

City Federation of Women's Organizations - Capsule History

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(brief note about 2012)

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Member Clubs

One of the founding organizations of the CFWO was the **Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)**, organized in 1870 to abolish liquor, because women were not welcome in men's temperance groups. Women had a vested interest in the cause since the law did not protect them or their children from abuse, neglect, or abandonment by drunken husbands. Mary B. Wood, the County president, led the members to rally around the cause for Ithaca to "go dry" and on April 17, 1918, Ithaca voted to go dry. The votes of women were decisive in this vote. By 1913 there was a Tompkins County WCTU with 30 local chapters, and by 1927, it had 1,008 members. On January 1, 1976, however, only 25-30 members remained and the members voted to disband.

The Ladies Union Benevolent Society (LUBS) was established in 1869. It was the first secular organization with a mission to care for the city's poor. Mrs. Ezra Cornell was a member. Most members were wealthy and driven to meetings by chauffeurs. They financed and ran children's home and Old Ladies home at 514 N. Aurora St., later moving to the McGraw House on Geneva St. (1971).

Ithaca Woman's Club (IWC): In 1895, at the home of Kate and Marie Lewis, 444 N. Aurora St., several women interested in suffrage, and encouraged by the work and effort of Louisa Lord Riley, worked on a constitution and bylaws for a new club. The Ithaca Woman's Club, as it was called, started out with 25 charter members. Dues were 25 cents, and the club was organized as a department study club, where each department presented a program at the regular meetings. The suffrage section especially was accused of disrupting family equanimity and received a storm of criticism. Eventually, the suffrage section of the club withdrew and started their own club, the Political Study Club. The Woman's Club thrived, however, in spite of the disruptions.

The **Political Study Group**, formed from the suffrage section of the Woman's Club in 1899, first met at the home of Mrs. Marcus F. (Lucy) Calkins on March 14, 1899. Membership grew rapidly, with members belonging to both the IWC and the Political Study Group. The Political Study Group existed for 18 years until the woman's vote in NY had been won. It disbanded on November 12, 1917, and the 100 members joined the Tompkins County League of Women Voters in 1918.

City Federation of Women's Organizations – CFWO

On January 8, 1910, the **Ithaca Woman's Club**, represented by Mrs. F. E. (Juanita) Bates, banded together with the **Political Study Group** lead by Mrs. M. E. (Lucy) Calkins and the **Women's Christian Temperance Union**, with Mrs. Percy (Mary B.) Wood as leader, to form the City Federation of Women's Organizations. The women passionately believed in **expanding their interests beyond the home and into the cultural and civic realms**. 15 women met in the home of Mrs. Frederick E. (Juanita) Bates and elected Mrs. Lelle Mangang as the first president. The women felt that they could speak with a stronger voice as a united group than they could as individual clubs.

The object of the CFWO was to "**bring into relations of mutual helpfulness the various clubs and organizations of women throughout the city and to make combined action possible when deemed expedient.**"

At the second meeting of the CFWO, the Campus Club and the Child Study Club joined the affiliation. The Cornell Women's Club, Congregational women, and the Unitarian women joined in 1911, and the Baptist Women and the Methodist Women joined in 1912.

Early accomplishments included the formation of a **Mother and Teacher's Club** (later the PTO), substitution of **drinking fountains** for cups in the schools, financing and supervising the **first vacation playground** and promotion of **dental inspection** in the schools. Through their efforts, **Mrs. Gertrude Shorb Martin** was nominated and elected the **first woman member of the Ithaca School Board of Education** in 1912.

The women felt the **need for public restrooms** where families coming into town from rural areas to shop could rest. With Mrs. Fred A. Mangang providing leadership as the first president, and through the cooperation of the Business Men's Association, a public rest room for women and children who visited Ithaca was **established in two rooms at 119 S. Tioga St. on April 15, 1915**. A month later, over 300 people had made use of the facilities, which included easy chairs and couches, a tea table and electric plate, a crib, a cradle, and small chairs. The CFWO provided babysitters and served hot tea at cost.

The continued use of these rooms led to a resolve by the Federation to (1) have a building of their own that would provide these services.

At the same time, the CFWO membership was gradually outgrowing meeting space available in private homes, and there was **(2) a need for a building that could be the center for all clubs to meet.**

Also, they envisioned **(3) a building where young working women could have a place to stay in the city** until they got established. As early as 1911, Dr. Esther Parker and Prof. Martha Van Rensselaer had presented **(4) the need for a recreation center for working girls**. Their theme was "**Substitute Recreation for Vice.**"

On August 2, 1920, the CFWO held a special meeting to extend the purpose of the Federation:

"In order to perform welfare and charitable work for girls; to provide a rest room; to furnish lodging for women and girls; to provide physical and moral development and improvement of conditions for women, girls and children of the community; to purchase, to own and hold, mortgage and dispose of real estate; to take, own and hold real and personal property by gift or bequest; and such organization not organized for profit or gain." Publicity made it clear that this was not a **clubhouse, but a community center.**

The CFWO, under the leadership of Mrs. Marcus E. (Lucy) Calkins, bought the **Winton Books Mansion** in 1920 for \$17,000 (oil painting by Mrs. David (Dottie) Barr, painted before the building's demolition in 1959, still hangs in our building.) The home, **designed by William Henry Miller** and built by Samuel Winton in 1872, had balconies, verandahs, and a conservatory. The debt for the building was paid off in one year.

