

FIRST WOMAN TOWN CLERK

By Ellen Knight¹

In 1911 applause broke out at Town Meeting for a simple but extraordinary reason—for the first time a woman acted as town clerk at the meeting.²

This was an historic moment. Women could not yet vote, and men were still arguing they were incompetent to do so. Women did not take part in Town Meeting but rather sat observing in the south gallery. Women might work in Town Hall, but they were not officers.

The change for women in Winchester's Town Hall started with Mabel Stinson, the woman applauded in 1911 who would set a precedent not only for the town, not only for the state, but for all New England in 1920.

In 1911, Stinson was not yet the town clerk. She only acted as such while Town Clerk George Carter was indisposed. But everyone, including the Boston press, recognized that "having a young woman occupy a position on the stage with the moderator and act in an official capacity as an officer of the town meeting" was "a unique distinction." She later became even more distinguished, though she may never have foreseen it.

Participating in town affairs must have been a familiar concept as Stinson grew up. Her father, Thomas Stinson, a real estate businessman, served on the Board of Registers of Voters for five years and was the clerk for the Board of Assessors at the time of his death in 1895. A resident of Winchester from about 1875, the elder Stinson set an example of public service which at least three of his children followed.

Mabel Stinson (1878-1966), a Winchester native and graduate of Winchester High School, entered the town's employ as a clerical assistant for some of the town officers in 1908. Gradually she took on more of the work around Town Hall until, in 1911, she was assistant town clerk, deputy collector of taxes, assistant to the town treasurer, agent of the board of health, agent of the overseers of the poor, assistant auditor, and assistant clerk for the assessors, cemetery commissioners, tree warden, selectmen, town engineer, and occasionally other boards and officials. "She is a remarkably bright young woman, and what she does not know about the general routine work of the town is but very little," the *Star* declared in 1911.

By 1920 when Carter died, Stinson knew the town clerk's job well, for Carter's health made it necessary for her to fill in for him often. In fact, she had only been at her job as general clerk and assistant town clerk for one week when Carter became ill and she had to "learn things the hard way."

When Carter died, Stinson was the obvious choice to be his successor, and the selectmen were reportedly ready to make the appointment when town counsel informed them it was illegal.

Though women had won the right the vote, it was said that, since the town clerk serves as Registrar of Voters, “a man is necessary under the law.”

But the board knew Stinson “who has had much experience and who has practically filled this office on many occasions in a very satisfactory manner” was the “best selection possible” for the job. Though it temporarily appointed Selectman Arthur Kidder, it set about making it legal to get Stinson appointed.

Selectman George Byrne told the story in 1954. “With the approval of the other members of the board, I put a bill in the Legislature to give the Town of Winchester the right to have a woman serve as Town Clerk. This bill went to the Legislative Committee on Towns who voted unanimously against it. The bill was substituted for the adverse report of the Committee on Towns and sent to the House of Representatives to be voted on. They, by a large majority, voted against it.

“I then submitted the bill to the Senate who voted in favor of it. This was later concurred in by members of the House of Representatives and approved by the Governor.”

“Our Board of Selectmen then unanimously voted to appoint Miss Mabel W. Stinson Town Clerk, thus making her the first woman to serve in that office in the state”—not only the state, but all New England as well.³

The opposition, it was first reported in 1920, developed from Framingham and Natick. Then, “It is reported that opposition to the bill developed among town clerks in other places who feared similar appointments of women.”

The appointment apparently did not take any convincing around Winchester. When Stinson stood for re-election the next year, no one ran against her then, nor did they during the following 28 years.

Interviewed in 1920, Stinson said, “There is an immense amount of detail that I believe women are better adapted than men.” Although she reportedly said that married women with children belonged in the home because “families are more important than politics,” she also said, “I feel strongly that work of this kind should prove interesting to many girls.

“I believe that women are more accurate than men in little things, and that they pay more attention to detail. A man can handle the big phases of a job, but many times he depends on some painstaking woman for the important records and data of his work. Women are better clerical workers because they are more careful.





