Woman's Club of Olympia

Founded in 1883, the Woman's Club of Olympia is one of the oldest women-only clubs on the West Coast. From a nucleus of a few women who in some cases defied their husbands to attend the first meeting, the club has grown and retained its vitality throughout its 129-year history.

Many dynamic and forward looking women have helped to create and maintain the club. Its first president, Abbie Howard Hunt Stuart was known as the "Mother of Women's Clubs" and founded other clubs in the area. Mrs. Stuart had belonged to the Woman's Club in Boston and was the driving force in the Olympia Club's organization. An independent-minded woman, she had worked as a bookkeeper and was a graduate of Tremont College. She married Robert Stuart, who was the Federal Land Commissioner of Washington Territory in Olympia. After his death, she undertook the job of answering letters and recruiting settlers to Washington Territory. Abbie Howard Hunt Stuart was also president of the Women's Suffrage Association in Olympia which was founded in 1871, and she worked steadily for passage of women's suffrage legislation. As president of the Club, Abbie Stuart encouraged the club to conduct businesslike meetings and to enlarge its horizons away from purely domestic topics.

Founding members were Pamela Hale, an early Thurston County School Superintendent; Abbie H. H. Stuart; Reverend Sarah E. Whitney, a minister; Mary Shelton; Janet Moore, a long time teacher; her mother Phebe Moore; Mehitable Elder, a member of the Mercer Girls party; Mary Hartsock; Ella Stork; and although they first met at her home, Clara Sylvester was not a founding member. Other prominent women joined the club over time including Goldie Robertson Funk, another early member who was active in preserving the club's history and publicizing its importance.

As the club grew, it branched out from teaching domestic arts to preparation and discussion of papers dealing with local and national political and social questions. Members were encouraged to read and study topics ranging from healthy clothing to cigarettes and prison reform. These papers are now part of the collection of the Washington State Historical Society along with the rest of the records of the club. They reflect the changing viewpoints and concerns of women in Olympia. The Club provided a forum for such interchanges not otherwise available. Organized as a "social club for self-improvement" to serve Thurston County, the club has been active in numerous philanthropic ventures. From 1896-1909 the club collected and maintained Olympia's only library facility. Later they aided in obtaining a Carnegie grant for a public library, donating their collection and remaining active in its support. Other beneficiaries of their work are the Veterans, handicapped children, scholars, community agencies and arts groups.

In its early years the club members met in private homes and later in a downtown building. By 1900 they had purchased their own clubhouse at the present location. That house burned in 1907 and the women were determined to replace it. By selling bonds, baked goods, newspaper subscriptions and writing and selling a song, the women were able to raise $2,500 for the new clubhouse, which now is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The club is affiliated with national and state Women's Club Federations as a charter member. The club rents the facility to other groups for meetings besides its own. The Women's Club represents the coming together of women's concerns and ideas in Olympia. As a repository of that history, it is remarkable in its longevity and vitality.