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Exhibit looks at women's struggles, victories



Campaign literature, including a sticker on behalf of the late Joyce Spiliotis, illustrates the emergence of women as a political force in Peabody.



Curator Heather Leavell displays Victorian fashions, part of the new Historical Society exhibit "From the Bustle to the Hustle: 150 Years of Women's History in Peabody" at the Cassidy Museum and adjacent Gideon Foster House on Washington Street. The two dresses are meant for a mother and daughter. Mom's dress is adjustable during pregnancy. Alan Burke/Staff photo



Curator Lyn FitzGerald displays late 20th-century dresses, part of the Peabody Historical Society's new exhibit "From the Bustle to the Hustle: 150 Years of Women's History in Peabody." Alan Burke/Staff photo Curator Lyn FitzGerald displays late 20th-century dresses, part of the Peabody Historical Society's new exhibit "From the Bustle to the Hustle: 150 Years of Women's History in Peabody."

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<http://www.salemnews.com/local/x520556587/Exhibit-looks-at-womens-struggles-victories>

By Alan Burke

Staff writer (<http://www.salemnews.com>)

PEABODY — Most battles aren't won in a moment where the tide suddenly turns. Rather, triumph comes after a succession of victories, some so small they aren't even mentioned in the history books.

The fight for women's equality was won in the same way. The suffragettes getting themselves hauled off to jail while demanding the right to vote might be the popular image — but it required decades and even centuries of struggle to get to that point. Nor was the fight over then.

The recent passing of Joyce Spiliotis, the city's first female state representative, reminds everyone of how recent some changes have been.

Peabody did its part, as a new exhibit at the Peabody Historical Society illustrates. "From the Bustle to the Hustle: 150 Years of Women's History in Peabody," which runs through April 21, brings alive this forgotten history, as well as the women who made it. According to curator Heather Leavell, the show describes an era starting 200 years ago when "women had few rights and very little independence."

The women in this city weren't willing to let that stand.

Their battles were ongoing as early 1848 when Mary Upton Ferrin refused to have everything she owned taken by the drunken and physically abusive husband she planned to divorce. Documents recall her six-year campaign to change a law that would give him all. Her effort included getting neighbors in Danvers and Peabody to sign petitions that she sent on to the Legislature.

Massachusetts passed the Married Woman's Property Act in 1854. And Ferrin didn't stop there, next taking her place in the movement for women's suffrage as it gained steam after the Civil War.

"You ain't a bit ashamed of having so many children and no husband," a woman once told Sally Richardson (1798-1887), or "Aunt Sally." She was a nurse and midwife whose children were the countless Peabody babies she helped bring into the world. The tireless Richardson, whose picture is part of the presentation, was so valued by her Peabody neighbors that the newspaper devoted three full columns to her passing.

"My impression is," Leavell said, "she was on call night and day."

In what is probably one of the most remarkable features of the exhibit, you can almost see the women themselves, thanks to the Historical Society's huge collection of clothing. Remarkably small dresses (and even underwear) put lovingly on display cover the years after the Revolution to post-World War II. Hoops, frills, bustles and waists that modern women would die for — or die from — are displayed in each of the exhibit rooms.

Leavell and dress curator Lyn FitzGerald wince at the thought of the corsets and ties required to get into and stay in them.

The wide dresses were also prone to catch fire while women were cooking. "And a lot of ladies died a horrible death because of them," FitzGerald said.

"It was mostly men who dictated the fashions," Leavell said. At the same time, the growth of the leather industry was ending the era when men and women worked the farm together. Now, they disappeared from one another throughout the day. In some cases, Leavell added, "women became accessories for wealthy men."

And they soon dressed accordingly, with bustles and bright colors.

The men who ruled Peabody — or South Danvers before that — have gotten plenty of mention over the years. After all, Leavell indicated, the city is named after financier and favorite son George Peabody. But the exhibit, housed in a half-dozen rooms in two buildings, shows the extent to which it

was remarkable women who held the place together.

Eunice Cook, a prime example, founded the South Danvers Ladies Soldiers' Aid Society on April 24, 1861, just two weeks after the guns were fired on Fort Sumter, sparking the Civil War. Hers was one of the first organizations of its kind and the beginning of a massive, national network of women's groups dedicated to relieving the burdens on soldiers and their families.

When the march for women's rights came center stage, the bustle disappeared and fabric hung loose.

"As they were fighting to take on the rights of men, (their clothes) had this more masculine aspect," FitzGerald said. World War II saw military styles and dresses made in an era of shortage, dresses that might just as likely be constructed with material from discarded drapes.

Some of the traditional aspects of the woman's world survived all this — but the cookbook on display is the "I Hate to Cook Book."

"For women who don't want to cook," FitzGerald said.

"A lot of women nowadays," Leavell said, "are trying to be everything and do everything." Thus, also on display is the evidence — aprons. "They're coming back."

The museum, which includes the Cassidy Art Museum and, currently, its annual Holiday Art and Craft Show, is free and open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and on the first and third Sunday of the month from noon to 3 p.m.

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