

SELF-IMPROVEMENT, COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT:  
NORTH CAROLINA SOROSIS AND THE WOMEN'S CLUB MOVEMENT  
IN WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA, 1895-1950

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
DEDICATION.....	vii
LIST OF IMAGES.....	viii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE: NORTH CAROLINA SOROSIS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT ...	10
CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN BEGIN TO ORGANIZE.....	23
CHAPTER THREE: MUNICIPAL HOUSEKEEPING.....	43
CHAPTER FOUR: HOME AWAY FROM HOME .....	67
CONCLUSION: END OF AN ERA.....	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	96

## ABSTRACT

The Progressive Era ushered in a new importance for women's associations with an increase in municipal housekeeping that centered on education, health, social services and other civic concerns. Prior to the Progressive Era, women's clubs across America focused on the self-improvement of their members through the study of art, literature, and other cultural pastimes. North Carolina Sorosis was part of the nationwide emergence of women's clubs during the Progressive Era. Organized womanhood provided a safe location to break down traditional roles of women and expanded women's influence in the public sphere.

The women's club movement established the idea that women had a moral duty and responsibility to improve society. Clubs provided them with the vehicle to enter the public sphere and to transform, define, and shape public policy. North Carolina Sorosis contributed to Wilmington's social and cultural infrastructure by creating parks, museums, libraries, and schools. For the women of Sorosis, the club provided an opportunity to become a powerful source of change in Wilmington. Members developed political skills by working with city officials even before women gained the right to vote. Sorosis members also acquired leadership experience and developed financial skills by sponsoring fund-raisers and by creating and maintaining museums, libraries and other civic institutions. These changes in women's clubs during the Progressive Era were exemplified with the clubhouse boom. The last chapter of this thesis focuses on the North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse. The Sorosis clubhouse, like so many clubhouses across America, was established through the hard work, talent, and efficacy of women willing to undertake financial, managerial, organizational, and bureaucratic



responsibilities on levels unprecedented prior to the Progressive Era. The women of Sorosis and thousands of clubwomen across the nation demonstrated, to themselves and to their communities, women's potential at these tasks. The clubhouse was recognized across the nation as an expression of pride and power for clubwomen. To build, design, and purchase clubhouses represented the effort of women's clubs to combine civic responsibilities with more traditional social roles. Clubwomen believed the city could become homelike and as domestic housekeepers they attempted to blur the lines between public and private space. This act enabled them to cross these lines and enter into the city's public spaces.

The very success of the clubwomen contributed to a decline in the power and influence of the clubwoman. Sorosis was no longer the driving force of change in Wilmington after World War II. Much of the work Sorosis had accomplished including the founding of the first free public library, establishing Greenfield Lake Park, organizing a night school for Delgado Mill Workers, sponsoring milk stations and baby clinics was turned over to the city for upkeep. With the professionalization of libraries, museums, social work, and other public institutions, the clubwomen lost their control and influence on the social and cultural growth and direction of Wilmington. As a result, North Carolina Sorosis reverted to once again functioning as a social club for women. Nevertheless, the institutions that Sorosis created remain central to the social and cultural vibrancy of present-day Wilmington.

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Finally, to my family and friends who suffered through endless years of discussions concerning the women's club movement and the women of North Carolina Sorosis. I am sure that each of them at one time or another tuned me out. My parents, however, have been with me every step of the way encouraging me to take chances, work hard, to succeed despite hardship. Thank you for listening. I thank my best friend, my husband John Nelson, who endured more than any one person should in the creation of this product.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, John, whose continued support and encouragement have meant more to me than he will ever know, and to my parents, Joan and Arthur Lang, for teaching me patience and persistence and giving me unconditional love and support through all my endeavors.

## LIST OF IMAGES

Image	Page
1. Map of Downtown Wilmington, NC .....	27
2. Home of Sallie Spears Hicks .....	29
3. Sallie Spears Hicks .....	31
4. Gertrude Jenkins Howell.....	36
5. Margaret Lovell Gibson.....	46
6. Interior of Wilmington Public Library.....	50
7. Greenfield Lake Swimmers .....	61
8. Greenfield Lake W.P.A. Work .....	61
9. Statue of Sallie Spears Hicks .....	62
10. North Carolina Sorosis Cancer Clinic.....	64
11. Drawing of North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse .....	66
12. North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse.....	76
13. North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse.....	81
14. Interior of North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse .....	83
15. Interior of North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse .....	84
16. Interior of North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse .....	85
17. Interior of Clubhouse during Party .....	88
18. Past Presidents of Sorosis .....	93

## INTRODUCTION

On a Saturday morning in early November 1895, three prominent white women met while they were shopping in the old market house on Front Street in downtown Wilmington, North Carolina. Mrs. Andrew J. Howell, Jr., Mrs. Rufus W. Hicks, and Mrs. Philander Pearsall discussed the idea of forming a club that would improve the women of Wilmington through the study of literature, art, and domestic science. A few weeks later on Wednesday, December 5, 1895, fifteen women gathered in the home of Mrs. Rufus Hicks at 418 South Third Street, for the purpose of forming a women's club.<sup>1</sup> The women named their club North Carolina Sorosis after the first women's club established in New York.

The Progressive Era ushered in a new importance for women's associations with an increase in municipal housekeeping focused on education, health, social services, and other civic concerns. Prior to the Progressive Era, women's clubs across America focused on the self-improvement of their members through the study of art, literature, and other cultural pastimes. North Carolina Sorosis was part of the nationwide emergence of women's clubs during this time. Organized womanhood broke down the traditional roles of women and expanded women's influence in the public sphere. This study examines the effects one such organization had on both Wilmington society and on the lives of its members. By studying North Carolina Sorosis, the state's oldest federated club, I seek to expand what scholars understand about women's clubs at the local level. The shift in the club's agenda from self-improvement to civic organization reflects the larger women's club movement of the Progressive Era.

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<sup>1</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1895.

The women's club movement established the idea that women had a moral duty and responsibility to improve society. Clubs provided women with a vehicle to enter the public sphere and to transform, define, and shape public policy. This thesis argues that an examination of North Carolina Sorosis is a useful tool for exploring the effects of women's clubs on their members and their community. North Carolina Sorosis contributed to Wilmington's social and cultural infrastructure by creating parks, museums, libraries and schools. For the women of Sorosis, the club provided the opportunity to become a powerful source of change in Wilmington. Members developed political skills by working with city officials even before women gained the right to vote. Sorosis members also acquired leadership skills by sponsoring fundraisers and by creating and maintaining museums, libraries, and other civic institutions. North Carolina Sorosis minutes, the *Wilmington Star News*, and the literature of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs (NCFWC) and the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) document this transition from self-improvement to civic mindedness that occurred on both national and local levels at the turn of the twentieth century.

Recent local history has verges on antiquarian. Some recent scholarly works are too narrow and are not contextualized. Where I depart from current standards of local history is in contextualizing the women's club movement of the Progressive Era by examining the founding and growth of Wilmington's North Carolina Sorosis. Local history allows for a depth that is often missed in broad overviews of the women's club movement. It is imperative that as historians we understand how the women's club movement played itself out at the local level in ways that are profoundly influenced by the specifics of local situations. While a study of one community does not provide a

representative model of the women's club movement, it does provide insight into how a single women's club influenced both its members and the community.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the historiography of the Progressive Era's women's club movement. Although historians have not examined North Carolina Sorosis, numerous scholarly works have explored the women's club movement. Over the past thirty years, historians from Anne Firor Scott to Karen Blair have delineated the impact of the women's club movement on the social fabric of America and on the women who joined clubs. Many social, cultural, and educational institutions began with the volunteer efforts of the women's clubs. North Carolina Sorosis is a useful tool for exploring the impact of women's clubs on women and their community. These volunteer efforts led to the institutionalization of libraries, museum, parks, and other programs. North Carolina Sorosis altered the roles of women in Wilmington by influencing the social, economic, and political development of Wilmington. The women of Sorosis changed and improved the quality of life in Wilmington; in creating Sorosis and sustaining not only the club but also its institutions, they also forged a new identity for women. This chapter also offers a historiography of the use of material culture as a means of demonstrating the impact the women's club movement had on both Wilmington and the members of North Carolina Sorosis. North Carolina Sorosis club women created a separate sphere with the purchase of their clubhouse. Separate spheres took on new meaning because of empowerment as material culture became integral to women's history.

The second chapter discusses how women's clubs began as self-improvement study groups focused on the intellectual and cultural improvement of women through the

study of literature, art and domestic sciences. This movement led to a separate women's culture that promoted activism. Women who joined North Carolina Sorosis, along with numerous other women who joined clubs across America, shared a common identity as members of a specific race, class, or religion. As a self-improvement club, Sorosis nurtured women to become active agents and to advance their positions in society. This change in the club's agenda was unintentional at first. However, club women gradually altered how they could best serve both themselves and their communities. They became agents for the promotion of institutions that addressed education and health concerns in Wilmington. Clubs promoted a female culture that played upon the values of middle- and- upper-class white Southerners specifically, that white women were morally superior to working class whites and all blacks. Self-improvement clubs supported one of the major fundamentals of this elite white female culture; the idea that an educated mother was better able to train the future citizens of America. This ideology of "Republican Motherhood" dated back to the late eighteenth century, and it continued to play an integral role in the expansion of women's roles from the private confines of family to a society concerned with the well-being of the community.<sup>2</sup> Women's clubs often started as small gatherings in the home of friends and neighbors and could be seen as extensions of women's familial relationships. This concept contributed to an extended female intimacy and produced what many historians label a separate female culture.

Women used these clubs to subvert the cultural role society determined for them as wives and mothers. Sorosis followed the trends set by many white, middle- and upper-class clubs established during the Progressive Era. The founding of thousands of clubs

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<sup>2</sup>Linda K. Kerber *Women of the Republic : Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: Norton, 1986).



across America during this era afforded the women of Sorosis numerous role models, including the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) and the Sorosis Club of New York to follow. North Carolina Sorosis members limited the club's initiates to white, middle- and upper-class women. This decision was made to uphold the strict segregation lines in the South. This resolution matched the unspoken assumption other clubs promoted during the Progressive Era. Many of the club's rules and regulations were influenced by other Progressive Era women's clubs. Societal assumptions about race, class, and gender influenced the members and programs of North Carolina Sorosis. This realization became even more apparent with the club's shift in focus from self-improvement to social welfare.

Women's clubs began to do more than improve their members through literary and artistic exploration; they began to take action to improve their communities. The third chapter examines the transition of North Carolina Sorosis from self-improvement to civic improvement club with the founding of public cultural institutions such as libraries and schools. These institutions, which were created by Sorosis, denoted the quality of life in a community. Libraries, museums, and many civic programs owed their existences to the hard work and dedication of North Carolina Sorosis. This shift from self-improvement to civic mindedness grew out of a female culture that trumpeted the uniquely feminine traits of moral superiority, nurturing qualities, and domestic management skills women acquired in the home. These characteristics became a springboard for civic involvement. Clubwomen believed their cities faced numerous moral and social problems. Attitudes about race, class, and gender affected the consciousness of the women involved in Sorosis, and the programs they undertook

reflected these values. North Carolina Sorosis did not embrace the black community in its attempts at community improvement because the majority of Southern white women supported the racist ideology and practices of their era. Sorosis members were not concerned with challenging Jim Crow laws. Thus, the institutions and programs created and supported by the club were for the sole benefit of the white community.

In 1907, the Sorosis club's purpose shifted to civic-mindedness that focused on the betterment of the community. The formation of Wilmington's first free public library that same year testified to this shift. Later programs provided domestic science education for young white women, a night school for Delgado Mill Workers, a milk station, baby clinics, the establishment of Greenfield Lake Park, the creation of the New Hanover County Museum, and the founding of a Cancer Awareness Center. North Carolina Sorosis also demonstrated its patriotism by contributing to the home front efforts during World War I and World War II. The spirit and determination these women displayed in undertaking timely problems and issues became apparent as Wilmington's landscape began to reflect the club's influence on the community. Their activism brought women into the public sphere and taught them valuable leadership skills. Sorosis provided women with an opportunity to define and shape public policy.

The new woman of the Progressive Era challenged the ideology of separate spheres and utilized the role of municipal housekeeper to expand her role in society. This new role led to greater power and clubs became essential to women's involvement in public affairs. Clubs represented safe and respectable means for white, middle-class women at local, state, and national levels to influence government policies.

This transformation in the purpose of women's clubs during the Progressive Era is best represented by the clubhouse boom. The last chapter of this thesis focuses on the North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse. The Sorosis clubhouse was established through the hard work, talent, and efficacy of women willing to undertake financial, managerial, organizational, and bureaucratic responsibilities on a level unprecedented prior to the Progressive Era. The women of Sorosis and thousands of other clubs demonstrated to themselves and to their communities women's ability to manage these tasks. The clubhouse became an achievement recognized as an expression of pride and power for clubwomen.

The women of Sorosis wanted their own space to symbolize their presence in the public sphere, and they announced their intentions by purchasing a clubhouse in 1914. North Carolina Sorosis claimed public space with the purchase of its clubhouse. The clubhouse gave new meaning to the concept of separate spheres as material culture became integral to women's history. Separate spheres also denoted the physical space which women and men occupied. The purchase of the clubhouse finalized the shift in the club's agenda from a self-improvement to a civic organization. No longer was Sorosis identified as a club focused on the improvement of the members; instead, it became an incorporated club that had all the rights and liberties such a designation entailed. With the incorporation of the club, women gained the ability to own property, sign contracts, and invest money. These newly found liberties allowed them to become business women and protect the interest of the club.

An examination of the North Carolina Sorosis clubhouse provides insights into how clubwomen entered the public sphere and altered public space. This thesis considers

the use of material culture as a means to demonstrate the impact the women's club movement had on both the Wilmington landscape and the members of North Carolina Sorosis. To build, design, and purchase clubhouses represented some of the more noticeable efforts of women's clubs to combine civic responsibilities with more traditional women's roles. Clubwomen believed the city could become homelike and as domestic housekeepers they attempted to blur the lines between public and private spaces. This concept enabled them to enter the city's public realm.

When North Carolina Sorosis purchased a house next to City Hall, the club women announced their presence to the city. North Carolina Sorosis members empowered themselves by altering the physical landscape of the city. Purchasing the clubhouse near City Hall situated the clubwomen next to Wilmington's source of male power and authority. From this public platform, Sorosis launched its programs for city improvement. Women's clubhouses were a physical space in which women could organize and enact their policies for social change. Clubhouses challenged the traditional male/public-female/private social construct by using a home as model for building an all-female institution.

Sorosis utilized its proximity to City Hall to lobby city officials to assist women in cleaning up Wilmington. Through their determination and perseverance, Wilmington clubwomen navigated the murky waters of private and public spheres and transformed Wilmington into a city where white women could move freely between public and private spheres. By the end of World War II, North Carolina Sorosis had transformed not only the individual members of its club, but also the community. However, the very success of the clubwomen contributed to a decline in the civic and public power of the

clubwoman. After World War II Sorosis was no longer the driving force of change in Wilmington. The clubwomen turned many of their projects over to the city. With the professionalization of libraries, museums, health care and other public institutions, the clubwomen lost their control and influence on the growth of Wilmington. The result was the club's return to its original purpose as a women's social club. Nevertheless, the institutions that Sorosis founded in the early part of the twentieth century remain important institutions in Wilmington today.

## CHAPTER ONE: NORTH CAROLINA SOROSIS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

North Carolina Sorosis began as a self-improvement club that centered on the intellectual and cultural development of its members through the study of literature, art, and domestic sciences. By 1907, the club had shifted to a civic-minded organization dedicated to the betterment of the community. This shift was evidenced by the formation of several programs and institutions including Wilmington's first free public library, domestic science education for young women, a night school for Delgado Mill Workers, Milk station, baby clinics, Greenfield Lake Park, and the New Hanover County Museum. North Carolina Sorosis also demonstrated its patriotism by contributing to the home front efforts during World War I and World War II. After World War II, North Carolina Sorosis began to languish as the drive for new, inventive ways to help the community dissipated, and the local government took over many of the civic programs the club had founded and sustained.

