



Embracing History

Abby Hemenway's Crowdsourced History of Vermont

ONE OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY USED books in the Vermont Historical Society library is a five-volume set entitled *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer: A Magazine, Embracing a History of Each Town, Civil, Ecclesiastical, Biographical and Military*. Its worn covers and tattered pages attest to the value generations of Vermont history researchers have put in the *Gazetteer*. Compiled during a period of 30 years in the late nineteenth century by Abby Maria Hemenway, a tenacious and talented Vermonter, this work is the product of what we today call crowdsourcing. Miss Hemenway had no internet to aid in her task; instead she had to rely on a constant flow of letters, frequent travel, and her own significant persuasive powers to successfully coordinate her massive project.

Abby Maria Hemenway was born in 1828 of old Yankee stock in the southeastern Vermont hill town of Ludlow. Her grandparents had arrived there in the 1780s when the town had fewer than 200 residents. She grew up in what was known as the Barton district (her mother was a Barton), surrounded by a close-knit family but isolated from the town center. She attended a log, one-room schoolhouse that had been erected by her grandfather Jacob Hemenway and later moved to the corner of her uncle Rufus Barton's farm.

Unlike her eight siblings and numerous cousins, Abby had a strong literary bent, fueled by her uncle Asa Barton's library. She also had a gift for storytelling that could keep her siblings occupied for hours. She and her cousin Lucretia were recognized in the family as assertive young women. Abby was especially close to her mother, Abigail, who Abby once bragged was the Ludlow resident who published the most poems in the county newspapers. Religion was an important aspect of mother and daughter's lives; they both belonged to the Ludlow Baptist Church.

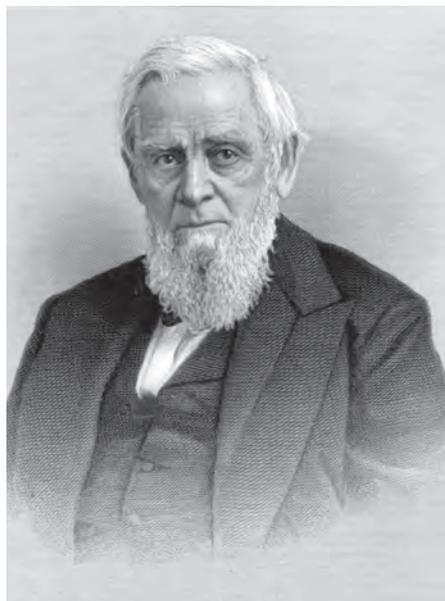
Abby's work life began early. During the summer of 1843, at age 14, she became a district schoolteacher in Ludlow, having just finished district school herself. Four years later she began attending Black River Academy, Ludlow's only institution of secondary learning. Her fellow students later remembered her as "an active, earnest scholar, foremost in her classes and eager to make practical use of knowledge when acquired." There she

nurtured her love of history and literature, graduating in 1852.

During her schooling and afterward, Abby was employed in a series of teaching jobs, first in district schools around Ludlow and, after 1853, on the frontier in Michigan. By 1855, tired and lonely, she returned to her family



Abby Maria Hemenway as she appeared in a c. 1865 tintype.



Hiland Hall of Bennington, former governor of Vermont, Supreme Court justice, and U.S. Representative, was the president of the Vermont Historical Society during the beginning of Abby Hemenway's publishing project. His advice and influence were crucial to the success of the first volumes of her *Gazetteer*.

in Ludlow. With a renewed appreciation for the culture and history of her home state, she began work on a volume of Vermont poetry. Her focus was on poetry written by those around the state for "whom poetry has been but a casual interest" and that would capture the local customs and legends of her state. She assembled a committee of four men and two women to help her select 110 poems from the hundreds of submissions she received. In 1858, she persuaded George A. Tuttle of Rutland to print her book, *Poets and Poetry of Vermont*.

