

# General Federation of Women's Clubs

The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) is an international women's organization dedicated to community improvement and enhancing the lives of others. In 1906 the group's Colorado chapter helped establish **Mesa Verde National Park**, its most enduring contribution to the state. Founded in 1890 by New York journalist Jane Cunningham Croly, the GFWC was established to advance the rights of women and children in education, working environments, and health care. Today, the GFWC continues to support various women, youth, and overall equality reforms worldwide.

## Birth of GFWC

The GFWC initially focused on the **women's suffrage movement** by encouraging education and civic responsibility for young women across America. The club's roots stem from 1868, when the New York Press Club denied, because of their gender, Jane Cunningham Croly and other women access to a dinner honoring Charles Dickens. This action motivated Croly into forming a women's association, Sorosis, later that year. The club quickly became the center of educational advocacy for women across the country.

At the twenty-first-anniversary celebration of Sorosis in 1889, Croly invited members from more than sixty women's clubs across the United States to attend the next National Women's Suffrage Convention in New York City. At the same time, Emma Brainard Ryder of the New York City Sorosis Club placed an advertisement in a newspaper in Bombay, India, inviting young women of all classes and nationalities to the New York convention in 1890. On April 24, 1890, sixty-three clubs from around the world officially formed the General Federation of Women's Clubs, with Bombay being the first international club to join.

The federation soon grew to represent 200 groups and 20,000 women. By 1900 it tallied 150,000 members. In 1904 **Sarah Platt-Decker** became the GFWC's fifth president and its first from Colorado.

## Suffrage Movement

In 1914 Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, formally invited the General Federation of Women's Clubs to participate in the women's suffrage movement. At the time, those two organizations were the most influential women's groups in the country. The president of the GFWC, Anna Pennybacker, a proponent of suffrage, often stated that the highest-caliber woman must be interested in politics to fulfill her mission as a wife and mother. That June, the GFWC officially began advocating for suffrage, and by the end of 1914, the GFWC had established seventeen state federations that all supported women's suffrage.

Clubwomen such as Frances Elizabeth Willard—head of the **Women's Christian Temperance Union**—and Julia Ward Howe became prominent leaders in the fight for women's suffrage. In 1917 clubwomen and suffragists, including Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, Dora Lewis, and others,

were imprisoned at the Occoquan Workhouse in Lorton, Virginia, for picketing the White House and demanding the right to vote. *The General Federation of Women's Clubs magazine* kept the public updated on the inhumane treatment of the jailed women.

The GFWC played a crucial role in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment by providing rhetorical training and education for women. Members of local clubs not only assisted with that training but also gave public speeches and took part in town hall meetings to push the amendment forward.

## The GFWC in Colorado

The GFWC's roots in Colorado began in 1895 when the Mountain Pine Woman's Club received its certificate of membership. The GFWC started with simple volunteer work and public gatherings to announce its goals, yet it was not until the establishment of the GFWC Women's Club of **Colorado Springs** in 1902 that Colorado turned into the western vanguard of the women's movement. The state made history as the most western state ever to hold a GFWC Convention when the **Denver Woman's Club** hosted the Fourth Biennial GFWC Convention in 1898. Platt-Decker, president of the Denver Woman's Club, unified the clubwomen with her opening speech. By the end of the convention, the GFWC unanimously passed a resolution against child labor, stating that no child younger than fourteen should be employed in any hazardous conditions and that businesses must always provide proper sanitation.

The GFWC's most significant accomplishment in Colorado, however, was its work in establishing Mesa Verde National Park in **Montezuma County**. At the state convention of the GFWC in **Pueblo** in 1897, members **Virginia McClurg** and **Lucy Peabody** gave an impassioned speech about the need to protect the **Ancestral Puebloan** cultural sites near Mesa Verde. They pointed out that vandals and looters were allowed to despoil the ancient ruins, and that the structures and valuable artifacts within them were in danger of being lost to history unless the area was preserved. The clubwomen in Colorado began lobbying the federal government, and in 1906 Mesa Verde National Park was finally established under the **Antiquities Act** of that same year. For their essential role in the park's creation, McClurg and Peabody are often referred to as the "mothers of Mesa Verde."

