lectures suggests that the members remained true to the Cult of True Womanhood, to "ladydom," while making occasional forays into delicate questions of equality from the companionate environment of a safe house. In later years women's issues continued to be a recurring theme, although hardly a dominant or defining one.

Thought-provoking though these topics were, the meetings were not well attended. By 1861 only seven people showed up for the annual meeting, and one member asked whether it was advisable to keep up the meetings, but a "few of the faithful" in attendance were unwilling to give up the social meetings. By 1868 lagging interest forced the suspension of the social meetings.⁴⁷ Still, much was learned in this lecture series. The women gained confidence in public speaking, acquired

organizational skills, and, as can be seen by the lecture on “The Princess,” had the opportunity to reflect on their reading. Reading the detailed notes of the lectures in the minute books, one is impressed by their dedication, zeal, and desire for education.

The association also sponsored the Reading Circle, which flourished from 1861 to 1868. As its name suggests, the emphasis was on readings—poems by James Russell Lowell and articles on Lord Byron, to name but a few. Reading aloud was a popular convention in the Victorian United States. Women’s issues appeared occasionally. “Let every woman . . . exalt herself to the ideal of pure womanhood, let her in the most recesses of her heart to be true to that,” records one entry.⁴⁸ Forty to fifty participants met at each other’s houses.⁴⁹

A Ladies’ Literary Club also existed for only one year, 1873. About forty members met the first Monday of each month to consider and discuss subjects pertaining to art and literature. Talks were given on George Eliot, Italian art, and Ruskin’s essays on pre-Raphaelite art. Finally, a Shakespeare club met between 1877 and 1878. Participants read and studied various plays, with each member taking a part or character.⁵⁰

Noteworthy in these literary experiments is the women’s quest for learning, the “mind hunger” noted earlier. Reading the minutes today, one gets the impression that they were not attempting to impress anyone with what they knew; their learning and education were assumed. Unlike other women’s clubs, they did not attempt to monopolize knowledge by limiting membership or attendance at meetings.⁵¹ Culture and education were democratic and not merely the playthings of twenty to thirty women. Anyone who paid the membership fee for the Ladies’ Library Association, even men, could attend the meetings. This openness underscores the women’s commitment to the dissemination of knowledge.

No one reason explains why the various lecture series did not enjoy sustained growth. One possibility is that the meetings were not well enough organized. Meeting in one another’s homes lent an aura of inconspicuousness and ease, but it could also lead to too much informality. Beginning in the 1870s many ladies’ library associations in Michigan began to embark on a different method of self-education. Education through study groups was given greater emphasis. “It was a sterner, more defined movement than the one of the ‘culture’ era of the ‘50s and ‘60s,” notes one critic.⁵² Another explanation is that members had become cognizant of the women’s club movement. Beginning after the Civil War, women’s clubs began to form a “dense network” across the country.⁵³ In 1873 the association founded a separate Ladies’ Library Club, a name that was very misleading. The Library Club provided the same kind of lectures that the ladies’ social and reading circles did. In actuality, its

structure and organization were identical to those of other women's clubs. It was a women's club in all but name.

The Library Club's creation, however, has been shrouded in myth. As reported in spurious contemporary sources, the library club was a response to the successful series of historical lectures by Lucinda Stone.⁵⁴ This claim is doubtful. The board minutes make it clear that the library club was created to counter the influence of the Kalamazoo Public Library, founded in 1872. In 1872 the board minutes expressed concern about "the possible danger of our Association being superseded by the Township Library," where "everyone is free to send in to the Library or the Board of Education a request for the purchase of any book desired, and it shall be procured." Other members called for a "New Departure" so that the association could maintain its "standing." Lucinda Stone, one of the founders, recommended the creation of a library club, "something like we have formerly had, only upon a larger scale." She got the idea from some Boston women who had visited Kalamazoo. The idea soon seemed "very plausible" to the board members.⁵⁵ A "pioneer" history of Kalamazoo County noted that Stone had spent some weeks in Boston, and "just after the formation of the New England Women's Club, she came home to transmute what had been her historical classes into a women's club, the first in the state."⁵⁶