Excited by the success of this publication and having developed important contacts across the state, Abby Hemenway decided to take on a much larger project: the collection and publication of the history of every town and village in Vermont. As historian Deborah Pickman Clifford has written, "Hemenway's resolve to publish the local history of her entire state was matched by no other person or institution in the country. [Her] conviction

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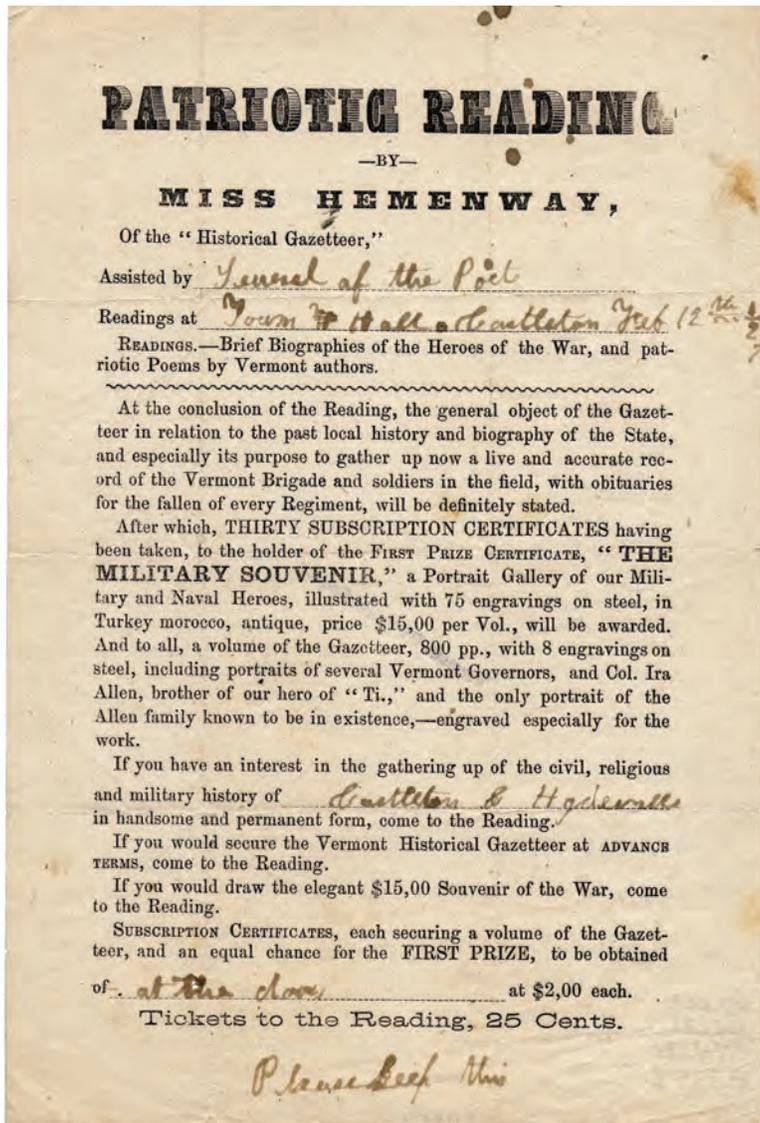
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A view of Montpelier, c. 1876. Abby Hemenway lived in the capital city 1880 to 1883. Railroads, seen entering the city over a covered bridge in the foreground, were crucial to her work of soliciting town histories for her *Gazetteer*.



Flyer for an 1864 patriotic reading by Miss Hemenway in Castleton celebrating Vermonters' service in the Civil War. She offered incentives to subscribers to her gazetteer and was looking for someone to write the histories of Castleton and Hydeville, a village of Castleton. Rev. Joseph Steele eventually wrote the chapter.

that she could manage such a vast and complex historical enterprise as a single woman on her own is astonishing." The massive project would consume the remaining 30 years of Abby's life.

Abby did not plan to research and write the history of all Vermont towns by herself. Instead, she planned to solicit chapters from people who lived in those communities, guide their efforts, edit their work, and publish their stories in a quarterly historical magazine, later to be compiled into volumes organized by county. She started alphabetically with Addison County in 1859, tapping into ongoing efforts to publish local history there. Although she gathered some early local support in the county, a committee of Middlebury professors who told her the project was "not a suitable work for a woman" soon rebuffed her.

