

Sherman Garden Cooperative Apartments

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FRANCES WILLARD (1839-1898): CELEBRATING HER 175TH BIRTHDAY

By Diane Keely

Childhood in Wisconsin (1839-1858). Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard was born September 28, 1839, in Churchville NY to a farmer/naturalist/legislator/aspiring minister father and a schoolteacher mother. At age two, her Congregationalist family moved to Ohio, where her father studied at Oberlin preparatory school, hoping to become a minister. When his health deteriorated with tuberculosis, the family moved in 1846 to a farm near Janesville in Wisconsin Territory. Frances and her siblings were schooled at home by their mother until a public school built by their father opened in 1853.

As a child, Frances was a tomboy, dressed as a boy, and loved being outdoors. When she was 16, her mother told her she had to begin wearing long skirts and pinning her hair up. Frances felt strongly that this was both unjust and unwise. Anticipating a life-long passion, she also viewed as an injustice her father and brother going out alone to vote. While in Janesville, the family converted to the Methodist denomination, which emphasized social justice and service to the world. As evangelical Protestants, the Willards supported temperance. Frances's father, Josiah, had already joined a temperance organization in 1841, and Frances herself signed an abstinence pledge in 1856.

College and Teaching Years (1858-1874). In 1858, Frances and younger sister Mary began attending college in Evanston at North Western Female College, a seminary for women with Methodist connections, and their parents soon moved to Evanston as well. Frances graduated as valedictorian with a "Laureate of Science" degree in 1859. She taught at a number of public and private schools/colleges in Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York. In March 1861 she became engaged to Charles Fowler, a divinity student, but she broke off the engagement the next year.

Frances gave up her teaching position in New York to return home and nurse her ailing father, who died in 1868. After her father's death, she went on a two-year world tour with her good friend Kate Jackson. Having returned to Evanston in late 1870, she was invited to take charge of a new college. At age 31 she was named president of the new Evanston College for Ladies, which opened in fall 1871 with 236 students. However, construction of a new instruction and residence building slowed when benefactors who had lost assets in the Great Chicago Fire of October 1871 could not fulfill their pledges. The school was forced to merge with Northwestern University in June 1873, and the building was finally completed. Located nearby on Elgin Road, it was known as Willard Hall from 1901 to 1938 and in 1940 renamed the Music Administration Building. Frances was appointed the first female dean (Dean of Women) at Northwestern University and was professor of aesthetics/art and English/rhetoric. Before long, conflicts over her governance of the college developed with the President of NU (her former fiancé Charles Fowler!) and so she resigned in March 1874. Willard said, "He has the will of Napoleon and I have the will of Queen Elizabeth."

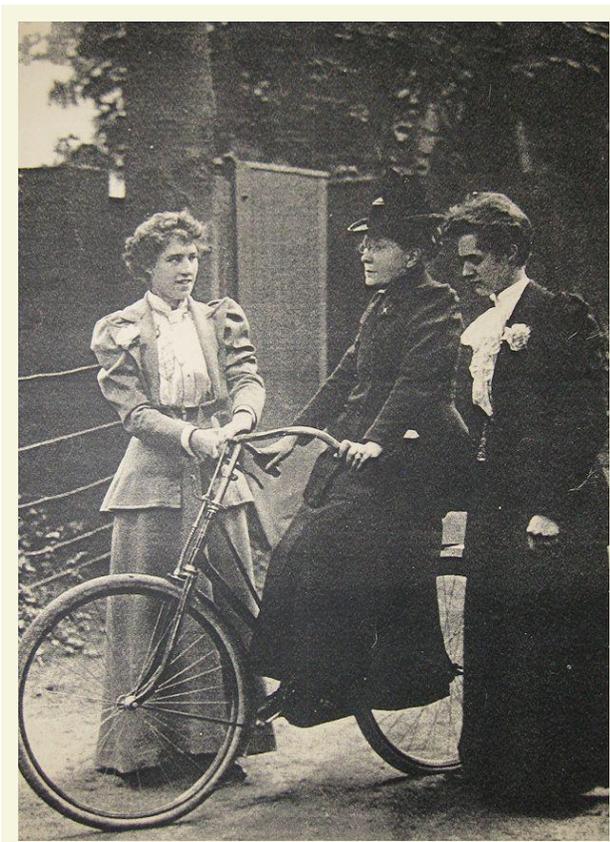


Frances E. Willard truly loved the city she considered home, as demonstrated by her book [A Classic Town: The Story of Evanston](#) (1892). She even told others, "When I get to Heaven, register me from Evanston." Her earthly remains are buried with family and many eminent Chicagoans in Rosehill Cemetery. Courtesy of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Evanston, Ill

Organizing in the U.S. and Beyond (1874-1898).

