

Abby Hemenway's Thirty-Year Legacy

“Have you checked with Abby?” is a common answer to **queries** about Vermont’s past. It may seem odd to look up a lady who died in 1890, but Abby is still considered an expert on Vermont history. But how can a woman so long dead be so helpful to today’s historians? When someone says “check with Abby” what they really mean is look in the five big books that Abby compiled. They will tell you all about the early history of Vermont’s towns and people.



Abby Maria Hemenway was born in Ludlow, Vermont, on October 7, 1828. She was the fourth oldest of ten children. Perhaps taking care of so many

younger **siblings** helped prepare her for her first teaching job when she was only fourteen years old. Later, in 1846 she continued her own education at Black River Academy. Then her desire to teach, or need for a job, took her to faraway Michigan. Abby spent three years there working at a school before returning to her hometown in Vermont.

Back in Ludlow, Abby began to collect poetry written about Vermont. In 1858 her first book, *Poets and Poetry of Vermont*, was published. An **anthology** of poetry with many contributors, including four of Abby Hemenway’s own poems, it sold many copies. In the 1850s people thought it was perfectly alright for a woman to write poetry but writing other kinds of books was not considered ladylike behavior.

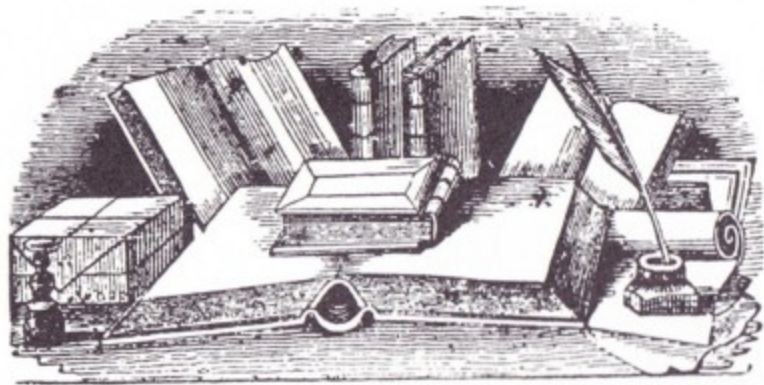
Confident after her good luck with this first book, Abby Hemenway set about advertising her next **endeavor**. The new project was far bigger and would take the young author and editor nearly ten times longer to finish than she had planned.

A complete history of her state, county by county and town by town, was her goal. It was a huge job for anyone, and male critics thought it quite beyond the **capabilities** of a woman.

Abby Hemenway decided to attack her project **systematically**. She would begin alphabetically with Addison County and work her way towards her home county of Windsor. To accomplish such a task she enlisted the help of many. Several contributors in each town put down on paper the stories their mothers and fathers and grandparents told them about settling the land that would later be known as Vermont. They wrote about the town’s churches, schools, sawmills, grist mills, shops, and taverns; when Indians were friendly and when they attacked; the first children born and the oldest residents; when a bear wandered into the village; and when blizzards, floods, and hailstorms struck.

She hoped to finish one county every three months

and publish the results in quarterly pamphlets. With fourteen counties in Vermont, Hemenway's state history would take three and one half years to complete, or so she thought.



In Addison County the faculty at Middlebury College and the forty male members of the historical society talked about Abby's idea with **skepticism**. They felt that a woman could not handle the job and would, no doubt, **abandon** it long before finishing the first county. These men did not know Abby Maria Hemenway.

Perhaps driven on by predictions of failure, Abby Hemenway set out to do what they said she or any woman could not do. On July 4, 1860, she completed the twenty-three towns in Addison County and the first pamphlet was published. But with just one fourteenth of her project under her belt she was already seriously in debt and behind schedule. Determined to finish what she had begun, Abby Maria Hemenway spent the rest of her life completing her **opus**.

Bennington County and the two C's (Caledonia and Chittenden) were soon done but the Civil War interrupted Abby's plans. She set aside work on her history book until the war was over. Even then she was not **idle**. In 1863 Abby published another poetry collection titled, *Songs of the War*. Three other books of prose followed.

In 1867 the section on Essex County was finished. It was bound together with Addison, Bennington, Caledonia and Chittenden and sold as Volume I of the now famous *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*. In the preface to the book Hemenway wrote, "Vermonters are New Englanders, and like naturally to know about a thing that interests them from beginning to end."

Fortunately for future generations, Abby Hemenway's desire to learn and record every imaginable aspect of life in Vermont and what made each individual town "tick" pushed her forever forward towards that end.

The histories of Franklin, Grand Isle, Lamoille, and Orange counties appeared in Volume II in 1871. Six years later she finished Volume III, on Orleans and Rutland counties. With nine out of the fourteen now complete and her debt still growing Abby turned to the state legislature for financial support for the printing of the W's. The 1878 and 1880 General Assemblies approved only five hundred dollars towards her project, not nearly enough to finish Volume IV.

Undaunted, she went ahead and compiled and printed Volume IV in 1882, dedicating it to the Vermont Legislature. But the bindery that put together this last volume confiscated it because Abby had no money to pay them. With no books to sell she could neither meet her bills or prepare Volumes V and VI. In desperation she broke into the Montpelier bindery at night and took the books. Then, to escape creditors, Hemenway left Vermont for Chicago, Illinois.



Book-binder.

Determined to finish despite her new home, Abby Hemenway got Vermont contributors to send the text for the remaining towns in Windham County. Then, partway through Volume V, Abby Hemenway experienced another major setback. She describes it: "May 2, 1886, parts of Windham County, Vol V., including 16 pages of Brookline with the type, stock, paper, etc. were utterly consumed [by fire]." Unwilling to give up, she redid the sections lost in the print-

TO
ALL WHO RESPECT AND ESTEEM VERMONT
AND TAKE AN INTEREST IN HER UNIQUE EARLY AND
PROGRESSIVE LATER HISTORY,

This Volume

IS CORDIALLY DEDICATED.

Excerpt from the dedication of Volume II of Hemenway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*.

shop fire. Each day she set in type the parts that she had edited the previous night. On February 24, 1890, with only three quarters of Volume V done and her beloved Windsor County not yet started, Abby Hemenway died. Her sister completed Windham County with material she found in Abby Hemenway's room and published Volume V the next year. Volume VI, however, was never written.

Abby Maria Hemenway worked **steadfastly** for thirty years on her story of Vermont. In her *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* she captured **obscure** human

details about early Vermont from persons who knew them firsthand or from stories told to them by their families. Certainly, no other state can pride itself on so fine and comprehensive a history of its early years as the one a hard-working woman from Ludlow **bestowed** upon Vermont. It is hard to imagine a time when historians will not "check with Abby" for help and information on those days gone by.

VOCABULARY

query - a question

sibling - brother or sister

anthology - a collection of literary pieces

endeavor - a serious effort

capable - able

systematically - carried on in a step by step procedure

skepticism - doubt

abandon - to leave behind or to give up

opus - a creative work

idle - inactive, lazy

undaunted - not discouraged

steadfast - loyal, faithful

obscure - not well known

bestow - to present