

A Brief History of the Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti

BY LULU CARPENTER SKINNER AND PENNY SCHREIBER

“An old-fashioned club, with an old-fashioned name, in an old-fashioned house, with old-fashioned ideals for right living, right thinking, and friendliness.”

– from the early records of The Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti

It is remarkable that a women's club that began meeting in the nineteenth century continues to thrive in the twenty-first. Remembrance of things past—continuity of club traditions and awareness of the splendid women from long ago whose names grace faded club yearbooks—partly explains the club's resilience. But without a doubt, a key reason for the club's longevity can be traced back to 1913, when members made the brave, astute, and prescient decision to purchase their wonderful 1840s Greek Revival clubhouse. During the more than one hundred years that the ladies have been meeting at 218 North Washington Street, the upkeep of the house has been an important goal for them to coalesce around. The ladies take great pride in superbly maintaining their home in Ypsilanti's historic district for their own use and the use of the community.

The Beginnings

The Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti, Michigan, organized in 1878, is one of the oldest women's clubs in the state. In 1878, President Rutherford B. Hayes was President of the United States; a young man at Menlo Park, New Jersey, created a sensation when he announced that he had perfected a practical system for lighting homes and public buildings with an electric current; and Henry Ford was regarded as a dreamer.

Women were not welcome in the business world in 1878. Few professions opened their doors to women, and they did not have the right to vote or own property. Because Ypsilanti had a fine seminary and a college for the training of teachers, the life of the mind was held in high esteem. The city was rapidly enlarging due to the arrival of



Mrs. Sarah Putnam [Ladies' Literary Club archives]

families from the eastern states. These new settlers brought their culture and education to Ypsilanti.

The ladies of the growing city resolved not to be left behind their husbands and children. They, too, would improve their minds by pursuing culture and learning the art of fine living. As early as 1861, a group of Ypsilanti women read David Hume's *History of England* and later studied the plays of Shakespeare. The time was propitious to organize a literary club.

Many of the city's women had been active in the Home Association organized in 1875 to help the needy, and they had also established a library in the city. Now the women discussed the possibility of organizing a literary club. Mrs. Daniel

Putnam suggested the plan to her co-volunteers. Sarah Putnam was from Kalamazoo, and she remembered the effective work and good comradeship in the literary circles of that city and wished for Ypsilanti the same. With the inspiration and leadership of Mrs. Putnam, who was blind, the idea grew into reality.

The First Meetings

The preliminary meeting of the club was held on May 7, 1878, at 206 South Washington Street, the home of Mrs. Paine. Mrs. Putnam had asked Mrs. Follett and Mrs. Watling to act with her on plans for the organization of the club. In June they called together seventeen ladies in the library rooms of the Arcade Building to begin the study of Africa's geography, resources, art, and literature.

At the first meeting, the ladies chose Mrs. Daniel Putnam as their president. In the fall, the ladies prepared and adopted a constitution. Very little formal business was conducted in the club's early years. The name Ladies' Literary Club was chosen by common consent, as the word "woman" then applied to kitchen maids and not to the mistress of the house. In the club's early years, meetings were in the pleasant homes of members or in rooms at the library in the Arcade Building.

The ladies had embarked on a very ambitious program that led them on literary and historical journeys to many interesting places and enlivened the routine of their daily lives. From 1879 to 1880 they read and studied the French Revolution, followed by a thorough study of Germany. In club year 1883–84, they entered the Tudor period,

followed by study of the After-Tudor Period, in 1884–85. Rome and its antiquities were their subjects in 1885–86, Spain in 1886–87, and Greece in 1887–88.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the programs were becoming more varied, and a music committee was added in 1908. The club's programs were no longer entirely literary. The changes came, no doubt, as the club began to broaden its activities to include civic affairs and political issues. From a self-centered group seeking self-improvement, the club now expanded its interests to national and worldwide affairs.

"The object of this society shall be the mutual improvement of its members through the study of literature, art, science, and the vital interests of the day," became the official purpose of the club. In 1918, a clause was added: "but also to serve as an energizing force for all that makes for civic or community betterment." And so it reads today.

A Clubhouse of Their Own

By 1910 the group had outgrown the south room of the library, and they were meeting in the Masonic Temple. In 1913, members learned that the Grant residence, at 218 North Washington Street, was for sale.

The Grant house was thought to be a most desirable future home for the club. One of the oldest houses in the city, it had been built in 1842 by Arden Ballard in the Greek Revival style so popular in the United States at that time. Much discussion, pro and con, ensued. The asking price of \$3,000 was a large sum for a small group of women to raise. Time was not on their side, because the house had to be sold at once.



The Clubhouse, 218 North Washington, 2021 [Paul Schreiber]

By December 10, 1913, the ladies had made up their minds. Mrs. Ann Bassett's \$200 seed money facilitated the purchase of the clubhouse. Members wondered where they would get the rest of the money. Neither of the two local banks had any intention of granting a mortgage to a group of women.

At this critical moment, Mrs. Atwood McAndrew gained the floor and announced with pride that Thomas W. McAndrew had offered to lend them \$2,000. Mr. McAndrew had more faith in the ability of the women to pay off the debt than had the presidents of two banks.

