

Myth #4: Hannah Clapp and the Capitol Fence by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist and Dennis Myers, Journalist

This is a folktale generations of school children in northern Nevada have grown up believing to be historical fact. Even today well-meaning teachers, authors, and others, unknowingly perpetuate the myth as a true story. According to the legend, practically everyone in Carson City was shocked to discover that Hannah Keziah Clapp was awarded the bid to purchase the Capitol fence in 1875 because the Capitol Commissioners did not recognize her initials, H.K., and found, to their surprise, that they had given the job to a woman!



Actually there are a number of different versions of the fence-building myth that have been widely circulated over the years according to Kathryn Totton, Clapp's biographer. Writing in the fall 1977 issue of the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Totton noted that writer Marian Michelson first presented the fence story in a feature article entitled "A Sketch From Life" in 1899, nine years prior to Hannah's death in Palo Alto, California; it was the subject of a radio program called "Death Valley Days" in 1940; in the same year Reno's *Nevada State Journal* published a version of the tall tale; and on December 28, 1943, Gladys Rowley in her column "Reno Revue" in the *Journal* made it the principal topic. Each re-telling altered the details of the event for the sake of the tale.

Michelson had Hannah hiring the crew and supervising the work in a "long, warm ulster" and warm woolen hat. In fact, the fence was erected in the heat of August and September. Anyway, according to records at the State Archives, Ms. Clapp, and her colleague and longtime companion Elizabeth C. Babcock, were only responsible for the fence purchase. Another contractor, William D. Torreyson, was awarded the bid for installation, and Robert B. Stewart received the contract to lay the sandstone base for the fence.

With the facts obscured by the passage of time, the October 13, 1940 *Journal* article-- making reference to the recently-aired "Death Valley Days" broadcast--had Hannah in trousers and boots overseeing the project and doing ". . . a really excellent job building the fence." The article claimed that "Hannah Clapp believed she could do the job more efficiently than any man, and submitted an estimate which was so sound and so moderate that she was awarded the contract, in spite of the fact that she was a woman."

Gladys Rowley took even greater liberties and claimed that the Capitol Commissioners were unaware that the H. K. Clapp to whom they awarded the bid was a woman, although she had been a well-known resident of Carson City for almost fifteen years. Thomas C. Wilson, an advertising executive, perpetuated the myth in his popular *Pioneer Nevada* vignettes published by Reno's Harold's Club (1951). Dante Pistone followed suit in his article "Carson City Heroine," published in the *Nevada Official Bicentennial Book* (1976).

The population of the entire county was listed as only 3,222 souls in the 1875 state census. The truth was almost everybody knew H. K. Clapp, including Samuel Clemens when he lived and worked in the capital city in the early 1860's. Clemens, in a lengthy letter dated January 14, 1864 and signed Mark Twain, detailed a visit to Clapp's Sierra Seminary and his observations of the classroom. In

Church John, business manager "Silver Age" office
Clagett Wm. H. attorney-at-law, Carson near Proctor
Clapp H. K. Miss, teacher, NW cor Second and Nevada
Clark Daniel, speculator, bds with B. Henney
CLEMENS ORION, Secretary Nevada Territory, office N
side Plaza
Clemens Samuel, Assistant Secretary Nevada Territory
Cline Thos. res corner Fall and Fifth
Clow B. bds Penrod House
Coggeshall W. A. clerk with Winne & Amiraux
Collins G. W. ranchman, SW cor Carson and Sixth

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addition, the Carson City section of the 1862 *First Directory of Nevada Territory* lists Samuel Clemens and Miss H.K. Clapp on page 69. Virtually every city directory and newspaper story referred to Hannah as H.K. Clapp.

An article that ran in the May 4, 1875 edition of the Carson City *Daily Appeal* made it abundantly clear just how the editor felt about H.K. Clapp and Eliza C. Babcock being awarded the bid for the Capitol fence.

"Let there be no further complaints about the non-enjoyment of their rights by the women of Nevada. The contract for the furnishing of iron fencing for the Capitol Square has been awarded to Misses Clapp and Babcock, Principals of Sierra Seminary; their bid \$5,500 in coin for the delivery of the fencing upon the grounds is the lowest by some hundreds of dollars of those submitted." The cast and wrought iron fence was purchased from Robert Wood Co. Ornamental Iron Works of Philadelphia and shipped by rail to Carson City.

In the end, these pioneer educators and astute businesswomen made a sizeable profit of \$1,000. The *Appeal* graciously commented that "It will be found, we think, that Misses Clapp and Babcock have handsomely fulfilled their contract."

Photo: Nevada Historical Society
1862 City Directory page: Nevada State Library and Archives

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