

## The Fourteenth State

### **Abby Maria Hemenway's ambitious Gazetteer**

*Tyler Resch*

The most ambitious effort ever to document Vermont history was undertaken by a young and somewhat eccentric woman, Abby Maria Hemenway, who was born in Ludlow in 1828, the third of nine children in a stern Baptist family.

Starting in 1860, she attempted to publish a history of every one of Vermont's 251 towns. She almost succeeded. When the project was finished, the five thick volumes of Hemenway's Gazetteer totaled nearly 6,000 double-columned pages, containing histories of towns in 13 of the 14 counties. A set of these Gazetteers in good condition today would command a handsome price – if you could find one.

Abby proceeded alphabetically by county (Addison, Bennington, Caledonia, Chittenden, Essex, Franklin, Grand Isle, Lamoille, Orange, Orleans, Rutland, Washington, Windham, and Windsor), then alphabetically by town or city. Many handicaps stood in her way, chiefly financial. She was constantly in need of funds and was hounded by creditors.

After teaching unhappily in Michigan for three years, she returned to Ludlow and produced "Poets and Poetry of Vermont" as a money raiser. Professors at Middlebury College let her know that they believed a mere woman was not capable of writing history; and besides, they had started writing their own town histories in Addison County. She forged ahead anyway starting with a magazine format, also sold for startup money.

She enlisted volunteer historians around the state to write the history of each town. In Bennington County she conscripted among many others Hiland Hall. This lawyer, former U.S. Congressman and two-term governor was only too happy to comply because he was already working on his own state history, published in 1868.

Abby's efforts were slowed by the Civil War, then her Volume I was printed in 1868. Its 1,200 pages include a jumble of contributions from nearly 400 volunteer writers covering town histories from Addison through Essex counties. Volume II arrived in 1871 and includes histories from Franklin through Orange counties. Volume III covers Orleans and Rutland counties and was delayed until 1877. Volume IV was seized by creditors for nonpayment but she broke into the bindery at night, took it back, and somehow got it printed.

Volume V was partly done by the time she died, on Feb. 24, 1890, and her sister helped finish it. But its contents are disorganized and pages are often unfindable. Never published was Volume VI, covering Windsor County, because it was mostly destroyed by a fire in Chicago. Thirty years later the legislature appropriated \$12,000 to produce an index of names and subjects.

Abby Maria Hemenway's own story has been told several times. The late Janet Greene of the Stephen Greene Press wrote "The Woman Who Told Everything" in *Vermont Life*, winter 1960. The same press expanded that into "Abby Hemenway's Vermont: Unique Portrait of a State," by Brenda C. Morrissey, which offered samples of the best prose. A well-documented chapter on Abby was included by the late Deborah Clifford of Middlebury in her book "More Than Petticoats: Remarkable Vermont Women."