

THE FOXBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OCTOBER 2014 46th Year Issue #2

Tuesday, October 28, 2014, 7:30 p.m.
Boyden Library, 10 Bird Street, Foxborough, MA

The Foxborough Historical Society Presents:
Pioneering Journalist Jane Cunningham Croly



Jane Cunningham Croly, pioneer journalist and founder of the Women's Club movement. (Wikipedia - public domain)

Foxborough resident Dianne Weinfeld brings to life the remarkable Jane Cunningham Croly. Croly was America's first female journalist and founder of the American Women's Club movement. This gifted woman, known by her pen name Jennie June, lived at a time when women lacked outlets to pursue their

intellectual potential. Jennie June dedicated herself to advancement of women – thus raising the level of all, both men and women.

She was born in 1829 in Market Harborough, England, the fourth child of Jane Scott and Joseph Howes Cunningham. Her father was a Unitarian preacher known for his advanced ideas – their family home was stoned in 1841. It is then that Rev. Cunningham decided to move to Poughkeepsie, New York. Here Jane availed herself of the family's extensive library, and was, in effect, home schooled.

At the age of 15 she moved to Southborough, Mass., where she kept house for her brother, a Congregational minister in Worcester. In addition to her household duties, she taught school, wrote plays and served as the school's stage manager. It was at this time that she began producing newspapers for her school and her brother's congregation.

Ten years later she moved to New York City – but with no way to support herself. Much to her surprise the New York Tribune accepted her first article and she began working as a journalist for the New York Sunday Times and later Noah's Weekly Messenger. She is credited with being the first American newspaper woman.

Her first columns were entitled, "Pallor and Sidewalk Gossip." The press found her presence unusual and they noted that she was "small of stature... charming in manner with attractive blue eyes and brown hair, but beneath her engaging personality dwelt an independent spirit."

At 27, she married David Goodman Croly, a self-educated Irish immigrant who was a staff writer at the New York Herald.

In 1860 she became the chief editor of Demorest's Magazine, a position she held for 27 years. This popular publication was devoted to women's fashion, and hence Croly became an expert on the subject. Her articles were well received, quoted in the United States and Europe.

At that time she believed that a woman's prime responsibility was to be a good cook and homemaker. She gradually became a supporter of widening women's options.

Thanks partly to her husband's connections, she became the editor of several publications. She asked in print "Is it possible that women have a life of their own?"

She thus started her first organization, the Women's Parliament, in 1856 for the purpose of facilitating discussion of the role of women in society.

In 1868, she was scheduled to attend a dinner given by the Press Club of New York at Delmonico's restaurant to honor Charles Dickens at the close of his American tour, but along with all other women reporters was denied access to the event.

This incident prodded her to organize a women's club dedicated to supporting women interested in forming a community of learning. Twelve women gathered in her home to inaugurate this society, which became known as "SoroSis" - derived from a Greek botanical term meaning the sweet flavors of many fruits.

The club's first regular meeting was on April 20, 1868, at Delmonico's. The meeting was an enormous success. The Evening Post noted "This was a

gathering of accomplished women dressed in elegant spring suits, dainty blouses, well fitted glove and boots, not bluestocking literary types with unkept hair and ill-fitted dresses.”

“Sorosis” seemed to be the very thing women of America had been waiting for. Louisa May Alcott, Julia Ward Howe and Mrs. Alva Edison were three of their better known early speakers.

Massachusetts women were slower than New York women to gravitate to the club forum. Perhaps, thought Croly, they harken back to the days of Ann Hutchinson who organized Monday afternoon gatherings in her living room. Hutchinson noted that the women of Boston lived in a rather austere lifestyle with little opportunity to express viewpoints and exchange ideas. In 1638 Ann Hutchinson was tried for these and other views and banished from the Commonwealth.

Jane’s husband left the newspaper business in 1877. She found herself once again solely responsible for the family finances. She published Jennie June’s American Cookery Book, which was well received, and ten years later For Better or Worse, “a book for some men and all women!”

1889 was a triumphant year for Jane Cunningham Croly and her club members. Classes began at Barnard College for Women, as part of Columbia University, an answer to her petitions over the course of twenty years.

On April 24, 1890, sixty-three clubs officially formed the General Federation of Women's Club by ratifying their constitution.

Five years later, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs had over 800,000 members and a chapter in each state. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs gathered in 1893 for the Chicago for the World Columbian Exposition - to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America.

In addition to Jane Cunningham Croly, Susan B Anthony, Clara Barton, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Bacon Custer all worked together at the venue to form The Congress of Women. One hundred and eighty-five clubs were represented. Delegates came from twenty-nine states, a recognized force.

In 1898, at the age of 69 and in failing health, Jane began research for her final project, an 1184 page commemorative book, “History of the Women’s Club Movement in America.”

Here is her entry from page 623 of that book documenting the early history of Foxborough [Mass.] Monday Club.

“The Foxborough Monday Club was founded January 17, 1893, with three directors, and Miss A. E. Hitchcock, secretary. The object was historical, literary and sociologic study. Membership is limited to twenty, and is full. The first year was given to miscellaneous study; the second to French History, with a lecture from Mrs. Julia Howe.”

The Foxborough Monday Club still exists!

One of the last significant events in her life occurred in 1901 when the 56th Congress of the United States chartered the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and designated that the Federation be headquartered in Washington, DC. She died in December 1901 at age 72 after a pilgrimage to England, the country of her birth.

Ninety-three years after her death, in 1994, Jane Cunningham Croly was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York.

The historical society will meet Tuesday evening, October 28, at 7:30 pm, in the first-floor meeting room of the Boyden Library. The library is at the corner of Bird and Baker Streets in Foxboro center. Enter by the Baker Street entrance. Parking is available on nearby streets and around the Common. (Please do not park in the Aubuchon lot.) Admission is free and all are welcome.

The Foxborough Historical Society is always looking for new members. If you are interested in joining, ask for an application form at the check-in table the night of the meeting. Annual dues are \$8 for individual memberships and \$10 for the entire family.

We are happy to hear that Joan, wife of Charles Clifford, is recovering at home.

Memorial Hall is open every Wednesday evening, 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.
and on the second Saturday of each month from 9 a.m. to noon.

Our next speaker will be **Dr. Gary Hylander** – “**To End All Wars**”, on November 25th.
On October 29 at the **Johnston Historical Society**, 7 p.m. – “Cemetery Iconography”.
On November 17 at N. **Attleborough Historical Society**, 7:30 p.m., James McGuany, author of *The Hunted Whale* will speak on his research.

50 YEARS AGO IN FOXBOROUGH

OCTOBER 1964

- Fall fashions modeled at South Foxboro Community Club
- Pupils may now take band instrument lessons in school.
- Former Governor John A. Volpe scores apathy at small G.O.P. rally here.
- Police still camping out as builder reneges on promise.
- Parties for patients of State Hospital fun for volunteers.
- Old Soldier soon to resume guard duty over library. The 9 foot statue of the Civil War soldier is now ready to return. Trustees hope there will be no more trouble for another 90 years at least.
- Ask State to probe pond pollution charge off North St.