

Fannie E. Bates

“The Mother of Cranford”

In honor of Women’s History Month, we would like to republish the following article which was researched and written by Julie Pencinger, our summer intern from St. Vincent’s College in PA in 2009.

The activism that Fannie E. Bates performed for her community gave her the nickname, “the Mother of Cranford.” Today, a woman such as Bates being involved in community service would not be at all remarkable, but in the late 1800’s a civic minded woman activist was virtually unheard of. And when such activity was heard of, it was met with resistance, especially from men. It was in this environment that Fannie Bates decided to exert her influence in order to improve her community. Thus, Bates earned her nickname through her membership in two pioneering women’s clubs in Cranford as well as through her operation of two early local boarding houses.

Fannie Bates was born around 1841, but not much is known about her childhood besides the fact that she had three sisters. Bates married like most women of her time and had two children: Fannie, a daughter, and George, a son. Sometime—sources are split between either around 1871 or in the 1880’s—Bates and her husband moved to Cranford. Bates’ husband died after the move, and she became a widow. However, she was not a stereotypical reclusive widow whose life solely revolved around mourning her husband. To the contrary, Bates’ spirited personality and civic mindedness drove her to want to improve the growing community she lived in. In this way, Bates had the tendencies of an early feminist. She supported women’s rights to some degree, arguing that a woman’s traditional duty to care for the home extended beyond the physical home and into the larger community. To apply her philosophy, the widow had to get involved with the other like-minded women in Cranford, which she did by seeking out early women’s clubs in the community.



Bates quickly joined the Wednesday Morning Club, the first exclusively women’s organization in Cranford. As women were still very much socially excluded from politics and the like, the Wednesday Morning Club had been formed as more of a leisure group for women based around the activity of book discussions. After their book discussions, however members of the club such as

Bates often turned the topic of their meetings to town affairs and their thoughts on them. Soon, these discussions evolved into actual activism. Using the pretense of being a literary circle, the Wednesday Morning Club, began gathering books which would eventually stock the local library they would help establish. Still, Fannie Bates was not satisfied by this limited community involvement and sought a more active role.

Thus, on February 12, 1896, Bates met secretly with twenty-five friends to talk about problems in town caused by its growing population. Five days later, Bates officially founded the Village Improvement Association and became its first president, leading about forty other women. This new group was only the second women's group in Cranford, and it was the first organization for women to be explicitly dedicated to letting women have an avenue through which they could perform civic activism. The new club was immediately popular with eager Cranford women; the group's membership tripled by the end of 1896. Men, however, resisted the Village Improvement Association and the intentions of its members as they felt it challenged their authority as the traditional power holders and sources of action in the community, but Bates ignored their complaints and pushed on.

The Village Improvement Association took on numerous projects in its early years with Bates at its helm. Its first project despite opposition by the township committee was to clean up ash heaps that littered the streets of Cranford. The VIA managed to complete this task of cleaning the street, and in the process set up the town's first sanitation department. This department was later expanded through further funding by the VIA in the 1900's to include snow plowing services as well. Other early projects of the VIA included organizing the town's school board, formally establishing the aforementioned library with the Wednesday Morning Club and campaigning for school construction and redesign to eliminate the fire hazards of the buildings. Bates also advocated more purposes for her club in a 1912 newspaper article, such as addressing environmental concerns, lobbying against undesirable businesses, fundraising for the poor, having food drives and temperance activities. In fact, Bates, as the club's founder, was so vocal with her VIA role that the successes of the VIA, including contributing to an increase in population and property value in Cranford double and sevenfold respectively, were attributed to her almost exclusively.

However, Bates' life as an independent and civic minded woman at the turn of the century did not solely encompass her duties with local women's organizations. She was also a businesswoman who helped build up Cranford through her investments in real estate. In 1888, Bates started construction on Hampton Hall, the town's first fashionable residence hotel, which opened its doors in 1891 and remained in operation until it was demolished in 1969. Hampton Hall, a type of high-end boarding house, became very popular after it was opened. In 1901, Bates had to buy a nearby house to annex to the hotel's property. In addition to Hampton Hall, she also bought another piece of property named Yggdrasil in January 1907. Bates renamed this property Riverside and opened a second boarding house on it in February of that same year. Both Hampton Hall and Riverside were heavily frequented, not just by residents but by townspeople as well. This is because both locations hosted various town events such as carnivals, dances and club meetings—the VIA met annually in Hampton Hall—in addition to being temporary residences of several people including Bates herself. Bates both owned and oversaw the management of the two boarding houses up to her death at age 77 in May 1918 after a long illness.

When Fannie Bates died, the impact of the event in Cranford illustrated just how well respected “the Mother of Cranford” was. Local stores were closed for Bates' funeral. It is clear by this gesture that Bates earned her title through her success with her boarding houses and her achievements with

the two women's community organizations she belonged to. In other words, Bates was "the Mother of Cranford" as she literally cleaned up the town, gave it a library and a better school system, developed real estate and offered more opportunities for local women to be involved in the town. In addition to this, Bates could also be considered one of Cranford's first feminist icons as she completed all her civic activism during a time when women were expected to remain in the home and when men actively opposed women having any influence outside the home.

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