When I [Mrs. Stone] was asked what should be the name of this club, I well remember the trepidation with which I answered: "Why, they call theirs the 'Women's Club,'" though there were some who feared the name might sound somewhat of women's rights. Later, at a time when I was absent, this club took the name of "The Ladies' Library Club" which seemed very proper, as it was a part of the Library Association. This is the first club, as far as I know, founded in the west.⁵⁷

Three things are significant about the founding of the Library Club. One is that fear of the township library motivated the establishment of the Library Club. The women exaggerated the ability of patrons to get any book that they desired, but they were correct in seeing the library as competition for the services that they provided. The association even took extreme umbrage at an errant townsman who remarked that the only public library in Kalamazoo was the Township Public Library.⁵⁸ It is ironic that in other towns and cities in the country, women's clubs orchestrated the development of public libraries. Indeed, Anne Firor Scott has argued that the role of women's clubs in establishing public libraries deserves a high place on the research agenda of library historians. She further cites a 1933 American Library Association study which

asserted that 75 percent of public libraries then in existence owed their origins to women's clubs.⁵⁹ After the Carnegie endowments became available, women's clubs commonly alerted the city fathers to the availability of these funds. But in Kalamazoo the township library was seen as an unwelcome intruder, and the association acted expeditiously to protect its interests and increase its "effectiveness."

Secondly, although it was not apparent at the time, the Library Club extended the life of the association. It gave the association the ability to make a successful transition from a subscription library to a women's club. With the demise of the various literary societies and the appearance of the township library, it is unlikely that the association would have had a reason to exist as a subscription library. Social libraries, Jesse Shera notes, were in decline by the 1890s.⁶⁰ The association had "outgrown" its original purpose. Finally, the birth of the Library Club signifies the association's linkage to kindred-minded women in other parts of the country. The transportation revolution, especially railroads and telegraphs, broke down the isolation of island-communities. The visit of the "Boston ladies" expressed this change, and it provided the necessary "spark" that the association needed to reassess its mission. Without this shift, it is probable that something like a Kalamazoo women's club would have appeared.

The Library Club operated under the aegis of the association, but it had its own bylaws. Bylaws facilitated the organizational structure of the Library Club and preserved the authority of the association. Board minutes stipulated the necessity of bylaws so as "to have some regulatory force in power."⁶¹ The association and the library club each had their own officers, with the exception of the treasurer who served both organizations. Ostensibly this freed the Library Club from "financial and business" matters so that it could "devote itself to literary pursuits."⁶² It seems more likely that the association did not want the Library Club to have too much power. Outward appearances suggest that they were two organizations. For example, membership in the Library Club did not mean membership in the association with borrowing privileges from the library. More importantly, the public image of the association actually faded. Newspaper articles focused on the activities of the Library Club, not the association. The bylaws and the common treasurer, however, ensured that the Library Club never got too much autonomy.

The Library Club succeeded where the association's lecture ventures had failed. Bylaws helped to insure organizational continuity. Committees appealed to wide intellectual interests—art and literature, science and education, history and miscellaneous—and also contributed to the Library Club's cohesiveness. This committee structure was similar to other women's clubs across the country. The early literary societies consisted

of informal gatherings that met at someone's house. By 1879 the association had its own impressive building where the Library Club met. Moreover, Article 4 of the bylaws called for the creation of a "Critic." "The Critic," the bylaws note, "shall note any error in the pronunciation of members presenting articles, 'Worcester,' 'Webster,' and the 'Standard' dictionaries being the authorities. Any pronunciation, authorized by the above, shall not be regarded as an error."⁶³ Critics were a ubiquitous feature of women's clubs. "The criticism of professors or club critics," writes Theodora Martin, "was designed not to keep a woman in her place but to enable her to reach a higher level of performance with the clear assumption that there was one."⁶⁴ As with the bylaws, the critic provided a sense of purposefulness and seriousness.

