

The Beginnings of the Fredonia Shakespeare Club
By Douglas H. Shepard, about 2008

My original intention was to describe what Fredonia was like when your club was begun and then talk a bit about how the club itself got started and who the founders were. However, that turned out to be much too long a presentation, so what I would like to do is start in the middle, with the founders themselves.

Unfortunately, the earliest records are missing. When your club had its Golden Anniversary in October 1935, there was an account in *The Fredonia Censor* describing the event and quoting “from research notes gathered by Miss **Bickers** and used by her in her anniversary talk.” In the 1930s, the *Censor* had begun a series of columns called “Histories of Fredonia Clubs.” The series began with an account of the DAR by Ruth **Steger**. When the Shakespeare Club had its anniversary meeting, the *Censor’s* account was made part of that series. Although Ruth **Steger** wrote most of the columns, a few were done by other people, and since the one for the Shakespeare Club is unsigned, it’s difficult to know who actually wrote it, which means “can the account be trusted”?

My impression, for what it’s worth, is that it can. This is how the article begins: “The Fredonia Shakespeare Club yesterday afternoon celebrated the golden anniversary of its founding with a birthday party held at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. C. D. **Sessions** in Central Avenue [that was Chauncey D. and Clara B. **Sessions** at 80 *Central Avenue*] with its president, Mrs. Hugo L. **Wolfe**, as hostess.”

Miss Alice J. **Bickers** of Liberty Street, the speaker of the afternoon, reviewed the club’s 50 years of existence under the title “Looking Backward.” There were some guests at that event including two charter members from 1885: Mrs. George M. **Newton** and Mrs. Herbert **Miner**. After some opening remarks “Miss **Bickers** then gave her historical talk. . . . The club’s brilliant history taken from research notes gathered by Miss Bickers and used by her in her anniversary talk, is printed herewith as this week’s chapter.”

The article goes on, “‘The Fredonia Shakespeare Club was organized in 1885,’ says a typewritten note attached to a file of programs. ‘The object of the organization is the study and discussion of the writings of Shakespeare, together with the writing and reading of papers by the members of the society, connected with and suggested by this study.’”

In other words, when Miss **Bickers** gave her talk in 1935, there was this typewritten note in the files. It is no longer there. The file for the Shakespeare Club at the Barker Museum is made up almost entirely of printed programs giving the names of the officers and members that year and the topic or topics for that year. One interesting point is the list of strict guidelines by which each assignment is to be approached.

There were two lists. The first is headed: ANALYSIS FOR USE IN THE PREPARATION OF PAPERS ON THE VARIOUS PLAYS. Which is followed by: “Chronological proofs, external and internal; Outline of plot; on what does it turn? Condition of text as to correctness. What of the title? Its rank as compared with other plays of the same period? How long a time is comprised in the action? Analyze the two central characters.” And so on.

The second list is headed: QUESTIONS BY THE WAY, FOR CONSTANT USE IN THE STUDY OF THE PLAYS, which begins with, “Read one scene, then review, any member being called upon for explanation. Point out and give full explanation of: All classical and mythological allusions, All scriptural allusions and parallels, All figures of speech,” etcetera.

This gives you a taste of how the Club was structured at the beginning. In the file there are also a few printed menus for the annual banquet and a typed copy of the club's more modern constitution somewhat different than the earlier version. That early version is in the oldest of the programs in the file, one for 1890-91. There is nothing earlier than that, so that any record of the first five years of the club's existence is lacking. It is possible that having printed programs only began in 1890 except for one thing. The printed program has a typo on the first page. That page lists the calendar of regular meetings followed by "Plays to be Studied during 1889-'90," which should read 1890-'91. That suggests the Secretary set up the copy of the new program using the previous year's as a guide and inadvertently repeated the previous year's date. So maybe there were earlier programs. If so, they are no longer in the file, or perhaps never were.

The 1935 article explains some of this. "Formation of the club is known to have been started in 1885 but the organization was not completed and the club did not settle down to work until 1886." Then follows a list of the twenty original charter members: Mrs. S. B. **Smith**, Pres., Mrs. M. T. **Dana**, Vice Pres., Miss Clara A. **Lester**, Sec., Miss Nellie **Shaw**, Treas. And so on. Miss **Bickers**' talk continued pointing out that the emphasis was always on work and participation. "Founded as a study club, the members originally were known as a class and the assigned work as a lesson." And that is particularly significant. I will come back to it in a moment.

There is nothing more in the 1935 article about the beginnings of the club. Luckily, however, there is more information available, outside the Shakespeare Club's file. By 1905, the Club was listing "Honorary Members" in its programs, and one of the names in the list was Miss Ella **Lapham**, to whom we should pay some attention. Ella Caroline **Lapham** was born in 1852, the daughter of Arioch and Sylvia (**Smith**) **Lapham**. I found them first as a young couple in the 1850 Census in Greenwich OH where he is identified as a "merchant." By 1860 they are in North Collins where he was farming, living in the household of Humphrey and Deborah **Smith**, who were probably Mrs. **Lapham's** parents.