"I feel honored to be the first woman to hold such a public office. The work is interesting because it brings me in close contact with the town people and it affords an excellent opportunity to study human nature. The political element does not attract me as much, but before I am through they may make a suffragist of me."⁴

Although a registered voter, she reportedly said she was not a suffragist. "The joke of it is, I'm not a suffragist. Winchester is not a suffrage town, and the men who were chiefly responsible for having the law altered so I could hold this office are not particularly fussy about women voting."⁵

When she resigned in 1954 and when she died, there was ample testimony to her rightness as town clerk, the expressions used including never too busy to help, "reliable, pleasant, dependable, courteous, quiet dignity, friendly, and irreproachable efficient conduct of her office.

"It was with great satisfaction," Byrne wrote, "that I heard Frederick Cook, the Secretary of the State, say publicly on two occasions in the Town of Winchester that the town had the most efficient town clerk in the state."

FAMILY BUSINESS

After 15 years as town clerk, Stinson's sister Helen became her assistant and when she retired, Helen was appointed her successor. Prior to becoming assistant town clerk, Helen Stinson (1887-1959), also a native, graduate of WHS, and life-long resident, had worked for over 20 years as a secretary in Boston.

The sisters worked together for 19 years. As Town Clerk, Helen served just three years, but by her retirement she was 70 years old. Reportedly, she was "always popular with her associate workers and the public generally because of her pleasant manner."

Mabel also associated with her brother William in Town Hall. An employee of Ginn and Co., publishers, William Stinson worked as tax collector from 1918 to 1924. He reportedly gave his time untiringly and felt his responsibilities keenly. In fact, when an illness of three months duration in 1924 forced his absence from his office, worry over the duties and fear of criticism preyed upon his mind. In February 1924 he "went to the cellar of his home on Myrtle street and in a mood of despondency shot himself."

Surviving (because the bullet, meant for his heart, was deflected by a rib), he later reportedly said his act was an impulse of the moment. Reportedly there was no problem with his work, and

a letter from the state's director of local taxation was published to that effect. Despite expressions of support and though unopposed in the upcoming election, he nevertheless ended his career as collector there.

WOMEN CLERKS CONTINUE

Though not unique in her family for public service, Mabel Stinson holds a unique place in Winchester history as the first woman town clerk. But she was not the last. Once Winchester appointed its first female town clerk, it kept on filling the position with women candidates down to the present.

Following Mabel and Helen Stinson, Elsie Nelson served in the office for 28 years. Unlike the Stinsons, Nelson had married and raised children. When her children left home, she thought of going to work and, in the early 1950s, got a job in the clerk's office.

When she retired, it was noted that "several employees who started out working in the clerk's office have left for other offices within Town Hall. But not Elsie Nelson. She started in the clerk's office and that's where she's stayed."

In 1957 she ran for Town Clerk and was elected. In 1975 with the adoption of the Town Charter the position became an annual appointment. She applied for reappointment until 1980.

Town manager Thomas Groux then appointed another able woman who has given dedicated service to the office, current Town Clerk Carolyn Ward, who coincidentally lived in the house that was once the home of the Stinson sisters. When she resigned, MaryEllen Lannon took over (and holds the distinction of being the first woman acting town manager in Winchester).

Stinson did not set out to change history. She merely did her work well, so well that others would change the law for her.

The Boston paper that noted Winchester's Town Meeting in 1911 remarked in closing, "Miss Stinson is not a suffragette, either militant or dormant. She is a quiet, demure little lady, of retiring disposition, who attends strictly to her work and lets others do the talking."

Apparently, those who did some talking for her (and about her) spoke right and well.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on March 28, 2003. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² The event was reported in the March 31, 1911 issue of *The Winchester Star*, next to an announcement that noted suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst would be speaking in Town Hall that Saturday.

³ "Miss Stinson's Appointment Not Easy," *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 19, 1954.

⁴ Muriel Caswell, "'Suffragist? No!' Declares the First Woman Town Clerk," *Boston Post*, May 30, 1920.

⁵ "Puts Babies Ahead of Office Holding," *Boston American*, May 24, 1920.