Another reason for the club's success was that it received support and sustenance from being a "member" in a "network" of national women's clubs. For example, a correspondent from Ohio noted that the association was mentioned in an issue of the *New England Magazine* and wrote, "Certainly Kalamazoo must have a great many wonderful women and the influence of what you have accomplished will be felt in ever widening circles."⁶⁵ In 1888 the Women's Library Association of Helena, Arkansas, adopted a charter modeled on the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo.⁶⁶

Well-organized meetings with good attendance also contributed to the Library Club's success. Wide participation undoubtedly flowed from the club's "openness." Anybody who paid the one dollar annual dues could attend.⁶⁷ As is the case with the earlier literary societies, the women attempted to democratize knowledge and eschewed the social differentiation that plagued so many other women's clubs. With a good organizational structure and wide support, the Library Club embarked on the mission of continuing and expanding the work of the previous literary societies.

What did the women of the Library Club talk about? The lectures ran the gamut of human knowledge, indicating that the lecturers were both inquisitive and *au courant*. Topics included, "The Hellenistic Age 323–146 B.C."; "The Power and Influence of the Hanseatic League"; "Chinese Gordan and the Soudan" [*sic*].⁶⁸ As the club moved into the late 1880s and 1890s, and subjects became more "timely," they did not overshadow historical or literary themes. For example, one lecture was entitled "What Shall We Do with the Dago?" which indicted unrestricted immigration. Mrs. W. E. Upjohn, wife of the founder of the pharmaceutical company, gave a paper on "Justice," which articulated a progressive and compassionate analysis on the wrongs which had been done to working men and women.⁶⁹ Another topic popular in women's clubs throughout the United States was Indian policy. A lecture on the question "Have

“We Been Fair to the Indians?” was answered negatively and the lecturer lambasted the “scandalous” policies of the United States government.⁷⁰ Members addressed the “women’s issue” with verve, invective, and awareness. A talk on “The Women of India,” which linked the plight of Indian women to American women, led one woman to write a letter to the newspaper:

When government recognizes that the temperance cause, the enfranchisement of women, the labor reform, all reforms that help to make humanity better, mean purer laws, a higher conception of duty and a development on a higher plane; then perhaps wrongs will be righted, justice prevail; and then, and not till then will the darkness be dispelled. . . .⁷¹

“Greek Manners and Customs—Relating Partly to Women” emphasized the fact that “no nation, however advanced, can afford to belittle its women, the mother of its race, without sowing the seeds of its destruction.”⁷² Another lecture, “Women,” examined women’s rights and wrongs in various countries and legal status in Michigan. Generosity and strength of character did not belong to either sex, the lecturer stated.⁷³

Lucinda Stone, one of the association’s founders and a leader of women’s rights in Michigan, gave a talk on the “Education of Women” in which she argued that no woman could have written “My country ’tis of thee, sweet Land of Liberty” while

our flag waved over millions of slaves deprived of every right set forth in the Declaration of Independence. A woman’s eye would have SEEN and her head FELT the lie in these lines before they had ever found their way into any hymn book.⁷⁴

In a play entitled *Lucinda*, written in 1973 by Ada McAllister, great-great-granddaughter of Lucinda Stone, the author refers to her ancestor as a “feminist, radical and revolutionary.”⁷⁵ By 1990 standards, she was a feminist. Feminism as an idea, however, did not find its way into the English language until the late 1890s.⁷⁶ She was hardly a radical or revolutionary, however. It is unlikely that a women’s club would have tolerated either a radical or a revolutionary. “The radical woman has found no place in the woman’s club,” said Jane Croly, one of the founders of Sororis, the first women’s study club.⁷⁷ Club women were generally conservative and avoided controversy, and this was true in Kalamazoo, too.⁷⁸

Placing the Kalamazoo ladies in the current debate of women’s history is an arguable and probably contentious issue. Historian William O’Neill has used the concept of “social feminism” to describe “reformers who

wanted equal rights for women, but not at the expense of other causes."⁷⁹ Another engaging concept that can be utilized is "domestic feminism." David Scott Smith first developed this concept, and it was later used as a heuristic device by Karen Blair in *The Clubwoman as Feminist*. Blair sees the proliferation of women's clubs as an expression of domestic feminism, "an attempt by women to gain greater autonomy while still carrying on their traditional duties." "Clubwomen," she writes,

transformed ladydom by providing an intellectual and social self-improvement program outside the realm of the household, designed to nurture the skills that would enable women to demand reform for women and all people in a society that had relegated them to the sidelines."⁸⁰

