

Caroline Severance

<http://uudb.org/articles/carolineseverance.html>

Carolina Seymour Severance (January 12, 1820-November 10, 1914), called Caroline, was for nearly seventy years an active social reformer, organizer, church woman and club woman whose varied work changed the lives of countless of people. The eldest of five children born to Orson and Caroline Maria Clarke Seymour in Canandaigua, New York, Caroline and her family moved to nearby Auburn, New York after her father died an early death in 1824. The influence of a devout Presbyterian uncle and guardian, James Seymour, and the revivalism of Charles G. Finney made for a religiously tumultuous childhood.

Her schooling was typical of that given girls of her time and class. She attended the Upham Female Seminary in Canandaigua and Miss Almira Bennett's Boarding School in Owasco Lake, New York. She graduated with honors in 1835 from the female seminary of Mrs. Elizabeth Ricord in Geneva, New York. For a short time she taught at Mrs. Luther Halsey's boarding school for girls on the Ohio River below Pittsburgh.

In August, 1840, Caroline Seymour married Theodoric Cordenio Severance, an Ohioan of New England birth. They moved to Cleveland, where her husband entered the banking business. Five children were born to them between 1841 and 1849. One died in infancy. Caroline Severance credited her marriage with "freeing her from bondage to authority, dogmas and conservative ideas and for making of reformer of her." The Severance household in Cleveland became a gathering place for those involved in liberal causes. Like other leading women of the 19th century, she maintained the conventional emphasis on woman's role as wife and mother, along with an increasingly added emphasis on woman's ability to shape public policy.

Severance and her husband left the Presbyterian Church soon after their marriage. She said, "[W]e could no longer sit conscientiously under a preacher, or in a fellowship, where the golden rule of Christianity was not recognized as applicable to all men, whatever the color of their skin, or crinkle, or non-crinkle of their hair." They formed the Independent Christian Church whose members were antislavery. The congregation grew, drawing other reformist parishioners and ministers, including in 1854 Amory D. Mayo, a noted Unitarian clergyman.

Severance soon became involved with woman's rights and joined [Frances Dana Gage](#) in lecturing, writing, and organizing meetings for the cause throughout Ohio. In 1853 she presided over the first annual meeting of the Ohio Woman's Rights Association. Through this work she met and became good friends with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. With Lucy Stone and other New England suffragists, she was one of the founders in 1869, at a Cleveland convention, of the American Woman Suffrage Association.

The Severance home had also become a regular stop for traveling lecturers such as [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), Wendell Phillips, and [Bronson Alcott](#). In connection with her many New England friends, Severance developed a great love for the city of Boston and became convinced that Cleveland "did not offer the kind of companionship I craved." When her husband was offered a position in Boston's North Bank, the family led moved east. Before long Severance was very much a part of the city's network of reformers. She served on the first board of the New England Hospital for Women and Children. In 1873 she was one of the founders and first president of the Moral Education Association. She was a founder of the New England Woman's Club, a vehicle for reform which helped to establish the Girls' Latin School and the Co-operative Building

Association. Severance went regularly to hear [Theodore Parker](#)'s sermons. She helped organize the Free Religious Association. She was the first woman to speak in the popular Parker Fraternity Lecture Course after his death. Her discourse, "Humanity: A Definition and a Plea" was well received.

In 1875 Severance and her husband left Boston for Los Angeles where two of their sons had settled. There they founded the city's first Unitarian congregation, Unity Church. Severance raised the social consciousness of the city with her tireless civic activity on behalf of free kindergartens, a training school for kindergarten workers and the city's first woman's club whose members campaigned for the establishment of a juvenile court system.

The death of her husband in 1892 and her own advancing years barely slowed her. She inaugurated a weekly discussion series in her home. She championed Christian Socialism, Progressivism, anti-imperialism and peace. In December 1900, the Los Angeles County Woman Suffrage League was reorganized with Caroline Severance as its new president. She served until 1904.

She died at age 94 in 1914.

Archival collections of Severance papers are at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California; Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts; and Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Two books devoted to Severance are Ella Giles Ruddy ed., *The Mother of Clubs: Caroline M. Seymour Severance, An Estimate and an Appreciation* (1906) and a biography, Mary S. Gibson, *Caroline M. Severance, Pioneer* (1925).

Article by [Celeste DeRoche](#)

<https://archive.org/details/motherofclubscar00severich>

Suffragist and Organizer of Women's Clubs -

<http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2014/01/caroline-severance.html>

Caroline Severance was an abolitionist, suffragist and pioneer organizer of women's clubs, founding the first club in the East and the first in Los Angeles. Viewing clubs as vehicles for social reform and a bridge from the home to the public arena, she brought political awareness and support of suffrage to the club movement, and earned the name The Mother of Clubs.

