

GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS OF VIRGINIA

A Brief History

The story of the General Federation of Women's Clubs of Virginia is indeed fascinating. In 1907 the General Federation of Women's Council was to meet in Norfolk in conjunction with the Jamestown Exposition. In the meantime, Alice Aunspaugh Kyle, President of The Woman's Club of Lynchburg and Elizabeth Gish, Chairman of the Club's State Federation Committee, were thinking of forming a federation of clubs in Virginia. The Woman's Club of Lynchburg sent out invitations to existing clubs in Virginia to attend a convention on May 16, 1907 at the Lynchburg YMCA. The result of this meeting was the formation of the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs with a membership of ten clubs and almost 700 women. Mrs. Kyle was elected the first president and is fondly remembered as "Mother Kyle". The Woman's Club of Norfolk hosted the GFWC Council Meeting with great success. However, the fledgling organization found some of GFWC's policies too liberal and they did not join GFWC until 1910. In 2000 the name of the organization was changed from the Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs to the VFWC of GFWC. In 2002 the name was again changed to General Federation of Women's Clubs of Virginia, to be known as GFWC Virginia.

"Service, the Debt of Education" was chosen as the motto for the state in 1913. Even though promoting education for women was the initial drive, the women made it very clear that this did not mean just formal education advancement, but the "continuing process which comes about through reading, listening, acting." The emblem of the state flag lying on a wreath of golden rod in the chosen colors of blue and gold was also adopted in 1913.

Details of the early meetings of Virginia can be found in the history written by Etta Belle Northington, past state President, as part of the Golden Jubilee which was celebrated in 1957. All records and important papers were collected, indexed and presented to the State Library. Mrs. Northington wrote her book from this information, and the fact that she knew each president who served during the 50 years adds special interest.

In the early years, members helped initiate the industrial arts program into rural schools; supported school fairs which exhibited vocational training projects; worked to establish a state supported women's university and supplied books to libraries, in fact, the Federation established 75% of the libraries in existence. They worked for legislation that would assure adequately trained and paid teachers, expanded building of schools, worked for compulsory attendance and the establishment of libraries. These women also pioneered action in fields of sanitation, pure food and the clean up of litter and filth from public places.

Health issues also claimed the attention of clubwomen as infant mortality was high; tuberculosis was the number one killer, the death rate from typhoid and the incidence of malaria were causes for alarm, so they worked to clean up open wells and outdoor privies and demanded that all stores selling food be screened to keep out insects and dust. Clubwomen today are still concerned with health issues. They can be found working with the American Cancer Society, the Arthritis Foundation, American Heart Association, and other health organizations; conducting osteoporosis screenings, blood pressure screenings, working with children with cancer and much more. Virginia clubwomen raised money for cancer treatment machines, i.e., Maxitron, Clinac and a linear accelerator at the Massey Cancer Center in Richmond.

A Federation magazine "Club Life in the Old Dominion" was first published in 1921, fell on hard times and was reactivated in 1928 with the President serving as editor. "The Virginia Clubwoman" official publication of the Federation is now published five times per year with the editor appointed by the president. This magazine and the yearbook are indispensable tools for all clubwomen. Headquarters for the Federation was established and housed in a small room in the Woman's Club of Richmond, and was later moved to the mezzanine floor of the Jefferson Hotel and remained there many years. It was then moved to the Berkshire for twelve years and in 1992 was relocated to 513 Forest Avenue. Headquarters serves as base of operations for officers and chairmen and a source of help to all members. The Executive Secretary is in the office to handle general business, distribute materials and disseminate information. Contributions from clubs and clubwomen help maintain Headquarters, but the major support is realized from the interest on the state's Endowment Fund. The Headquarters Building Fund was merged with the Nellie Watts Flemming Endowment Fund to become the GFWC Virginia Endowment Fund in 2000.

Convention minutes show that Juniors became a part of Virginia Federation in 1924. The Newport News Juniors were the first Junior Department. Today, the Director of Junior Clubs is the Third Vice President of GFWC Virginia and a member of the Board of Directors of GFWC.

Scholarships have been of major interest to clubwomen. In addition to other work to improve educational opportunities in Virginia, many clubs give their own scholarships, as well as lending support to the state scholarships: Mary Macon McGuire and the Phyllis V. Roberts Scholarships. These funds are administered by the state's Scholarship Committee.

