

PERFORMANCE

“Women’s Voices of the Western Reserve”

Women in History Project

Women In History agrees with historian, Arthur Schlessinger Jr. - “Women have made up half the human race, but you could never tell that by the books that historians write.” In an effort to rectify this situation, the non-profit organization of Women In History, was formed in 1991. This organization is dedicated to the task of educating the public, via living vignettes of women in American history, who have impacted society through their contributions. Cleveland’s Bicentennial offered this organization the opportunity to explore the history of Cleveland women’s work that enhanced the quality of life for their community. In researching this topic, it was decided to focus on the lives of fifteen women, whose work represented two hundred years of Cleveland’s history of philanthropy and achievement.

The program for “Women’s Voices of the Western Reserve”, selected six of these women to present their efforts to deal with issues that constantly reappeared in different eras of Cleveland’s history. Each, in her own time, struggled to alleviate pain, suffering and the lack of opportunity for her fellow Clevelanders. Whether it was to survive or to enhance life these women devoted themselves to their causes. Please join Flora Stone Mather, our hostess at this “celestial tea”, as she and her distinguished guests reminisce about the Cleveland they once knew.

Presenters and Characters

Celeste Earhard	Flora Stone Mather, Cleveland Philanthropist
Stephanie Tolliver	Hannah Peake, First permanent African American Settler in Western Reserve
Vernice Jackson	Josephine Wilson Bruce, First African American to teach in integrated school, wife of Reconstruction senator
Charlene Connors	Adella Prentiss Hughes, Founder of Cleveland Orchestra
Sherrie Tolliver	Jane Edna Hunter, Teacher, Attorney and founder of Phyllis Wheatley Foundation
Sophia Mastrandreas-Dadas	Margaret Skapes, Immigrant and suffragist

The scene is the ladies’ parlor of Flora Stone Mather’s home. Flora Stone Mather has invited several Cleveland women of note to gather for a “celestial” tea. The point of the gathering—to recall the contributions made by these women to the development of Cleveland. Presented in a somewhat chronological format, the women discuss the events and/or conditions of their time, that caused them to take action to remedy the situations that proved problematic.

Although the women are not contemporaries, the issues they address are issues that existed in each one’s lifetime. Their discussion of the steps taken to improve the quality of life for the community of Greater Cleveland has meaning to them all. They revel in the accomplishment of the tasks they undertook and pose questions as to the outcome of their work. They ask the audience if their solutions are still in place and pertinent.

Flora Stone Mather is seated at the table with Mrs. Hannah (George) Peake, the first African American female pioneer in Cleveland. Flora asks Hannah about the Cleveland she knew. Hannah’s issues are survival, disease, religion, neighbors or the lack thereof, childbearing and raising, education and the growth of the city. She talks about the role of women in her time. She asks Flora about these issues in her time. Flora talks about the growth and economy of her Cleveland and begins to tell of opportunity for education and employment of females outside the home when a knock is heard at the door. An offstage maid announces the arrival of her second guest, Josephine Wilson Bruce, teacher at the first integrated school in Cleveland and the wife of Blanche Bruce, senator during the era of Reconstruction. Mrs. Bruce has overheard some of Flora’s speech about the war years (Civil War), and says that because Flora was so young at that time she would like to fill in some important items. As Bruce continues, the maid again interrupts, with the announcement of the arrival of Adella Prentiss Hughes, founder of the Cleveland Orchestra and Jane Edna Hunter, founder of the Phyllis Wheatley Association. They join in the lively discussion with their observations on the status of Cleveland and its inhabitants. Finally, without announcement, Margaret Skapes, the Immigrant, the new pioneer and suffragist flies into the room to add her experiences of action and reaction to Cleveland and the American way of life.

In closing the program the women turn their attention to the audience and ask them “How are these things with you?”