During this last quarter of the 19th century Frances Willard earned her reputation as organizer, activist, speaker, and strategist for the causes of prohibition and women's suffrage, which she came to see as intertwined. While the consequences of excessive alcohol consumption had been of concern for decades, many males during the Civil War acquired a taste for liquor that continued after the war ended. Frances saw that women and children were often forced to live in poverty and subject to abusive behavior because their husbands drank away their earnings and because married women could not own property in their own names. However, many women supporters of temperance did not support suffrage, so Willard linked the issues conceptually to "Home Protection" for women and children: if women had the vote, they could help bring about an end to drunkenness, poverty, and abuse at home. The first Home Protection legislation, which died in committee in 1879, was written simply to allow women to vote to close saloons in their communities.

In 1874 Willard became president of the Chicago Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), followed by statewide and national offices in the organization, and in 1883 she fulfilled a dream by co-founding the World WCTU. During her presidency of the national organization between 1879 and 1898 membership grew from roughly 5000 to 200,000. By the 1890s, the WCTU was the largest women's organization in the United States with an agenda that had expanded from the fight against alcohol to women's rights and labor reform.



Lady Henry Somerset gave this bicycle (on display at the House Museum) to Frances. Willard learned to ride it at age 53 in England and wrote *A Wheel within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle* (1895), in which she told entertainingly of how the experience mirrored lessons learned, such as persistence, in her life. Although she wore a long dress, riding conveyed to Frances a kind of free, self-generated movement that few women of her time knew. She called her bicycle Gladys because it "made her glad."

<http://wahsoneverything.blogspot.com/2009/08/woman-and-bikes.html>

Along with Susan B. Anthony and others, Willard founded the National Council of Women in 1888, the first national organization for women in the United States. Her aim here and elsewhere was to accomplish reform and to train women to accomplish reform. Over time her vision expanded in support of measures to help families: labor organization, eight-hour workdays, improved factory working conditions, end of child labor, raising the age of sexual consent for females to 16, and establishing laws regarding rape. Willard's ground-breaking efforts were important contributors to the eventual passage of the Prohibition (18th) Amendment in 1919 and the Women's Suffrage (19th) Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, but she did not live to see either passed.

In addition to a rigorous travel and lecture circuit (visits to every state in the U.S. and 400 lectures over a 10 year period!), Willard did a considerable amount of writing and editing: books, journals, and newspapers. She published her autobiography in 1889 with the title *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman*. Willard was also a popular speaker in England, where she became good friends with an important and wealthy philanthropist, temperance leader, and fellow campaigner for women's rights, Lady Henry Somerset.

Frances never married. In 1877 she met Anna Adams Gordon who became her private secretary and living and traveling companion for the next 21 years. Her mother's death from pernicious anemia in 1892 led to a similar diagnosis for Frances. Doctors had no cure for the disease but did recommend exercise. This caused Frances to take up a new challenge at age 53, learning to ride a "safety" bicycle, a gift from her friend Lady Henry Somerset.

Willard died of influenza in New York City on February 17, 1898, while preparing for a trip to England. Anna Gordon continued to live at Willard House, and in 1914 she followed in Willard's footsteps as national WCTU President and in 1922 as World WCTU President.



Located at 1728-1730 Chicago Avenue, the house was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965. It is believed to be the oldest house in America to honor a woman. Public scheduled tours are offered on the first and third Sundays of non-holiday weekends each month from 1 to 4 pm. Visit www.franceswillardhouse.org for more information.

Photo by Diane Keely

THE FRANCES WILLARD HOUSE MUSEUM

In 1865, Josiah Willard, Frances's father (1803-1868), built a nine-room Gothic cottage on "new lots reclaimed from the swamp." About 1880, an eight-room addition was constructed to house Frances's widowed sister-in-law, Mary Bannister Ward, and her four children. Originally called Rose Cottage, Frances later changed its name to Rest Cottage and bequeathed the house to the WCTU. In 1900 the WCTU made the addition its headquarters and turned the original house into a museum, preserving the Willard furnishings and memorabilia (including many books and rocking chairs!).



This Carrara marble statue of Frances Willard was given in 1905 by the Governor of Illinois to the National Statuary Hall Collection in the Capitol Building, Washington, D.C. Each state has two statues in the hall, but this was the first one of a woman. In another 1905 tribute, the U.S government issued a five-cent stamp commemorating Willard in the "Famous American" series.

<http://www.willardsorority.org/frances4.html>

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