This thesis argues that North Carolina Sorosis is a useful tool for exploring the impact of women's clubs on women and their community. North Carolina Sorosis provides a model of the women's club movement in the South. North Carolina Sorosis altered the roles of women in Wilmington by influencing the social, economic, and political development of Wilmington. The women's club movement demonstrated that women had a moral duty and responsibility to clean up society and North Carolina Sorosis, Wilmington's local club, provided women with the vehicle to enter the public sphere to define and shape public policy. Progressive Era reformer Jane Addams coined

the term social housekeeping, and women used this concept to take themselves out of the home and into the community.<sup>1</sup>

Although historians have not focused on North Carolina Sorosis, numerous scholarly works have explored the larger national women's club movement. Over the past thirty years, historians have attempted to explain the impact of the women's club movement on the social fabric of America and on the women who joined clubs. Anne Firor Scott's first publication, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, marked the beginning of such scholarly analysis of Southern, white, elite women. Scott's analysis hinted at a paradox. According to her, a woman's prescribed place in the South was in the home, but in actuality, Southern white women unmistakably occupied the political and public arena.<sup>2</sup>

Scott viewed the crisis of the Civil War and the Reconstructions years as a time for women's "liberation." The transformation of Southern society offered women new avenues to explore outside of their homes. Scott maintained that clubs and temperance societies were the forerunners of the suffrage movement and female empowerment. The founding of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874 and the missionary work advanced under the guidance of the social gospel movement helped to define and to limit the image of the Southern lady as a paragon of virtue and propriety. Women, according to Scott, belonged on a pedestal and were supposed to be well-behaved, pure, and nurturing. However, Scott concluded that these same Southern, elite,

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Association in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991)141-158.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in America, 1890-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 3-37.

white women were the first to challenge the prescribed role of women in Southern society when they joined WCTU.<sup>3</sup>

Under the conditions of oppression and separation that Scott outlined, women developed an affinity for leadership and a sense of sisterhood based on a shared culture. The development of separate spheres - one male, one female – with differing sets of cultural values and assumptions-led to men and women inhabiting different physical spaces. This perception provided historians with the opportunity to perceive women as agents of historical change. Estelle B. Freedman’s 1979 article, “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism,” argued that one of the major strengths to female empowerment prior to the vote was the creation of separate female communities established by women’s organizations.<sup>4</sup> These organizations offered members the opportunity to engage in political and social reforms. She further argued that the sense of female community women enjoyed through club membership began to disintegrate in the 1920’s as women moved beyond separatism and attempted to integrate male space.<sup>5</sup>

Scott’s work inspired the next generation of women’s history scholars. Much of the research in the 1970’s and early 1980’s focused on a women’s culture that flourished under the separate spheres doctrine. Nancy Cott and Caroll Smith-Rosenberg emphasized the values women shared and the cultural feminism women found within

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<sup>3</sup> Scott, *The Southern Lady*, ix-44.

<sup>4</sup> For a more lengthy discussion see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America” *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975),1-29., Nancy Cott’s *The Bonds of Womanhood: Women’s Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Estelle B Freedman, “Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism” *Feminist Studies*, (Fall 1979), 512-529.



female organizations. Karen J. Blair expanded this argument with *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Defined, 1868-1914* (1980), which focused on women's clubs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Blair examined a select group of women's clubs, including the first women's club, the Sorosis Club of New York, and the development of the national organization, the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Blair argued that the experience women gained as club members fostered a recognition and assertion of their responsibilities in the public arena. Clubs became the medium white, middle class women used in their struggles for autonomy; their empowerment led Blair to characterize women's clubs as latent feminist organizations.<sup>6</sup>

Blair's *The Clubwoman as Feminist* also argued that women's associations were vital to the establishment of a sense of sisterhood among women. This sisterhood allowed women to enter into the public arena disguised as domestic housekeepers. In other words, women created a public role for themselves based on their differences with men. This difference was grounded in their moral superiority and based on their domestic responsibilities.

Blair, however, failed to place the women's club experience within a larger context. Her work ignored the formation of African-American clubs and the development of women's organizations outside of New England. She also failed to address either the differences in the development of individual clubs or the differences that geographic regions might have had on club formations. Disagreeing with Scott, Blair argued that it was not until the late nineteenth century that Southern women

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<sup>6</sup> Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980).

developed an independent identity based upon gender and sisterhood that enabled them to challenge and alter the patriarchal values characteristic of the South.<sup>7</sup>

Adding to the separate spheres ideology in southern women's history, Jean E. Friedman's 1985 work, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900*, offered a new interpretation of the southern woman's experience. Emphasizing regional differences, Friedman wrote, "Community and not gender bound southern womanhood." This concept of the enclosed garden accounted for much of the subordination of Southern women during the nineteenth century. Women's identification within the garden prevented them from creating their own gender-based culture within the larger patriarchal society. This, according to Friedman, provided an explanation for the absence of women's clubs in the middle to the late nineteenth century in the South.<sup>8</sup> Friedman, unlike Scott, argued that the Civil War offered no new opportunities for Southern women and it was not until women became involved in church organizations and temperance movements after the Civil War that they started to emerge from their gardens.

Theodora Penny Martin's *The Sound of Our Own Voices; Women's Study Clubs, 1860-1910*, published in 1987, responded to Scott's call for further analysis of white, middle class women's clubs. Martin fostered a new awareness of the impact the women's club movement had on its members, and she offered a better understanding of community development and the importance of local resources in the creation of a community study. Martin moved beyond the studies of Scott and Blair by analyzing

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<sup>7</sup> Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 1-38.

<sup>8</sup> Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xiii.

study clubs as organizations that fostered intellectual, independent adult education and forged camaraderie among clubwomen.<sup>9</sup> Instead of focusing on feminism and benevolence as Scott, Blair, and Freedman had done, Martin emphasized the role of literary studies to the members of the Decatur Art Class of Central Illinois

Lori Ginzberg's 1990 study *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century United States* argued that the role of women in benevolent organizations denoted a correlation between the emergence of a middle class culture and the role women played in that culture.<sup>10</sup> In support of Scott's thesis, Ginzberg argued that a new woman emerged from the Civil War with an altered view of society's ideals of benevolence. Benevolent societies began to represent middle class values. These organizations gave rise to a form of social control that would soon dominate the Progressive Era.<sup>11</sup>

Anne Firor Scott's *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History*, published in 1991 examined women's organizations from 1790-1929 as key contributors to social and political changes in America.<sup>12</sup> In her examinations of white and African-American middle class women's organizations, Scott argued that these clubs offered new ideas about true womanhood, and she explored how volunteer organizations helped

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<sup>9</sup> Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices; Women's Study Clubs, 1860-1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> For a more lengthy discussion please see Mary P. Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality and Politics in the Northeastern United States, 1820-1885* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> For further details see Scott's "On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility." *Journal of American History* 71,( June 1984), 7-21.

women move from the confines of the private realm to the public sphere.<sup>13</sup> Women latched onto the concept of true womanhood and became moral gatekeepers by participating in voluntary organizations. She also argued that women's clubs played an integral role in shaping America's social order during the Progressive Era.<sup>14</sup>

Women in the Progressive Era joined voluntary organizations that supported government action in social reform policies. Robyn Muncy's *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (1991) argued that women's clubs influenced social welfare policies. Muncy determined that women's effectiveness in society was dependent on their control over their institutions. For example, women's power declined as women's organizations began to lose their authority over social welfare programs with the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act in 1921 and the Social Security Act in 1935. However, many women's organization continued to follow through with the programs they had started despite the fact that they lacked the authority they once held within their communities.<sup>15</sup>

Not surprisingly, the works thus far discussed have a national focus. It has been much more difficult to uncover regional records other than those of activists and organizations with national reputations. The broad outline of the Southern women's club movement appeared with Marsha Weddell's, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, Tennessee*, (1991). Weddell focused on Memphis, Tennessee, which allowed

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<sup>13</sup> The term the cult of true womanhood was defined by Barbara Welter's 1966 article, "The Cult of True Womanhood" *American Quarterly* 18 (Winter 1966); 151-169. Welter described the ideal characteristic of nineteenth century white, middle class women as piety, submissiveness, and domesticity.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in America, 1890-1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-37.

her to examine the influence the reform movement had at the local level during the Progressive Era. She examined the Nineteenth Century Club, the most influential woman's club in the city. Weddell, like Blair, argued that women's clubs fostered a sense of sisterhood that developed out of a unique women's culture. This culture encouraged women to enter the political arena and created a political consciousness in the area of health and education.<sup>16</sup> The defining attributes of the separate women's culture were race, class, religion and a shared social experience as women and mothers.

Much of the research in the 1970's and 1980's focused on the formation of a separate women's culture that flourished under the separate spheres doctrine. By the 1990's, a new generation of women's historians had begun focusing on the diversity of women involved in the club movement. Sandra Schackel's *Social Housekeepers: Women Shaping Public Policy in New Mexico, 1920-1940*, published in 1992, offered a new interpretation of women's clubs by examining the effect the professionalization of health and social services had on women and their organizations in the pre WWII West. Her work was also among the first to examine the participation of Native American and Hispanic women in organized social reform. Schackel argued that differences arose among the women's clubs because of differing ethnicities. Further, she asserted that gender did not create a universal sisterhood among women or women's clubs.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Marsha Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis, 1875-1915* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). For more information on the relationship between domesticity and politics see Paula Baker 's "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920" *The American Historical Review* 89:3 (June 1984), 620-647.

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Schackel, *Social Housekeepers: Women Shaping Public Policy in New Mexico 1920-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

Scholars studying the women's club movement also explored the role of the state in the creation of social welfare. Kathryn Kish Sklar's article "The Historic Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930" argued that women's strength and power directly contrasted their lack of authority at both local and national levels. A weak central government benefited women by allowing them the leeway to build institutions of higher learning and organizations that benefited both women and society. According to Sklar, gender shaped social welfare programs in the Progressive Era, and women were successful because of the strong maternalist coalition and the state's recognition of a need for reform. Sklar, similar to Freedman, argued that by the time of the New Deal many of the women's achievements had been incorporated into state or national laws. In addition, organized women no longer worked autonomously outside the political system; instead they contributed by joining the Democratic Party.<sup>18</sup>

Elizabeth Hayes Turner's *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion, and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920* (1997) not only examined women's activism in Galveston, Texas, but it also asked which women predominated in reform efforts. Turner discovered that religion often played a key role in Progressive reform but "that elitism rather than evangelism drove the Southern women's reform movement." She further maintained that women created their own community within the male-dominated church and state, and both she and Scott argued that women created the welfare state.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar's "The Historic Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930." in *Mothers of a New World; Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, edited by Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993), 43-93.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

In *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930*, published in 1997, Anastasia Sims argued that women's voluntary associations worked within prescribed gender norms to define new public policies and to bring social reform to North Carolina. Working within the gendered constraints society placed on them, women created an identity based on domesticity. This resulted in an authority that did not challenge the region's patriarchal hierarchy. Sims examined Southern white women and the benevolent work they undertook. She focused on four objectives of the Southern women's club movement: temperance, cultural reform, patriotic societies, and suffrage. Through these four objectives, Sims traced the commitment of women's organizations to state's rights, the Lost Cause, and Progressive Reform.<sup>20</sup> Lagging behind women's clubs in the North and in Southern states, North Carolina clubwomen depended heavily on the ideology of the lady on the pedestal to justify their social housekeeping efforts. The state's and the clubwomen's conservative values hindered women's efforts to make major changes in North Carolina.

Nancy Hewitt's 2001 publication, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida 1870's-1920's*, focused on the often overlapping circles of women activists in one city, Tampa, Florida. Rather than focusing on unity and sisterhood, Hewitt examined ethnic diversity within women's organizations in Tampa. According to Hewitt, native-born white, African-American, and immigrant women of Cuban and Italian heritage shaped women's activism in Tampa. Hewitt argued that Florida never fit the biracial model of other New South cities. Tampa was home to numerous voluntary

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<sup>20</sup> Anastasia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations in North Carolina, 1883-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

and reform organizations founded by women of various ethnicities. Hewitt determined that ethnic and class backgrounds shaped women's activism.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis also makes use of the growing body of literature on material cultural studies. The purchase of the clubhouse symbolized the nationwide shift in women's clubs from self-improvement to civic reform. An examination of the North Carolina Sorosis clubhouse and the other physical spaces the women of Sorosis occupied provides a new source to explain how clubwomen entered the public sphere.<sup>22</sup>

This thesis attempts to contribute to the growing body of material culture literature by demonstrating the impact the women's club movement had on residents of Wilmington and the members of North Carolina Sorosis. Although the clubhouse was torn down in 1968, images of the exterior and interior of the house and minutes from club meetings offer valuable insights into the clubhouse's role in North Carolina Sorosis. North Carolina Sorosis created a separate public space with the purchase of their clubhouse. Separate spheres took on new meaning as material culture became integral to the field of women's history. Separate spheres also denoted the physical space which women and men occupied. Christine Stansell's 1986 monograph *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York; 1789-1860* delved into a strong woman's culture in the heart of

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<sup>21</sup>Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida 1870's-1920's* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> For a more in depth discussion of the definition of material culture see Henry H. Glassie's, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historical Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).; James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life* (Garden City: Double Day and Company, 1977), Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture and Theory and Method" (*Winterthur Portfolio* 17, 1982); 1-19. Thomas J. Schlereth's *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990; 17-33.



the city's working class women. Women, according to Stansell, were active agents in defining the city's geography and the shaping of urban space.<sup>23</sup>

Margaret Marsh's 1989 article, "From Separation to Togetherness; The Social Construction of Domestic Space in American Suburbs, 1840-1915," also provides an interpretation of how men and women conceived space during the nineteenth century. The development of a suburban culture in cities allowed women to move beyond the confines of their homes. The arrival of feminine architecture, including department stores and new family homes, carved out separate gender spaces. Specific areas within the home, especially the kitchen and family parlors, were designated specifically for women. The new architectural designs of cities and homes in this period offered new avenues for historians to explore the role of gender in the development of private and public spaces for both men and women.<sup>24</sup>

Sarah Deutsch's *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* built upon Marsh's argument. According to Deutsch, women broke down the preconceived idea that a woman's place was confined solely to the home by using the city as a locale with public places and responsibilities for women to undertake through social organizations.<sup>25</sup>

Most historians agree that the women's club movement transformed women's expectations of themselves and what they should accomplish. Municipal housekeeping placed women's greatest value to the nation in the domestic sphere. Women's clubs

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<sup>23</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Marsh, "From Separation to Togetherness: The Social Construction of Domestic Space in American Suburbs, 1840-1915" *The Journal of American History* 76:2 (September 1989):506-527.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

enabled women to move beyond the home and into the public sphere. These clubs utilized the ideology that had been established in the late eighteenth century with 'Republican Motherhood,' and transformed it to suit their needs to improve themselves and the community.

## CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN BEGIN TO ORGANIZE

Previous works by historians have focused on the women's club movement during the Progressive Era on both local and national levels. This thesis, which examines the women's club movement in the Southern town of Wilmington, North Carolina, seeks to expand what scholars know about women's clubs at the local level. Women's clubs began as self-improvement study clubs that focused on the intellectual and cultural improvement of women through the study of literature, art, and domestic sciences. By the turn of the twentieth century, the purpose of women's clubs had evolved into community and civic-minded organizations that focused on the betterment of the community. This was reflected at national and local levels. It is necessary first to discuss the rise of the women's club movement on the national level in order to understand the formation, goals, and projects of North Carolina Sorosis. The shift in the women's club movement was reflected on the national level with the General Federation of Women's Clubs and locally with North Carolina Sorosis.

The women's club movement began as a result of a controversy involving Jane Cunningham Croly, an accredited New York journalist and women's rights activist. Croly, born in 1829 in England, moved to Poughkeepsie, New York, at age twelve. She educated herself by reading books from her father's library. She taught for a short period of time, but found her true passion-journalism-when her first article was accepted and published by the *New York Tribune*. She married fellow journalist David G. Croly at age twenty-seven and raised four children. During this time she continued to publish articles and manage the Woman's Department of the *New York World*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward T. James et al. *Notable American Women, 1607-1950*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 409-411.

Croly reserved a seat at the 1868 New York Press banquet under the name J.C. Croly. When the New York Press discovered Croly was a woman, her invitation was revoked. The correspondence between Croly and the New York Press drew the attention of numerous activists, including Alice and Phoebe Carey, who would later join Croly's club. Negative publicity forced the New York Press to reissue Croly's invitation to the banquet, but she refused to attend. Because of the New York Press' sexist action, she started her own club on April 13, 1868 two days after the banquet which featured Charles Dickens as the guest speaker.<sup>2</sup>

Croly called upon her friends to aid her in starting a woman's only club that would improve the status of women. The initial members of Sorosis met in Croly's home to develop the organization. Croly sought women who thrived on intellectual thought to join her club. Twelve charter members signed a pledge and adopted the name Sorosis.<sup>3</sup> The term Sorosis was found in a botanical dictionary and defined as a "cluster of flowers on one stem."<sup>4</sup> The name, members felt, would not be offensive to the general public because it evoked images of flowers and beauty. At first, the members of Sorosis did not wish to upset the balance of the Victorian concept of public and private spheres for men and women. The newly formed club emphasized the need for self-improvement.

Gertrude Jenkins Howell of North Carolina Sorosis wrote of the club movement in her

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Cunningham Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (New York: Henry G. Allen, 1898); Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America*, Mary Jean Houde, *Reaching Out: A Story of the General Federation of Women's Clubs* (Chicago: The Mobium Press, 1989); Mildred White Wells, *Unity in Diversity; The History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs* (Washington D.C.: General Federation of Women's Clubs, 1953.)

<sup>4</sup> Jane Cunningham Croly, *Sorosis, Its Origin and History* (New York: Press of J.J. Little, 1886, );and Gertrude Jenkins Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis, 1895-1957*, Wilmington: North Carolina Sorosis, Inc, 1958, 7.

history of the North Carolina Sorosis Club, “Women ...were beginning to wake up to the fact that if they worked they could accomplish almost anything they desired.”<sup>5</sup> Sorosis of New York doubled its membership within a month and continued to grow. The women’s club movement had begun. The club’s purpose was “to promote agreeable and useful relations among women of literary and artistic tastes.”<sup>6</sup> The members also regulated the business protocol of fees, etiquette, membership invitations, and initiations. The club’s guiding philosophy opened an avenue thirty years later for the women of Wilmington, North Carolina, to form and eventually name their club Sorosis in honor of the first women’s club in New York.