In 1922, the CFWO **rented a farm** 20 miles north of Ithaca, and converted it into a **camp for girl scouts and camp fire girls**. This camp still exists but is no longer under the auspices of the Federation.

In 1923, it was reported that there were 800 books in the library, 1,400 people had used the waiting rooms in one month, house activities were increasing, and 16 young women were living in the house.

In 1926, approximately 2,000 persons per month used the building, and more space was needed. The CFWO purchased the "Annex," Dr. Eugene Baker's home adjacent to the building, for \$15,000. This building became a housing unit for 11 elderly women. (It's the parking lot now).

From 1920 to 1956 meetings were held in the old brick building, but there was always a cry for new space. The building was 80 years old by then and needed extensive repairs of over \$20,000.

In 1950 a new building fund was set up. 55 clubs were federated at that time. The CFWO studies the possibility of becoming a YWCA at this point, but discovered that this was impossible, since the YWCA is based on individual memberships, not groups.

In 1956, it was reported that 22,694 people had attended meetings in the building. Some groups listed as using the building included 2 high school prayer groups, churches, a cooperative nursery school serving 20 children,

rooms for young women at \$5.91/week, and rooms for elderly women in the annex at \$5.89/week. Concerns that year included the traffic situation and a need for improved county probation services.

On November 9, 1956, the CFWO voted unanimously to demolish both the mansion and the annex and build the present building, at a cost of \$285,000, to fill the expressed needs of the member clubs and the women and girls of the community.

The CFWO followed strict characteristics for fundraising and building planning: **No door-to-door solicitation, strict adherence to the budget, use of local firms, and determination to achieve the goal.** Two hundred women earned \$2,500 by taking the school census for the Board of Education. “Operation hospitality” was undertaken whereby members of the clubs would open their homes to out-of-town visitors during football weekends, and convocations. By January, 1959, \$102,231, well over the \$100,000 needed for financing, had been raised by club women. Many were heard at that time to quote: **“Never underestimate the power of a woman.”**

Martha Van Renssalaer, an active member of the IWC from 1902 – 1927, believed that the girls coming in from rural areas should continue to have a “home away from home,” and **so dorms for 22 girls** were included in the plans for the building. **She spearheaded a campaign to raise \$75,000 for the auditorium**, which was named for her. The IWC donated \$12,000, and a lounge in the building was named for the club. Room for the Service League was also planned into the project, with room for a sales room, dressing room, and office.

On July 9, 1959 the cornerstone was laid, and on Valentine’s Day, 1960, the first open house was held during a terrible snow storm. 300 people came. In 1969, the mortgage for the building was only \$2,230, so the IWC, with Edna Michael as president, spearheaded a campaign to raise the money. On May 20, 1969, the mortgage was burned.

The result was new facilities with housing for 25 young women, an attractive public waiting room, Traveler’s Aid services with a room to take care of stranded women, classes for those wishing instruction, a center for community activities of all kinds and meeting places for clubs, groups and organizations.

The dormitory space on the third floor of the Women’s Community Building included 13 rooms that housed 22 women. There was always a waiting list. There was also a **“transient” room** on the second floor for women who only needed a place to stay for a short time. This room was **donated by Georgia Hare**, who gave \$500 for the room, **in case “someone got stranded at the bus stop.”**

Programs that have been offered through the “new” Women’s Community Building: meeting place for Federated clubs and other community groups, continuing education classes, transitional residence for women and emergency shelter room for women, Ithaca Women Speak series, Women’s Information Network WIN, Women’s Equality Day and Women’s History Week celebrated. It has housed Suicide Prevention, Displaced Homemakers, an afterschool program and Ithaca Rape Crisis.

Major income sources were programs, Service League rental, dormitory rentals, public rentals of rooms and the auditorium, flare sales, the antique show, the IWC fashion show, and annual fund drives. In 1964, the CFWO had over 50 member clubs. It later increased to 75 clubs.

Times changed, and the Women’s Community Building continues to change with them. In **1997, a new business plan** was adopted, as recommended by the Human Services Coalition. The dormitory rooms, no longer as in demand by women new in the community, were transformed into **office space for non-profit organizations**.

By 2010 membership in the CFWO declined and community needs were different. **The building was sold in 2012** to make way for much needed affordable housing. The proceeds from the sale of the building and existing CFWO resources have been used to **establish an endowment that will continue the legacy of the many organizations** of the CFWO and community members who have supported the changing needs of women over the years.