



Houston Heights Woman's Club: Over 100 Years of Friendship and Philanthropy

By Lindsay Scovil Dove

Students of Heights High School benefited from the creation of the school's library by the members of the Heights Woman's Club, shown above, in the early 1900s.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Houston Heights was a budding community, the pride of some of Houston's elite, but its developer, Oscar Martin Carter, envisioned the area as a suburb for everyone, not just the wealthy. Carter's plans included both industrial opportunities and beautiful homes in a park-like setting. With its easy access to and from Houston via electric trolley, the Heights stood to become a booming suburb.²

As builders constructed the first homes in the early 1890s, Carter's vision came together. Soon, three-story Victorian-style homes sprung up along Heights Boulevard, simply called "the Boulevard." The first house built on the road was for Daniel Denton Cooley, who brought his family to the Heights where he served as the general manager for Carter's business, the Omaha and South Texas Land Company. The Cooley home, located at 1802 Heights Boulevard, boasted two beautiful wrap-around porches, eight bedrooms with attached

bathrooms, central heat, and a tube communication system.³

The Boulevard anchored the community from North to South. At 150 feet wide, it welcomed both citizens and guests from nearby Houston on its streetcar rails. Carter took care to retain as many of the original trees as possible on the Boulevard's wide esplanade. In the 1908 marketing pamphlet "The Key to the City of Houston," the wife of the Heights' first mayor, William Love, wrote with pride about the street's beauty, "One of the beautiful and distinctive features of the boulevard is the esplanade, adorned with forest trees, as nature planted them, in grand and

*"It's a labor of love,
but it's also rewarding.
I can't really explain
why. . . . It's just the
feeling of community."*

Shea Hill, current president
Heights Woman's Club, evening group.¹

unstudied grace."⁴

Part of the Heights's success resulted from Carter's purchase of the two competing Houston streetcar companies. By 1891, he electrified the streetcars, which no longer needed horses to pull them along the rails. In addition to keeping the streets clean of horse droppings,



Omaha and South Texas Land Company built seventeen houses, primarily on Heights Boulevard and Harvard Street. Of these, five became homes for Oscar Martin Carter and his associates, including Daniel Denton Cooley. Shown here is 1802 Harvard Street, which along with 443 and 1102 Heights Boulevard are the last three of the original seventeen homes that remain standing today.

Photo by Aimee L. Bachari.

the electric streetcars made it more feasible for people to live farther away from where they worked in Houston's downtown commercial district. The Heights soon became Houston's most popular suburb.⁵

During this time, a movement swept the nation. Woman's clubs sprung up in cities from New York City to San Francisco. Each club was unique in its own way, but all were created for the purpose of bettering their members and society. According to an August 1897 article in the *Gulf Messenger*, these clubs were "all progressive; all tending toward reform, redress of wrong and the advance of important interests."⁶

Influenced by this air of reform Houston Heights women decided to start a club to improve themselves through the study and discussion of literature. On January 15, 1900, sixteen women met at the home of Mrs. C. R. Cummings and formed the



Heights Woman's Club president Pearl Dexter and her husband, Fred, built a Queen Anne-style home in 1899 at 224 West 17th Street that was known for its exquisite Rose Lawn where they hosted many parties and social gatherings.

Courtesy of Anne Sloan, *Images of America: Houston Heights*.

Heights Literary Club. Shortly after, when Cummings moved away, Kate McKinney took her place as the club's leader.⁷

The Heights Literary Club was hugely popular and membership grew steadily. Club members met weekly at the home of the president, and when membership quickly outgrew the space available at the president's home, Carter volunteered meeting space in the Heights' waterworks building on 19th Street.⁸

In 1905, the club elected Pearl Dexter president of the Heights Literary Club. As president, she spearheaded a campaign to establish a library at Heights High School, following the club's motto of "Seek Wisdom and strive to do good." The clubwomen raised funds to purchase the school's first books, starting a long-standing commitment to school and public libraries, and influencing future Heights generations.⁹

Just a few short years later, thanks to increased membership and a desire to expand beyond their literary focus, the

women in the Heights Literary Club decided to evolve into a departmental club. They expanded with departments for music study, civic needs, arts and crafts, social events, and literature. In order to logistically serve an even greater membership base, the club needed a home of its own. After the Cooleys donated the land at 1846 Harvard for this purpose in 1910, the ladies of the club immediately began planning the clubhouse. Committees put together fundraisers, including a carnival for the neighborhood children and plays at the local theater to raise the monies needed to start construction.¹⁰

