

BEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY *stories*

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In honor of Women's History Month, these are the stories of several extraordinary, trailblazing women who, during their lives graced the town of Bedford with their presence, many of whom were alive before women had the right to own property or to vote.

They include Ellen Morris Wood, Dr. Katherine Bemet Davis, Sister Elaine Roulet, and Florence Jaffray Harriman. They were involved in undertakings ranging from politics to women's suffrage, criminology, and social justice reform.

- Ladies Who Launch -



Ellen Morris Wood was born on September 15, 1868 to James Wood II and Emily Hollingsworth Morris in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is best known for her work as a nurse. She was the older of two siblings, her younger sister Carolena continuing her work after her death. Ellen studied nursing at the Teachers College in New York and at Johns Hopkins University, graduating in 1896. She then moved to Bedford where she founded the District

Nursing Association of Northern Westchester County, then known as the Bedford Visiting Nurse Program in 1898.

Ellen also was the founder of the Sewing School Program at the New York Colored Mission, which held sewing classes for black women in New York City as part of a mission to help provide "religious, moral and social elevation," for African Americans.

She volunteered as a nurse during the Spanish American War at Fort Hamilton in New York and was engaged to marry famed Quaker, Rufus Jones. Unfortunately she died before the wedding of typhoid fever on August 10, 1900, which she is believed to have contracted during her work at Fort Hamilton.



A coach leaving the Colony Club

Florence "Daisy" Jaffray Harriman was born on July 21, 1870 to shipping mogul F.W.J. Hurst and his wife Caroline Eliza Jaffray Hurst in New York City. Florence married banker J. Borden Harriman in 1889 at the age of 19, and they settled in the Bedford Corners section

of Bedford, New York. In 1903 she co-founded the Colony Club, the first club that was exclusively for women in New York City. Florence worked tirelessly as a suffragist and social reformer. She was appointed a member of the Board of Managers at the Women's Reformatory located in Bedford Hills, NY in 1906. She also helped expose harsh working conditions in the factories, hotels and foundries of New York in 1908. Florence hosted over 100 labor delegates from the Brotherhood of Stationary Firemen at her Bedford home in 1909, helped expose unhealthy conditions of the tenements of New York, and led a women's suffrage parade down 5th Avenue in New York City.

She then went on to be elected the first President of the Women's National Wilson and Marshall Association, and was appointed a member of the US Commission on Industrial Relations by President Woodrow Wilson. She later turned her Bedford home into a tuberculosis sanitarium, and during the Mexican Civil War, she helped tend to the wounded during a visit to the Rio Grande area to attend hearings on working conditions for farm workers.



Daisy Harriman Oversees a Democratic Rally in New York City

During World War I Florence directed both the Women's Motor Corps in France and the American Red Cross Women's Motor Corps of the District of Columbia. She also served as the chair of U.S. National Defense Advisory Commission's Committee on Women in Industry from 1917 to 1919. After the war, she attended the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919, was a member of the Democratic National Committee and

became founder and President of the Women's National Democratic Club. President Roosevelt appointed her the American ambassador to Norway in 1937, where Harriman lead evacuations and helped refugees during World War II. She was later awarded both the Nordic Grand Cross of the Order of St. Olav by Norway's King Haakon VII in 1942, and a Citation of Merit for Distinguished Service by President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Harriman died at the age of 97 on August 31, 1967.



Dr. Davis at work with inmates

Dr. Katherine Bement Davis

was born on January 15, 1860 in Buffalo, NY and was the oldest of five children. She is best known for her work in criminology and prison reform. Dr. Davis graduated from Rochester Free Academy in 1879, after which she was a high school chemistry teacher for 10 years at Dunkirk Academy. She then went back to school, enrolling in food chemistry and

nutritional studies programs at Vassar College, a food chemistry program at Columbia University's Barnard College. She became the first woman to graduate with a PhD in Political Science and Economics from the University of Chicago in 1900.

In 1901, Davis was appointed the first female superintendent of the Bedford Hills Women's Reformatory, where she worked for the next thirteen years taking an experimental approach to penology. This included reforms such as instituting a prison farm, vocational classes for prisoners, and a cottage system for the prison. She also instituted psychological testing at Bedford and found that many inmates were mentally ill. She advocated for judges to take this factor into consideration during sentencing, thus making sure that those who entered the criminal justice were placed appropriately. In 1914, Davis became the first female to head a major New York City agency when she was appointed the Commissioner of Corrections, later also becoming the head of the Bureau of Social Hygiene in 1918. Dr. Katherine B. Davis died on December 10, 1935.

Sister Elaine

Roluet was born in 1930, and was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993. She is a Roman Catholic Nun who

is best known for her work in prison reformation. Sister Roulet created and served as the director of the Children's Center at Bedford Hills Correction



Entrance to the New York State Reformatory, Bedford Hills

Center. This unique program allows mothers whose babies are born in prison to keep them up to one year and also provides a parenting center, playroom, and nursery and infant center to the children of prison inmates. It also serves as the national model for providing support to mothers and their babies while in prison. Sister Roulet also founded Providence House Inc., an organization that works with Catholic Charities to provide shelter and assistance to battered or homeless women and their families as well as provide temporary housing for women just released from prison.



But women had been serving in many other public roles for a long time-not only Management of the Women's Prison, but also the Temperance movement, Women's Suffrage, the District Nursing Association and various associations such as Village Improvements Societies, the Women's

Civic Club of Katonah (1922)-to say nothing of women's long involvement in teaching in the public schools, originally a government appointment.

Within Bedford Town government, **Dorothy Butler Harder** was the first woman elected to the Town Board in 1954. **Mary Hart** became the first woman Town Clerk in 1974 and in 2003 **Lee Roberts** was the first woman elected Town Supervisor.

Thanks to our intern, Alexandra Morris, for her research and assistance with this month's Bedford Story.

The Historical Society was founded 100 years ago by FIVE WOMEN AND FOUR MEN. If you'd like to support our Centennial and help bring history to life for the

next 100 years, you can [make a donation here](#).

Thank you for your friendship and support!

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