



150 Years of Women Changing Lives and Minds, 1874-2024

Anniversaries often commemorate **turning points in history**—marking the events or ideas that made a difference. For example, National History Day, **a turning point in the way history is explored and presented**, turns 50 years old in 2024. And the **Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)**, **a turning point in women’s use of power and activism**, was founded in 1874—150 years ago.

A Turning Point in Women’s Empowerment

What was it like before? The majority of women in the 19th-century United States were wives and mothers who worked inside the home, while men went to their jobs outside it. Politics and even the idea of voting seemed definitely men’s work, too complex and unsavory for women.

What was the turning point? Involvement in social reform efforts convinced women to leave the house and assert themselves in new ways. The WCTU helped empower women to reach this turning point. Founded in 1874 with the goal of reducing or eliminating the damage done to individuals and families by alcoholism, the WCTU became the largest women’s organization in the US in the late 19th century. The organization encouraged women across the country, in small towns and big cities, to speak out in public and to lobby local and national government to address the social issues that caused alcoholism.

What was it like afterwards? WCTU members learned how to advocate for a cause by running a meeting, speaking in public, writing articles, petitioning for change, and lobbying legislatures. **The WCTU’s methods and goals became turning points that empowered women across the country and around the world.**

Here’s another turning point: historical research! Historians have realized that the story of our country has often left out many voices, including those of women and people of color. The **extensive primary sources** in our Archives can **bring hidden voices and untold stories to light**. For example, our “Truth-Telling” online exhibit at <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/willard-and-wells/index> explores the debate between Willard and Ida B. Wells, and a new ongoing project documents the lives and work of the many Black leaders in the WCTU.

How we can help History Day students, whatever topic they choose:

- **Turn the page** to see a selection of **research topics and recommended resources**.
- The Archives is **open by appointment**, for individuals or teams of 2-3, for students who wish to **visit in person**. More information at <https://franceswillardhouse.org/research/collections/>
- Archives staff are available for **virtual interviews** and **consultation** by phone and email.
- We can supply **scans of photos and documents** from our collection.

Selection of potential topics for “Turning Points in History” (Contact us for details and more resources!)

- **Frances Willard:** How did a girl from the Midwest become the leader of a global women’s movement? Willard’s autobiography, *Glimpses of 50 years* (<https://archive.org/details/glimpsesoffifty00will>) describes turning points in her life with documents and images. A new biography, “*Do Everything*” by Christopher Evans (get it through your library) explores both the successes and challenges of her life.
- **Votes for women:** How did the WCTU and the Suffrage Movement inspire each other? Frances Willard’s “Home Protection” campaign (1876) was a turning point in convincing women that they had a duty to vote in order to shape legislation that affected their families. See our blog post at tinyurl.com/crjbfzfmk and digital exhibit at <https://franceswillardhouse.omeka.net/exhibits/show/-womanly-liberty---frances-wil>.
- **Learning to lead:** How did Frances Willard motivate women to take on new roles? Her 1879 handbook, *Hints and Helps in our Temperance Work*, taught women how to run a meeting, organize a WCTU branch, generate publicity, and use petitions and lobbying to get their voices heard. See a digitized copy of the handbook at <https://archive.org/details/9605531.nlm.nih.gov>.
- **Taking a stand against alcohol:** What motivated middle-class women in small towns to protest against saloons? The Woman’s Crusade Against Alcohol of 1873-74 was a mass movement that surprised both the nation and the women who participated in it. See our blog post at <https://franceswillardhouse.org/launching-the-last-call-the-womens-crusade-against-alcohol-1873-1874/>.
- **Social change:** What else did the WCTU do? As they realized that alcoholism resulted from social factors ranging from poverty to powerlessness, the WCTU expanded its mission, working to “Do Everything” to change negative social conditions. Our resources include many examples.
- **Speaking out:** How did women gain the courage to speak out in public? What resistance did they face? Check out the Speaking While Female Data Bank: <https://speakingwhilefemale.co/temperance/>.
- **Knowledge is power:** When and why did women decide to seek higher education? Our blog series describes Frances Willard’s own search for a college education, as a student and a teacher: [Part one](#); [Part two](#); [Part three](#). Also see our timeline of Willard’s educational path: tinyurl.com/437kdw9z
- **Facing issues:** How did the WCTU respond when Ida B. Wells spoke out about their racism? Our “Truth-Telling” exhibit <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/willard-and-wells/index> explores the debate.
- **Turning to Youth:** How did the WCTU influence health education in the public schools? See our digital exhibit: <https://franceswillardhouse.omeka.net/exhibits/show/scientific-temperance-instruct>.
- **Wheels of change:** How did Frances Willard make bicycle riding acceptable for women? Read her book *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.rslfcd&seq=1>.
- **Local history:** What was the impact of the WCTU in your town? Is there a building, a park, a drinking fountain? <https://franceswillardhouse.omeka.net/exhibits/show/temperance-fountains--a-legacy>

Need more ideas? We have lots of suggestions, plus the primary sources to turn ideas into projects

- More blog posts, with primary sources: <https://franceswillardhouse.org/blog/>.
- Topics covered by our Subject and Biographical files: <https://tinyurl.com/4p94vyyf>.
- More digital exhibits, full of primary sources: <https://franceswillardhouse.org/digital-exhibits/>.



Frances Willard House Museum

*The Frances Willard House Museum and WCTU Archives in Evanston document the life of social reformer Frances Willard (who lived in Evanston most of her life) and the history of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the largest U.S. women’s organization of the 19th century, which also had a world-wide presence. In addition to the history of the WCTU’s work for temperance and women’s suffrage, the WCTU Archives is a resource for **Chicago stories, national and international stories of women’s empowerment, and stories of innovation, change, and conflict.***



WCTU Archives Building