Ella must have gone through the usual local schooling, and in 1871 she entered Vassar, graduating in 1876. In May 1875, while she was still at Vassar, Julia **Ward Howe** who had founded the A.A.W., the Association for the Advancement of Women, in 1873, visited and spoke on the topic "Is Polite Society Polite?"

After Ella **Lapham** graduated from Vassar she lectured and taught in her specialty, English Literature with an emphasis on the Elizabethan Age. By the early 1880s the **Laphams** were living in Fredonia about where St. Joseph's Church is today on East Main Street [the former **Taylor** house at today's *145 East Main*], and in October 1883 Ella became Secretary to the National AAW group at their meeting in Baltimore where Julia **Ward Howe** was once again made President.

From the scanty evidence including some remarks in her obituary, it looks as though Ella **Lapham** may have become the sole breadwinner, tending to her ailing parents. That included giving lectures for a fee. In May 1884, Ella **Lapham** announced through the *Censor* that she would be offering a course on "the Life and Literature of the Elizabethan age" beginning in the early Autumn of 1884. The topics were to be English homes and customs, the time and contemporaries of Elizabeth, Sidney and Raleigh, Spenser, Hooker, The dawn of the drama, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Johnson [sic] and Bacon. "It is her intention to repeat the course at Lockport, Jamestown and other places in their vicinity, where classes of twenty or more can be formed."

Unfortunately there was some difficulty getting enough participants to sign up, so that the series was put off until January 1885. In the meantime, Miss **Lapham** went to Baltimore in October 1884 to attend the Association of which she was Secretary. In its issue of 17 December 1884 the *Censor* noted that she hoped “to begin her class in English literature early in January” and on the front page, in the “Woman’s Work” column was a long section giving some details. “The subject of these lectures has been discussed by the women generally, but no publication has as yet been made. A number of women are going to embrace the opportunity of hearing these lectures, but not as many as one would expect in a town of Fredonia’s population. Some have remarked that the price was too high; perhaps so, but how easily this difficulty could be overcome, if all the Women who are at all interested in literary work would attend bringing one. Or for instance, if twenty-five from each church would become interested, the entire course could be had for the nominal price of one dollar.”

The next notice was in the *Censor* of 7 January 1885 that “Miss **Lapham** will open her course of parlor lectures at her house, on Tuesday, Jan. 13th, at three P.M. Tickets for the course, \$3.00, to be obtained of Miss Nellie **Shaw**.” And here we leave Miss **Lapham** for a few minutes and turn our attention to the money lady, Miss Nellie **Shaw**. Helen M. **Shaw**, always referred to as Nellie, was born in 1859, the younger daughter of Merrill H. and Almira **Shaw**. He was a physician who may not have been too successful. He had a practice in Silver Creek by 1850, then in Charlotte where Nellie was born, then Buffalo by 1870.

Nellie must have had the usual schooling as she grew up. In 1877 she entered the Fredonia Normal School, graduating in 1880 in the Advanced English curriculum. At that time, the whole **Shaw** family moved to Fredonia, living at 66 West Main Street. Nellie was very active in the Fredonia Presbyterian Church. There is an item in March 1883 about a meeting of the Young People’s Association of the church, meeting at the residence of Mrs. C. M. **Howard**, the Fredonia Watch Company people, where Nellie was elected Vice President. However, in September she took a position teaching in Oil City, coming home for the holidays and attending Mrs. **Howard**’s New Year’s reception. She remained here and took on the task of selling tickets for the series of lectures Miss **Lapham** was to give at her East Main Street home. And the lectures finally were given. On each Tuesday, for ten weeks beginning in mid-January of 1885, the women met.

What happened next was described years later by Nellie **Shaw**. Ella **Lapham** died in June 1917. Nellie — by now she was Mrs. S. A. **Jennings** living in Larchmont NY — wrote to the *Censor* expressing her sorrow at the news of Miss **Lapham**’s death. She then added “Well do I remember the day that I sat on the porch of her home on east Main street talking over ‘clubs.’ I proposed to her that she start a Shakespeare Club in Fredonia. She responded ‘I cannot do it, Helen, I have too much to do now and beside, I am not well enough acquainted in the town — but if you will organize the club I will do everything in my power to help, excepting to take office.’ Being her intimate friend and knowing the literary work that she had commenced, I acquiesced. And, yet, before leaving her, I urged again. She at last said ‘if there is to be a Shakespeare Club in Fredonia you will be obliged to organize it.’