In 1890, at the height of the women’s club movement, Croly modified her version of Sorosis with the formation of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC). Boasting a membership in the millions, the GFWC became the largest women’s organization of the Progressive Era. Self-improvement was no longer the principal purpose of women’s clubs. By 1890, women were well-aware of their subordinate position in society, particularly in the fields of education and politics, and they wanted to improve their status. Because women were dissatisfied with self-improvement alone, they turned to social reform. Women utilized their voluntary associations to create a public female culture.

Against the backdrop of the Progressive Era emerged a new ideal of womanhood that transformed the social role of women both at home and within public spheres.

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<sup>5</sup> Croly, *Sorosis* and Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Sorosis Constitution as quoted in Croly’s, *Sorosis*, 8.; Marguerite Dawson Winant. *A Century of Sorosis, 1868-1968* (Uniondale: Salisbury Printers, 1968).

Reformers such as Jane Addams, who established Hull House of Chicago provided kindergartens, daycare facilities, libraries, music and art classes, and numerous other neighborhood social welfare programs for women. The club movement encompassed an ever-changing group of women who wanted something more than the nineteenth century self-improvement clubs provided. Addams and Croly offered women opportunities to expand their horizons. Clubwomen who associated the community environment with that of the home believed they had a moral responsibility to clean up their communities.<sup>7</sup> This new female culture of civic engagement utilized the rhetoric of municipal housekeeping to justify women's participation in the public sphere. As a result, women improved their status in society. The Progressive Era ideals of social welfare meshed with the tenets of Croly and other reformists and made possible specific reforms such as city playgrounds, public libraries, baby clinics, sanitation policies and other GFWC goals.

The formation of New York's Sorosis and the GFWC had far reaching effects in the creation of countless women's clubs across America. The women of Wilmington, North Carolina closely followed the national headlines and believed in 1895 that it was time to organize. Mrs. Andrew J. Howell, Jr., Mrs. Rufus W. Hicks, and Mrs. Philander Pearsall discussed the idea of forming a club to improve Wilmington's women themselves through the study of literature, art, and domestic science. A few weeks later

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<sup>7</sup> Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 1-14; Julieanne Appleson Phillips, *Unity and Diversity? The Federation of Women's Clubs and the Middle Class in Cleveland, Ohio, 1902-1962* (Case Western Reserve University, 1996).

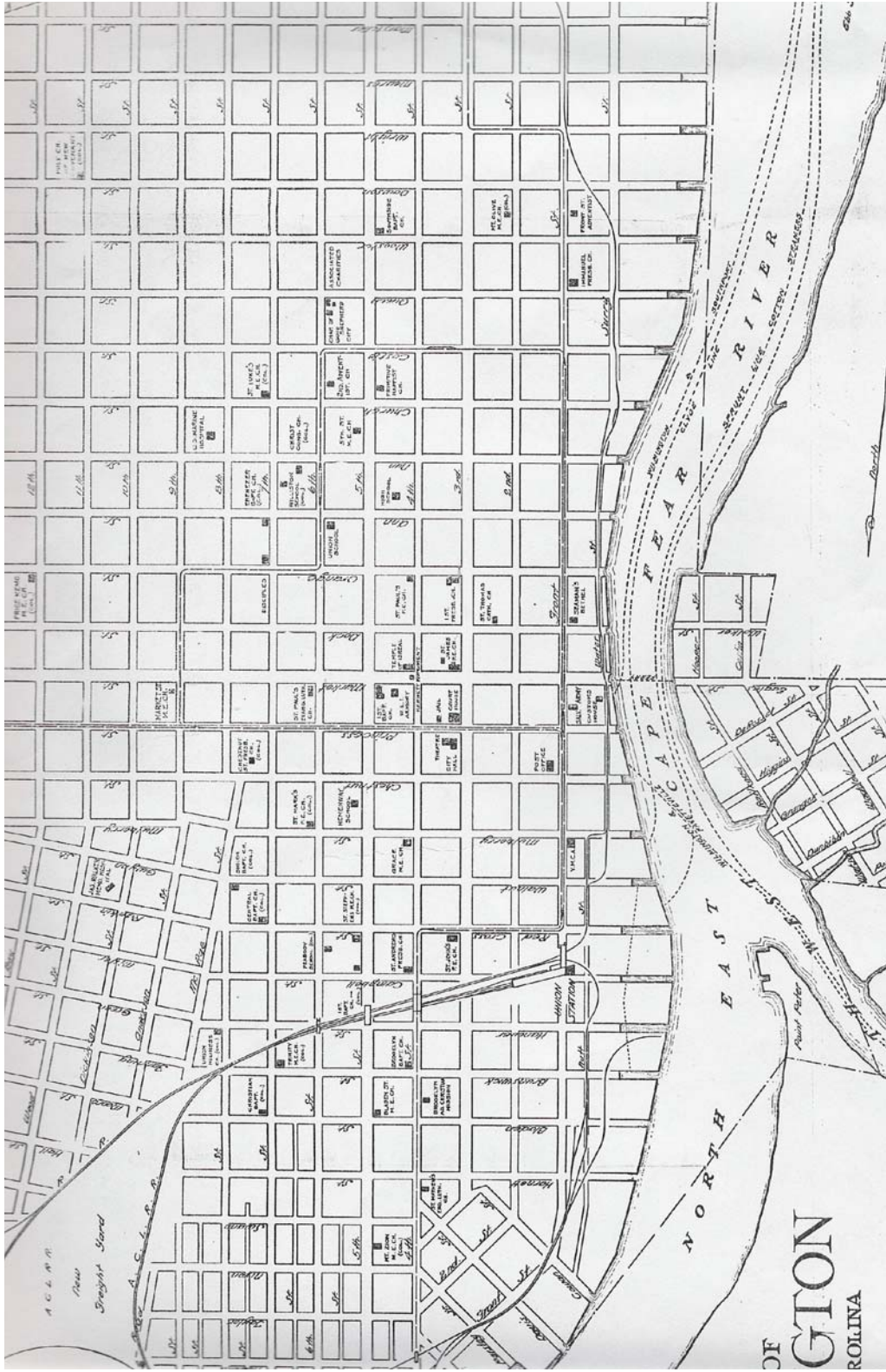


Image 1. Map of Wilmington, 1911. New Hanover County Public Library

on Wednesday, December 5, 1895, fifteen women gathered in the home of Mrs. Rufus Hicks for the purpose of forming a women's club.<sup>8</sup>

The fifteen women who answered the call for a women's club grew up in middle class homes, were college educated, and had married in their early twenties. The first president of Sorosis, Mrs. Andrew J. Howell, recalled that first meeting, "There is no record as to how it happened that this particular group was the one who met together on that December day to plan a woman's club. About half of them lived within a block or two of each other, and probably social relations or church memberships accounted for the others."<sup>9</sup> The founding members of North Carolina Sorosis were Mrs. C.E. Borden, Mrs. W.M. Cumming, Mrs. H. Green, Miss Alice Green, Miss Margaret Gibson, Mrs. Andrew J. Howell, Mrs. Rufus W. Hicks, Miss Margaret Kingsbury, Mrs. Philander Pearsall, Miss Anna Savage, Mrs. Walker Taylor, Mrs. D.C Whitted, Mrs. C.W. Worth, Mrs. James Worth and Mrs. Martin Willard.

Club recruitment for North Carolina Sorosis perpetuated homogeneity. This club, like many across the nation, was exclusive in terms of race, religion and class. These women were married to or were the daughters of the city's most prominent businessmen.<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Jenkins Howell, married Andrew J. Howell, a Presbyterian minister, print bookseller, and stationer. Sallie Hicks, later known as the mother of

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<sup>8</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1895.

<sup>9</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 7.

<sup>10</sup>Wilmington's population and economic growth was based on its location as a port city in southeastern North Carolina. The men and women relied heavily upon the import and export business the port offered to its residents. The population of New Hanover County, the county in which Wilmington resides in grew from 25, 785 in 1900 (the census for 1890 was destroyed in a fire) to 63, 272 in 1950.<sup>10</sup> The city more than doubled its population in a matter of fifty years. The increase in population and the growth of the port city's businesses through the railroad, cotton, mills, naval stores, and other white-collar businesses created a white middle class in Wilmington.





**Image 1. Home of Sallie Spears Hicks at 418 South Third Street, circa 1890.  
New Hanover County Public Library**

Sorosis, was married to the owner and operator of an import business; Mrs. Willard's husband, Martin, was the president of Willard Bag and Manufacturing Company.<sup>11</sup> The occupations of their men not only permitted the women of Sorosis to participate in a women's club without jeopardizing their status in society but also provided them with the leisure time necessary to participate in club activities. The women did not need to work outside of the home because their husbands provided for their families.

Prosperity gave the women of Wilmington time for reflection and action. These women were well- acquainted with national events and they admired the women who founded the New York Sorosis Club. Howell wrote about the members' knowledge of national events: "we knew that women all over the country in the early years of the gay nineties ...and our group here in Wilmington had been reading with interest of the forward steps taken by women elsewhere."<sup>12</sup> The fifteen charter members of Wilmington's club wrote a letter to the members of New York Sorosis requesting permission to use the Sorosis name. The New York club granted permission but stipulated that a qualifying word be used to differentiate the two organizations; accordingly the Wilmington women added North Carolina to their club's name. The New York Sorosis Club also sent a copy of their club's Constitution and By-Laws to aid the Wilmington organization.<sup>13</sup> North Carolina Sorosis used this information and adopted several Articles and By-Laws of the New York club. North Carolina Sorosis implemented the By-Laws and the Constitutional amendments that regulated the daily

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<sup>11</sup> Wilmington City Directory, 1896.

<sup>12</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 7-10.





**Image 2.** Sallie Spears Hicks, circa 1900. *Wilmington Star-News*

concerns of the club, including the division of meetings and the electoral process that determined club leadership. By the end of its first year, North Carolina Sorosis had printed a yearbook with a membership list and had included the Constitution and By Laws. North Carolina Sorosis maintained close ties with the New York club, and several members, including Mrs. Howell and Miss Margaret Lovell Gibson, traveled to New York as guests of the northern city's club members.

The women of North Carolina Sorosis crafted a constitution that outlined the club's agenda. The club adopted seven articles within the first year. Article one of the constitution officially named the association The North Carolina Sorosis. Article two outlined the club's purpose: "to promote agreeable and useful relations among women of literary, artistic, and scientific tastes; to encourage mental and moral development in the community, and to render women helpful to each other and to the world."<sup>14</sup> This objective closely followed the same principles set by the New York Sorosis Club with the promotion of sisterhood and self-improvement.

Article Three established the leadership and general business of the club. It stated that a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary, and a treasurer would be elected annually, and that no officer would preside for more than two consecutive terms. Elections would be held by secret ballot. It was also the responsibility of all officers and the chairmen of the art, literature, and domestic science departments to present annual reports at the end of each year.<sup>15</sup> Within the exclusive confines of North Carolina Sorosis, the women gained experience conducting meetings, participating in public speaking, and managing money. The club also presented women with an opportunity to

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<sup>14</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Yearbook, 1898.

<sup>15</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Year Book, 1897.

practice electoral politics by electing officials and holding office. These opportunities offered women the space to develop their own civic values and the practice of politics.

White middle class women preferred the company of their own kind, and the club's founding members limited club membership accordingly in Article four. The formation and organization of the club established clear race and class boundaries that worked to promote white middle-class values. The women who joined North Carolina Sorosis, similar to numerous other women who joined clubs across America, shared similar attributes defined by race, class, and religious beliefs.<sup>16</sup> To be admitted into North Carolina Sorosis, a candidate's name and qualifications had to be presented to the executive committee. At the monthly committee meeting, new members were voted into the club. Each member of the club could present two names annually to the committee for admittance. Members also provided confidential references for potential candidates and had to be unanimously voted into the club by the executive committee.<sup>17</sup> North Carolina Sorosis' strict guidelines and admittance policy represented the club's unstated determination to exclude all black women and working class white women. When two members agreed to sponsor a potential new member, the executive committee considered the applicants suitability. Such by-laws ensured that members' friends and relatives would be admitted and that women from different and unacceptable backgrounds would be turned away. Southern white women had long been revered by society as moral and pure and they did not want to associate with African-Americans women who were seen as being immoral and sullied. Thus, North Carolina Sorosis as did the majority of other

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<sup>16</sup> Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 7-13., Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, 1-34.

<sup>17</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Year Book, 1897.

white women's clubs refused to admit them.<sup>18</sup> In response to this exclusion, African-American women formed their own organizations. In Wilmington the African-American community founded its own library and literary societies and supported its own benevolent and civic associations. These organizations included the Patrons of Mercy and Love & Charity Benevolent Association, and a separate chapter of the YWCA. Within their churches African-American women also formed parochial schools, instigated adult literacy classes, and promoted the idea that a good education was necessary for self-improvement.<sup>19</sup>

North Carolina Sorosis also incorporated club fees and dues which were outlined in Article four. Initial dues were set at \$1.00 annually. These dues were established to support the different departmental committees, which met monthly. Dues also supported a traveling library for club members and the publication of yearbooks. The latter was important because it allowed the members of Sorosis an opportunity to read selected works from the different departments of the club.<sup>20</sup>

In its early years, North Carolina Sorosis emphasized self-improvement. The study of different topics and subjects offered new educational opportunities for clubwomen. Elections for positions within the different departments were held annually or biannually. The three original department chairpersons of art, literature, and domestic

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<sup>18</sup> Sims, *Power of Femininity*, 56-7.

<sup>19</sup> William M. Reaves, *Strength Through Struggle*, Chapter 1, Scott, *Natural Allies*, 118-149, Blair, *Clubwomen as Feminists*, 108-111. Khadijah Olivia Turner Miller, *Everyday Victories: The Pennsylvania State Federation Of Negro Women's Clubs, Inc., 1900-1930 Paradigms of Survival and Empowerment*. ( Temple University Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, Literature Department, 1896-1903.

science met monthly to determine club policies, objectives, and memberships. Within fifteen years, music, civic, and current events departments were added.<sup>21</sup>

North Carolina Sorosis started as a literary and self-improvement club for women. The self-improvement principle was institutionalized by the formation of the Literature Department, which met for the first time on November 13, 1896 and Mrs. James Chadbourne, Jr. was elected chairwoman. Under her guidance, the goal of the literature department was to “promote agreeable and useful relations among women of literacy and scientific tastes; to encourage mental and moral development in the community and to render women helpful to each other.”<sup>22</sup> The Literature Department acted as a study group for its participants. The department activities reflected women’s desire to go beyond the formal education society deemed appropriate for women by actively educating themselves on diverse topics.

The Literature Department promoted programs that encouraged critical thinking and helped women to develop writing and oratory skills. Members contributed papers, gave readings, and debated. Debates were tools for learning, and they provided women with opportunities to examine issues and to improve their public speaking skills within a supportive environment. Reading literature had long been a part of women’s attempts to compensate for the limited intellectual opportunities society offered to them as women.<sup>23</sup> Participating in the literature department of Sorosis allowed members to develop

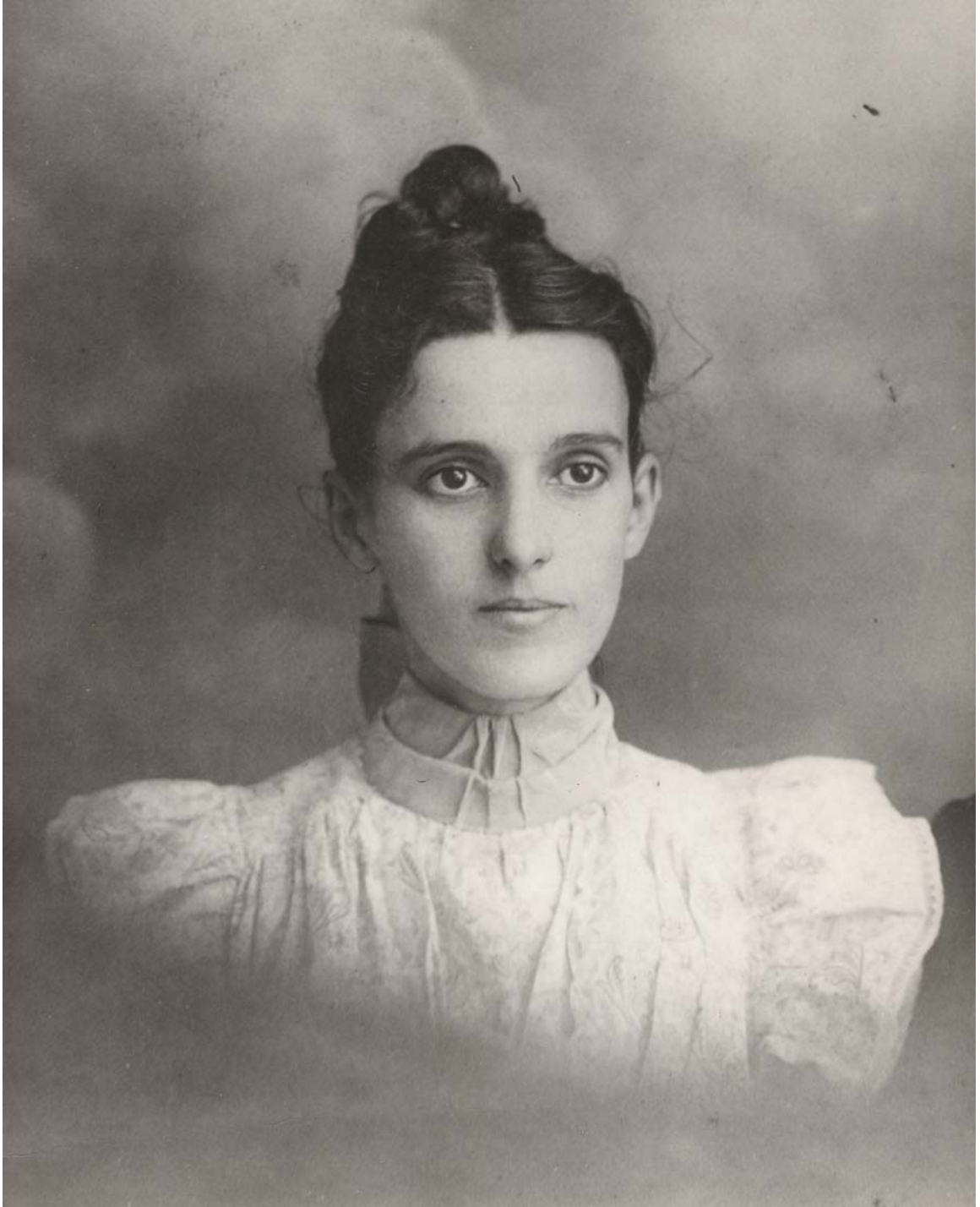
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<sup>21</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 7-10.

