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# Ella Grant Campbell, 19<sup>th</sup> Century florist, author and historian

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## ABSTRACT

Floristry evolved from commercial floriculture production and women played a key role in its 19<sup>th</sup> century development. Ella Lawton Grant Campbell (Wilson) (1854-1939) was an important figure in 19<sup>th</sup> century American floriculture. Her publication, *Floral Designs Series 1, A hand-book for cut-flower workers and florists* (1888) aided florists in both constructing and selling floral designs, serving as consumer selection guide and professional technical manual. Her work provided a glimpse into Victorian-era floristry, a significant era in the history of floral design history.

**KEYWORDS:** Women in floriculture, 19<sup>th</sup> century, floristry, floral design history

## INTRODUCTION

Notable women in floriculture history deserve recognition in collegiate and industry education programs because women are often the majority of student and professional florists. Hershey [1] noted the lack of historical information of women in horticulture and cited 10 significant females who deserve attention in college curricula. This research delves into the life and work of nineteenth century florist and historian Ella Grant Campbell (1854-1939) and her contribution to floral design advancement.

## FLORAL INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

Before the equivalent of today's professional floral designers, flower growers were referred to as florists. Horticulturist John Claudius Loudon [2] described two different types of florists. The first, *market-florists*, grew cut flowers or potted, exotic greenhouse plants. The second type, *select florists*, produced and distributed plants, bulbs, tubers, and seeds, and participated in annual flower shows. Professional florists, as we know them today, emerged from the early growers and distributors [3] due to consumer demand for visually-pleasing decorations, gifts, and displays for weddings, funerals and events. In time, growers began to recognize they needed floral design instructions [4].

Consumer-level floral design instruction was available in popular print media. Contributors to Godey's Lady's Book, the most widely read U.S. periodical prior to 1860 [5], discussed arranging flowers for the home, including practical hints on harvesting and extending floral longevity [6]. Readers could learn to fashion

paper flowers [7] for memorial decorations or shell flowers for home décor [8]. Artificial floral crafting held the possibility of revenue-generation, selling flowers at fundraising bazaars [9-12] or from home-based businesses [13,14] for the dressmaking industry.

Brief floral design lessons for growers were found within horticulture production manuals largely devoted to plant selection, greenhouse culture, soil amendments, new varieties, garden layouts, insect pests, and diseases. Demand for these books rose as people desired to learn how to grow flowers and plants for hobby or profit, and the skills associated with floral design began to be acknowledged. British horticulturist Frederick William Burbidge [15] addressed sourcing hard-to-find floral supplies, urging readers to buy bouquet wire from a florist "... who will show you the best sizes to use". In the case of sympathy flowers, he noted "... London florists tell me that this branch of their business is rapidly increasing every year." London-based James Shirley Hibberd's [16-20] gardening books included explanations on how to use cut flowers in hand-held bouquets and arrangements. In turn, these publications brought European floral design customs and techniques to American readers. In the US, Peter Henderson's Practical Floriculture [21] lists 58 chapters, one devoted to the "construction of bouquets, baskets, etc." James Vick included articles about floral arrangement in his horticultural periodicals [22,23]. Henry T. Williams [24] noted that cut flowers "... can hardly be spoiled, though the best effect is not always attained."

## A HANDBOOK FOR FLORISTS

Horticulturist, author, publisher and later, conservationist J. Horace McFarland (1859-1948) published the book *Floral*

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*Designs Series 1, A hand-book for cut-flower workers and florists* [25], a compilation aiding retail florists with marketing and design instruction. Written by Cleveland, Ohio florist Ella Lawton Grant Campbell (Wilson), the volume contained two parts, a consumer selection guide and an instructional guide for retail florists. At the time, photographic selection guides were already being used in florist shops, but McFarland felt they included costly, overly-complicated designs. Thirteen designers, including one from Germany, contributed photos resulting in 51 published engravings to help discern between floral design forms (for example, cross, cross with slanting arms, gates ajar) and plant materials used [*Convallaria*, *Cycas*, *Triticum*]. Readers learned how to build design foundations, reinforce stems or use veiling technique [26] in the second segment of the book, titled *Practical Hints on Floral Work*. Campbell instructed florists how to use wire, string, and toothpicks to anchor cut flowers into rigid wire frames filled with moss [*Sphagnum* sp.]. From these instructions, designers were led to applications in wedding and funeral work.

