SKIRTING SYDNEY
PUTTING WOMEN’S HISTORY ON THE MAP
Historical Walking Tour

Miss Nellie Stewart as ‘Sweet Nell’ in 1909
(Image: National Library of Australia, David Elliott theatrical postcard collection)
But what of the other, less obvious, city spaces where Sydney women went about their daily lives?

This map pinpoints key sites where girls and women lived and worked, where they were educated and entertained, and where pioneering activist women held meetings, published journals and sometimes in the process expanded the

The majestic Queen Victoria Building stands in the heart of the city as a monument to a much-loved and long-reigning Queen, although she never visited Sydney.

Putting women’s history on the map

Sydney’s history is all around us.

Our walking tours will lead you on a journey of discovery from early Aboriginal life through to contemporary Sydney.

Clover Moore MP
Lord Mayor of Sydney
MARY REIBYE
THE ARGYLE STORES, 12–20 ARGYLE STREET, THE ROCKS

Mary Reibey (1777–1855) was a convict who became a highly successful businesswoman with interests in hotels, trading, shipping, farming and city buildings. She briefly owned the land around the Argyle Stores in 1828. Mary Reibey was a governor of the Free Grammar School and a founding member of the Bank of New South Wales, as well as active in church and charity work.

LOUISA LAWSON AND THE DAWN
OFFICES, 26 JAMISON STREET

Louisa Lawson edited the monthly newspaper, The Dawn, at 26 Jamison Street from 1888 to 1905. It was written, laid out and printed solely by women and advocated women’s rights to vote and hold public office. In 1891, the NSW Women’s Suffrage League printed its pamphlets at The Dawn offices free of charge. The NSW Woman’s Suffrage Bill was passed in 1902 and Lawson was described in Parliament as “the Mother of Suffrage in New South Wales”.

FORT STREET GIRLS’ HIGH SCHOOL
NOW NATIONAL TRUST CENTRE, OBSERVATORY HILL

Established in 1849 by the new Board of National Education, the Boys’ and the Girls’ Schools stood on the site of the Old Military Hospital at Fort Phillip and were the first government high schools in Australia. The Girls’ School remained at Observatory Hill until 1975. Many distinguished Sydney women were students of this school.

FEMALE ORPHAN SCHOOL
SITE, CORNER OF GEORGE AND BRIDGE STREETS

The Female Orphan School was set up by Governor King in 1801 to house destitute young girls. It was officially opened on 17 August 1801, housing 31 girls between the ages of 7 and 14. By 1829 there were 152 inmates, including some Aboriginal girls.
FLORENCE TAYLOR, ARCHITECT
16–20 LOFTUS STREET

The Building Publishing Co., founded by Florence Taylor (1879–1969) and her husband George in 1907, operated out of 20 Loftus Street from 1924–1962. Florence edited a number of trade journals, providing contemporary comment on architecture, design and urban planning issues. She was a founding member of the Town Planning Association of NSW. Despite completing her articles, having a flourishing domestic architecture practice and obtaining glowing references, the NSW Institute of Architects knocked back her application for associate membership in 1907. It was not until 1920 that they finally invited Florence into their ranks.

FEMALE IMMIGRATION DEPOT
HYDE PARK BARRACKS, MACQUARIE STREET

Hyde Park Barracks, a former convict dormitory, was adapted in 1848 as Sydney’s Female Immigration Depot, to protect and process women arriving in the colony under various government schemes. Up until 1886, thousands of impoverished working-class women were housed here, some with their children, before starting new lives in Australia. A contemporary monument in the compound wall commemorates the many Irish immigrants and “workhouse” girls who came to New South Wales fleeing the Irish Famine.