<sup>22</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, *Southern Lady*, 75; Sally Ann Myers, *Northwest Ohio Women’s Literary Clubs as Arbiters of Culture, 1880-1918* (Bowling Green State University, 1995).





**Image 3. Gertrude Jenkins Howell, circa 1890, Private Collection of North Carolina Sorosis**



intellectual independence and a newly found confidence in their sex.<sup>24</sup>

The Art Department followed a premise similar to that of the Literature Department. With a desire to “foster and encourage art interest” the Art Department included many of the pioneers of the club, including Mrs. Philander Pearsall and Miss Margaret Gibson.<sup>25</sup> This department in particular cultivated the ornamental aspects of self-improvement. The department often promoted local artists and organized displays of local artists’ works that were both “interesting and gratifying.”<sup>26</sup> By promoting local artists, North Carolina Sorosis became not only students of the artistic masters but also promoters of artistic talent.

The Domestic Science Department provided a clean and safe environment for Wilmingtonians and promoted the traditional concept of women as homemakers. The members of this department believed that those, “who work for the uplifting of mankind ... [represented] the highest of all callings for women ... And the character of a people made in the home and the school room is at once its best fortune...”<sup>27</sup> Clubwomen believed it was their moral responsibility to educate themselves and to promote education for the betterment of the community. In 1902, the clubwomen created a Domestic Science Department at the Union School. Sorosis equipped the kitchen and paid a teacher to instruct students on how to cook proficiently. Recalling the uproar over teaching young white girls to cook, Mrs. Howell wrote, “A few of our prominent citizens disapproved of having their daughters spend time learning to cook. In those days a

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<sup>24</sup> Martin, *Sound of Our Voices*, 31-47.

<sup>25</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>26</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>27</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, May 13, 1902.

colored cook just naturally went with a kitchen. How Time marches on!”<sup>28</sup> Howell’s assessment of middle class values suggests that must have been commonplace for most middle and upper class households to employ black women in the kitchen. Thus, concept of teaching a young middle-class white girl to cook was revolutionary. By providing such instruction, Sorosis women believed that they were doing their duty to improve the quality of white homes.

The members of North Carolina Sorosis expressed a sense of urgency toward their civic responsibility to the community. As Howell wrote in the club’s official history, “Ever since the beginning, the guiding star of North Carolina Sorosis has been that short sentence in our Constitution which says: The object of this Club shall be to . . .render women helpful to each other, and to the world.”<sup>29</sup> The conditions in Wilmington, along with the literature of the GFWC, encouraged women to contribute to the betterment of their communities by taking their domestic responsibilities out of the home and into the public sphere. North Carolina Sorosis became the first club in North Carolina to join the GFWC in 1896, just one year after the Wilmington club formed. The national women’s club movement promoted the concept that women had a moral responsibility to improve the welfare of their communities. Conditions in Wilmington and across America reflected a need for change, and clubwomen responded to the challenge.

Sorosis of New York and the GFWC helped develop and lead the women’s club movement in America. Women formed state organizations that affiliated with the GFWC. In the GFWC’s early days, it was an umbrella organization of individual clubs

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<sup>28</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 41.

run separately and without much central organization or power. With no state club established in North Carolina, an official for each state was appointed by the GFWC and given the title State Chairman of Correspondence with the hope of recruiting more clubs and members. Mrs. Andrew J. Howell, of North Carolina Sorosis, became the first woman in North Carolina to hold this post. Maintaining correspondence with the GFWC necessitated the addition of two members to the committee: Mrs. Robert R. Cotton of Farmville, and Miss Margaret Lovell Gibson, of Wilmington.

North Carolina was one of the last Southern states to form a state federation. As Sallie Cotton Southall, the woman who initiated the drive for a state federation, recalled, “Clubs were few and unpopular – were considered unwomanly and existed solely for mental culture.”<sup>30</sup> Miss Louisa Poppenheim, president of the South Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs, suggested to the women of North Carolina that a North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs be created. Sallie Southall Cotton, a suffrage leader and author, was key in bringing together representatives from seven clubs. These clubs were the Sorosis, Round Table, and Embroidery clubs, of Winston-Salem, North Carolina Sorosis, of Wilmington, the Woman’s Club, of Goldsboro, the Circulating Book Club, of Salisbury, and the Alphen Club, of Statesville. Cotton chose a women’s institution, Salem College, as the setting for this meeting, and on May 26, 1902, the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs was created.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cotton as quoted in Sims’, *Power of Femininity*, 41; Emma Gay Stephenson, *Challenges for Change: A History of the North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs* (Charlotte: Delmar Company, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> Gertrude S. Carraway, *Carolina Crusaders: History of North Carolina Federation of Women’s Clubs* (New Bern: Owen G. Dunn Company, 1941), 7-11.

Regarding officers and departments, the NCFWC was established along similar lines to the GFWC. Mrs. Patterson was elected president; Mrs. Cotton, first vice-president; Mrs. W.R. Hollowell, second vice-president; Miss Gibson, recording secretary; Miss Clayton Candler, correspondent secretary; and Mrs. Charles Price, treasurer. Four departments were organized: Education, Library Extension, State Charities and Village Improvement. The purpose of the state federations, like the GFWC, was to incorporate as many clubs as possible in order to coordinate civic reform.<sup>32</sup>

In 1911, a few years after the NCFWC was organized, Sallie Southall Cotton summarized the activities of the women's organizations in North Carolina:

The activities of the clubs were almost innumerable and clubs were being organized over the whole state. Clean-up Day, screening foods, getting garbage ordinances passed...medical inspections in schools ... so many things done that the retrospect is wonderful and inspiring...man who thought housekeeping belonged solely to a women's sphere is becoming himself a good public housekeeper and generally admits he learned it from the women.<sup>33</sup>

Cotton's experience summed up the changing role of women during the Progressive Era. She exemplified the shift in the women's club movement from self-improvement to civic responsibility.

In the early twentieth century, public attitudes toward the role of government began to shift. Progressives began framing social problems as the result of social conditions, not individual failings. From this perspective, solutions lay not in improving the moral fiber of citizens but in addressing community needs with collective actions. In

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<sup>32</sup> Carraway, *Carolina Crusaders* 7-11.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Coates. *By Her Own Bootstraps: A Saga of Women in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1975), 65.

the early decades of the twentieth century, the activists of the Progressive Era sought government resources to improve children's health. They also lobbied for a broad array of public health and social services designed to improve living conditions. The new woman of the Progressive Era challenged the ideology of separate spheres and utilized the role of municipal housekeeper to expand her role in her community. This tactic led to greater power for women. Clubs represented safe and respectable means for middle and upper class white women to influence public policies at the local, state, and national levels. This shift from self-improvement to civic mindedness grew out of the belief that women's moral superiority, nurturing qualities and domestic management skills qualified them to improve their communities.<sup>34</sup>

Small local clubs that began as self-improvement clubs followed the national pattern. The formation of the NCFWC in 1902 and North Carolina Sorosis' rise to prominence at the state level signaled the shift toward civic reform. By 1907 North Carolina Sorosis had founded Wilmington's first free public library and had embraced the national women's club movement's civic reform policies.

Sorosis' influence in Wilmington was evident in the women's section of the *Wilmington Star-News*. Dubbed the society page, this section covered social events such as parties, wedding announcements, and club activities on local, state and national levels. The *Wilmington Star-News* recorded the club's achievements and accomplishments, both social and civic. Thus, as North Carolina Sorosis expanded its role in civic reform through its programs and initiatives for community betterment, the club's achievements appeared in the paper. Leading the way was the creation of the public library. Other

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<sup>34</sup> Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 1-56.

notable achievements included a night school for Delgado Mill Workers, the formation of the New Hanover County Museum, the establishment of Greenfield Lake Park, the creation of milk stations, the founding of baby clinics for the underprivileged, and contributions to home front efforts during World War I and World War II.

### CHAPTER THREE: MUNICIPAL HOUSEKEEPING

Women's clubs at the turn of the twentieth century began to do more than improve their members through literary and art exploration; they began taking action to improve their communities. As Mrs. M. L. Stover, a member of North Carolina Sorosis, wrote in 1913 about a woman's place in society, "Now she sees her business transcending from the four walls of her house and waiting for her everywhere. From house keeping to municipal house keeping was but a step."<sup>1</sup> Women all over the country were taking that same step out of the home and into the public sphere. They were continually motivated by their domestic traits and skills that could be used both in and out of the home.

Gertrude Jenkins Howell wrote of the work club members had accomplished over the first sixty years of the club's existence: "Our members are giving of their best in the business works and in quiet home duties. A great help in making life worthwhile for themselves and others...."<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the establishment of the public library, the club's civic mindedness resulted in a night school for Delgado Mill Workers, the New Hanover County Museum, Greenfield Lake Park, a cancer clinic, milk stations and baby clinics for the underprivileged as well as contributions to the home front effort during World War I and World War II.

In 1890, the GFWC helped coordinate efforts of local women's clubs across the country. Clubs, including North Carolina Sorosis, embraced the GFWC's traveling library campaign and created makeshift libraries in schools, churches, and town halls, which provided a range of literary materials for patrons to read. By 1904, the GFWC

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Sims', *Power of Femininity*, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 41-2.

reported that women's clubs across the country had established 474 public libraries.<sup>3</sup>

Sorosis club members were instrumental in establishing a public library in Wilmington, and they supported a variety of social and education programs. Numerous other clubs across North Carolina, including the Goldsboro Women's Club, founded libraries that were eventually turned over to city governments.<sup>4</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, Wilmington, the largest city in North Carolina, did not have a library for its citizens. Aware of the growing numbers of women participating in improvement projects at the local level, the women of Sorosis designed a plan to provide Wilmington with a free public library. Mrs. Philander Pearsall, president of Sorosis in 1897, started a small free circulating library.<sup>5</sup> Traveling libraries sent books to those who had little access to reading material. The goal of traveling libraries was to expose people who lived long distances from large towns to the best literature.

Public interest for a library began in earnest during Margaret Gibson's second term as Sorosis president. Sorosis held town meetings and discussions with city officials with the intended purpose of establishing a library in Wilmington. The importance of a library was reflected in *The Wilmington Messenger* a local newspaper, when the editor wrote, "A public library is well nigh as important as the public schools and could almost be classified as a part of the public school system."<sup>6</sup> For Southern progressives, libraries represented modernity in a region stereotyped as provincial and antiquated. Education

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<sup>3</sup> Wells, *Unity in Diversity*, 171.

<sup>4</sup> Sims, *Power of Femininity*, 84.

<sup>5</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Wilmington Messenger*, 27 March 1906.



through culture, which included literature and the arts, was key to Southerners attempts at reform.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the community's desire for a library, city officials were unwilling to pay the necessary maintenance costs. At the turn of the century, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie had offered Wilmington \$25,000 towards the establishment of a library, with the stipulation that the city would agree to provide \$2,500 annually to maintain the facilities.<sup>8</sup> The aldermen rejected this offer because they thought this sum was too much for the city to allocate toward the maintenance of a Carnegie Library. Despite this setback, Sorosis continued its campaign to establish a library.

Public acceptance of a free public library took several years of hard work. Margaret Gibson and Margaret Kingsbury actively sought the approval of Wilmington's Aldermen for financial support and space for the book collection. Sorosis held numerous functions to raise funds and collect books for the library project. A Library Tea, for example, provided the public with an opportunity to support the club's cause by donating books and money.<sup>9</sup> Sorosis also organized a rummage sale, one of the first of its kind in the state, according to Mrs. Howell. This benefit event netted \$102.00 for the library fund.<sup>10</sup> Clubwomen also put on a play benefit to raise funds for the library.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sims, *Power of Femininity*, 84-89; Paula D. Watson "Carnegie Ladies, Lady Carnegies: Women and the Building of Libraries." (*Libraries & Culture* 31 1996): 159-196. Marilyn Martin. "From Altruism to Activism: The Contribution of Literary Clubs to Arkansas Public Libraries, 1885-1935." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 55(1996) 64-94.

<sup>8</sup> *Wilmington Messenger*, 27 March 1906.

<sup>9</sup> Sorosis Minutes Literature Department 1896-1903, Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 11-13.

<sup>10</sup> Sorosis Minutes Literature Department 1896-1903, Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 11-13.

<sup>11</sup> Sorosis Minutes from Literature Department 1896-1903, Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 11-13.



**Image 4. Margaret Lovell Gibson, Circa 1900. Lower Cape Fear Historical Society**

Sorosis employed a variety of methods to maintain the interest of the community and its political leaders in establishing a library.<sup>12</sup> Clubwomen devoted large quantities of time and poured money from bazaars, teas, and other forms of fundraising into the campaign for the library. Sorosis members' work exemplified the ideal of an appropriate feminine public role for women in the New South. Women were seen as consumers and agents of high culture, and with these clubs they hoped to spread their knowledge and appreciation of the arts to the masses.<sup>13</sup>

The result of Sorosis' numerous fundraising campaigns was a free reading room for the white citizens of Wilmington which opened on February 3, 1904 in the Masonic Temple. At first, the public library was off-limits to African-American residents. A branch for African-Americans did not open until the late 1920's; the two did not merge until the mid 1960's. The reading room, which was privately owned but open to the public, quickly outgrew its initial space and moved to larger quarters in the Odd Fellows building. Residents too far from the reading room availed themselves of the five traveling libraries organized by Sorosis.<sup>14</sup> *The Wilmington Messenger* wrote of Sorosis' efforts "North Carolina Sorosis who have labored so diligently during the last few years... to provide the city of Wilmington with this library..."<sup>15</sup> Larger accommodations were soon needed as the community's demand increased.

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<sup>12</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes from Literature Department 1896-1903.

<sup>13</sup> Beverly Gordon. *Bazaars and Fair Ladies: The History of the American Fundraising Fair* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998); Sims, *Femininity*, 84-89.

<sup>14</sup> *Wilmington Messenger*, 6 April 1906.

<sup>15</sup> *Wilmington Messenger*, 6 April 1906.

The *Wilmington Messenger* noted the city's lack of participation in the establishment of the library. The editor wrote "It is surprising the number of people that visit the library at the present time and enjoy and get the benefit of the books placed there by the efforts of a band of energetic ladies of this city. For the metropolis of North Carolina and the wealthiest town in the state to not give one cent towards a public library in this day and time certainly does not appear to be progressive...."<sup>16</sup> Sorosis sent a letter signed by Margaret Gibson, Sallie Spears Hicks, Margaret Kingsbury, and Mrs. M.H.P. Clark petitioning the Aldermen to follow their suggestions outlined with the necessary tools the city would need to carry out this plan for a library.

The *Wilmington Messenger* closely followed the club's efforts to organize a free public library and summarized the clubwomen's plight: "For the past few years the ladies of the North Carolina Sorosis have been doing all in their power towards a library and have increased the number of volumes from one hundred in 1904 to 1,700 at the present time. The ladies will present a petition to the board of Aldermen asking that the city appropriate the sum of \$720 per year, to be expended in paying the rent of the rooms now occupied by the only public library in Wilmington-the Sorosis library-and to pay a librarian."<sup>17</sup> Sorosis, aware of its inability to provide an adequate public library for Wilmington, enlisted the aid of some aldermen, including John Bellamy, the brother of two Sorosis members, to provide support for the library. The backing of several affluent men who spoke on behalf of Sorosis at council meetings ensured the acceptance of Sorosis' plan.

