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CLARA BABCOCK

THE FIRST FEMALE ORDAINED CHURCHES OF CHRIST MINISTER



By Julia Gilchrist

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The Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein.

Hear the story of 19th century trailblazer, Clara Celestea Hale Babcock,ⁱ the first ordained female Churches of Christ minister who baptized 1502 people, held four church pastorates and was in high demand up to the day before her death.

Born on Tuesday 30 April 1850ⁱⁱ in Fitchville Ohio, a place of diverse natural beauty, Clara grew up with springtime magnolias, vast flat plains unfurling to the American Northwest and rugged Appalachian Mountains to the southeast. Wooden sleepers were laid at a cracking pace, miles of rail transforming agricultural Ohio and Illinois into major hubs for iron, coal and steel works.ⁱⁱⁱ In a life marked by tears, Clara's Biblical foundation and ministry career strongly shaped by her identity as a Midwestern woman, the US Civil War and personal loss.^{iv} At just four months, her father John, a wagon-maker^v died aged 22, leaving Laura to raise Clara supported by relatives next door.^{vi} In 1860, life dramatically changed, one source claiming Clara's adoption by Rev F.C. Paine, the local Methodist minister,^{vii} another recalling relocation to Scott Beals' farm.^{viii}

The US Civil War broke out on 12 April 1861, Clara seeing Ohio's vital role as a central artery for Union troop and supply movements and its political influence as the home of Union Army's top three generals,^{ix} Mid-conflict in 1863, Laura^x married Enos Babcock, a brother of Beals' neighbour, Oren Babcock, and they welcomed sons Ira in 1864, and Adelbert in c1866.^{xi} On 9 August 1865, aged fifteen and three months to the day war ended,^{xii} Clara married eighteen-year-old Israel R. Babcock,^{18 5"8} with hazel eyes, black hair and a light complexion. Farmer and Civil War veteran of the Co. A 34th Illinois Infantry, Israel served three years^{xiii} before mustering out at Louisville, Kentucky^{xiv} on 12 July 1865.^{xv} After their firstborn son Arthur arrived in 1866, Clara and Israel experienced deep personal grief for of six children, only two survived to adulthood:^{xvi} Clarence Jessie died on 21 August 1871, aged one,^{xvii} three more lived and died, then on 28 April 1877, Clara bore her last, Ernest, at Rock Falls, Illinois.^{xviii}

Conversion to the Churches of Christ came in 1875, hinging on the practice of baptism. As Nathaniel S. Haynes, writing in 1915, explains:

"Clara was zealous in her religious life and was quite content with the [Methodist] teachings of her church. At twenty-five, curiosity led her to attend church when Evangelist Geo. F. Adams was preaching and several persons had publicly confessed their faith in Christ. Challenged by Adams, Clara questioned her Methodist pastor, asking him: *'How much does the church teach that is not in the Bible? If you have one human plan, how shall we know the divine plan? It weakens my faith.'* A week later, Mr and Mrs Babcock were baptized

and with Bible in hand, Clara went from door to door of her friends, many of whom turned to the Lord.”^{xxix}

The 1873 formation of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in Hillsboro Ohio, and the 1874 creation of the Christian Woman’s Board of Missions^{xx} and the 1883 the ordination of three missionaries, Josephine W. Smith, Laura D. Garst and Mary L. Adams^{xxi} inspired Clara to join Whiteside County WCTU in 1887,^{xxii} and to become their President.^{xxiii} Widely known in four states as a woman of “strong intellect, clear presentation of the Scriptures and effective appeal on behalf of Christ”^{xxiv} speaking at Erie Christian Church as WCTU President led the congregation to ask Clara to become their minister. On 2 August 1889^{xxv} Andrew Scott, pastor of Sterling Christian Church performed the ceremony, making Clara the first ordained woman in the Stone-Campbell movement^{xxvi}.

As the first ordained woman minister in Illinois^{xxvii} Clara’s ordination triggered 29 people to write to the *Christian Standard* debating whether she was allowed to minister! Reported by the *Christian Standard* and *Christian Evangelist*, the furor spilled into 1891-1893, and a period of wilderness loomed with 400-500 articles relating to ‘the woman question’,^{xxviii} seeing her opponents entrenched to the literalist interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12, whilst culturally reinforcing the 19th century concept of ‘a woman’s place.’^{xxix} However, as the more powerful weekly periodical influencing public opinion, the *Christian Standard* embodied a progressive spirit^{xxx} and published Clara’s fierce advocacy for women in June 1892 in her article, ‘A Woman in the Pulpit.’

Clara’s reply to a disdainful colleague boldly asserted:

“The story of the resurrection was first told by women...On the glad morning of the resurrection, at early dawn, the women stand at the vacant tomb and an angel voice speaks – heaven’s messenger: “Go tell them he has risen.” Eight hundred years before Christ, it had been prophesied that women should use their special gifts... The gospel lifts her once more to her position before the fall in the countries where Christ is honored. Woman is man’s equal, hence in the light of gospel truth, the apostle Paul could say, “There is neither male nor female, but ye are one in Christ Jesus.”^{xxxi}

Clara’s church family provided significant support, so many people coming to her services in 1889 that visitors were charged an entrance fee, funding construction of a much larger sanctuary on church grounds in 1890.^{xxxii} Reflecting her status as an in-demand evangelistic preacher, Clara and Israel travelled across Northwestern Illinois and Eastern Iowa^{xxxiii} returning periodically to Katherine Perkins, a member of Erie Christian Church whom they considered a daughter.^{xxxiv}

By 1920, Clara “was taken sick in January...regaining her strength, she ...took up the work in July and was taken sick at the Sunday evening services after having administered baptism to two

candidates, making 1,502^{xxxv} she had buried in baptism, reminding, as she said she wished, "in the harness until the end."^{xxxvi} Clara passed on 12 December 1924^{xxxvii} after an illness of seven weeks,^{xxxviii} at the home she shared with Israel and Katherine.

