

Famous Firsts

By Carolyn Forbes, WHRC Committee Member

Women's achievements are often overlooked. It is important to acknowledge their triumphs and set them up as role models for the next generation of girls. The following information highlights many of the notable women with ties to GFWC.



In 1890, **Julia Ward Howe** (GFWC Massachusetts) helped author the GFWC Constitution. She wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic and inspired the creation of Mother's Day. She was also an advocate for abolitionism and a social activist, particularly for women's suffrage.



Thomas Edison's wife **Mina** (GFWC New Jersey) hosted the first GFWC council meeting in 1891 at their home in West Orange, New Jersey. After a luncheon, Edison invited delegates to his lab for a demonstration of the kinetoscope, an early motion picture projector. Mina gave her talents to the surrounding communities, working tirelessly on various social, educational, religious, and community causes for the benefits of citizens.



Josephine Ruffin used her financial security and organizational abilities to start *The Women's Era*, the country's first newspaper published by and for African-American Women. In 1900, GFWC met in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Josephine tried to attend as a representative of three Boston organizations: the New Era Club, the New England Women's Club, and the New England Women's Press Club. Ruffin was told she could be seated as an honorary representative of the two predominantly white clubs, but not as a representative of the Black club. She refused on principle and was excluded from the proceedings. This event became known as "The Ruffin Incident" and was widely covered in newspapers around the country.



Julia Lathrop (GFWC Illinois) was an American social reformer in the area of education, social policy, and children's welfare. Appointed by President Taft in 1912 as director of the United States Children's Bureau, she was the first woman to head a U.S. federal bureau.



Mary Belle King Sherman (GFWC Colorado), a GFWC Conservation Chairman from 1914-1916, helped create the National Park Service. She was the only woman on the National War Gardens commission and established National Garden Week. In 1924, she was elected president of GFWC.



Jane Addams, social worker and feminist, was the first American woman to receive a Nobel Peace Prize. She received her award for her efforts to advance peace in 1931.



Emily Greene Balch was an American economist and sociologist as well as a friend and co-worker of Jane Addams, who also worked on social issues. She helped found the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She won her Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. Both had ties to GFWC.



In 2008, GFWC advocated for the bipartisan pay equality bill on the discrimination case of **Lilly Ledbetter** (GFWC Alabama). Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in January 2009. In 2011, Ledbetter was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

These women are but a few of the examples of women throughout history who have had an effect on the world around them. Women wield a great deal of influence in this world, but it often goes unseen. From making a house into a home, molding children into the future of tomorrow, to changing the course of an entire nation, women should not be overlooked for the impact they have on the path of humanity.