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<sup>16</sup> *Wilmington Messenger*, 6 April 1906.

<sup>17</sup> *Wilmington Messenger*, 27 March 1906.

On November 30, 1906, the campaign for a public library culminated when Sorosis donated 1,700 volumes to the city to stock the upper floor of City Hall as the county's first free public library.<sup>18</sup> Sorosis members remember this ceremony as "impressive and momentous."<sup>19</sup> After its establishment, North Carolina Sorosis continued to play a key role in the library. At least one member of Sorosis has served as Library Trustee. Sallie Hicks, Gertrude Howell, Margaret Gibson and Mrs. Herbert Bluethenthal all filled this position. Gibson and Bluethenthal each served as chairwoman of the library board.<sup>20</sup> Sorosis also donated time to staff the library, decorated the library, and continued to solicit financial and political support from city officials for continued funding of the library.

The library project had a positive effect on the members of Sorosis. Working together as members of a civic organization, they created a public institution that benefited both their club and their community. Approximately twenty years after the success of the library program, minutes of a meeting hint at the importance this project had to the clubwomen: "The library should have more than one member from the club on its board, as it is the child of Sorosis."<sup>21</sup> That the library signaled Sorosis' shift from a cultural self-improvement club to a civic organization is evident in the way the members refer to the library as their child. Their work with the library provided the members of Sorosis with the confidence to execute other projects. The effort to found and sustain a

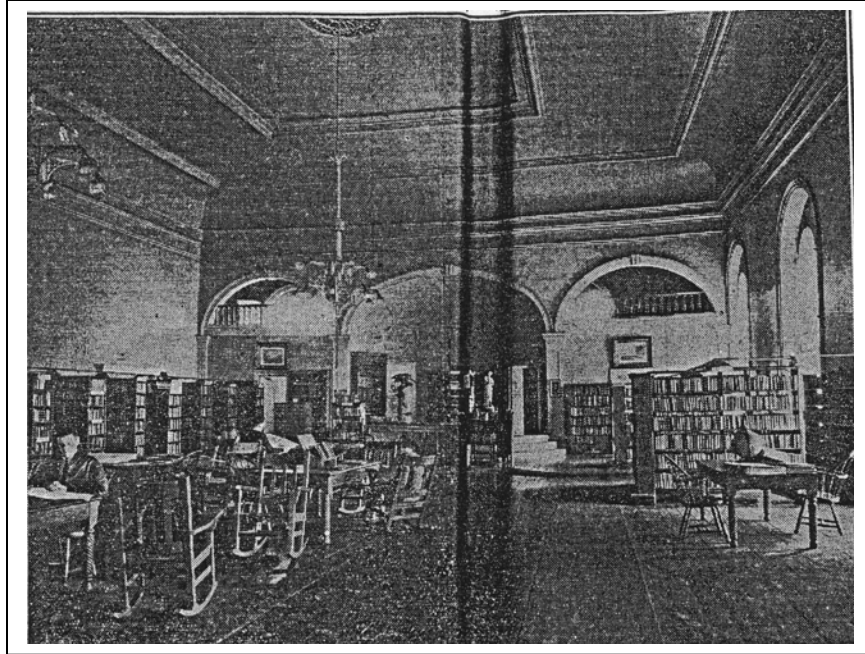
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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Lee. *New Hanover County: A Brief History* (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1971),104-105; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Wilmington Morning Star*, 3 April 1906.

<sup>21</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 10-6-1926.



**Image 5. Wilmington Public Library, circa 1910. New Hanover County Public Library**

public library in Wilmington was a significant part of the clubwomen's work to promote self-improvement for Wilmington's citizens.

North Carolina Sorosis was involved in several community problems during the first fifty years of its existence. Public health issues had been a major concern for Sorosis since 1902 when the City Aldermen appealed to the members of Sorosis for assistance in complying with the City Sanitary Ordinances. Clubwomen also offered help in keeping the city clean through a beautification project for the parkways. Sorosis continued its health crusade by banning public drinking cups and participating in the "Swat the Fly" campaign, which focused on the food industry. As reported in the December 6, 1915 club minutes, "[Sorosis] had succeeded in having drinking cups abolished from the schools, and now there is a rule in every school, and the public drinking cup is a thing of the past."<sup>22</sup> Another major concern of the food industry was the freshness of milk. Public health issues, like many Progressive reforms, started with community education. Women's clubs were especially concerned with the welfare of babies and children, and they sponsored milk stations and better baby clinics to encourage women to practice advanced principles of baby nutrition and welfare.<sup>23</sup>

Under the guidance of Civics Department chairwoman Mrs. John Thames, the Sorosis milk station started in the spring of 1916. Dr. Thames, the husband of the civics department chairwoman, emphasized to the members of Sorosis "that there was great need in the community for better care and nourishment of the children of the under

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<sup>22</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes 12-6-1915.

<sup>23</sup> Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminists*, 83.

privileged and indigent population.”<sup>24</sup> For several decades, North Carolina Sorosis raised funds to care for children and urged the local government to protect public health and safety by setting standards for cleanliness of public markets and the refrigeration of perishable items, such as milk. Helped along by Dr. Thames, individual concerned citizens and other organizations, Sorosis lobbied the local government for funds to establish a milk station.<sup>25</sup>

The milk station started as a small service in a basement room of the courthouse, but when it outgrew its quarters it moved to the James Walker Memorial Hospital. The club hired a trained nurse to distribute the milk and to maintain the books. The purpose, wrote Mrs. Herbert McClammy, was to “serve any needy cases that applied for help.”<sup>26</sup> When the hospital location proved problematic, the milk station moved again in May 1929. This time its location was in the southern section of Wilmington where the majority of the poor people lived. The milk station remained there for several years and dispensed about five thousand quarts of milk annually.<sup>27</sup> The station closed its doors in 1934; however milk continued to be delivered to people’s homes.<sup>28</sup> By 1936, 16-20 babies received milk on a regular basis.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>25</sup> With cities growing in population and size milk was often shipped in from a distance and this increased the chances for contamination and health risks for infants and children. Clubs across the country including Sorosis set up milk stations to sell clean milk at cost for individuals in need.

<sup>26</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1914-1919; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>27</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1915-1917; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>28</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1915-1917; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>29</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1915-1917; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.



The poor conditions of North Carolina's public education system led North Carolina Sorosis and other clubs to reform the system. North Carolina Sorosis promoted a program that offered education to all mill workers who could not attend regular schools. The minutes of North Carolina Sorosis first identified efforts in establishing a moonlight school on October 7, 1916. Education reform was a basic part of the Progressive Era, and teaching was one of the few professions open to women reformers. The U.S. Bureau of Education published a pamphlet in 1913 that described a model for moonlight schools to improve the literacy rate among adults. The bulletin also indicated that it was possible for adults to learn to read and write if night school classes existed.<sup>30</sup>

Mrs. Danes' presentation on adult illiteracy in North Carolina spurred the women of Sorosis to aid adults in learning to read. Sorosis club members started night schools in the fall of 1916 for factory workers at the Delgado Mill, Wilmington's largest factory. Within a month of the first entry in the club minutes concerning a moonlight school, Mrs. Danes, chair of the Civics Department, reported to the committee that the school had opened with one hundred students and with more expected to enroll. The members of the Education Department of Sorosis, pleased with the number of pupils who attended the first lessons at the mill, asked for volunteer teachers to meet the expected surge of new students. Sorosis' Social Science and Educations departments donated textbooks to help the night school students.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> U. S. Bureau of Education, *Illiteracy in the United States and an Experiment for its elimination* (Washington Government Printing Office, 1913, 29; Willie. Nelms *Coral Wilson Stewart; Crusader Against Illiteracy* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1915-1917.

Unsure of its initial impact, Sorosis continued to sponsor night schooling; in the spring of 1917 club members made another plea for volunteer teachers. Several members, including Mrs. Howell, Mrs. French, Mrs. Bury, and Mrs. Sheppard responded to the second call for teachers. Delgado night school continued as a Sorosis project for several years. The minutes of Sorosis described the sense of accomplishment members felt, “the twelve lessons completed in the moonlight schools with most gratifying results...It was moved that all who helped to make the moonlight school a success be thanked through newspapers...”<sup>32</sup> Over one hundred and fifty Delgado Mill workers learned how to read and write. One 76 year-old man said, “If you ladies will teach me to read my bible, I will be the happiest man in the world.”<sup>33</sup> He did learn to read his bible. Another student of the moonlight school project who attended the school for the three years that Sorosis maintained it, wrote a letter thanking the club for all that it had done for him. By then he was in China, working as a chemist in the head office of a dye works company, and earning \$6,000 annually.<sup>34</sup> Members of the Civics Department deemed this program one of their most successful. It garnered immediate results for the students and the members of Sorosis felt a sense of accomplishment for having helped less-fortunate people learn to read.

In December 1922, the subject of moonlight school was again addressed by Sorosis members. They suggested that a permanent night school be established by the county and that night school teachers be included in the annual budget. The committee

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<sup>32</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1915-1917.

<sup>33</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1918-1925; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>34</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1918-1925; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

reported that other states, such as Pennsylvania, paid their teachers and that it “is a blessing to men, boys and working girls.”<sup>35</sup> Sorosis wrote a letter to the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce asking for the support of the county. On January 5, 1923, Louis T. Moore, secretary of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, replied to Mrs. R. F. Campbell, chairman of the civic department. “At the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Chamber of Commerce held today at noon, the idea of night schools was unanimously approved. President Lynch was authorized to appoint a committee of three, of which he is to be a member, to confer with your committee and with any other committees, as to the best methods of placing the general idea into effect.”<sup>36</sup> That spring, the county agreed to provide night schooling for people unable to attend during the day because of their work schedules. Clubwomen played a vital role in the fight against illiteracy. Women’s voluntary organizations continued to affirm that educating North Carolinians was essential for the betterment of the state.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, women’s organization gained a new sense of importance. American women turned to patriotic service and as women had done in previous wars, they rose to the occasion. They cooperated with the Red Cross and endeavored to raise the morale of soldiers. Sorosis contributed to the war efforts during World War I and World War II by purchasing bonds, entertaining soldiers, and assisting in the home front efforts.<sup>37</sup> World War I provided North Carolina Sorosis and other women’s organizations with the chance to serve their country.

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<sup>35</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1918-1925; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>36</sup> Louis T. Moore correspondence 1-5-1923.

<sup>37</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 20.

Twenty years later, World War II gave women's organizations a second opportunity to serve their country. In the midst of World War II, the NCFWC president, Mrs. Pressley Robinson Rankin wrote in her speech, "Never before, perhaps, has the country needed so vitally cooperative efforts of women, trained leaders as community builders, business managers, home makers, and supervisors of health...through the various women's clubs, thousands of women are trained...and willing to answer this call of their government to save America's freedom and preserve the American way of life."<sup>38</sup> Clubs across the state answered this call. North Carolina Sorosis president Mrs. G.L. Clendenin registered 1,500 black and white women to serve separately on local emergency service organizations. The club opened its doors by providing home cooked meals to servicemen and "efforts were made to lighten the tension."<sup>39</sup> The club supported the construction of Liberty ships that were built and launched from Wilmington. North Carolina clubwomen were represented with the launching of the Sallie Southall Cotton named after the founder of the NCFWC.

Rations had an effect on the meetings of Sorosis during World War II. The increase in gas prices limited meetings. Despite rations, the NCFWC awarded Sorosis first prize for two consecutive years for patriotic welfare work. Sorosis was selected by New Hanover County government to head the first drive for the sale of World War II bonds. The Red Cross used the clubhouse as its headquarters during the war. Club members made 8,871 bandages, volunteered 110,500 hours of services, and bought bonds totaling \$262,620. They also canned 8,234 quarts of fruits and vegetables as part of the

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<sup>38</sup> Carraway, *Carolina Crusaders*, 98.

<sup>39</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 29.

National Food Conservation Program.<sup>40</sup> The efforts of all the clubs in the NCFWC in bond sales placed North Carolina fourth among 48 state federations with a total of \$12,079,245.00 sold.<sup>41</sup> World War II temporarily expanded women's opportunities. It created jobs for working class women and gave clubwomen the opportunity to apply many of the administrative and organizational skills they had acquired as clubwomen to support their country in a time of war.

Gertrude Jenkins Howell brought to attention the need to re-establish a museum in the city. The Daughters of the Confederacy had begun the first Confederate Museum in a room in the Wilmington Light Infantry armory as a "credible museum of Confederate relics," announced the *Wilmington Morning-Star* on January 20, 1898. During World War I the collection moved to the North Carolina Hall of History in Raleigh for safekeeping. After the war, the New Hanover County Historical Commission worked until 1929 to secure the return of the collection to Wilmington.<sup>42</sup>

The establishment of the New Hanover County Museum in 1929 was aided by Reverend Andrew J. Howell, the husband of Gertrude Jenkins Howell. Reverend Howell was appointed the county historical commissioner. The commission found space in the New Hanover County Courthouse annex for the museum and asked North Carolina Sorosis to manage the museum. Under the club's management, the collection expanded to include items of general interest. The women also established an afternoon for public visitation. The museum's purpose was to provide citizens who "should not have to

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<sup>40</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 29-30.

<sup>41</sup> Frances Renfrow Doak. *Toward New Frontiers: A History of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs*, volume III (Raleigh: The Federation, 1962), 27.

<sup>42</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1927-1931.

depend upon written history alone for evidence of the development of this section of the South.”<sup>43</sup> Minutes from Sorosis meeting show that the club kept a tally of museum visitors. Several hundred patrons a year visited the museum and the numbers increased as the collection grew. The majority of the original artifacts contained Civil War relics, including a flag (sewn by Wilmington women) that had hung in Fort Fisher before the fort fell to the Union in January of 1865. The museum reflected the history of Wilmington’s white residents and it manifested the pride and loyalty white citizens felt toward their region. By the 1960s, the museum renamed the New Hanover County Museum, had outgrown its quarters. It moved to a floor of the city police station, and the New Hanover County government provided an operating budget. A full-time director was hired to oversee Wilmington-New Hanover Museum; the name change reflected the funding sources. Growth of the collection in the late 1960’s forced the museum to move to the National Guard Armory in 1970. In its continual growth, professionalism took root. New Hanover County accepted full administrative control in July 1977.

One of the more noticeable contributions to Wilmington that Sorosis undertook was the establishment of Greenfield Lake as a park for the white residents of Wilmington. The club was first interested in Greenfield Lake in 1924 when it was a privately owned, run-down amusement park. Sorosis reflected upon the shape of the lake ten years after its inclusion as one of the clubs projects:

[It was] by no means a thing of beauty or of much joy to anybody. The beautiful cypress lake was then obstructed by high ugly board fences topped with rows of barbed wire. The grounds thereabouts had been used indiscriminately as a dumping ground... But some noteworthy members of

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<sup>43</sup> Wilmington Star News, 5 April, 1936.

Sorosis pierced beyond these disheartening things and caught a vision of such marvelous beauty...<sup>44</sup>

Mrs. Hicks and Mrs. Williams were instrumental in opening the park to the public. They met several times with the owner and hinted at the possibility of turning a profit by cleaning the lake and running a concession stand. The owner listened to the women's advice, and sometime thereafter he approached Sorosis with an offer for the club to use the property as the women saw fit until it was sold.<sup>45</sup> Clubwomen not only wanted their communities to be healthy and safe, but they also wanted them to be beautiful. Greenfield Lake represented the perfect spot for Sorosis to plant trees, bushes, and flowers that would benefit the community.

The women who had seen Greenfield Lake's potential responded in the words of Mrs. Hicks "as women often do, they acted."<sup>46</sup> Many club members were seen taking their lunches to Greenfield Lake to continue the clean-up process. They installed a cinder walkway and insured the cooperation of the city with the installation of more lighting.<sup>47</sup> Sorosis succeeded in creating a public space for residents to enjoy. The city purchased the property and made improvements under the direction of Mr. J.E.L. Wade.<sup>48</sup> A zoo was added for the enjoyment of the children and the lake became a swimming destination

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<sup>44</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1925-1931; Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 22-24; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>45</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1925-1931; Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 22-24; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>46</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1925-1931; Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 22-24; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>47</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1925-1931; Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 22-24; *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>48</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

for both children and adults.<sup>49</sup> A waterfall was installed with colored lights, playground equipment was installed, and long, winding pathways were built around the lake. Thousands of plants and flowers were purchased by the city, including azaleas, dogwoods, yapons, roses, and numerous others native to the region. These flowers were planted by the WPA during the Great Depression. The WPA also used local, unemployed men to build a five mile scenic drive around the lake and provided a plan to alleviate some of the poverty of the 1930's.<sup>50</sup>

The community rallied behind Greenfield Lake, with the establishment of a Beautification committee. Donation boxes were placed in local restaurants and funds received from wealthy individuals and the city ensured the success of the campaign. Parks, recreational facilities, and playgrounds provided safe havens for young children. These facilities, like the libraries and museums, and other services were segregated.