Early Years

Caroline Maria Seymour was born January 12, 1820 in Canandaigua, New York, the eldest of five children born to Orson and Caroline Maria Clarke Seymour. After her father died an early death in 1824, Caroline, her mother and her siblings moved to nearby Auburn, New York.

Caroline attended the Upham Female Seminary in Canandaigua and Miss Almira Bennett's Boarding School in Owasco Lake, New York. In 1835 she graduated with honors from Elizabeth Ricord's Female Seminary in Geneva, New York. For a short time she taught at a boarding school for girls on the Ohio River below Pittsburgh.

Cleveland

In August 1840, Caroline Seymour married Theodoric Severance, and they moved to Cleveland, where her husband was in the banking business. Five children were born to them between 1841 and 1849. One died in infancy. She credited her marriage with turning her into a social reformer as an abolitionist and as a pioneer in women's rights and social justice.

The Severance home became a gathering place for reformers and women's rights activists. Caroline lectured, wrote and organized women's rights conventions in Ohio and met the suffrage leaders at a Syracuse convention (1852). However, like other leading women of the 19th century, she maintained the conventional emphasis on woman's role as wife and mother.

Severance and her husband left the Presbyterian Church and formed the Independent Christian Church soon after their marriage. She said:

“[W]e could no longer sit conscientiously under a preacher, or in a fellowship, where the golden rule of Christianity was not recognized as applicable to all men, whatever the color of their skin, or crinkle, or non-crinkle of their hair.

In 1853, after several years of attending and speaking at conventions on behalf of women's rights, Severance made her first appearance as a speaker to the general public with a speech to Cleveland's Mercantile Library Association, the first lecture delivered there by a woman. Her subject was "Humanity: A Definition and a Plea," meaning that women should be included as part of humanity.

Severance soon became involved with women's rights and joined Frances Dana Gage in lecturing, writing, and organizing meetings for the cause throughout Ohio. In 1853 she presided over the first annual meeting of the Ohio Women's Rights Association. Through this work she met and became good friends with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

Boston

Through her many New England friends, Severance developed a great love for the city of Boston and became convinced that Cleveland "did not offer the kind of companionship I craved." When her husband was offered a position in Boston's North Bank, the family moved to Boston in 1855.

Before long Severance was very much a part of Boston's network of reformers, and her home there became a regular stop for traveling lecturers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Wendell Phillips and Bronson Alcott. Severance was active in the years before the Civil War in organizations ranging from the Boston Anti-Slavery Society to the New England Hospital for Women and Children. During this time she associated with leading thinkers and delivered abolition lectures.

Severance served on the first board of the New England Hospital for Women and Children. In 1868 she and her friends founded the New England Women's Club, of which she was the first president. The Club was the first of its kind - a place where women could meet to discuss social issues, literature and art, as well as direct their efforts towards the betterment of society as a whole.

With Lucy Stone and other New England suffragists, Severance was one of the founders of the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) in 1869. The AWSA was a vehicle for reform which helped to establish the Girls' Latin School and the Co-operative Building Association. She also founded the short-lived Women's International Peace Association with Julia Ward Howe in 1871, and was one of the founders of the Moral Education Association in 1873.

Los Angeles

In 1875, because of her husband's health and to be near their two older sons the Severances relocated to Los Angeles, buying a tiny home on West Adams Street which they called Red Roof. Both Caroline Severance and her husband, who was called T.C., had a major impact on the development of the city of Los Angeles. T.C. was a founder of the Orphan's Home Society and the Horticultural Society.

Caroline Severance continued her reform work in California, raising the social consciousness of the city with her tireless civic activity. She led the successful drive on behalf of free kindergartens in the Los Angeles school system and a training school for kindergarten

workers. She served as president of the city's Free Kindergarten Association, and helped establish the Los Angeles Public Library.

In 1878 she founded the Los Angeles Women's Club, whose members campaigned for the establishment of California's juvenile court system. Her interests were far ranging, from women's suffrage to historic preservation to world peace.

As she grew older, she was considered the elder stateswoman of the women's rights movement in the city, and the press began to refer to her as Madame Severance, an indication of her prestige. She also became more radical in her thinking, and was active in the city's Christian Socialism movement at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1881, Severance established a lasting institution, the Friday Morning Club, devoted to cultural and social betterment and civic reform. It was reported that the club "ran a lending library, maintained an employment bureau and conducted classes." It became one of the most powerful and prestigious organizations in the city.

After her husband's death in 1892, Caroline Severance barely slowed down. She changed the name of her home to El Nido, Spanish for the nest. Situated in a tree-shaded garden, El Nido was a gathering place for men and women devoted to social change. She held a weekly discussion series there, and championed Christian Socialism, Progressivism, anti-imperialism and peace.

Ella Giles Ruddy wrote in her book *The Mother of Clubs: Caroline M. Seymour Severance; An Estimate and an Appreciation*:

“For more than thirty years this hospitable home has been a rendezvous for literary people visiting Los Angeles, for leaders in progressive thought... in whatever direction it may tend, and for men and women interested also in local or municipal reforms and improvements. The title Mother of Clubs has been supplemented by that of the Ethical Magnet of Southern California...