Clara's Legacy

Living on the road bearing the history of war, hardship and dramatic social changes, Clara's life was tough. But she was well prepared for serving the Lord in her ultimate career as an ordained minister, making her ministry an incredible achievement, albeit complex in its execution. For 36 years, Clara preached and evangelized mainly in the Erie, Thomson, Rapid City (which she churchplanted^{xxxix}) and Savanna Christian Churches in Illinois; LeClaire and Dixon in Iowa; Ellendale in North Dakota and at Port Arthur, Ontario, Canada.^{xl} Clara's evangelistic legacy includes fifteen other American women being ordained to ministry within the movement by 1915.^{xli}

The Erie Independent published Clara's obituary, recognizing her as:

"Beloved by the community. She was always a welcome visitor to their homes or social gatherings as her presence acted as an inspiration to all. She was always ready and willing to assist in any undertaking for the good of the community. As a member of the Woman's Club, she took great pride in this organization and was ever ready to assist when called on. Her life, her works are a monument that will live in the memory of all who knew her. To the man, woman or child, saint or sinner, she always extended a cordial greeting, that lent a ray of light to brighten their pathway in the journey of life. She commanded the respect of all sects and classes of people, as the attendance at her funeral verified."

Nathaniel S. Haynes further recorded Clara saying: "A true Christian searches the Scriptures for truth, does not trust the word of denominational tradition alone, but uses her reason to believe the facts of the Gospel and is baptized in 'the biblical way'."^{xlii}

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ⁱ A note on spelling – some records show Clara's middle name, Celestea spelled as 'Celestia'. I have adopted the spelling used by Douglas A. Foster et al. *The Encyclopedia of the Stone Campbell Movement*. 54.

ⁱⁱ Debra B Hull. *Christian Church Women: Shapers of a Movement*. St Louis: Chalice Press, 1994, 29-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ driving huge population growth from 1.8 million in 1850 to 5.8 million by 1920, ⁱⁱⁱ underpinning the significant evangelism opportunities for Clara and her female contemporaries as young adults.

^{iv} Women around Clara also assertively challenged the 'ideal woman as a mother and wife, her sphere of influence being the home where she lived out her sacred vocation as a mother.' ^{iv}

^v Donovan W. Hannis. 'Researching the Babcocks'. Erie Cemetery History Project (unknown date)

^{vi} Hannis. 'Researching the Babcocks'. Erie Cemetery History Project. John Sr, his wife Polly and their older children Rebecca, Luisa and Robert

- vii Hull. 1994, 29-30.
- viii Hannis. Erie Cemetery History Project.
- ix Roy Morris. 'Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan'. Crown Publishing, New York. 1992. U.S. Grant, W.T. Sherman and P. Sheridan
- x Laura was 39 years old, Enos was 36. Young enough to start a second family.
- xi Hannis. Ira was 6 years old in 1870; The Erie Independent. Adelbert as Clara's half-brother living in Kewanee, Canada, no age.
- xii The US Civil War broke out on 12 April 1861 and concluded on 9 May 1865.
- xiii The Erie Independent. 'Laid at Rest: I.R. Babcock', 1926
- xiv 2nd Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery, 2017. Israel Babcock transferred to the 2nd Minnesota (Union) during winter 1863-1864.
- xv The Erie Independent. Obituary 'Rev. C. C. Babcock', 19 December 1924.
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- xxii Clara served as a public lecturer for ten years, conducting itinerant evangelism on the side.
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- xlii Haynes. 1915, 466-467.

A note on the 'Woman question' - Ohio and Illinois, as pioneering midwestern states had long incubated a 'useful woman' attitude, spurning glamorous and delicate clothing, instead building dugouts and canoes whilst battling snakes and harsh prairie winds.^{xlii} The Civil War drove many people to the Bible, particularly women, who adopted religious reform as the largest and most important extrafamilial activity they could undertake.^{xliii} A post-war evangelical revival renewed debate concerning women's roles.^{xliiii} The Confederate states plunged into acute chaos and mourning,^{xliii} the men shattered by a deep loss of pride, security and hope, highly reluctant to lose the little power and dignity they had by sharing the public sphere with women.^{xliii} The Union states generally adopted a more emancipated view.

A note on Clara's family - By 1899, the bulk of the Babcock family had relocated to Canada for a settled farming existence, Clara and Israel heading to Thunder Bay, Ontario Canada in 1900,^{xliii} joined by their older son Arthur, his wife Mary and their three children, Roy, Florence and Bernice.⁵⁰ Clara and Israel's younger son Ernest remained in Thomson, Illinois, marrying Tina M. Dyson on 12 September 1899 at the Thomson Christian Church.^{xliii}