Clubwomen hoped to improve the lives of poor white families by sponsoring classes, hosting social gatherings, and extending public services such as playgrounds, art programs, sports, summer camps, clean-milk stations, and well-baby clinics. Clubwomen saw social reform as their mission. Their clubs became models for developing new techniques in the rapidly growing profession of social work, and they offered training for women as well. In the first decades of the century, the federal government and public

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<sup>49</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>50</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.; Priscilla G Massmann. *A Neglected Partnership: The General Federation of Women's Clubs and the Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (University of Connecticut, 1997).

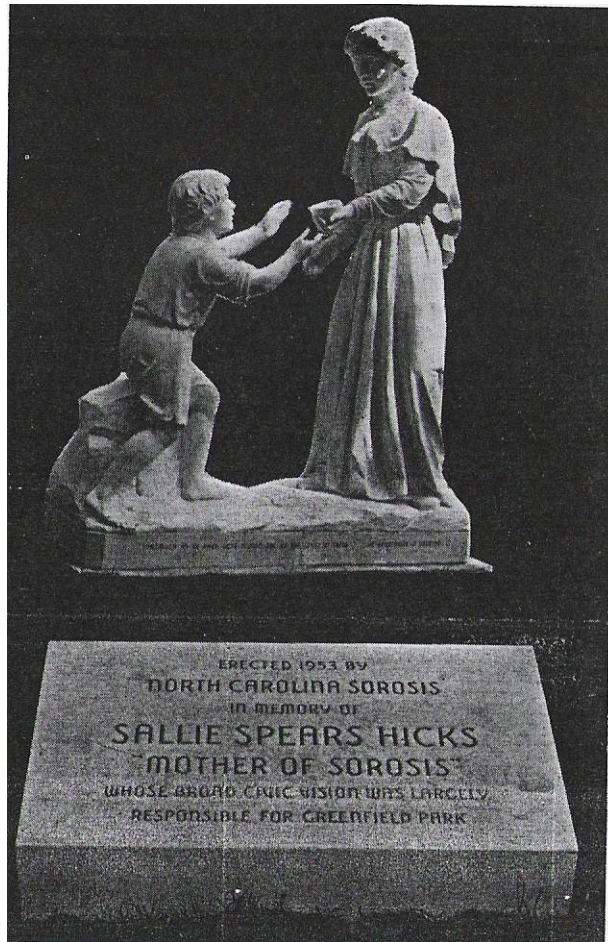




**Image 6. Greenfield Lake, Circa 1925. New Hanover County Public Library**



**Image 7. Works Progress Administration at work at Greenfield Lake, 1932. New Hanover County Public Library**



**Image 8. 'Mother of Sorosis' Sallie Spears Hick Statue at Greenfield Lake Park, 1954.**  
*Wilmington Star-News*

health departments across the country began to institute preventive health measures by supporting educational programs, visiting nurses, and making improvements in sanitation and hygiene, housing conditions, water chlorination, organized solid waste disposal, food and milk handling practices, animal and pest control, the disease control programs, and immunization programs.

In spring 1929, Sorosis continued its work aiding the youngest of Wilmington's population. With the help of Dr. Crouch and Mrs. McClammy, a better babies clinic was organized. During its first four years of operation the clinic was housed at the intersection of Wooster and Second streets, but a lack of funding forced the club to move the clinic to its clubhouse on North Third Street. From the clubhouse, North Carolina Sorosis sponsored clinics on a weekly basis and served over 215 white children annually. Sorosis enlisted the support of a local pharmacist who supplied vaccinations and other necessary items for infants. According to Sorosis, the clinic "aids mothers who are financially unable to secure medical services, medicines, and prepared foods for their babies."<sup>51</sup> Female audiences and women-led education efforts were important venues for the dissemination of health information. There were numerous health arenas in which women represented an important force in health education, particularly towards infants.

After World War II, Sorosis redirected its focus on health concerns for women. Under the guidance of Mrs. Willis, Sorosis took part in the first public cancer drive and raised more than \$6,000 in 1946. This collection led the state federated clubs on a per capita basis. When Mrs. Foy took over as president of Sorosis in 1947, she used the club's resources to expand the cancer program. In addition to sponsoring the fund

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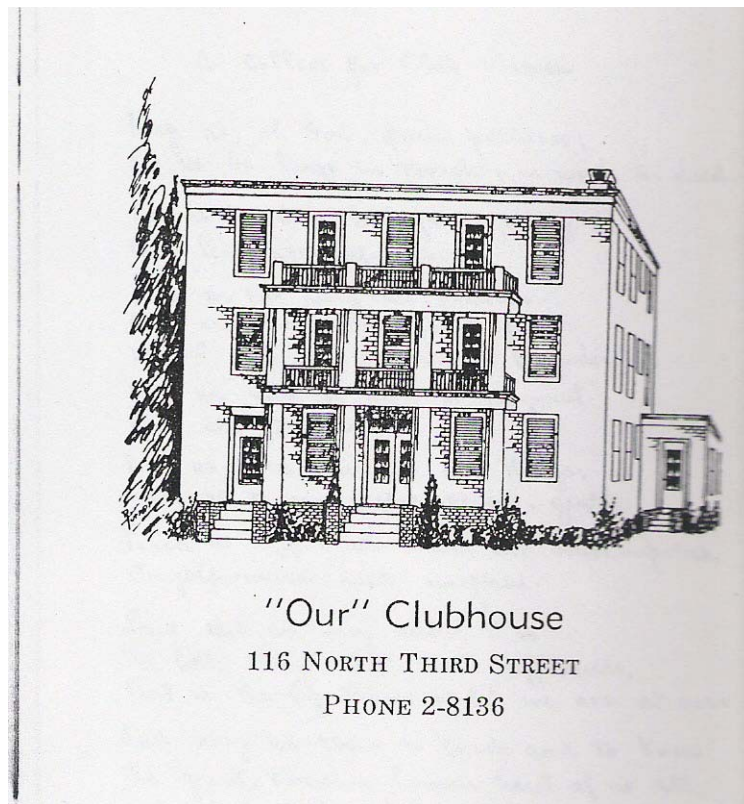
<sup>51</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.



**Image 9. North Carolina Sorosis Cancer Awareness, circa 1950.  
New Hanover County Public Library**

campaign, Sorosis launched a cancer education program. The Cancer Information Center was opened at the clubhouse in 1948. The state division of the American Cancer Society offered a grant of \$1,200 to assist in building an addition to the clubhouse, which would be used for cancer education. Sorosis provided the funds necessary to complete the room. Shortly after the Cancer Information Center opened, members made dressings for needy cancer patients. Sorosis continued to promote cancer awareness by providing volunteer receptionists for the Cancer Detection-Diagnostic Center, which opened at James Walker Memorial Hospital in the early 1950's. North Carolina Sorosis was the first woman's club in the state to sponsor a Cancer Information Center. The club expanded women's health care services, inserted women's issues into health care training, forced institutional shifts towards women-centered services, and increased women's abilities to access health information and knowledge. Women desired information on how to take care of themselves and their families. These outreach efforts and programs brought to light a great unmet need.

One of the earliest projects of North Carolina Sorosis was an effort to create a physical space for clubwomen. The clubhouse symbolized the club's shift from self-improvement to civic mindedness. Women naturally saw the clubhouse as manifestation of their hard work. By creating spaces in which to serve the clubwomen's and the community's needs, they were helping to alleviate the social problems they were tackling. The most obvious symbol of their transition into the public sphere was the purchase of their clubhouse in 1914.



**Image 10. North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse, circa 1950.  
Private Collection of North Carolina Sorosis**

## CHAPTER FOUR: HOME AWAY FROM HOME

North Carolina Sorosis allowed women to claim a place in the public sphere that had long been the domain of men. Symbolic of their claim for access to public space was the purchase of the Sorosis clubhouse in 1914. Sorosis also transformed the public space of Wilmington by owning, renovating, and renting the clubhouse. Clubwomen saw their clubhouse as an extension of their role as municipal housekeepers. To build, design, and purchase a clubhouse represented a noticeable effort by clubwomen in combining civic responsibilities with social rituals.

The concept of separate spheres dominated the ideology of nineteenth century America for the middle and upper classes; it was not simply a social construction created by men and women. While men lived and worked in both the public and private spheres, while women were confined to the private sphere of the home.<sup>1</sup> The women's club movement epitomized the struggle women undertook to construct their own realm of influence, which included both the public and private spheres.<sup>2</sup> Joining same sex organizations allowed women decision making power that was not afforded to them with mixed sex groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History." *The Journal of American History* 75,1 (June 1988):9-39.

The workplace and the home which had previously been the same, separated. As the workplace moved outside the home, male and female spheres of activity also separated. Women, still the primary caretakers of the children found themselves assigned to the private or domestic sphere, while men found themselves in the public sphere. The ideology of Separate Spheres was developed to explain why this separation was necessary, by defining the 'inherent' characteristics of women. These traits supposedly made women incapable of functioning in the public realm. Women were classified as physically weaker, yet morally superior to men. This concept was reinforced by religious view of the mid-nineteenth century. It was women's moral superiority which best suited them to the domestic sphere. Women were also expected to teach the next generation the necessary moral virtues to ensure the survival of the society.

<sup>2</sup> Kerber, "Separate Spheres", 9-39.

The comforts of an urban setting gave middle and upper class women an opportunity to reform their cities. Urban life provided these women possibilities for social and political activities. The population increase in the South, and by extension in Wilmington, between 1880 and 1920 coincided with an increase in organized reform efforts by white women interested in community betterment. Chambers of commerce, merchant associations, and civic organizations, including women's clubs, imposed their values and goals on the design and format of city planning.<sup>3</sup> In Southern cities, spatial relations mirrored racial segregation and resulted in the growth of both white and black communities. Urban growth created opportunities for white women to move beyond the confines of the home. However, freedom for women was limited by the cultural constraints the South placed on upper and middle-class white women.<sup>4</sup>

The private and public spheres men and women had adhered to in the nineteenth century were broken down by the women's club movement of the Progressive Era. The club meeting rooms, the clubhouse, and the public venues the women of North Carolina Sorosis utilized within Wilmington represented spaces women had carved out for themselves. Women began spending more time outside the confines of their homes in club meetings held in acceptable locations that cities provided. Women entered the public sphere, created and defined their own space, and pursued their own agenda. Clubwomen believed the city could become homelike. As municipal housekeepers, they

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<sup>3</sup> Blaine A. Brownell, "The Commercial-Civil Elite and City Planning in Atlanta, Memphis, and New Orleans in the 1920s." *The Journal of Southern History* 41 is (3)August 1975):339-368.

<sup>4</sup> David R. Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities : Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1997) 95-97.



thought they could blur the lines between public and private realms and thereby enter the city's public spaces.<sup>5</sup>

The first meeting of Sorosis was held in the parlor of Sallie Hicks' home at 418 South Third Street. Only fifteen women attended, and the Hicks' parlor was large enough to accommodate the group. At the turn of the century, the first floor parlor was a space within the home that women used for social gatherings and meetings. Nineteenth century home designs not only indicated a separation from the family and the outside world, but also a separation within the home between men, women, and children. The study was commonly viewed as the male sanctuary while the parlor, sitting room, kitchen, and children's rooms were perceived as female spaces.<sup>6</sup> Club meetings were held in the mornings or late afternoons before the men returned from work. This arrangement allowed women to meet within the home without the presence of men.

The privacy of the parlor offered the space needed to accommodate and provide comfort for club meetings. The Hicks' residence contained sixteen rooms and was built in 1889.<sup>7</sup> The size of the Hicks' home allowed large groups to hold meetings without disrupting the household. The location of the house also offered easy access for fellow club members. The club directory of North Carolina Sorosis indicated that the original club members lived within a few blocks of each other in downtown Wilmington. For the first twenty years of its existence North Carolina Sorosis did not have a separate

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret Marsh's "From Separation to Togetherness: The Social Construction of Domestic Space in American Suburbs, 1840-1915." *The Journal of American History* 76:2 (September 1989):506-527 and "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915." *American Quarterly* 40 (June 1988):165-186.

<sup>6</sup> Katherine C. Grier, *Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1988), Introduction.

<sup>7</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1895-1903.

clubhouse. When the need for additional space arose, the size of Wilmington allowed the clubwomen to hold meetings in some of the public facilities located downtown.

By the time of North Carolina Sorosis' formation, women had begun to enter previously male-dominated the public spaces. Because the Woman's Christian Temperance Union had established a pattern for public acceptance of women's clubs across America in the 1880's, Sorosis was able to rent clubrooms. Despite the advancements women made as members of the WCTU, clubwomen could only visit certain public spaces without damaging their reputations. As the city grew, the number of acceptable locations increased, and public spaces were more readily available to meet women's needs. Women were able to gather in public meeting rooms in such places as the, the Odd Fellows Building on Second Street, the Masonic Building on Front Street, and the YMCA at the corner of Front and Walnut streets. In 1912 the YMCA moved to its new building on Market Street between 3rd and 4<sup>th</sup> streets. The new YMCA building contained a swimming pool and a gym on the ground floor, and the upper floors were reserved for meeting rooms rented by the day or by the month.<sup>8</sup> Public spaces used by both sexes were used at different times. Thus, these spaces provided a safe location to meet women's basic needs for a clubroom.<sup>9</sup>

Each space North Carolina Sorosis members used became the club's home for the amount of time it was utilized. In 1903, the president of Sorosis, Margaret Gibson, suggested the "need of having a house and decorating committee to see to the needs of

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<sup>8</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, Business Meeting, 5 November 1903.

<sup>9</sup> Deutsch, *Women and the City*, 5-18; Tony P Wrenn. *Wilmington, North Carolina: An Architectural and Historical Portrait* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984).

the club room and to provide and make it more attractive.”<sup>10</sup> The rented rooms were not designed to meet the needs of a women’s club. It was not uncommon for these temporary homes to have other functions or for other groups to utilize the space. This mixed used limited decoration and design and did not provide a satisfactory facility for planning gatherings, events, and services for the community.<sup>11</sup> As Gertrude Howell wrote, “No wonder the club longed for a home of its own!”<sup>12</sup> Sorosis, like hundreds of other clubs across the country, discovered that rental rooms were not satisfactory. Club members did not bring their clubhouse dream to fruition for several years; however, the Decorating Committee was allowed to “buy what [members] saw fit for the furnishing of the club room.”<sup>13</sup> The shift from the use of member’s homes to rented meeting places was an improvement; however, as renters they had no control over rental fees or over the cleanliness of the space rented. It was often difficult to determine which furnishings would be available on a daily basis. Clubs, including Sorosis, found it difficult to store supplies, minutes, and the president’s podium and gavel. These items often had to be regularly transported for the club’s meeting and were often stored at the secretary’s home for safe-keeping.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the lack of a clubhouse North Carolina Sorosis prided itself on the social events it hosted within the community. Mrs. O’Crowley noted the importance of the club’s social gatherings when she wrote, “[The] social life of the club has been an

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<sup>10</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, Business Meeting, 5 November 1903.

<sup>11</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 179-186.

<sup>12</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, Business Meeting, 3 December 1903.

<sup>14</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 185.

important factor both to further friendship and spirit of cooperation among members as well as an act of courtesy to many prominent persons the club has had the pleasure to entertain.”<sup>15</sup> Sorosis held its first annual social function on January 5, 1898, at the home of Mrs. Philander Pearsall at 314 South Front Street. The time and effort the club members spent to create a successful function is exemplified by the invitations sent to each club member and by the receiving line for guests arriving at the Pearsall’s home by the Art Department. The club served elaborate food and refreshments, and guests were pampered by Mrs. Green and Mrs. Parsley. The buffet table was “beautifully decorated in white and green and candles shed a soft effect.”<sup>16</sup> Numerous social events cluttered the members’ calendars. Mrs. Charles Worth hosted a reception at her home at 416 South Third Street on March 5, 1900 that required the construction of a platform so that members could stand on it while they read from select works of literature. Sallie Hicks, Mrs. Betty Willard, Mrs. George French, and numerous other members also opened their homes to social events for Sorosis. These gatherings provided opportunities for the different departments to socialize and they promoted unity within the club. Souvenirs were often provided. For example, the literature department offered a corsage in the club’s shade of violet on January 4, 1900.<sup>17</sup>

Acquiring a clubhouse took money. Bazaars and fundraising fairs were an important aspect of club life. Each year, the club needed to raise money for club activities.<sup>18</sup> Early twentieth century clubs focused their fundraising efforts on specific

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<sup>15</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>16</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936.

<sup>17</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936.

causes. In 1910, under the guidance of club president Mrs. Herbert McClammy, North Carolina Sorosis organized the Ways and Means committee. Mrs. William Parsley was elected the first chairwoman. The Ways and Means committee was established to oversee the club's social events and fundraisers. Its efforts included card parties, silver teas, barbecues, rummage sales, refreshment stands at fairs, dinner gatherings, balls, and receptions.<sup>19</sup> Committed to the betterment of Wilmington, Sorosis sought to improve its strategies and programs. Like many clubs, Sorosis members believed that they could become more influential if they had a facility that would suit their needs. The funds from these events provided them with the means to achieve their goal. Once the decision to acquire a clubhouse was made, where it should be located, the services it should provide, and the amount of money that should be spent on it needed to be considered.