“The next morning, after our talk, I made out a list of charter members, and called on each in her home. My first visit was at Mrs. **Dana**’s. She was so cordial in acceptance, that I was encouraged to proceed. Miss Carrie **White**, now Mrs. George **Newton**, was next who responded gladly as did Mrs. **Rolph** and Mrs. Samuel **Smith**.

“The first meeting was held in our house on Main street. There, the constitution and by-laws were drawn up. Miss **Lapham** guiding and giving advice generously and heartily.

“Intending a visit to Chicago, I could not accept an office, and, while there, lost my membership by breaking one of the rules, which I helped to formulate. The rule was to report on the preparedness or unpreparedness two weeks before the reading of the paper assigned. I was to have been the reader, and I am sorry to say, I did not report.

“The above was the beginning of the Fredonia Shakespeare Club, which has flourished so many years (since 1885) and, of which I am proud to be the founder. Your truly, Helen **Shaw Jennings**.”

So there you have it. The beginnings of your club by Nellie **Shaw** under the guidance of Ellen **Lapham**, which explains a great deal. It explains why the membership was set at 20, the required size for Miss **Lapham’s** talks and the ideal size for a seminar; why the group was originally referred to as a class and the assigned work was called a lesson; why Miss **Lapham**, never a member, was made an Honorary Member; and why the group’s calendar was an academic one, beginning in the fall. Just as with Miss **Lapham’s** lecture series, each member had to pay a fee (tuition) and, as a further safeguard, visitors could be from outside but not Fredonia residents. There would be no freeloading by those who might want to learn at no charge. And it explains those guides to analyzing the plays, exactly what you would expect for a class of beginners, except in this case, curiously enough, there would be no teacher to guide you. You may remember that the 1935 article said that the Club started in 1885 but it didn’t settle down to work until 1886. As Huckleberry Finn said about Pilgrim’s Progress, that statement was interesting but tough. It would be nice to narrow down just what “settle down to work” in 1886 meant.

It may be possible to do that. The first mention of the Shakespeare Club in *The Fredonia Censor* was a passing reference in the issue of 24 February 1886. However, there is an item in the issue of March 3rd reporting that the Club had had its 6th meeting at Mrs. **Greene’s** the previous Wednesday. “The object of this club is the thorough study of Shakespeare and his plays. The requisite number, twenty, have been chosen. The members hope to make the meetings a success. The President, Mrs. Samuel **Smith**, is doing all she can to make it a beneficial study.”

First I should explain that the meeting at Mrs. **Greene’s** meant today’s Barker Historical Museum building which had only recently begun to house the Barker Library. The Library was opened in February 1884, using the “main room” and the “wing.” The rear rooms downstairs, all of the upstairs rooms, and part of the cellar remained the property of the **Greenes** in residence for another three years.

Since the Club met once a week, counting back from the 6th meeting on 24 February means the first meeting took place on 20 January 1886. That makes sense. Ella **Lapham** gave her course of ten lectures from 13 January to 17 March 1885, inspiring her “treasurer,” Nellie **Shaw**, to suggest a Shakespeare Club be formed.

Unfortunately, we don’t know when Nellie made her suggestion. When she got together with Mrs. **Dana**, Carrie **White**, Mrs. **Rolph** and Mrs. Samuel **Smith** at her home on Main street with Miss **Lapham** there to guide them, a constitution and by-laws were worked out, surely not at one sitting. After that, with the number 20 agreed on, there must have been many discussions of whom to ask and reports on who was considering joining and who refusing.

It looks as though the summer intervened and then the holidays. Finally the preliminaries were completed and on 20 January 1886 the Club had its first formal meeting. It is not likely that there had been time to prepare papers to be read. Instead, as the *Censor* of 17 March 1886 reported, the Club invited Miss **Lapham** to give her course of lectures once again, this time under its auspices, at the Library beginning on 23 March 1886. The last of the ten lectures, one

on Bacon, took place on 25 May and at that point, as the Constitution stipulated, there was to be a summer recess.

In October 1886, the first of the regular annual cycles began, apparently what the note meant by “settling down to work,” the first of an astounding, unbroken sequence of meetings of your Club over the last 120-plus years. Although my account here does seem to describe what had been thought to be lost, it is still a thin, skeletal description at best of the real origins of your Club. So in closing I will presume to go one step further and remind you that 2010 will be the 125th anniversary of your founding. One, or several, or all of you could take this skeleton I’ve offered you and flesh it out.

Why not write a real history of your Club including full biographies of those twenty founding members, plus Miss **Lapham**. Vassar has a full file on her and there are plenty of local sources that could be used for the other women. There must be children, grandchildren and great grandchildren somewhere, perhaps with memories, family stories, correspondence, photographs. It would be a wonderful thing if you could finally put into your file the true history that has been missing for so long. So that is my assignment for you. After which I can only say, in the spirit of your origins, this class is dismissed.