Virginia clubwomen have supported safety, crime prevention, child welfare, the artmobile from the Virginia Museum, get out the vote, billboard blight removal, court watching, patriotic campaigns, mental health research and education, gave money for a heated physical therapy pool to the Children's Rehabilitation Center of the University of Virginia.

For many years clubwomen, especially Juniors, worked tirelessly for the upkeep and development of Camp Easter Seal West in Craig County. In 1978, Virginia clubwomen adopted the building of Camp Easter Seal East in Caroline County. Since that time the central building named "Federation Lodge" was built, a heated pool with cover, another dormitory building, and a multipurpose building have been constructed with the Federation being the major contributor. In the fall of 2001 ground was broken for a Health Care and Speech Therapy Center, which was officially dedicated in 2004. During the 2004-06 administration, over \$70,000.00 was raised to assist Camp Easter Seal with the maintenance of Camp in Craig County.

Canine Companions for Independence was introduced in 1986, and Virginia members immediately became involved. Virginia was the FIRST state to provide the funds to train a dog to assist a disabled person and since then Virginia clubwomen have contributed funds to place six dogs with Virginians with disabilities.

Operation Smile was introduced in 1988 and has continued as a major focus of clubwomen. Virginia club members have also volunteered their services to this medical mission to developing countries, working in the Philippines, China and Africa. Clubs still provide money and make "smile bags" and gowns for children receiving surgery during the missions. Operation Smile was introduced to GFWC and adopted as an objective by them in 1990.

GFWC Virginia has had the honor of having three of its members serve as GFWC International President: Mrs. J. L. Blair Buck-1947-50, Mrs. James B. Roberts-1986-88, and Mrs. Leslie W. Hamlett, Jr.-2000-2002.

GFWC Virginia holds an annual convention for the purpose of conducting the business of the federation, an annual conference with workshops for training purposes and orientations for officers and chairmen.

Beginning in 2006 with the appointment of a 100th Anniversary Committee, plans emerged for two years of events to celebrate our history in Federation. The first year included the 2007 Convention Champagne (Sparkling Cider) Banquet, Memorial Service and Hats and Gloves luncheon. With the 2008 Convention, we were featuring our chorus, fashions of the decade's revue and completion of our written history book. Scrapbooks from districts were available for viewing. Ornaments and pins were created for members to obtain items of remembrance. With special events, mementos, fashions, music, and written history, we have reviewed our past, celebrated our accomplishments, and accepted challenges to step forward into our future of volunteering.

Virginia Clubwomen surged into their Second Century of Service with a challenging State Project for 2008 – 2010 - the raising of funds for the purchase of a fully equipped ambulance for the Virginia Tech Student Rescue Squad. This volunteer effort was to provide a living memorial to the students lost in the April 2007 campus tragedy, one of which was the son of a Virginia Junior. Despite the depressed economy, over \$110,000 was raised and the newly purchased vehicle was presented as a surprise to Convention 2010 attendees!

The 2008 – 2010 Administration also launched a Strategic Plan Committee as well as a Study Committee to review publication practices. The findings and recommendations of both furnished valuable data to guide the future of GFWC Virginia.

In support of the GFWC Signature Program, Virginia club women embraced the 2010-2012 State Project and its partnership with Prevent Child Abuse Virginia, "Take Time to Save A Child...". More than \$65,000.00 in financial contributions and in-kind services were provided to support Healthy Families' programs across the Commonwealth. A Pilot Study was completed on the distribution of *The Virginia Clubwoman* magazine. The Committee's research netted a 51% saving on distribution costs. Extensive review of Bylaws provided more than 55 amendments, including one that established a Strategic Planning Committee, allowing for ongoing leadership, membership and identity initiatives.

Observing...to take notice...to take action! That is just what Virginia's dedicated and tireless volunteers did during 2012-2014! Embracing conservation, the state project, clubs across the state rolled up sleeves and grabbed work tools to introduce our youth to nature and improve their communities. One club initiated/partnered with 10 local groups to achieve two gardens and natural areas for migrating monarch butterflies. A priority put into action was to inspire our members to become comfortable and embrace the "digital age" with a conference geared toward this and marketing their clubs. We even Skyped a GFWC officer that weekend! An increase in club and district websites and the use of multimedia among members has blossomed

In 2016 our President challenged the membership to “Dare to Dream of No Hunger”. This the members did in volume, and food was distributed in everyplace we met. We had the first Conservation Fashion Show. Clubs were asked to present an outfit made of plastic tote bags. Virginia sent a representative to GFWC Convention. Members contributed to the Capital Fund for Naming Rights to Shelby Hamlett’s portrait to hang in GFWC Headquarters. St. Jude became part of our conversation, as we were made aware of its mission. Members took part in the Annual St. Jude Walk. Hopewell Junior Woman’s Club became the proud sponsor of Southside’s first Juniorette Club. Clubs did their work in membership and community service. In January 2018 we were saddened by the passing of President Fran Edwards.

