



# WOMEN OF THE VALLEY



The Martindale Sisters

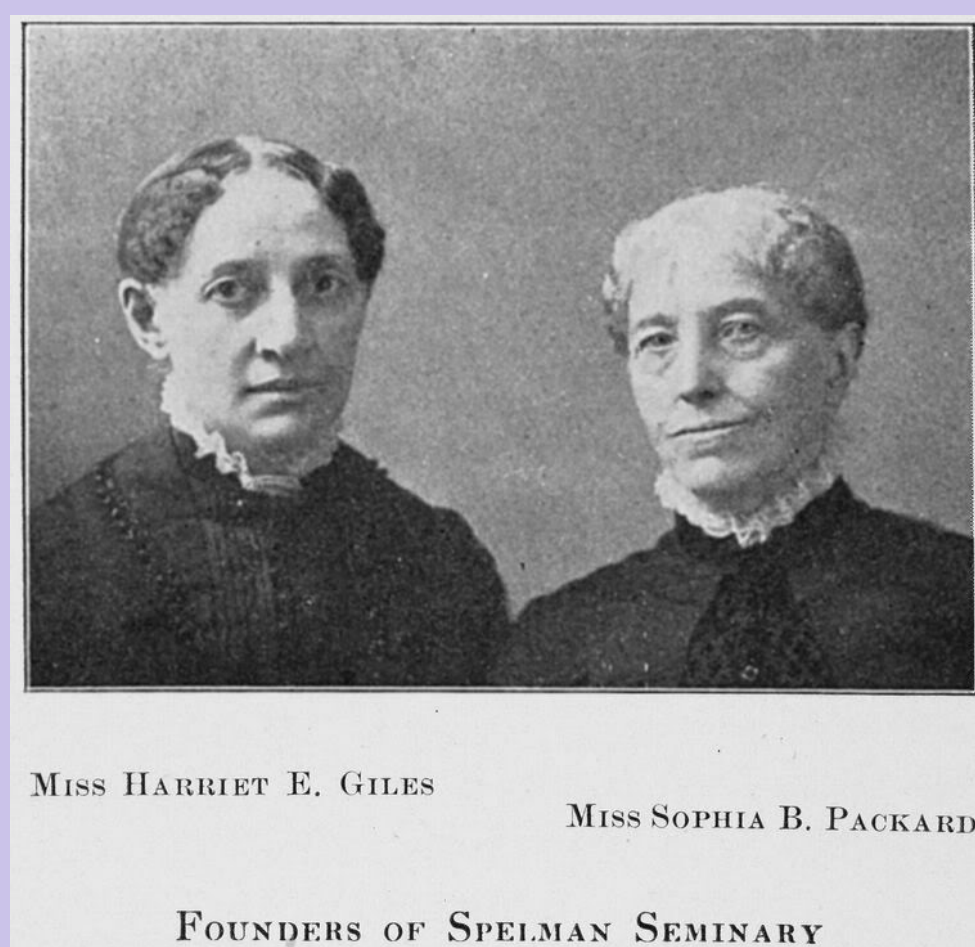
From it's earliest days, the Swift River Valley has been host to some remarkable women. They have been survivors, scholars and activists. They have made their mark on both the Valley and on the nation.

Many women lived as they did in other rural communities. They lived and worked on farms, took care of their homes, often helped run family businesses. Some women worked outside the home in the service field or in town jobs like mail clerk. Women of the Valley also had a unique opportunity to earn extra income from home by braiding straw to be woven into hats in places like the North Dana Hat Factory. Other women fulfilled the calling to teach.



Some women took this calling to new heights. Sisters Charlotte and Mary Drinkwater opened the Hillside School on their family's farm in Greenwich. This school gave poor and orphaned boys the opportunity to receive a well rounded education in both academics and trade, to help them grow into successful men. The school was moved to Marlborough when it became clear that the valley was to be taken over by the state.

Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles of New Salem were struck by the conditions of newly freed black women in the south, who had no education at all, so they opened the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in Atlanta, GA. They began with 11 students, and grew to over 400 in under 3 years. Oil magnate and millionaire John D. Rockefeller was so impressed that he paid off the schools debts. The school was renamed Spelman College, after his in-laws.



Both schools are still open today, still run by the same principles they were founded on.

Dr. Mary Walker was born in Oswego, NY to activist parents Alvah and Vesta, of Greenwich. Dr. Walker spent many summers with family in Greenwich, and often caused quite a stir when she was around.

Raised to believe in equality for all, Mary Walker pursued a medical career and became the first female surgeon in the Civil War. She received the Congressional Medal of Honor for her service, and to this day is the only woman ever to have done so.

She was adamant about dress reform, believing that the tight, heavy clothing women wore was unhealthy and immoral, and herself wore a man's suit, complete with top hat, throughout her life. She was an activist for temperance and women's suffrage, but died in 1919, just one year prior to the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment.



Dr. Mary Walker. She wore her Medal of Honor everyday until her death.



Close-up of dress detail

Two 19<sup>th</sup> century formal dresses. The one on the right was a wedding gown. The "traditional" white wedding gown didn't become a tradition until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. If the woman came from a family with a limited income, her wedding dress would simply have been her best dress.



In areas like the Swift River Valley, where dry goods stores and spending money were limited, women were the seamstresses in the family, creating everything from blankets and towels to suits and dresses. Because sewing was such an important task, women had special boxes or baskets to hold their needles, thread, scissors and notions. Some of these boxes were very elaborate, like this organ shaped one.



Beaded collars were an independent accessory from a dress or shirt which could be worn on multiple outfits to dress them up, much like necklaces are worn today. Lillian Pierce Coolidge of Prescott is wearing one in this photograph. Prescott is the only one of the four dis-incorporated towns that has a full written history, thanks to Lillian, who wrote *The History of Prescott*, after the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir.



This case contains many beautiful accessories like beaded handbags, hair combs, hat pins and eyeglasses - some of which even have fashionably tinted lenses!



Governor Dukakis signing in 1988 as the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year of Remembrance

Women have had an enormous role in preserving the Valley's past, and ensuring it's memory lives on in the future.

Lois Barnes and Eleanor Griswold Schmidt, both former residents, each spent decades working to preserve the heritage and memories of the Swift River Valley. They are pictured above during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the dis-incorporation of the towns in 1988. Their combined work with the Prescott Historical Society, now part of the Swift River Valley Historical Society, and the Friends of Quabbin, has ensured a legacy to survive for generations.

Lois was the person primarily responsible for the Friends of Quabbin Oral History Project, in which she spent hundreds of hours interviewing other former residents and anyone else who had a connection to the valley, in addition to being an active member and historian for both SRVHS and FOQ.

Her work was commemorated in 2006 with a memorial tree, taken as a sapling from the site of her family homestead on Prescott and planted just outside the parking area for this administration building.



Lois Barnes out on the Reservoir

Eleanor Schmidt and Marty Howe on a Prescott Tour



Eleanor was the driving force behind the merger between the Prescott Historical Society and the Swift River Valley Historical Society, and moving the Prescott Church onto SRVHS grounds. She left the trust for the SRVHS to carry on and the trust for the continuation of the Memorial Day Services at Quabbin Park Cemetery, and she began the Prescott Tours run by SRVHS each fall.



The Swift River Valley Historical Society

The Swift River Valley Historical Society in New Salem, MA is the home of thousands of items from the Valley. Photographs, letters, artifacts of everyday life, tools, and even the Dana Fire Truck are kept here as a final resting place.

The president, Elizabeth Peirce, took over from her husband, Clifton Peirce of Prescott, after he passed away. Though Elizabeth is not from the Valley herself, her love and passion come from the love her husband had for his childhood home, and her work is a tribute to him. In addition, she has authored three books of photographs from the SRVHS archives.

The SRVHS is open to the public May through October.



Elizabeth Peirce and her latest book, "Quabbin Valley: Life as it Was"

(photos in this column courtesy of the Swift River Valley Historical Society)



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