The first meeting in the club's new home took place on October 14, 1914. Now that the ladies had their dream home, they had to pay for it. Like a bird of evil omen, the mortgage hovered over the lovely old clubhouse for fourteen years. Then came the day, in 1928, when members celebrated the club's fiftieth anniversary. The mortgage, dated February 7, 1914, was burned in the flames of a taper with proper ceremony, and Mrs. Sarah George, a member since 1879, delighted her audience by recalling anecdotes and incidents from the club's history.

The flames of the taper had scarcely died out before Mrs. Henry Frain proposed a Sarah George Loan Fund, to be funded initially by a gift of \$5 from each member. Fundraising activities were also proposed to bring the fund quickly to \$500. Mrs. Frain set up the loan fund with the purpose of benefiting young women at Ypsilanti High School, whose selection would be based on scholarship, leadership, and moral character. In 1953, the first recipient of a Sarah George Scholarship was Ypsilanti High School honor student Miss Betty Ann Curtis.

The clubhouse has undergone many changes through the years. These included enlarging the club's seating space, and this was approved by prominent local architect Emil Lorch. Lorch was also the first dean and one of the founders of the University of Michigan College of Architecture. Lorch believed the Ladies' Literary Club's house to be one of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture in the country.

In club year 1933–34, with so many people out of work, a group of eight architects, headed by Professor Lorch, had the time to invade the beautiful and interesting 1840s Greek Revival house at 218 North Washington Street. They measured it inside and out, while jotting down figures in notebooks. The architects recorded all of the house's unusual features, including its large pillars and metal lacework on the outside, and its interesting doorways, arched windows, and Victorian fireplaces on the inside. The result of the architects' study of the house was its selection by the Advisory Committee of the American Buildings Survey "because of its age and architectural interest as being worthy of most careful preservation for future generations." This document was deposited in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The house was the first one in the state of Michigan to be so designated.

Other clubs and organizations rent the clubhouse regularly, and wedding receptions,

teas, and other social functions are often held in its charming parlors. Many pieces of furniture have been donated over the years by members. In 2022, founding member Mrs. Eunice Watling's beautiful pier mirror, among many other antique treasures, still graces the clubhouse's main meeting room.

Postwar Achievements

The involvement of club members in elected civic positions began in 1962 when Susan Sayre was elected to the Ypsilanti City Council. Sayre was later chosen by council members to be Ypsilanti's first woman mayor. In 1970, Sayre was elected to the Washtenaw County Board of Supervisors. The civic involvement of club members continued with Nathalie Edmunds' election to City Council in 1970, a position she held until 1978.

In November 1965, the first marker on a historic house in Ypsilanti, bearing the Michigan State Historical Commission designation No. 47, was presented to the club; and on March 16, 1972, the club was notified that its clubhouse was now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

In February 1970, preservation architect Richard Frank spoke to the membership. After that, a building committee was appointed, headed by Mildred Harris, and a year of intense study and discussion ensued. The need for a caretaker's apartment, a larger and more convenient kitchen, additional restrooms, and basement space for workshop activities and storage was evident. Suggestions presented at a second meeting with architect Frank led to the formulation of final remodeling plans.

The total price for the remodeling was set at \$58,000. The club had in hand \$20,000,



Ladies at tea, 1970 [Gary Cooperman]

and a mortgage of \$38,000 was arranged, with two local banks loaning equal amounts. Women applying for a mortgage were no longer persona non grata at Ypsilanti banks.

Since the early 1980s, Sarah George Scholarship funds have been invested in conservative mutual funds. A third named scholarship was added in 2014–15, in honor of late club member, past president, and community leader Barbara Weiss.

By 2022, the Sarah George fund combined with a Joan Willoughby fund, established by Dr. Robert Willoughby in 1999 in memory of his wife, a past president, had grown large enough to allow the club to award six scholarships to local young women in the amount of \$3,500.

The Twenty-first Century

Today, the Ladies' Literary Club of Ypsilanti continues to thrive, bringing in speakers twice monthly during its club year, from October to May. Beloved traditions, such as Drama Day, Gala Day, and May's Annual Luncheon survive. Also, the tradition of preserving and treasuring its historic Greek Revival clubhouse remains paramount. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the club transitioning from its much-loved November Christmas Bazaar fundraiser to an annual October Fall Fest. The club has benefited from a recent generous bequest it received from late community member Joe Lawrence.

A Note on Sources

Portions of this essay were adapted from *The Ladies' Literary Club, 125 Years: 1878–2003*.

About the Authors

The late Lulu Carpenter Skinner was a member of the Ladies' Literary Club from 1924 to 1963 and served as president from 1945 to 1947. Penny Schreiber has been a member of the Ladies' Literary Club since 1990 and served as president from 1998 to 2000. She is a retired editor, journalist, and book editor. Penny was managing editor of the *Ann Arbor Observer* for twelve years. She volunteered for the University Musical Society Ambassadors and served on the University of Michigan Wallenberg Committee from 2001 to 2020.