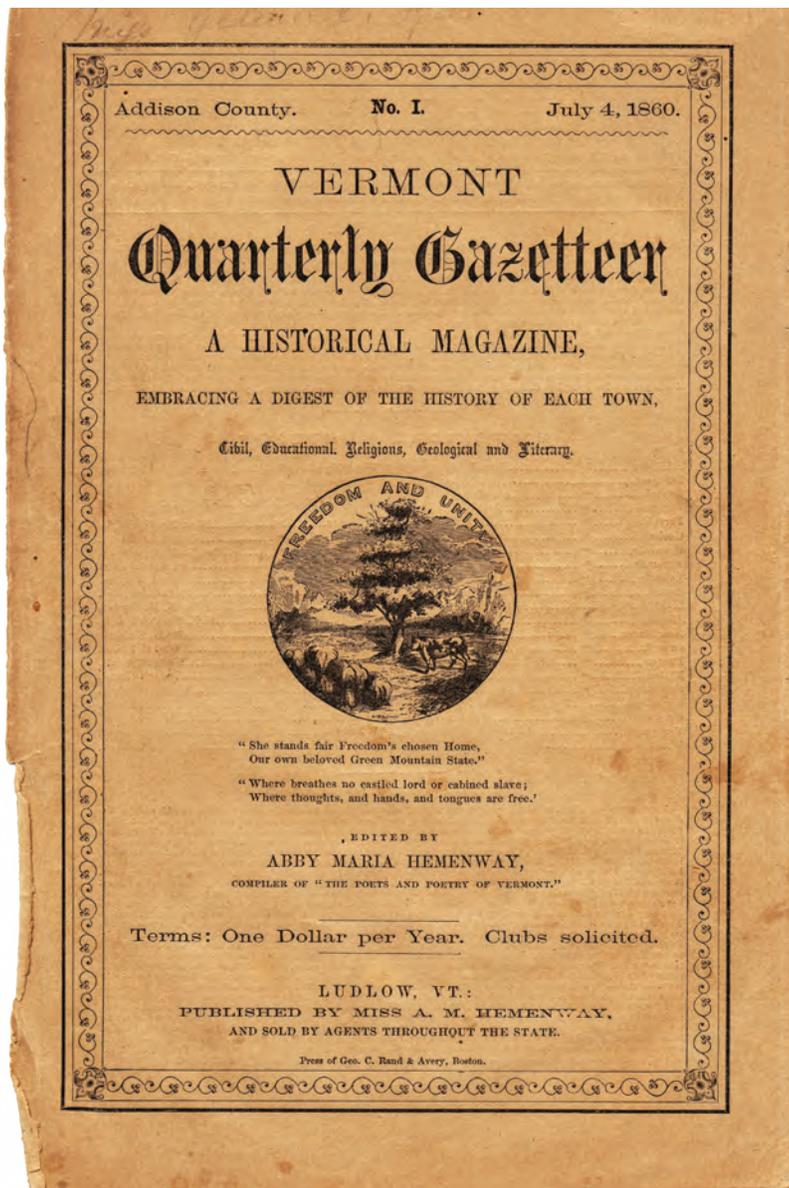
Despite the rebuke, Abby continued her tour of Addison County, traveling from Middlebury to Orwell by train and stagecoach. There she convinced Judge Roswell Bottum to write a general history of his town and Rev. Rufus Cushman to write a history of the church in that town; she also sold her first subscription for the magazine to Rev. Cushman's cousin. She traveled from town to town, nearly always finding someone to write about his or her community. Four towns in Addison County were uncooperative, so Abby had to write the history of those towns herself, drawing from what published sources were available.

Abby returned home to Ludlow from her Addison County tour and began editing the first issue of the *Vermont Quarterly Gazetteer*. After months of trying to read difficult handwriting from her contributors, revising submissions, corresponding with authors, negotiating with printers, and preparing for the next county history, Abby published the first issue of her projected statewide histories on July 4, 1860. The publication date was no accident; she considered her task of "gathering up and preserving the fast-perishing records, and traditions of our forefathers ... a patriotic work."

Bennington was the next county alphabetically and conceptually in Abby's historical crusade. There she received the invaluable support of Hiland Hall, a leading citizen whom she had met in Montpelier while he was governor in 1859. Hiland and his son Nathaniel helped Abby find contributors for their county and helped edit their submissions. As in Addison County, Abby traveled through Bennington County trying to per-



Ludlow as it appeared early in Abby Hemenway's life. Black River Academy, where she attended high school, met in the church building at the left side of the photograph.