The original clubhouse plans called for a \$4,000 building, equivalent to approximately \$100,000 today, but frugality prevailed. The women decided to “build within our means,” and instead, slated a \$1,500 structure for the lot. The modest building near the corner of Harvard and 20th Street consisted primarily of a large meeting room with a high stage. Kate McKinney, who served as both president and historian, wrote in 1933, “While not of a distinct architecture, it [the clubhouse] has served sufficiently and well the needs of the organization and has helped to promote the feeling of unity and fraternity which has been characteristic of the club since its inception thirty three years ago.”¹¹

Each department of the newly reorganized club donated something for use in the house including a piano, window treatments, a library table, and 100 folding chairs. In October 1912, the clubhouse officially opened and the Heights Woman’s Club was born.¹²

Interestingly, the piano cost \$1,500, the same amount as the entire clubhouse. It comes as no surprise, then, that the women were quite protective of it. Meeting minutes in 1912 noted that the piano “cannot be played by rough or ragtime players.”¹³

The Heights Woman’s Club carried on many of the traditions of the Heights Literary Club. For example, during member roll call, the women responded with a note about that week’s topic of discussion. In 1913, the literary department listed the expected responses in its annual yearbook. Most roll calls required a response of the member’s favorite quote from that week’s book or play. At a meeting in March, however, the department reached beyond the written word and held a discussion on silent “Moving Pictures,” with roll call responses about the member’s experience with movies.¹⁴

Just a few years after the clubhouse was finished, World War I began. Under club president Mrs. A. B. Sheldon’s direction, the clubhouse hosted a variety of events for local soldiers’ entertainment. Once the United



Helen Cooley and her husband donated land for the Heights Woman’s Club. Members decided to build a clubhouse, and the women held a carnival in 1911 to raise money for the building. The carnival was held on the Heights playground, now the site of Hamilton Junior High School.

Photo courtesy of Anne Sloan, Images of America: Houston Heights.

States entered the war, the clubhouse became home to a Red Cross unit. Instead of holding meetings, the members came together to make bandages to send to the troops. After the war ended, the Heights Woman’s Club resumed its regular activities.¹⁵

Throughout the years, the clubhouse underwent some minor changes. In the early 1930s, the club added a kitchen to the house, installed modern lighting, and lowered the stage. In fact, as the current style for women’s skirts became increasingly shorter, the club lowered the stage two separate times to prevent too much being exposed to those sitting below.¹⁶

Over the years, the members of the Heights Woman’s Club have represented a veritable “who’s who” of Heights society. Wives of Heights founders and mayors often served as president of the club. Other women were also well-known outside of the group. Mildred Grambling Dupuis, who served as president of the Woman’s Club from 1951-1953, was one of the first female pharmacists in the state and was also honored as the nation’s “Outstanding Pharmacist” in 1938. Another member,

Kate McKinney, a former president, and charter member of the Woman’s Club, was married to a Heights founder. Both she and her husband loved children, and despite never having their own, they left the bulk of their estate to the DePelchin Faith Home in Houston.¹⁷

The Heights Woman’s Club’s most well-known member, however, may not have actually been a member at all, but her influence can be seen throughout the club’s history. Hortense Sparks Ward became the first woman in the state of Texas admitted to the Bar. She achieved this historic distinction in 1910 and later founded the law firm Ward and Ward with her husband. A passionate advocate for the rights of women, specifically their property rights, Ward spoke on the “Legal Status of Women in Texas” at the very first club meeting held in the new house in October of 1912. This clearly stood out as an important topic to the Heights Woman’s Club at the time. At the end of the 1912-1913 yearbook, which acted as a calendar as well as a membership list, the women included a section on the “Laws of Married Women in Texas.” These four pages informed the members of their legal rights in relation to everything from ownership of property to wills and divorce, radical rhetoric in the early twentieth century. After all, women did not gain the right to vote in the United States until eight years later in 1920. Nevertheless, the “progressive” nature of the woman’s club movement made Ward’s suffrage activities relevant to the members of the club.¹⁸



The Heights Woman's Club clubhouse has served as the center of activity for over 100 years. During World War I and World War II, club activity was suspended and the house became a hub for making bandages for the Red Cross. In the last five years, membership has grown over forty percent to approximately 140, with many members joining in the evening group that was instituted in 2007.