## Current Work

At the start of 2019, the GFWC includes twelve women's clubs with over 300 members across Colorado, the most prominent clubs being Boulder Valley, Mountain Pine, Southwest Region, and Colorado Springs.

These four lead clubs continue to take the most hands-on action within their communities. The GFWC Boulder Valley club and Women's Club of Colorado Springs regularly hold food drives at local supermarkets. Since the early 2000s, the GFWC has partnered with the March of Dimes, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of mothers and babies and working against premature birth and infant mortality.

The GFWC has at least one head club in all fifty states—plus the District of Columbia—and twelve foreign countries. The federation includes 3,000 local clubs within the United States that focus on various community projects. It supports and donates to Partners in Housing, Kid’s Hope, Make-A-Meal, and many other charitable organizations. It also supports and donates to causes such as the GFWC Signature Project Fund—in partnership with Domestic Violence Awareness Month—and providing aid to the Grand Bahama American Women’s Club after Hurricane Dorian. Meanwhile, the GFWC’s Youth Literacy grants program helps schools, public libraries, and nonprofit organizations assist students who are below grade level in reading and writing.

At the start of 2019, GFWC Colorado decided to raise funds to replace the weather-beaten sign in front of the Hemenway House, a sign commemorating the group’s role in founding Mesa Verde. On September 28, 2019, clubwomen and their families traveled to Mesa Verde National Park to unveil the new sign and celebrate their partnership with **National Park Service** staff. In addition, GFWC Colorado obtained a proclamation from Governor **Jared Polis** that declares September 28, 2019, as Colorado Federation of Women’s Clubs Day.

In Lorton, Virginia, the GFWC plans to build a “Turning Point Suffragist Memorial” that will open in 2020 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment. The memorial will commemorate the women imprisoned for their nonviolent protest outside the White House in 1917.

## Author

**Matthew S. Mungai**

## References

Jennie Cohen, “[The Mother Who Saved Suffrage: Passing the 19th Amendment](#),” History.com, A&E Television Networks, August 16, 2010.

Dawson, Henry Hollister, *The General Federation of Women’s Clubs Tenth Biennial Convention, May 11 to May 18, 1910, Cincinnati, Ohio: Official Report* (Newark, NJ: Published by the Federation, 1910).

“[GFWC Active in Alamosa and Beyond](#),” *Valley Courier*, “Alamosa News,” May 10, 2019.

GFWC (General Federation of Women’s Clubs), “[GFWC Leadership](#),” 2019.

GFWC (General Federation of Women’s Clubs), “[GFWC News & Notes—October 10, 2019](#),” October 10, 2019.

GFWC (General Federation of Women’s Clubs), “[A History of Child Advocacy](#),” October 22, 2018.

GFWC (General Federation of Women’s Clubs), “[History and Mission](#),” 2019.

GFWC (General Federation of Women's Clubs), "[Impact & Accomplishments](#)," n.d.

GFWC (General Federation of Women's Clubs), "[News & Notes—January 31, 2019](#)," .

Elaine Ko-Talmadge, "[Making an International Impact: GFWC Affiliates Around the World](#)," GFWC (General Federation of Women's Clubs), March 4, 2016.

Rebecca J. Mead, "The [Woman Suffrage Movement in the United States—Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History](#)," Oxford Research Encyclopedias, May 16, 2018.

Patricia Miller, "[GFWC and Suffrage](#)," Turning Point Suffragist Memorial, n.d.

Mary Jane Smith, "[The Fight to Protect Race and Regional Identity Within the General Federation of Women's Clubs, 1895–1902](#)," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (2010): 479–513.

## **Additional Information**

"[GFWC](#)," Facebook, General Federation of Women's Clubs, n.d.

GFWC, "[Impact & Accomplishments](#)," n.d.

GFWC (General Federation of Women's Clubs), "[State Federation and Club Websites](#)," n.d.