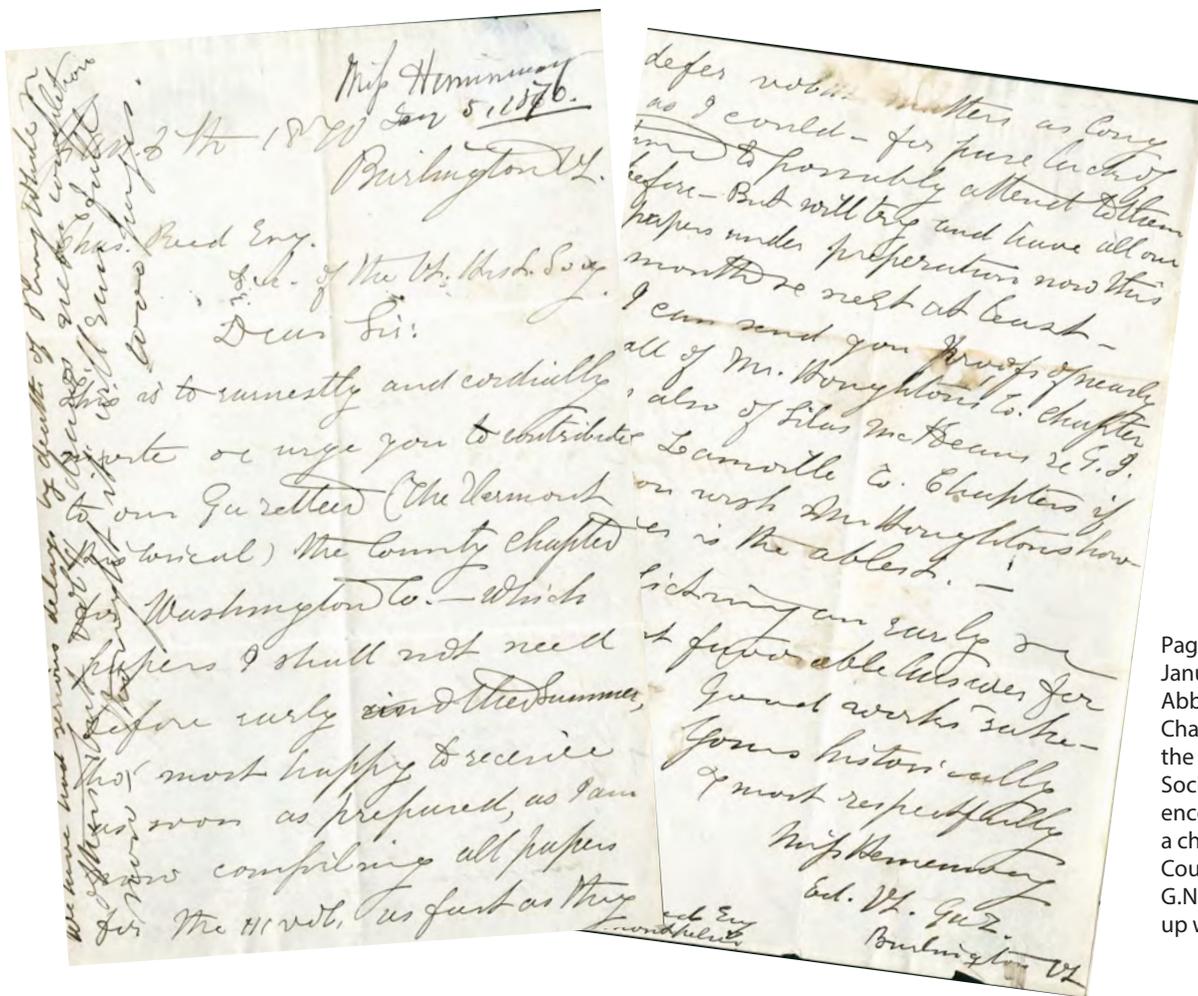
The first issue of *Vermont Quarterly Gazetteer*, documenting the histories of the towns of Addison County, was issued on July 4, 1860. Abby varied the subtitles of her publications. In this instance she uses the descriptive terms "Civil, Educational, Religious, Geological and Literary."

suaude reluctant authors to write for her historical magazine. In Arlington she convinced Rev. Frederick Wadleigh to write about his town by telling him that Governor Hall had told her she would not be able to find an author for a chapter on Arlington because its residents were ashamed of the town's Tory past. After a year of delays, the second issue of her periodical was finally published in October 1861. But now the country was at war.