Federation volunteers were challenged to “Step Up To Stop Human Trafficking” during the 2018-2020 Administration. Clubs supported the State Project by sponsoring classes to introduce the Prevention Project Curriculum of Richmond Justice Initiative. A donation of \$10,038.77 was made to RJI. Members had fun with the SHOES symbol as they worked on programs and projects including longstanding (30th year helping at the State Fair, 20th year of the Endowment Fund which had grown to \$371,371.00, and presentation of 9 scholarships) plus newer initiatives (electronic reporting and giving the website a new look).

2020 brought the historic Covid-19 pandemic with accompanying shutdown. Meetings were cancelled including Convention 2020. Election of officers for 2020-2022 was accomplished using online techniques. Digital age meeting methods allowed the completion of necessary work in the final months of the 2018-2020 administration.

The Administration of 2020-2022 was a different one to say the least. Because of Covid-19, meetings and activities were either canceled or curtailed. For the first time a GFWC Virginia meeting was held via Zoom. 191 registrants met remotely for our Summer Conference to hear guest speaker, Patricia Wirth, CEO of the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial, and new program ideas from our state chairmen. In the spring of 2021, In the spring of 2021, our second virtual meeting featured guest speaker, Jolie Frankfurth, GFWC Secretary, spoke on “Using Social Media to Gain the Right Attention.” The State Project was put into action by collecting funds for the purchase of a bus for the Armed Forces YMCA of Hampton Roads. The goal was \$35,000.00. By April 2022, over \$42,000 collected funds enabled GFWC Virginia to present a check for the purchase of the bus. GFWC Virginia lost two distinguished members during the 2020-2022 administration, Shelby Hamlett Past GFWC Virginia President and Past GFWC President and Millie Brown Past GFWC Virginia President. Both Ladies gave much to GFWC and GFWC Virginia. As the administration ended, members visited the Virginia Beach Oceanfront on one of the coldest weekends that spring. One thing became abundantly clear from the administration is that ZOOM is part of our world as several Convention speakers addressed members via Zoom.

The 2022-2024 Administration was an “Enlightening” one as we supported the state project of “Education of Virginia’s Natural Resources - flora and fauna, waters, soil and woods” and took a “Step in Time” to improve our health in the “It’s All About Me in 2023” challenge. Members supported the State Project with the purchase of Dogwood leaves and blossoms for the Federation Forest, sent in donations and purchased state project pins that led to \$12,000 being raised, which was split between the Virginia Forestry Educational Foundation and Wildlife Center of Virginia. This administration also saw the end of a 35-year run of volunteerism with the State Fair of Virginia. A fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) has been planted on the State Fairground in honor of GFWC Virginia. Three new Past District Presidents Clubs were formed during this time as well. Membership held steady with a zero net gain/loss in members! A beautiful redesigned GFWC Virginia emblem that includes the General Federation of Women’s Clubs emblem was adopted at the 2024 GFWC Virginia Convention.

During the 2024-2026 administration GFWC Virginia members continued a long tradition of service by building on its history of community involvement and volunteer leadership. One of the administration's key focus areas was early childhood education. The goal of the state project was to support young children's growth and learning. By prioritizing resources, partnerships, and advocacy aimed at strengthening early learning opportunities across Virginia, members carried forward its mission of making a positive difference in families and communities throughout the Commonwealth. The Southeastern Region meeting was held in Roanoke during this administration and GFWC Virginia became a beacon of hospitality to the other states in the region. Working together, the districts provided decorations for each event designed to be donated in support of the many projects throughout Virginia. Continuing the Advocates for Children collections at each state meeting, members donated books, school supplies and gift cards in support of our goal of bolstering Early Childhood Education. There were two General clubs and one Junioresette club organized during this administration.