Domestic feminism, social feminism, and certain features of Theodora Martin's exposition have the ring of verisimilitude in analyzing the goals and aspirations of the Library Club. Women's rights were important to some members of the club, and their lectures represented what one historian has called "some general stirrings of emancipation."⁸¹ The Library Club in general, however, was not ardently feminist and did not concentrate on women's issues to the exclusion of other reform. In 1892 a local newspaper commented on the club's talks, "In the following subjects: 'Women's Clubs' . . . 'Complex Personalities,' 'The Public Library as a Factor in Education' . . . we have seen the drawing of the club toward the vital subjects of the age."⁸² The fact that the newspaper made this observation would suggest that social issues were not the stock-in-trade of lectures as the annual program bulletins in fact bear out. It would have been unusual if the Library Club, composed as it was of inquisitive minds and existing at the dawn of the progressive movement, remained uninterested or unchallenged by the reform issues that were reshaping the country. A minister, for example, lectured on "Our Party Machine and Civil Service Reform."⁸³ These topics notwithstanding, the Library Club remained very much a traditional women's club. To the extent that it concerned itself with women's issues, it was less interested in emancipation and feminism than it was in autonomy. The programs reflected general education, not feminist issues.

The Library Club was a successful venture for the association. Meetings were well attended with forty to fifty women usually present. The only time a meeting was cancelled was when the temperance movement came to town.⁸⁴ The club allowed the association to survive much longer than it would have and completely overshadowed the prominence of its previous efforts. The Library Club also represented an ironic turn for the association. The Ladies' Library Association was founded primarily

as a circulating library, and in its formative years successfully acquired and circulated books. By 1890 it had over 3,641 books but purchased them at a slow rate, sometimes only 11 books per year.⁸⁵ Circulation figures were also dismal in the last five years of the 1880s. It never circulated more than 263 books during these years.⁸⁶ The association faced competition from the Kalamazoo Public Library which was open more days and better funded. The association also suffered from a self-inflicted wound, unwitting though it was. Almost from its inception, the association's dream had been a building of its own, a legitimate cause in view of its many residences. In 1879 it finally built a splendid residence costing \$8,000.⁸⁷ Heavily laden with stained glass, rich woodwork, portraits, and *objets d'art*, one might have mistaken it for a "gentlemen's club."⁸⁸ While the members paid for the building in a timely manner, upkeep remained expensive. "Repairs" and "care of the building" were recurring marginal notations in the board minutes. For example, in 1889, \$1,200 was spent on physical improvements while only 106 books were purchased. In 1884, \$47.87 was spent on books and \$100.00 on roof repairs. In 1883 the association purchased 43 books for \$63.25 and spent \$500 on chairs.⁸⁹ The building became a showpiece which detracted from the association's ability to acquire and circulate books. By 1892 its building and grounds were valued at \$20,000.⁹⁰

No one in the association could be accused of "missing a turn." The association stood between two currents in library development. It was founded when subscription libraries were still important, if not actually increasing in certain parts of the country. By the 1880s subscription libraries had lost their momentum, although their influence lasted longer than is generally recognized.⁹¹ Until 1872 the association's library was unchallenged; it was the only "public" library in town. By the 1890s the "free circulating" library was "in vogue," according to one contemporary account, and the most important work of the association was its Ladies' Library Club which had two hundred members.⁹²

It is likely that the ladies were prescient enough to realize that subscription libraries had had their day. The establishment of the public library precipitated an unsettling event for the association. Undoubtedly its members realized the significance of the competition that they would face from a public library, not only in the hours each institution was open but in the number of books circulated. The association's library was only open two days a week and for five days when the building was completed. This gesture, however, was only temporary to celebrate the new residence. The decision to create a library club in 1873 was thus a wise move. Besides putting the association in the mainstream of the women's club movement, it allowed the circulating library to survive, albeit in a more limited role, and it also allowed the association to survive.