The property where the North Carolina Sorosis clubhouse originally stood was owned in 1846 by North Carolina's first elected governor, E.D. Dudley. Dudley was also the first president of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, the longest railroad line in the state. S.M. West purchased the property in 1858 and built the house that North Carolina Sorosis acquired in 1914. The West house was built in 1858, along with Thalian Hall, its neighbor, which served as both a theatre and as City Hall. Thalian Hall's construction lasted from 1855-1858 and with its completion the Sorosis clubhouse's location at the corner of Third and Princess streets became a focal point for Wilmington.<sup>20</sup> By purchasing a house next to City Hall, Sorosis announced its presence in the city. North Carolina Sorosis members empowered themselves by manipulating the city's physical

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<sup>18</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1911-1914, Gordon, *Bazaars and Fair Ladies*.

<sup>19</sup> *Wilmington Star News*, 5 April 1936.

<sup>20</sup> Isabel M. Williams *Thalian Hall* (Wilmington: Thalian Hall Commission, 1976, 2003), 3-6, 13.

space. The location of the Sorosis clubhouse aligned its members spatially with City Hall, the symbol and source of power and authority in Wilmington. From this new residence, Sorosis launched its programs for city improvement.

The design of the West house along with the Bellamy and Latimer houses of the same period reflected the popularity of Italianate architecture in Wilmington. The West house was square and angular and had long double-paned windows. The Italianate style was used for two or three story buildings with overhanging eaves with decorative brackets underneath.<sup>21</sup> The West house also had a front porch that ran the length of the front of the house.

The purchase of the West house in May of 1914 for \$8,750 marked the club's largest venture to that point in altering the landscape of downtown Wilmington. North Carolina Sorosis paid \$1,250 for the house, and the remaining \$7,500 was financed by mortgage bonds offered by a bank.<sup>22</sup> In order to purchase the clubhouse, North Carolina Sorosis incorporated on May 2, 1914, by an act of North Carolina Secretary of State J. Bryan Grimes. Incorporation gave women the power to purchase and dispose of property and to enter into contracts under the designated name, The North Carolina Sorosis Incorporated. The women of Sorosis believed that "to the end that the corporation may properly engage in the objects and purposes set forth it shall have power and authority to purchase ...acquire, hold, mortgage...property."<sup>23</sup> They justified the purchase of the clubhouse for Sorosis as a way of providing better service to the community. A

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, 16-18.

<sup>22</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes 15 May 1914.

<sup>23</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, Board of Directors, 2 May 1914.

clubhouse made it possible to run clinics, to house exhibits, and to perform other services that could not be offered in rented space. In purchasing the West house, the women were able to control and shape the club space as they desired.

The clubhouse symbolized public female space.<sup>24</sup> Women's clubhouses represented a place from which women could organize and enact their policies for social change. Clubhouses bridged the traditional male/public-female/private social construct by using a home as a means of building an all female institution. The home did not belong to an individual but to a corporation. Clubwomen believed that such structures made several important statements to the community. As the GFWC president Alice Ames Winter stated, "A building would serve as a visible symbol for strength."<sup>25</sup> The purchase of the clubhouse also demonstrated women's ability to maintain and manage a corporation without assistance from men. The extensive business knowledge women needed to acquire to support their club, their clubhouse, and their social programs dismantled the myth that women were financially irresponsible. Instead, a clubhouse demonstrated that women could be as successful as men.<sup>26</sup>

The clubhouse represented a physical space where women maintained close same-sex relationships. The boundaries of separate spheres overlapped when women gained representation in both the public and private spheres.<sup>27</sup> The clubhouse was a place that

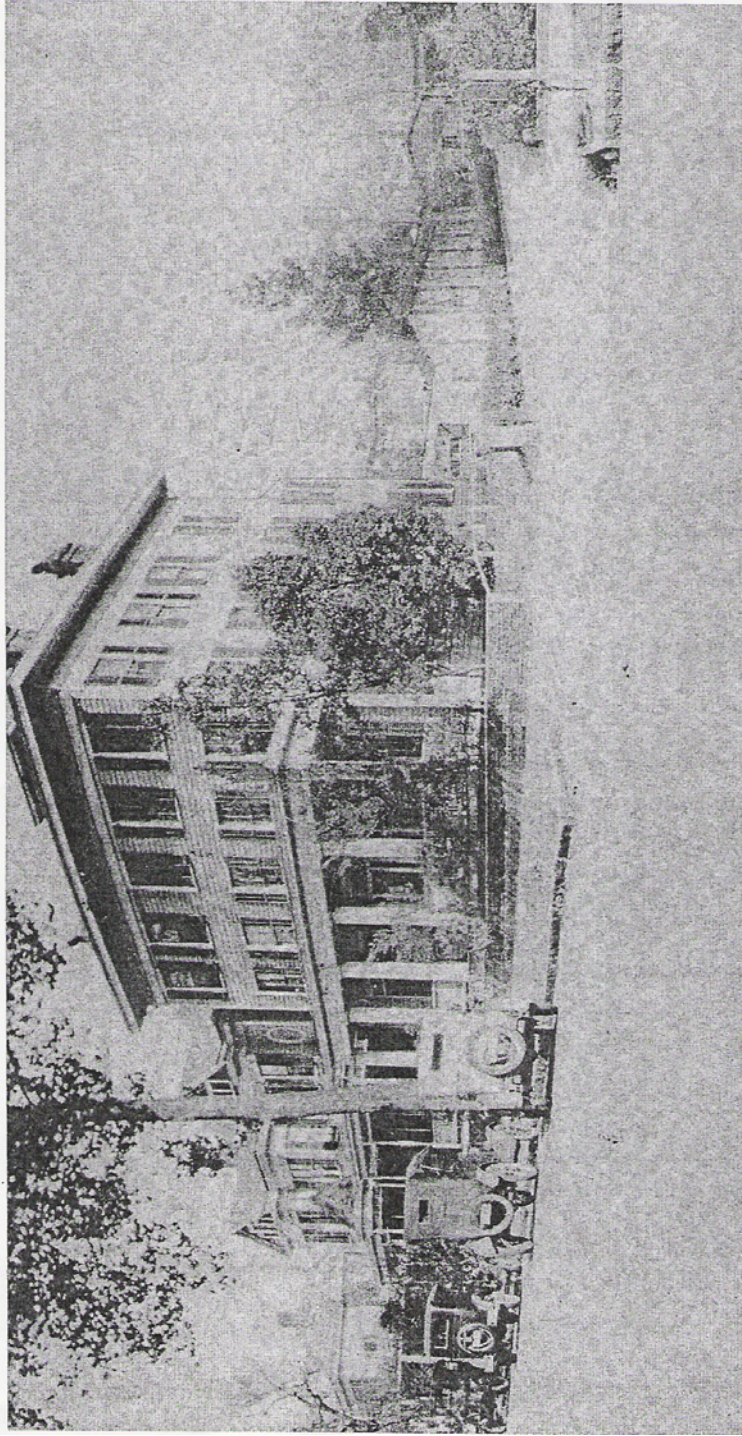
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<sup>24</sup> Deutsch, *Women and the City*, 5. My concept of space follows closely to that of Deutsch. Its meaning or power is often determined by the ways groups of people view private and public spaces.

<sup>25</sup> As cited in Blair's, *Torchbearers*, 185.

<sup>26</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> Kerber, "Separate Spheres", 33-37.



**Image 12. North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse, 116 North Third Street, Wilmington, NC, 1918.  
New Hanover County Public Library**



women devised with their own specifications to carry out their own programs.<sup>28</sup> To gain the advantages of owning their own space, clubwomen were willing to invest a great deal of themselves in the purchase and planning of a clubhouse. Prior to the purchase of the house in 1914, the minutes of Sorosis contain numerous entries related to the establishment of the corporation, the strategy for paying debts, and the plan for maintaining the house. For women who had maintained households for their husbands and children, the clubhouse would be a place where they could be entertained without the responsibility of cooking and cleaning. Inside the clubhouse they were no longer wives and mothers but clubwomen with responsibilities to the community and to other clubwomen. The clubhouse also provided offices for the elected officials of the club and storage space for the club's archives. This place provided a homelike atmosphere that merged the public and private spheres while housing the club members' civic work.<sup>29</sup>

Once purchased, the clubhouse needed repairs and modifications to fit the needs of Sorosis. Finance Committee chairwoman Mrs. E.L Price maintained meticulous records of incoming and outgoing funds for the club, particularly for the clubhouse. The house was converted into an auditorium, a kitchen and five rental apartments. The bottom floor was divided into two sections. Half of the first floor became a rental apartment while the other half housed the club meetings, auditorium, and kitchen. The second and third floors also housed two apartments. Rents from the five apartments were used to reduce the building's debt and to pay remodeling costs.<sup>30</sup> The apartments

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<sup>28</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 186.

<sup>29</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 185-6, North Carolina Sorosis Minutes Board of Directors, 1914-1919.

<sup>30</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes Board of Directors, 1914-1919.

allowed women to maintain the clubhouse. It also provided the women with the opportunity to participate as active businesswomen in Wilmington.

The apartments (rented from 1914 to the sale of the clubhouse in 1965) housed both single individuals and married couples. Although individual renters of the five apartments changed often, the occupants of the Sorosis apartments were always white, middle-class professional, skilled or “pink collar” workers. Miss Lizzie West was hired to run the furnished rooms of the Sorosis apartments for several years and provided the residents with the on-site benefits of a boarding house. Mary Sutton lived in one of the apartments for four years. Her occupation was listed as a nurse, and she was also a widow and mother. Miss G.L. Ezzell, also listed as a nurse resided in an apartment in 1917. Miss Sarah Johnston, a dressmaker, lived at 116 North Third Street in 1915 and 1916. Miss Margaret Aman, a stenographer, and Miss Annie Gillespie, a bookbinder, also resided at one time at the clubhouse. The majority of women who lived in the Sorosis apartments were either single or widowed.<sup>31</sup> The rental of the rooms provided a consistent income for the club and also allowed the clubwomen to dabble in real estate.

The clubhouse was remodeled in 1925 at a cost of \$5,000. Mrs. Bluethenthal loaned the money to the club until the Finance Committee cashed in its investments at the end of the club year. New construction added fifteen garages to the rear of the property, which were also available for Wilmingtonians to rent. The main change to the clubhouse occurred on the first floor which was renovated to make room for a larger kitchen, a meeting room, and a room for the baby clinic.<sup>32</sup> By including space for the baby clinic

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<sup>31</sup> *Wilmington City Directory*, 1915,1916.

<sup>32</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936.

the clubhouse transformation took on a social as well as spatial dimension. The baby clinic opened the clubhouse to daily visitors in need of service. Sorosis members took the act of providing for the community into their home. The clinic combined the private space for the clubwomen with their actions as reformers.

The house was remodeled again in the winter of 1935 at a cost of \$17,500. To finance this renovations club members collected \$5,000 from fundraisers and contributions from community and club members. Sorosis also borrowed \$10,000 from a bank, and the remaining \$2,500 they paid over a two year period to the contractor, W.A. Simon, hired to remodel the clubhouse. The contractor extended the space of the house by adding more apartments, a new brick veneer, and porch space. The bottom floor, which had housed the clubroom, the baby clinic, and the kitchen was expanded once again. A much larger auditorium now included a stage; the kitchen, pantry, and baby clinic were also enlarged. The second and third floors were remodeled into eight modern apartments: four housekeeping apartments and four bachelor apartments.<sup>33</sup> The remodeling of the clubhouse apartments in the 1930's reflected growing trends in spatial organization and social concepts in apartment life. Distinctions were made between these two types of apartments, for each appealed to certain potential residents. Bachelor apartments were usually one-to-two room apartments designed for young men, who presumably neither cooked nor entertained guests at their residences. The housekeeping apartments were larger and appealed to working females and families. The amenities of

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<sup>33</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936.

the housekeeping apartments included a full kitchen and a living room conducive to entertaining.<sup>34</sup>

The renovation of the clubhouse in the winter of 1935 reflected a change in spatial relations of apartment building facilities. After the renovation, the city directories listed the residents with spouses, and the bachelor apartments housed young couples or singles. The Wilmington City Directory of 1936 listed the clubhouse and the street address of 116 North Third Street with the first floor housing North Carolina Sorosis. The listing also included the eight apartments by number and the resident of each. The occupations of the men included lawyer, salesmen, stenographers, clerks and other white-collar jobs. The occupations of the women who lived in the apartments included cashiers, personal assistants, office secretaries, stenographers and teachers.<sup>35</sup>

The alterations to the interior and exterior of the clubhouse represented a transformation from a domestic home to an institution. The renovations of the clubhouse to fit the needs of the club altered the clubhouse's identity. No longer a home, the clubhouse's interior and exterior renovations did not resemble the house Sorosis had originally purchased. The meeting room reflected the concept that space and power were interwoven. The idea of separate spheres had been dismantled, and the utilization of the clubhouse and clubroom represented both spheres. The clubhouse was a significant achievement for the women of Sorosis, and they saw the continual improvements of the club house as, "indicative of the spirit of progress and growth which the club

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<sup>34</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936 , North Carolina Sorosis Minutes Board of Directors, 1930-1937.

<sup>35</sup> *Wilmington City Directories*, 1936-1964.



**Image 11: North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse, circa 1940.  
Private Collection of North Carolina Sorosis**

promotes.”<sup>36</sup> Continued improvements to the clubhouse suggest that the women viewed ownership of the clubhouse as symbolic of the club’s success. Maintaining the house reflected the Progressive spirit of change and improvement embodied in the members’ civil responsibilities to the community.

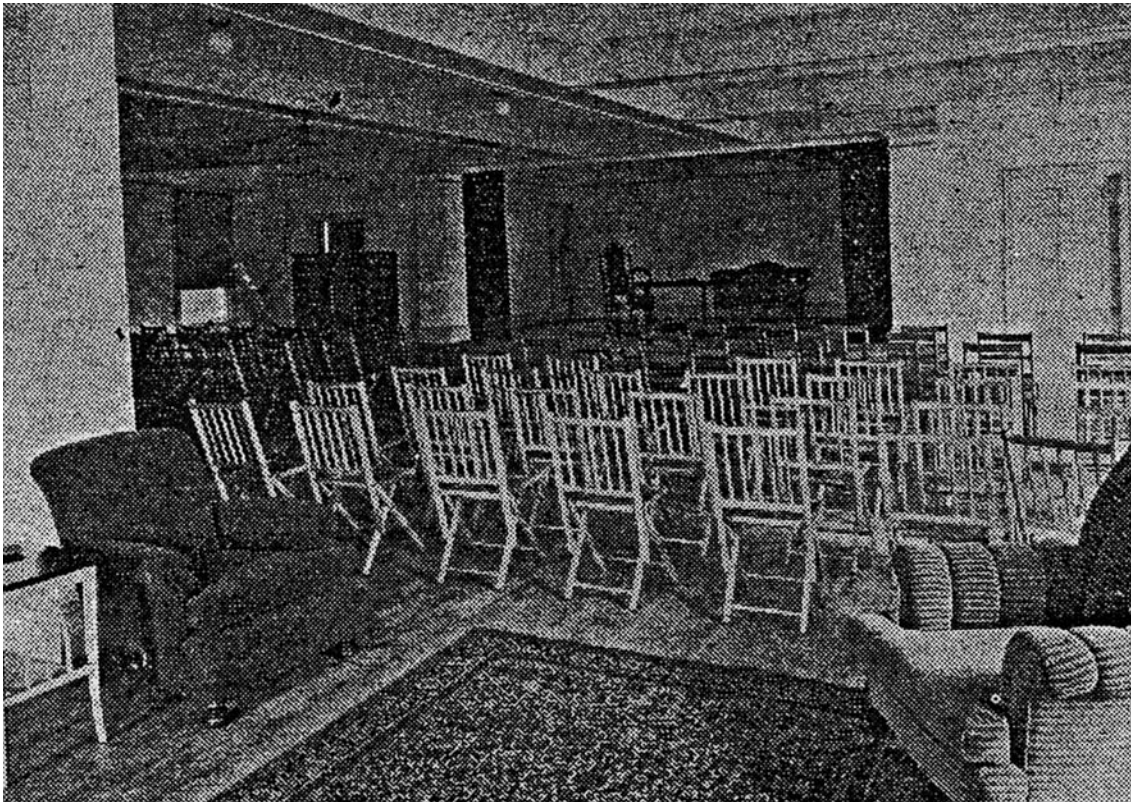
The clubhouse provided an opportunity for women to utilize the space they created. Clubhouse decorations were of vital interest to clubwomen. The financial records of the club indicated that each year funds were used for alterations to the clubhouse. Receipts for flowers and food were prevalent in the account books. Once business was completed meetings ended with a gathering that allowed the members to socialize. A buffet table was set up with tea or a punchbowl depending upon the occasion. Violet flowers, the club’s official color and flower, usually graced the tables.<sup>37</sup> The decorations of the clubhouse reflected how clubwomen viewed the space they occupied. It was important not only that the clubhouse maintain a sense of home but also that it provide separation between the business of the meetings and the social conclusion of the activities.

The clubroom, with its large, open, area, provided ample room for meetings, social events, and fundraising campaigns. The clubhouse contained a baby grand piano used by members of the Music Department and their guests for other club functions. Music was an integral part of the clubhouse. The piano, acquired in 1911 by the music department, received a prominent place on the clubhouse stage. Prior to the purchase of

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<sup>36</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936.