Abby continued working throughout the Civil War and beyond, despite many challenges and delays. In 1868, she was able to publish the first volume of her collected work, composed of the 11 issues of her *Quarterly* covering Addison, Bennington, Caledonia, Chittenden, and Essex counties. Volume two was published three years later, but volume three did not appear until 1877, with quarterlies being published in between to help finance the enterprise. Financial challenges persisted and in 1880 Abby sought state funding. She rented an apartment in Montpelier and installed herself in the state library in the statehouse. Thus situated, she lobbied hard, promising legislators from her first counties that she would supplement their town histories in subsequent volumes if she received funding. Her efforts succeeded. The Legislature approved state aid for her work in return for copies of the book and a rigorous publication schedule.

Abby stayed in Montpelier to work on volume four, which was published in the summer of 1882 by newspaper man Joseph Pollard, editor of the *Vermont Watchman and Journal*. A subsequent business dispute with Joseph and his successor caused Abby to leave the capital city and return to Ludlow. By 1885, Abby was sick and the Legislature's deadline for volume five was long passed. Furthermore, she was going to need to write a sixth volume to cover the histories of the remaining Vermont towns. Determined to complete her project despite setbacks, she closed the print shop in her Ludlow home and moved to Chicago, possibly to avoid creditors. It was taking so long for her to complete her work that she started a small monthly magazine *By the Path of the Gazetteer*, to keep her subscribers apprised of her progress!

Abby Hemenway died in Chicago on February 23, 1890, far away from the Green Mountain State she knew so well, with the manuscripts of volumes five and six in her apartment. Abby's



Pages of a letter dated January 5, 1870, from Abby Hemenway to Charles Reed, librarian of the Vermont Historical Society in Montpelier, encouraging him to write a chapter on Washington County for her *Gazetteer*. G.N. Brigham, MD, ended up writing the chapter.

youngest sister, Carrie Page, a Brandon, Vermont housewife with no editorial experience, picked up the mantle of her sister's lifetime work. After almost two years she was able to print volume five. However, the financial realities of publishing local history in Vermont became all too obvious and the sixth volume, covering the towns of Windsor County, was never published. The unpublished manuscript was shunted to various people, ending up with the niece of a Hemenway friend in North Carolina.

In the fall of 1911, the Vermont Historical Society woke up to the fact that that manuscript of the sixth volume of Abby's monumental work was still unpublished and resolved to acquire it from its out-of-state owner. On November 22, 1911, the VHS sent a letter to Janette Baxter, informing her of the Society's interest in acquiring Miss Hemenway's papers. On November 27, the Baxter house was consumed by fire with all of Abby's papers inside.

Although the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* remains forever incomplete, its five extant volumes are a testament to the devotion of its editor. In a heroic effort to document Vermont's early history before it disappeared from public awareness, she tapped into the knowledge of local people. They were the ones who knew the legends, customs, institutions, and citizens of their towns. Her authors did not rely on town records, which were scarce, but on personal and social history. Abby herself explained her approach

in the introduction of volume two: "[the histories] are the ready and natural outpouring of the literary talent of these counties—a most empathically original history from the people—their own town and county historians and multiplied [*sic*] local contributors." This was a grassroots project, executed not by academic scholars or trained historians, but by the leading citizens of the towns about which they wrote. It was a valuable project that has stood the test of time. ▼

Paul A. Carnahan is the librarian of the Vermont Historical Society.

JUST THE FACTS

The fascinating story of the life of Abby Maria Hemenway as told by Vermont historian Deborah Pickman Clifford in *The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the Making of History* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 2001), is available from the VHS bookstore at vermonthistory.org/shop. The 350-page book recounts in detail Abby's monumental effort to publish her history of Vermont towns. Deborah also explores other aspects of Abby's life, such as her conversion to Catholicism and her devotion to the Roman Catholic Church, in her book and in an article on the topic found at vermonthistory.org/journal/misc/HemenwayRoadToRome.pdf.

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