At this writing, it is the oldest women's club in Michigan, the third oldest in the United States, and the first to erect its own building. It still exists as a library, and lectures are a staple of its services, although not under the aegis of the Library Club. Ironically, the Ladies' Library Association disbanded the Library Club in 1900. "The time had come," said one historian, "for the union of the Club and Association under one name and that name to be the Ladies' Library Association." This move was bitterly opposed. The Library Club had "ceased to be a working Club and became a company of women who met once a week for their own entertainment."⁹³ It is possible, even likely, that the association resented the public attention focused on the Library Club. As noted earlier, once the club was formed, mention of the association in the local press almost ceased. The president of the association cleverly justified her actions by saying that the club did not have a constitution or a treasurer and that its bylaws were made by a board of directors whom the club did not choose. This form of government, she added, had become obsolete in 1776.⁹⁴

The creation of the association and the Library Club benefitted both its members and the city of Kalamazoo. The women gained self-confidence in organizing, preparing, and presenting lectures. Their lectures did not exude profundity or originality, but the circulating library, the various literary societies, and the Library Club undoubtedly raised the level of intellectual discourse for the people who read the books and attended the lectures. "Its [lectures'] purpose," said Theodora Martin, "lay with individuals, and there lay its success."⁹⁵ Like club women elsewhere, Kalamazoo women discovered that there was more to the world than their hometown. Excluded from most institutions and professions, they developed a role for themselves. The construction of their own building, for example, must have been a source of great satisfaction. Female bonding was another benefit. One manifestation of bonding was their constitution which "announced solidarity and proclaimed legitimacy in the public sphere."⁹⁶ Constitutions were borrowed from neighboring associations, some local, and even as far away as Arkansas, thereby fostering a commonality of purpose and interests. Their companionship also broke down the isolation of small-town and rural life, resulting in a more complex culture. While remaining true to the Cult of True Womanhood and generally accepting women's traditional roles, their comradeship provided the "critical mass" necessary to venture beyond women's traditional sphere to question their roles, their rights, and their wrongs. This bonding and comradeship created an ambient atmosphere that was, if not "sisterhood" or even feminism, one that made them aware of their roles as women and gave them a podium to tell the world what they thought and felt.

Notes

1. *Michigan Manual*, (Lansing: John Kerr & Co., 1863), 216.
2. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1952, Folder 1, "L.L.A. Centennial," Box 1. Papers of the Ladies' Library Association. Regional History Collections and University Archives. Western Michigan University. Unless otherwise noted, all future references will be to this collection. For more information on the New England origins of Kalamazoo, see *History of Kalamazoo County Michigan* (Philadelphia: Everts & Abbott, 1880), 208–286.
3. Jesse Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, 1965), 57–64.
4. Phyllis Norris Hamner, "The Ladies' Library Associations of Michigan: A Curious Byway in Library History," (Master's thesis, Western Reserve University, 1954), 3.
5. "Constitution of the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports," 1859–1881," Box 1. The association was incorporated in 1859, a common procedure for subscription libraries. By incorporating, the association had the legal power to enforce the regulations governing the use of its books. See Folder 7, "Corporation Petition, 1888," Box 8, for a copy of the association's incorporation documents.
6. Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1952, Folder 1, "L.L.A. Centennial," Box 1.
7. Ann Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 103.
8. *Ibid.*, 331.
9. *Ibid.*, 103.
10. *Ibid.*, 80.
11. *Ibid.*, 72.
12. *Ibid.*, 282–283.
13. *Ibid.*, 330–331.
14. Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women's Study Clubs 1860–1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 30.
15. *Ibid.*, 36.
16. Booklet, "Fifty Years L.L.A. 1902—History," Folder 6, "Fifty Years L.L.A.—1902—History," Box 9. Unidentified clipping, "Annual Report, 1 April 1860," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
17. "Minutes," 31 December 1859, Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
18. "Minutes," 1 December 1863, Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
19. Typescript, "Donations and Subscription Fund," Folder 6, "Donation and subscription fund to help pay for L.L.A. addition, October 1856," Box 8.
20. "Broad-sides," Folder 15, "Entertainment for the Building Fund of the L.L.A., May 19–20th" n.d. (broad-sides), Box 8.
21. Unidentified, undated clipping, "Seventeenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo" [1870], Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1859–1881," Box 1.
22. Unidentified, undated clipping, January, 1861, "Ladies' Library Association," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
23. Unidentified, undated clipping, "Nineteenth Annual Report of the Secretary of the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.