<sup>37</sup> *Wilmington Star News* 5 April 1936; North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1914-1919



**Image 12.** North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse, 116 North Third Street Wilmington, North Carolina, 1935. *Wilmington Star-News*



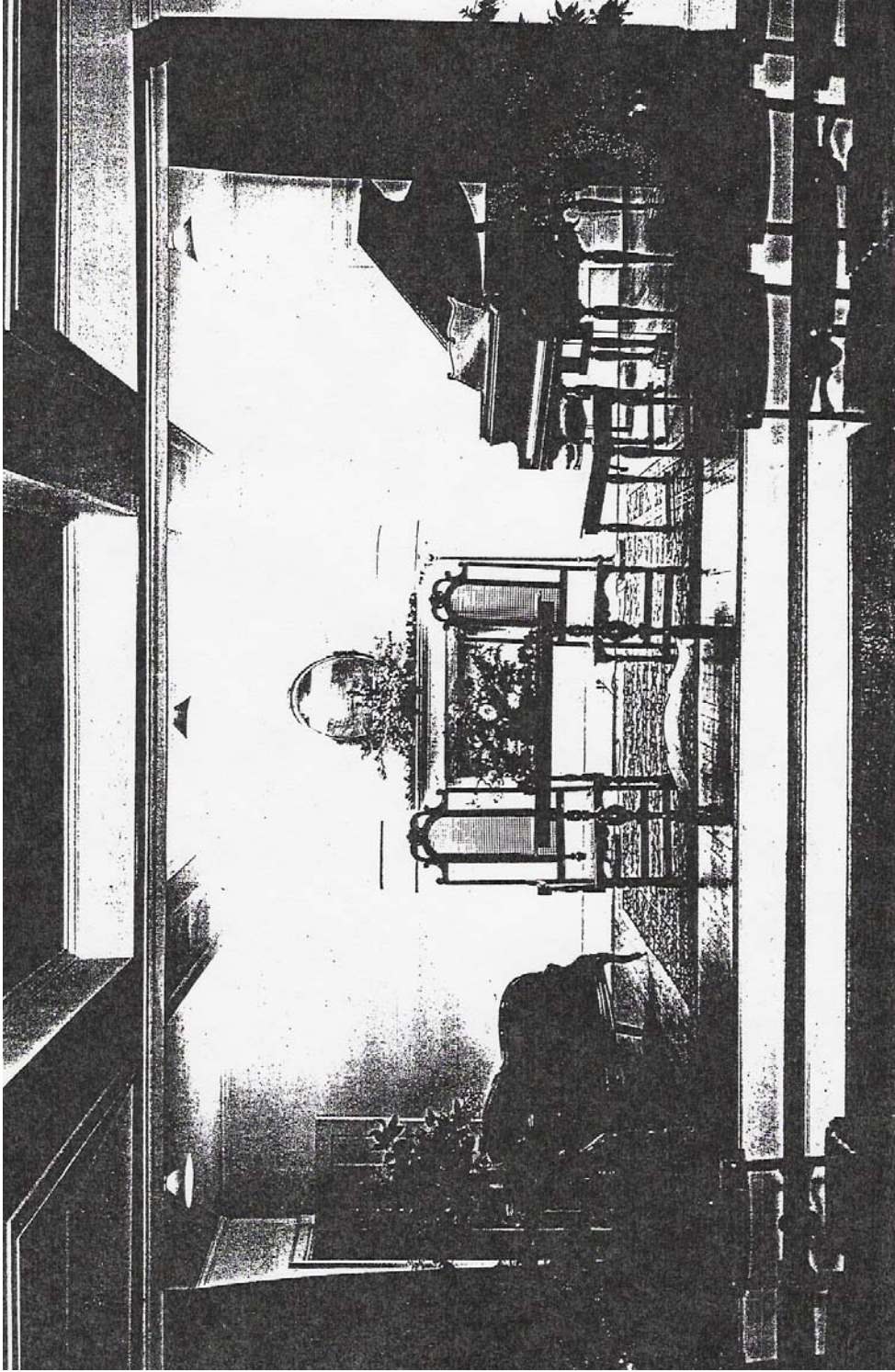
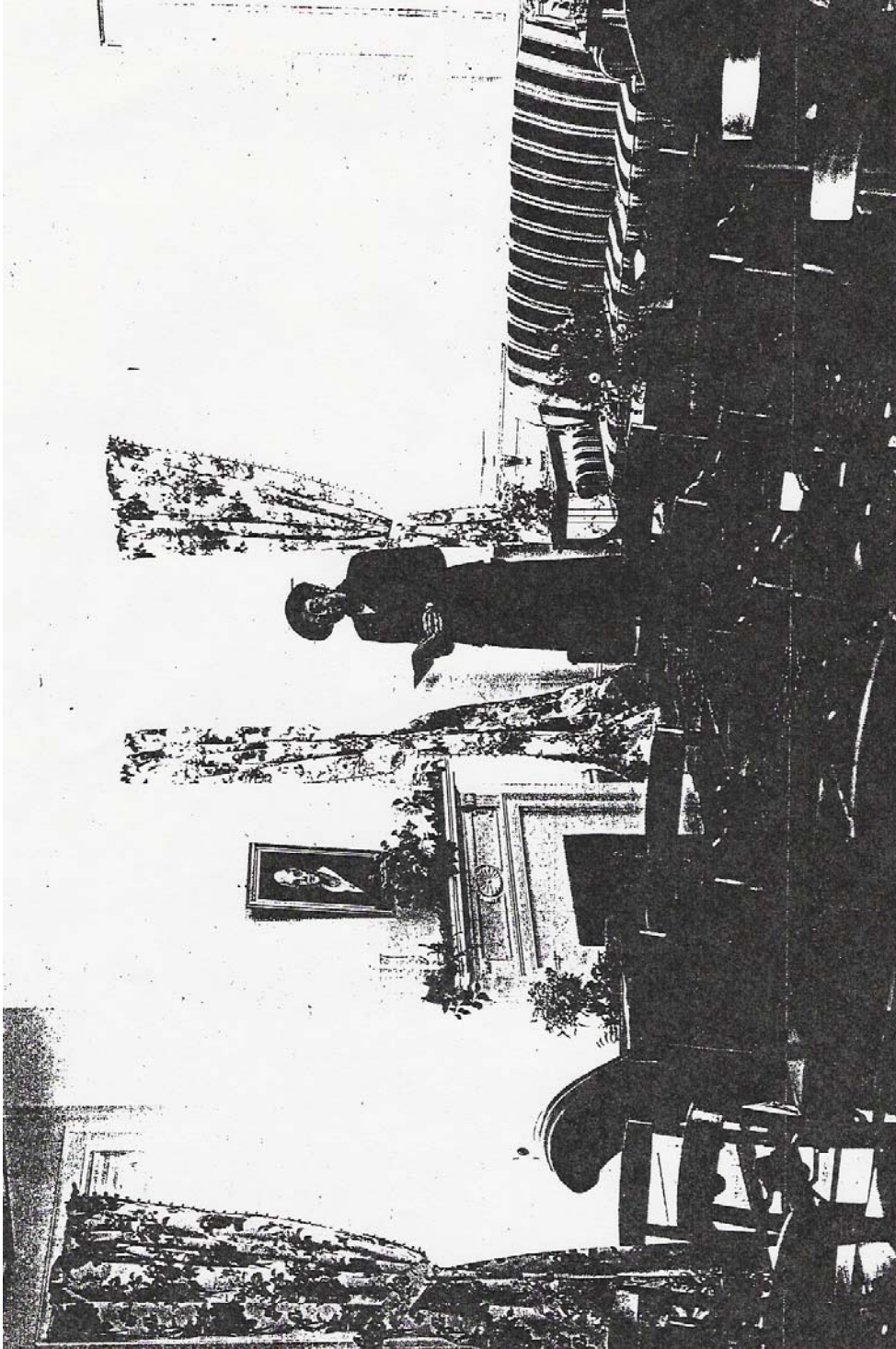


Image 15. North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse, 116 North Third Street, date unknown, Private Collection of North Carolina Sorosis





**Image 16. North Carolina Sorosis Clubhouse, 116 North Third Street - date unknown, Private Collection of North Carolina Sorosis**

the clubhouse, the piano was housed in the meeting room at the YWCA. Club members would sing the club hymn and the North Carolina state song. The House Committee constantly berated the club members for moving the piano and damaging the floors and suggested that the club hire professional piano movers each time the piano had to be moved for larger events. Given the number of guests invited to the social meeting and the fund-raisers, the women were often concerned about damage to the house. A janitor was also hired to clean and organize the clubhouse on a weekly basis after such events<sup>38</sup>

The continual upkeep of clubhouses strained the resources of all clubs. Clubwomen across the country were forced to update and remodel their clubhouses as new technological advancements for the home were invented. Within twenty years of its purchase, the Sorosis clubhouse was remodeled twice. These renovations cost more than the original price of the home in 1914 and placed a financial burden on the women. Ultimately, renovations took funds, time, and effort away from the civic programs clubwomen had established.<sup>39</sup> Regular payments to the bank, the utility companies, the gardener, and the janitor also depleted the club's funds. It was not until the end of World War II that the debt on the clubhouse was paid in full.<sup>40</sup> Despite these financial burdens, clubwomen continued to support the baby clinic, milk stations, and renovations to Greenfield Lake. However, their time and funds would be forever divided between the upkeep of the clubhouse and their civic responsibilities to the community.

The clubhouse served many purposes for the members of Sorosis. It provided a practical resource for the women. The clubhouse was located in the central part of town,

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<sup>38</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1914-1919.

<sup>39</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 178.

<sup>40</sup> Virginia H. Begor, *North Carolina Sorosis, 1895-1984*, 4.

close to the department stores and markets. Its location was convenient for members who used the clubhouse restrooms, and stored their packages and other personal belongings inside the house. The clubhouse afforded clubwomen comfort and safety while they were away from home.<sup>41</sup>

The clubroom was designed as both a meeting place and an auditorium. The front of the auditorium had a stage with two steps leading up to it. The stage was set up with a P.A. system and a table decorated with fresh flowers in crystal vases and crystal candleholders. The stage was the focal point of the room, and upon entering the clubhouse, members and visitors would be informed as to the event by the furniture arranged upon the stage. Use of the stage was reserved for the most influential guest speakers or members of the club. High-ranking members of Sorosis, including the president, department chairwomen, and other elected officials had access to the stage for presentations, speeches, meetings, and other club activities. For guests, access to the stage represented an acknowledgement of their status as esteemed visitors to the clubhouse.<sup>42</sup>

The clubhouse's auditorium arrangement allowed for a maximum number of people to attend special events. The furniture used for rows of seats consisted of wooden folding chairs which were easily moved or stored in separate rooms. Club members also purchased 25 folding card tables for bridge-night fundraising events that drew more than one hundred male and female guests.

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<sup>41</sup> North Carolina Sorosis Minutes, 1914-1919.

<sup>42</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 178-203.





**Image 13. North Carolina Sorosis, 118 North Third Street, Wilmington, North Carolina, date unknown - event unknown.  
Private Collection of North Carolina Sorosis**

The Sorosis clubhouse, like so many others was established through the hard work, talent, and competence of women willing to undertake financial, managerial, organizational, and bureaucratic responsibilities levels that were rarely attributed to women prior to the Progressive Era. The women of Sorosis and thousands of clubwomen across the nation demonstrated to themselves and to their communities their capabilities as businesswomen. The building of clubhouses was an achievement recognized for its success in pleasing clubwomen and communities.<sup>43</sup>

North Carolina Sorosis contributed to the building and enhancement of Wilmington's public spaces. The club's constant push for acceptance in the public sphere altered the landscape of Wilmington and gained a permanent space for women. Sorosis, like numerous other clubs, wanted to create a public space where white, middle class women could appear without losing their status in society and to broaden the number of acceptable locations for all classes of white women.<sup>44</sup>

The civic programs of North Carolina Sorosis altered the landscape of Wilmington. Public spaces for women expanded to include milk stations, clinics, the library, Greenfield Lake, the county museum, and other institutions all close to City Hall. Sorosis utilized its close proximity to City Hall to participate in the clean-up of Wilmington.<sup>45</sup> Through the members determination, perseverance, and ability to navigate the murky waters of private and public spheres, Sorosis sought to mold Wilmington into a city where white women could navigate unhampered between the two

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<sup>43</sup> Blair, *Torchbearers*, 195-203.

<sup>44</sup> Deutsch, *Women and the City*, 145.

<sup>45</sup> Howell, *North Carolina Sorosis*, 7-12; Deutsch, *Women and the City*, 146.

sectors. In finding a means to organize and build a clubhouse, the women of Sorosis altered the physical landscape of Wilmington. In doing so, they expanded the spaces in which women could successfully assert themselves, and they reconfigured the city to fit their needs and interests.

## CONCLUSION: THE END OF AN ERA

The women's club movement provided women with the opportunity to leave the privacy of their parlor and expand their influence on society. Clubs redirected the traditional responsibilities of women to their families toward the needs of a rapidly expanding industrial society. Thus, the transition from private domestic duty to public responsibility symbolized by the term "municipal housekeeper." For over fifty years, North Carolina Sorosis embraced all that municipal housekeeping represented. Members continually offered new and inventive ways to improve Wilmington. The best illustration of women's entrance into the public sphere was the purchase of the Sorosis clubhouse in 1914. The study of the clubhouse represented a method by which women entered the public sphere. Women became active agents in defining Wilmington's landscape and shaping the city's urban spaces.

North Carolina Sorosis encapsulated the crusading spirit that swept America from the Progressive Era through the New Deal. Clubwomen went to great lengths to improve themselves through the study of literature, art, and domestic science. The early days of Sorosis had club members reading, writing papers, and presenting lectures on topics that included Shakespeare, Keats, Bach, Mozart, de Vinci, and Michelangelo. They studied art, sang songs, and held socials. The power women garnered in being clubwomen shifted the club's agenda from self-improvement to civic duty.

Clubwomen were successful in extending the women's sphere into the public realm by building on women's instinctive domestic and moral traits. Evidence of this shift from self-improvement to civic responsibility is found in the formation of the first free public library, a night school for Delgado Mill Workers, the establishment of

Greenfield Lake, organization of the county museum, providing milk stations, offering baby clinics, and numerous other programs and projects undertaken during the height of the women's club movement. Under the guise of municipal housekeepers, clubwomen altered their traditional roles as wives and mother and fled their parlors to enter the public sphere. Members developed political skills by working with and for city officials prior to women gaining the right to vote with the Nineteenth Amendment.

Today, Sorosis holds the title of the oldest federated club in North Carolina. Of the seven founding organizations that comprised the NCFWC in 1902, only two remain active and Sorosis is one of them. Sorosis has, of course, changed since its inception. The 1950's saw a diminishment of Sorosis' influence despite continual assurances of the club's vitality by its members. Beginning in the 1950's, Sorosis lost the ability to create new, innovative ways of helping the community. Members no longer maintained the civic initiatives of the library, museum, Greenfield Lake, baby clinic, and other programs. Many Sorosis programs had been turned over to county government by the end of World War II.

Clubs that began during the Progressive Era lost membership and influence in their communities by the 1950's. The positions that Sorosis had once held were no longer considered to be a part of the voluntary aspect of the club. Many of the civic initiatives of Sorosis had been professionalized including the library, museum and the clinic. Sorosis' last significant campaign came on the heels of World War II with the creation of the Cancer Awareness Clinic. The Cancer Information Center opened in 1948 in the clubhouse. They continued this program for several years until the hospital professionalized the center.





Image 14. Past President of North Carolina Sorosis, 1895-1955

The minutes of the Sorosis meetings from 1895 to 1950 provide clues to the changes in the club's agenda. These minutes reflect an almost circular progression from self-improvement to civic to social club. The end of Sorosis as a source of change in Wilmington was signaled by the death of the last of its original members, Gertrude Jenkins Howell on December 28, 1959, and the sale of the clubhouse to the city in 1965. Howell's death and clubhouse's sale marked the end of an era for North Carolina Sorosis. No longer was Sorosis the powerhouse that had adorned Wilmington's landscape with programs focused on the improvement of its residents. Today, Sorosis continues to be active on a much smaller scale. The club provides scholarships and makes donations to local and national causes.

Local history allows for an in depth exploration that is often missed in broad, sweeping glances of the women's club movement. It is imperative that as historians we understand how a social movement such as the women's club movement was influenced by locality. In examining North Carolina Sorosis' influences on Wilmington, a new understanding of the effect the movement had on the community and club members can be reached. North Carolina Sorosis contributed to the social and cultural infrastructure of Wilmington through the creation of a museum, a library, a park, and a school. For the women of Sorosis, the club provided the opportunity to become a powerful source of change in Wilmington.

The women's club movement of the Progressive Era expanded the definition of the American woman. Civic minded clubs that littered the American landscape gave their members opportunities to pursue their interests and change their communities for the better. North Carolina Sorosis, like many other self-improvement and service clubs,

are now themselves a part of American women's history. Though these clubs are still in existence, they no longer resonate as they once did in the lives of women today.

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