Having devoted her life to the creation and support of organizations for women, in Los Angeles Severance became known as The Mother of Clubs. In December 1900, the Los Angeles County Woman Suffrage League was reorganized with Caroline Severance as its new president. She served until 1904.

California Women Win the Right to Vote

In 1911, when California women achieved the right to vote, Caroline Severance was lauded as the spiritual leader of the suffrage movement in Southern California. Although her advanced age had limited her participation in the campaign, she was featured in every Los Angeles newspaper the day after the election.

In 1912, at the age of ninety-two she cast her vote in the presidential election, having worked for women's suffrage for more than sixty years. As she dropped her ballot into the box, a photographer from the Los Angeles Examiner took her photograph. Dressed in her old-fashioned bonnet and cape, she looked into the camera with a serene and determined expression. She told the reporter from the Examiner that she had voted for Roosevelt, for free textbooks and against a racing amendment. She said:

“I am more than proud of California women today, and I am so thankful to be able to do my share. California women have thoroughly vindicated their right to the ballot; let us look forward to the time when over all the world men and women shall be equal and free.

Caroline Severance died November 10, 1914 at age 94.

Caroline Severance was an active social reformer, organizer and club woman whose varied work changed the lives of countless of people. Deeply involved in reform in the cities

where she lived - Cleveland, Boston and Los Angeles - Severance organized women's rights conventions, lobbied for married women's property rights, joined the American Equal Rights Association and helped found the American Woman Suffrage Association.

The Rome Daily Sentinel,
Monday Evening,
September 25, 1911: page 5.

Ontario Repository-Messenger, Thursday, January 4, 1906: page 6.

MRS. CAROLINE SEVERANCE.

Mother of Women's Clubs Celebrates Her Ninety-first Birthday.



"MOTHER OF CLUBS" IS 91.

Mrs. Caroline Severance Still Active in Women's Reform Work.

Los Angeles, Cal., Sept. 25.—Caroline Severance, whose unpretentious cottage, Red Roof, on magnificent Adams street, has welcomed many famous people, wears with modest grace the distinction conferred in the title "Mother of Clubs." Although celebrating her ninety-first birthday, she is still strong and inspiring force in the work of women's clubs throughout the country.

She was early identified with the woman's rights movement, and in 1853, when the young mother of five children, she went on the lecture platform to give what she could to the cause of arousing women in the interest of economical reform.

CAROLINE M. SEVERANCE.

She Organized the First Women's Club in the United States.

America's oldest clubwoman, Mrs. Caroline M. Severance, is spending her last days beneath the sunny skies of Los Angeles, Cal. One says "last days" upon discovering that her age is eighty-five, but it is hard to realize that Mrs. Severance has celebrated so many birthdays, for she is as active and as interested in life and people as she was at forty. The Friday Morning club of Los Angeles, which she founded, calls her "eighty-five years young." The nearly 5,000 clubwomen of Los Angeles also lovingly refer to her as "the mother of clubs," and she is also known by this title wherever in any part of the country a woman's club is founded.

Mrs. Severance was born in New York in 1820 and was the daughter of Orson Seymour, a member of an old Connecticut family. In 1840 she married Mr. Severance, who has been dead



MRS. CAROLINE M. SEVERANCE.

for several years. When the Severances lived in Cleveland, O., for several years in the early fifties, their home was the Mecca of all the cultured people who visited the city, including Emerson, Alcott, Wendell Phillips, Garrison and others equally well known.

In 1855 the Severances moved to Boston, and it was there that Mrs. Severance, in 1860, organized the first woman's club of the United States, the New England club of Boston. In speaking of the object of forming this first society Mrs. Severance says:

"We had our social life and our church life, but we wanted some gathering in which the women could meet on equal mental grounds without society or the church and be helpful in every way to one another."

She was the president of this club for three years.

Mr. and Mrs. Severance went to California and made their home in Los Angeles in 1875, building the home in which Mrs. Severance now lives. Since that time the "Red Roof," as the cottage, now "El Nido," was called, has been the rendezvous of cultured and noted residents and visitors. For many years Mrs. Severance was the president of the first woman's club of Los Angeles, organized by herself soon after her arrival.

Although her memories of the past are so delightful and are filled with days and hours spent with the Alcotts, Emerson, Hawthorne and others whom just to know was an honor, Mrs. Severance does not live in the past. She has more interests and demands on her time than the majority of younger women. She is interested in kindergarten work and started the first kindergarten in Los Angeles. She is womanly, motherly and altogether charming.

Mrs. Severance's good deeds are by no means all in the past, but so modest is she about them that one seldom hears of the many kind acts of this young old woman.—Pittsburg Dispatch.