24. Barbara Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late-Victorian America," in *Reading in America*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 205.
25. *Ibid.*, 215.
26. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 128.
27. "Minutes," 31 March 1859, Folder, "Secretary's Minute Book," 1849–1868, Box 3.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, 39.
30. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 35.
31. Abigail A. Loomis, "Subscription Libraries" in *Encyclopedia of Library History*, ed. Wayne A. Wiegand and Donald G. Davis, Jr. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1994), 609.
32. "Minutes," 24 August 1859, Folder, "Secretary's Minute Book," 1849–1868, Box 3.; see also Folder 3, "Donation Books, 1855–1886," Box 17.
33. Unidentified, undated clipping, "Seventeenth Annual Report of the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
34. Mrs. George E. Foote, *History of the Ladies' Library Association* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1941), 4, Folder 2, "L.L.A. Centennial 1852–1952, Foote's history of L.L.A., 1941," Box 9.
35. Unidentified, undated clipping, "Nineteenth Annual Report of the Ladies' Library Association of Kalamazoo," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
36. Foote, *History of the Ladies' Library Association*, 11.
37. Unidentified, undated clipping, "The Annual Meeting" [1890], Folder 5, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1882–1897," Box 1.
38. Hamner, *The Ladies' Library Associations of Michigan*, 17.
39. Unidentified, undated clipping, "Fourteenth Annual Report," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.
40. "Minutes," 28 April 1858; 26 August 1857; 29 September 1858; 26 October 1859, Folder 1, "Secretary's Minute Book, 1858–1868," Box 3.
41. *Ibid.*, 24 November 1858.
42. "Minutes," 28 July 1858, Folder 1, "Secretary's Minute Book," Box 3.
43. "Minutes," 31 March 1858, Folder 1, "Secretary's Minute Book," Box 3.
44. "Minutes," n.d. Cited as "last Wednesday" in May 1859. Folder 1, "Secretary's Minute Book," Box 3.
45. "Minutes," 26 August 1857. Folder 1, "Secretary's Minute Book," Box 3.
46. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 76.
47. "Minutes," 30 January 1861; 11 April 1868, Folder 3, "Secretary's Minute Book 1856–1868," Box 3.
48. "Minutes," 2 February 1861, Folder, "Minutes of Reading Circle, 1861–1867," Box 16.
49. "Minutes," 26 January 1861, Folder 3, "Minutes of Reading Circle 1861–1863," Box 16.
50. "Minutes," 2 June 1873; 9 June 1873, Folder 7, "Minutes of Meetings: Ladies' Library Club [1873]; The Shakespeare Club 1877–1878," Box 16.
51. Karen Blair notes that many women's clubs were socially differentiated with a hierarchy that reflected class, status, and ethnicity. "Members of the most prestigious organizations valued their aristocratic credentials," she writes. "In social clubs, membership was restricted . . . because elitism enhanced prestige

for the original members." Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1980), 63.

52. Hamner, *The Ladies' Library Associations of Michigan*, 22–23.

53. Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, 282.

54. *Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo, Allegan and Van Buren Counties, Michigan* (Chicago: Chapman Brothers, 1892), 661. The myth is also recounted by A. F. Bixby and A. Howell, compilers, in *Historical Sketches of the Ladies' Library Associations of the State of Michigan* (Adrian, Michigan: Times & Expositor Steam Print., 1876), 80. See also Foote's *History of the Ladies Library Association*, 6.

55. "Minutes," 28 December 1872; 4 January 1873, Folder 3, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.

56. Entry, "Mrs. Lucinda Hinsdale Stone." *Portrait and Biographical Review of Kalamazoo, Allegan and Van Buren Counties, Michigan*, 666.

57. Quoted in Hamner, *The Ladies' Library Associations of Michigan*, 23.

58. "Minutes," 26 August 1876. Folder 3, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.

59. Mary Clare Wilson Spencer, *Women's Clubs and Public Libraries: Paper Read Before the State Federation of Women's Clubs* (Lansing, Michigan: The Board, 1902?), 1–8. See also, Anne Firor Scott, "Women and Libraries," *Libraries & Culture* 21 (Spring 1986): 401.

60. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, 70.

61. "Minutes," 30 December 1876, Folder 3, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports, 1859–1881," Box 1.

62. Foote, *History of the Ladies' Library Association*, 6.

63. "By-Laws," Folder 16, "1896 Special Year Book," Box 9.

64. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 115–116.

65. Mrs. J. F. McKinney to Ladies' Library Association, 30 October 1890, Folder 13, "Correspondence, 1872–1918, 1927, 1963," Box 8.

66. Daniel Taylor, "Ladies of the Club: An Arkansas Story," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 59 (January 1985): 325.

67. Foote, *History of the Ladies' Library Association*, 11.

68. "Hellenistic Age 323–146 B.C.," "The Power and Influence of the Hellenistic League," Folder 18, "Papers presented by Mrs. Clarke Fulkerson," Box 8. These papers are extant. See also "Minutes," 25 March 1885, Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1859–1881," Box 1.

69. Unidentified and undated clipping, Folder 2, "Book of Newspaper Clippings 1889–1893," Box 17; entry "William E. Upjohn, M.D." in *Portrait and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo, Allegan and Van Buren Counties, Michigan*, 853–855.

70. "Minutes," 26 January 1885, Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1859–1881," Box 1.

71. Unidentified clipping, 3 January 1890, Folder 1, "Book of Newspaper Clippings 1886–1889," Box 17.

72. "Minutes," 1 February 1894, Folder 4, "Secretary's Minute Book 1894–1896," Box 4.

73. Unidentified clipping, "Secretary's Annual Report for the Ladies' Library Association for the Year Ending January 5, 1877," Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1859–1881," Box 1.

74. Unidentified clipping, "Education of Women," 12 October 1891, Folder 2, "Book of Newspaper Clippings 1889–1893," Box 17.

75. "Program Notes" in *Lucinda*, Folders 6–8, *Lucinda*, Box 17. A native of Vermont, Lucinda Stone had a long and distinguished career as a champion of

women's rights and equality, especially in the areas of education and suffrage. She was, for example, responsible for getting the first woman admitted to the University of Michigan and was herself awarded an honorary doctorate by that institution in 1890. Carl B. Griffin, "Lucinda Hinsdale Stone, Champion of Women's Education" in *Historic Women of Michigan, a Sesquicentennial Celebration*, ed. Rosalie Riegle Troester (Lansing: Michigan Women's Studies Association, 1987), 41–58.

76. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 14.

77. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 55.

78. *Ibid.*, 111.

79. William O'Neill, *Feminism in America: A History* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1989), 10.

80. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, 5.

81. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 36.

82. Unidentified clipping, 30 May 1892, Folder 2, "Book of Newspaper Clippings, 1889–1893," Box 17.

83. "Minutes," 19 January 1885, Folder 5, "Secretary's Minute Book, 1883–1888," Box 3.

84. "Minutes," 25 April 1874, Folder 4, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1859–1881," Box 1.

85. Unidentified, undated clipping, "The Annual Meeting," [1891], Folder 5, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1882–1897," Box 1.

86. Unidentified, undated clippings, "Ladies' Library Association," [1886]; "Ladies' Library Association," [1887]; "The Annual Meeting," 2 January 1891, Folders 1 and 2, "Book of Newspaper Clippings 1886–1889" and "Book of Newspaper Clippings 1889–1893," respectively, Box 17.

87. Foote, *History of the Ladies' Library Association*, 8.

88. Unidentified clipping, "Ladies' Library Report" 8 January 1889; unidentified, undated clipping, "Association Reports," [1885]; unidentified, undated clipping, "Ladies' Library Association—Thirty First Annual Report of the Secretary," [1884], Folder 5, "Board Minutes and Annual Reports 1882–1897," Box 1.

89. In 1892, it was reported that the association's art collection was valued at \$2,500 and that it had a "Choice museum, containing valuable specimens of the Indian arts. . . ." The building was also equipped with a stage and a grand piano. Entry, "Joseph Owen Seely," *Portrait and Biographical Record*, 484–485.

90. *Portrait and Biographical Record*, 485.

91. Haynes McMullen, "The Very Slow Decline of the American Social Library," *Library Quarterly* 55 (April 1985): 207–225.

92. *Portrait and Biographical Record*, 485.

93. Foote, *History of the Ladies' Library Association*, 16.

94. *Ibid.*

95. Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices*, 124.

96. *Ibid.*, 65.