

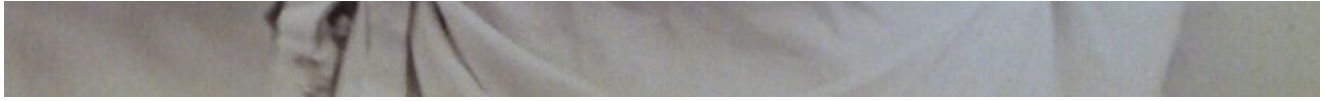
Women's History Month/Advocating for women's education while agitating against their right to vote

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By Nicole Carter

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OXFORD — In the 21st century, it is hard to consider that a woman who devoted her life to women's education could be an opponent of women's suffrage.

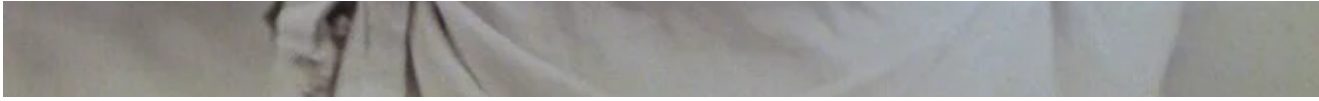
Any examination of women's history in the United States invariably includes discussion of the women's suffrage movement, launched in 1848 during a women's rights conference in Seneca Falls, New York.

Women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott established themselves as leaders of the movement. Other women, such as Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone, also advocated for women's rights throughout the 19th century and remain well-regarded figures in the suffrage movement.

But not all who championed for women's rights – primarily education – supported suffrage.

Heloise Edwina Hersey, who was born in Oxford in 1855, was one such person.





Heloise Hersey was born in Oxford in 1855 and became the country's first female professor of rhetoric and Anglo-Saxon language at Smith College in 1878. *Courtesy Oxford Historical Society*

Hersey is said to have been a witness of one of the most consequential presidential conventions in U.S. history, that of Abraham Lincoln's 1860 presidential nomination. She attended the convention at the tender age of five with her father, Artemas L. Hersey.

While her father was not an elector representing Maine he surely was an associate of Hannibal Hamlin of Paris and the eventual vice presidential nominee on the Lincoln ticket. By today's standards it is ironic that a girl who was so close to political history would not be inspired by it.

Hersey enjoyed an upbringing that certainly would have exposed her to the social issues facing the U.S. during the Civil War era. Her father graduated from Bowdoin College and taught school before assuming the medical practice of Dr. Edwin Mayberry in Oxford.

According to the *Annals of Oxford, Maine*, Dr. Hersey had a reputation for wisdom and was a prominent member of the Maine Medical Association. His wife Heloise Helena was affectionate and refined, "making their home the center of religious and social life of the town."

Hersey attended school in Oxford and attended Vassar College in New York, where she graduated with a degree in Anglo-Saxon language and literature. She went on to become the country's first female professor of rhetoric and Anglo-Saxon at Smith College before establishing a private school in Boston – Miss Hersey's School for Girls.

In a second occurrence of irony, Hersey's school would feature teachers and graduates who embraced suffrage and figured prominently into the movement by the turn of the 20th century.

Marquise Fayette King wrote in *The Annals of Oxford* that Hersey had won fame and money as a teacher, writer and public speaker in Massachusetts. Eventually she would become a footnote of derision in historical accounts of the suffrage movement.

Hersey dedicated herself to women's education, and early on she believed it only a matter of time before those of her sex could vote. But by the end of the century she was firmly aligned with anti-suffragists.

In 1899, the same year her school closed, Hersey was "remonstrating" against women's right to vote at public hearings in Massachusetts, according to *The History of Suffrage*, published in 1900 and edited by Stanton and Indiana suffragist Ida Husted Harper.

Here, Hersey was in the company of leading anti-suffragists Dr. Lyman Abbott of New York, Henry B. Thompson and his wife Mary Wilson Thompson of Delaware.

Abbott would write in *The Atlantic* in 1903, "Woman does not wish to turn aside from her higher work, which is itself the end of life, to devote herself to government, which exists only that this higher work may be done. Can she not do both? No!"

In Abbott's opinion, "women who have these outlandish ideals of equality are senseless and irrational" and suffered from hysteria.

In a letter to President Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Wilson Thompson wrote: "A woman can be one of the most useful & ornamental creatures in her own sphere, but in Politics she is dangerous, treacherous & revengeful – therefore sooner her political activity is curbed the better..."

In 1901 Hersey published *To Girls: A Budget of Letters*, a book cataloging advice she had given to young women over the course of her career. In it she made clear her position on women voting: "...women may be pretty fairly divided into two classes, the women who are too ignorant for the suffrage and the women are too good to spend themselves on it."

She went to say that it was women voters in Utah who elevated a sinful polygamist to elected office and then offered an anecdote about a Colorado activist leading a pro-suffrage "mob."

The activist, a woman who threw a rock at Vice President-elect Theodore Roosevelt, was judged by the local newspaper to be "undoubtedly a dissolute creature and probably half drunk at the time." The husband of the woman beat the reporter in defense of his wife, who he said, was a perfect lady. To this Hersey retorted the incident was proof that Coloradans had no idea what would

constitute “a perfect lady.”

In 1917 *The Woman Citizen*, the journal of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, ridiculed Hersey for stating during a public address against suffrage that even working men in America would be better off if they had no vote, as “than their employers would feel a sense of chivalry toward them.”

Following her career as an educator, Hersey became an editorial writer for *The Youth’s Companion*, the same magazine that in 1892 made the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance synonymous with public education while marketing the sale of American flags to every school house in the country.

Hersey was a leading figure in Gilded Age education. In her dedication to educating women she never married or raised a family of her own. Her name and accomplishments have faded from history, possibly because of her opposition to social progress for women.

Despite her public opposition to female equality, Hersey was recognized in education circles for her contributions to learning. In 1921 she was awarded an honorary degree from Bowdoin College, with Tufts University in Massachusetts following with another honorary degree in 1922.

Hersey passed away in Boston in 1933, just weeks shy of her 78th birthday.

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