ABBY MARIA HEMENWAY

Like other remarkable women in Addison County, Abby Hemenway rebelled against the prevailing, centuries-old, androcentric perceptions of her gender. She was a teacher, poet, author, historian and publisher, proving herself with fortitude, independence and great accomplishments. As the contributions Abby and other extraordinary women made were realized, the collective consciousness shifted towards support of more significant roles for all women.

Abby Maria Hemenway was born in 1828, on a hill farm in Ludlow, Vt., to Abigail and Daniel Hemenway. A precocious student, starting at age 14 she alternated between teaching in local area schoolhouses and carrying on her own studies at the Black River Academy. In 1853 she left Vermont for Michigan where she became an underpaid, homesick teacher with thwarted literary ambitions. Abby returned to Ludlow as a 30-year-old unemployed woman, again a ward of her parents.

Abby’s love of poetry, trust in her own literary abilities, and ambition to succeed as a single woman gradually gelled into a course of action that would define her life’s works. When Baxter died in 1911, all of Abby’s possessions went to William’s niece, Janet Baxter, in Jackson Springs, N.C. On Nov. 22, 1911, Vermont Historical Society sent her a letter asking to take possession of Hemenway’s records and notes. Just days later, on Nov. 27, a fire destroyed Baxter’s home, along with Abby’s last manuscript to Abby’s friend in Chicago.

The task of completion fell to her youngest sister, Carrie Page, a Brandon, Vt., housewife with little or no experience as an editor or publisher. Remarkably, after two years, Carrie was able to get all 1,249 pages of Volume V printed. Lacking money to print Volume VI, Carrie sent the last manuscript to Abby’s friend in Chicago, former Vermonter William Portus Baxter, to store along with other trunks stuffed with Abby’s life’s works. When Baxter died in 1911, all of Abby’s possessions went to William’s niece, Janet Baxter, in Jackson Springs, N.C. On Nov. 22, 1911, Vermont Historical Society sent her a letter asking to take possession of Hemenway’s records and notes. Just days later, on Nov. 27, a fire destroyed Baxter’s home, along with Abby’s irreplaceable notes, documents, Volume VI manuscript, and personal papers. Despite the horrific loss of Volume VI, the five surviving volumes of “Vermont Historical Gazetteer” provide a detailed and diverse history of early Vermont that is unrivaled by early histories of any other state.

From 1885 to 1888, she corresponded with her antiquarian friend Henry Sheldon in Middlebury, soliciting his help in appropriating funds from the Vermont Legislature to complete the “Gazetteers.” Along with Hemenway’s letters to Henry Sheldon, the Stewart-Swift Research Center of the Henry Sheldon Museum has her “Poets and Poetry of Vermont” and complete sets of both the “Vermont Historical Gazetteer” and “Notes by the Path of the Gazetteer,” a small monthly that Hemenway put out for subscribers. The latter contains the fascinating “Autobiography” of the “Gazetteer,” including her methods of persuading people to write for it and her recruitment of “lady assistants” to obtain subscribers.

Abby’s single-minded determination to finish Vermont’s early story ended with her death on Feb. 24, 1890, alone in a Chicago boarding house surrounded by documents and copious notes. The task of completion fell to her youngest sister, Carrie Page, a Brandon, Vt., housewife with little or no experience as an editor or publisher. Remarkably, after two years, Carrie was able to get all 1,249 pages of Volume V printed. Lacking money to print Volume VI, Carrie sent the last manuscript to Abby’s friend in Chicago, former Vermonter William Portus Baxter, to store along with other trunks stuffed with Abby’s life’s works. When Baxter died in 1911, all of Abby’s possessions went to William’s niece, Janet Baxter, in Jackson Springs, N.C.

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