Photo courtesy of Heights Woman's Club.

Just five months after Ward spoke to the club at their inaugural meeting, she accompanied Texas Governor Oscar Colquitt when he signed a bill into law that gave women the property rights that they had long deserved. In a nod to Ward's importance in the movement, Governor Colquitt handed her his pen after signing the bill.¹⁹

Ward is perhaps most well-known for her service on the Texas Supreme Court bench in 1925. The governor appointed her as chief justice along with an all-female panel for just one case that involved the Woodmen of the World, a fraternal benefit society. The usual bench recused themselves for this case as they were all members of the Woodmen.²⁰

Ambiguity surrounds Ward's membership in the Heights Woman's Club. In the annual handbooks archived at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Ward's name never appears as a member. However, in the club history included at the end of the 1937 book, the club historian refers to Ward as "our active member."²¹ Perhaps the members assumed Ward belonged to the club due to her involvement, or the club granted her honorary membership.

In 1926, president Mrs. O. F. Carroll inspired the club

to renew its commitment to Heights area libraries. The club made a donation to help beautify the new public library on Heights Boulevard. Even after her presidency, Carroll continued to encourage the club to support the library. In 1939, the Heights Woman's Club played an instrumental role in raising funds for an outdoor reading garden at the Heights Public Library.²²

As they had done previously, the club once again stepped up to help when the United States entered World War II, and the women turned over the house to the Red Cross for the purposes of making surgical bandages. From 1943 to 1944, a total of 2,669 volunteers made 1,176,699 bandages at the clubhouse.²³

Today, the club is experiencing a resurgence along with its neighborhood. After suffering through the oil crash of the 1980s and a general flight to the suburbs by Heights residents, the neighborhood has again emerged as a place where people want to live and raise their families. According to Shea Hill, the current president of the Heights Woman's Club's evening group, membership had dwindled in the late 1900s. With the addition of the evening group in 2007, the club began to reach



Houston History advisory board member and the first president of the evening group, Anne Sloan with Council Member Ellen Cohen and Judge Ed Emmett at the dedication of the historical marker for the Houston Heights Woman's Club.

Photo courtesy of Houston Heights Woman's Club.

out to the newer, younger Heights residents. Hill said of the older group that meets during the day, "A lot of the ladies that come to the Heritage group don't even live in the Heights anymore. They left to go to the suburbs like everyone else. So now you find with the evening group, it's all Heights people. It's people that find out about this little treasure and you learn about the history of it."²⁴ In the last five years, membership in the Heights Woman's Club has grown forty percent to around 140 members, many of them joining the evening group.

In many ways, the new evening group started its own traditions. The Witches' Luncheon every October draws a crowd of members eager to don their witch costumes and socialize with friends. They also honor those who have gone before them. In conjunction with the South Texas School of Law, the club hosts an annual Hortense Ward Appreciation Dinner that rewards a female law student that has shown an interest in furthering women's causes in her community.²⁵

A plan is also in the works to once again partner with the Heights Public Library on an upcoming improvement project, continuing the work of Dexter and Carroll.

Thanks to years of hard work by local historian and club member Anne Sloan, the Heights Woman's Club clubhouse received a historic marker in 2011. Many leaders in the Houston community attended the dedication ceremony and celebrated a century of the

club. According to Hill, the ceremony was especially moving because the women knew they had "saved a little piece of history."²⁶

When asked what draws her to be active in the club, Hill talks about the friendships and the feeling of community. "It just sort of felt like home when I was here [at the clubhouse]," she said. The current members focus on helping each other and helping others in the community, just like the founding members did. "You think about what the women accomplished, and they didn't even have the right to vote, and they managed to pull all of this together. It's pretty inspiring," remarked Hill. She continued, "I hope that the difference that we're making now helps the club stand another 100 years."²⁷

By focusing on continuing to build a sense of community among members, giving back to others, and nurturing friendships, the Heights Woman's Club will thrive for years to come. As quoted in the 1937 handbook, "If a man does

not make new acquaintances as he advances through life he will soon find himself alone. A man should keep his friendships in constant repair."²⁸

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Over sixty women attended the successful 4th Annual Witches Luncheon at Kris Bistro.

Photo courtesy of Houston Heights Woman's Club.