Campbell schooled florists on thriftiness, best-suited flower choices, and how to use plant materials to their best advantage. Demand for Christmas flowers eclipsed that of New Year's by 1888, when cut flowers were often scarce and expensive. She cautioned florists to promote evergreen arrangements with red-dyed, dried flower accents rather than high-cost fresh flowers during the Christmas season. Her recommendations included *Rosa* sp. cultivars 'Perle d' Or', "General Jacqueminot" and *Dianthus* sp. 'Crimson King' and 'Lady Emma' when abundant, in season. She reminded florists that they could keep potted foliage [*Adiantum*, *Areca*, *Begonia* 'Rex', *Huperzia*] plants in their greenhouses and rent them for events. Fast-growing plants could be trained on mossed frames within greenhouses, trimmed with fresh or dried flowers, and sold for decorations. In the winter months, potted evergreens were best kept in cool greenhouses until needed. Using such plants, architectural interest points (bay window, corner) were highlighted, creating focal areas for weddings, funerals and events. Floor-mounted mirrors draped with smilax [*Smilax* sp.] provided a similar effect. An observant florist would attend the evening wedding rehearsal to note bridesmaids and usher positions, then artfully arrange potted materials to frame the scene.

Bridesmaids could carry symmetric, rounded bouquets or unique styles such as satchels or sunhats filled with roses [*Rosa* sp.], sweet peas [*Lathyrus* sp.], hyacinth [*Hyacinthus* sp.] or water lilies [*Nymphaea* sp.]. Bridal gowns could be decorated with lily of the valley [*Convallaria* sp.] or clusters of roses or orange blossom [*Citrus* sp.] garnitures. Florists were cautioned to use white or pastel flowers for infants and children's memorial flowers, and Campbell suggested designers travel to the family's home to arrange delicate floral trims around the casket. Sturdier funeral designs could be made up and delivered, and many donned religious or sentimental mottoes spelled out in minute fresh or dried blooms.

In an advertisement at the end of the volume, Campbell advertised her ability to deliver flowers, shipped via train, within a 600 mile distance of Cleveland. At that time, it was

possible for florists to "wire" flowers outside of their delivery area to likeminded associates via telegraph service, cheaper than telephone which cost around \$72 per year for businesses [27]. Her shop offered a sales commission of 15-20% of the retail cost to the florist filling the order.

## BUILDING FLORAL BUSINESS

Campbell's good reputation grew tremendously in 1881 through the design and execution of massive floral arrangements for the funeral of assassinated US President James Garfield. Although she designed flowers for over 300 weddings and at least 1000 funerals by the closing of her business, the Garfield funeral was her biggest claim, and the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce entrusted her as their preferred florist for many years [28]. Campbell was active in local and national-level floral association work, promoting flowers and floral design at local, state and national levels [29,30]. She was instrumental in bringing the national convention of the Society of American Florists to Cleveland in 1896. The convention earned front page newspaper coverage [31].

To succeed, 19<sup>th</sup> century florists relied on professional networks aiding in product and knowledge exchanges. Florists grew much of the floriculture product they sold, but not all of it. Self-grown flowers were more profitable in the long run, and helped to avoid purchasing more costly stems from brokers [32]. In the event of crop failures or large orders requiring more flowers than were supplied by the greenhouse, an industry friend could make a difference between profit and loss. Meeting new and established business acquaintances at fairs, exhibitions, and industry events strengthened the potential for helpful contacts, near and far.

Campbell had female peers and kept contact with several including Mrs. Jaynes, the widow of her former Cleveland employer as well as Miss Bristol, Topeka, Kansas; Miss Merriman, Boston, Massachusetts; Mrs. Packard, Quincy, Massachusetts; and Mrs. Shuster, Brooklyn, New York [33]. It is possible that Campbell met her contacts within the Society of American Florists, which grew to 221 members in its first year, 1884-1885 [34].

Campbell closed her store after 30 years of service and went on to a second career as a local historian, publishing newspaper articles and books chronicling the wealthy families and neighborhoods of Cleveland. Her theoretical and practical work bridged floriculture production and design. Campbell worked in horticulture both practically and theoretically by growing, designing, teaching about and promoting flowers. She left a technical record unlike any of her peers and was a founder of American floristry.

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