WUGANMAGULYA (FARM COVE)
SHORELINE, ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS, FARM COVE

A ceremonial site before European arrival, modern-day Farm Cove was where Aboriginal women fished and swam. Colonial paintings show women in their canoes, with fires burning to cook their catch for their children, just offshore here. In the pathway along the shore, Wuganmagulya, an artwork by Aboriginal artist Brenda Croft, honours the original owners of this land.
Maybanke Anderson, founding member of the Womanhood Suffrage League of NSW, and campaigner for women’s and children’s rights, produced her journal, The Woman’s Voice from offices in a previous building on this site. It is said that the strategy for including women in the federal constitution was devised here in about 1897.

Sydney Hospital was the first in Australia to employ female nurses on the Nightingale model. Lucy Osburn, Lady Superintendent here from 1868 to 1884, laid the foundations of modern nursing in Australia. The Lucy Osburn-Nightingale Foundation Museum on level one commemorates her.

Jessie Street was a pioneering feminist who helped found the United Associations of Women, and was an activist for women’s and children’s rights, full equality for Aboriginal people, equal pay, international peace and universal human rights. She co-chaired the first union equal pay committee with Lucy Woodcock, and represented Australia at the UN Conference in 1945. She had an office in this building from 1924. She is remembered with a statue in the Jessie Street Memorial Garden at Loftus Street, Circular Quay.

Chinese tea merchant Mei Quong Tart’s tea-rooms here, and later in the Queen Victoria Building, were also used for meetings of other women’s organisations, such as the Kindergarten Union. Maybanke Anderson was a founding member of the League and the Union.
NELLIE STEWART, SINGER AND ACTOR
WALL TABLET, INSIDE ST JAMES CHURCH, KING STREET

Nellie Stewart (1858–1931) toured England, India and the USA, building a solo career in comic and grand opera. In May 1901, she sang at the concert celebrating the opening of the Commonwealth Parliament. In 1902, she first played Nell Gwynne in Sweet Nell of Old Drury, a production so successful that she became known as Sweet Nell. In 1910 she raised £3000 to buy radium for Sydney Hospital which named its Children’s Ward after her. There is also a Nellie Stewart monument in the Botanic Gardens, erected in 1938 by the Nellie Stewart Old Drury Club.

THE WOMEN’S CLUB
LEVEL 4, 179 ELIZABETH STREET

The Women’s Club was founded in 1901 by Dr Mary Booth, an early doctor, as a place where women interested in public, professional, scientific and artistic work “might spend their leisure moments and associate together”. The first committee also included Rose Scott, pioneer of women’s suffrage in NSW. It had 807 members by 1929. Sydney University Women Graduates Association and the Professional Women Workers Association were also associated with the Club.

SYDNEY GIRLS’ HIGH SCHOOL SITE
NOW DAVID JONES, CORNER ELIZABETH AND MARKET STREETS

Sydney High School was established on this site in 1883. Boys were taught on the ground floor and girls on the first floor, with separate entrances. The first school in NSW to prepare girls for entrance to university, Sydney Girls’ High remained on this site until 1921, when it moved to Moore Park. Many distinguished Sydney women are ex-students.

YOUNG WOMEN’S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION
WENTWORTH AVENUE, NEAR OXFORD STREET

The Sydney branch of the YWCA dates from 1880, providing accommodation for female migrants from 1881, an employment agency in 1890, an early savings bank for women in 1904, and the first women’s gymnasium in 1912. From its foundation, “The Y” has been in the forefront of advocacy and services for women in Sydney and throughout NSW.
This two-storey terrace house became Women’s Liberation House after the move from 67 Glebe Point Road. It was the venue for meetings of many groups as well as the general meeting place for women’s liberation. The Rape Crisis Centre’s first telephone counseling service and Control, the birth control and abortion referral service were located here. The Mejane, Scarlet Woman and Refractory Girl collectives met here as did Women in Education and Theory and Action groups. The Women’s Liberation Library is in the Jessie Street National Women’s Library collection.

The Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) was established in Melbourne in 1972 by Beatrice Faust. At a meeting at the Sydney house of Julia Freebury, Caroline Grahame, June Surtees and Wendy McCarthy agreed to convene a Sydney group. Forty women attended the first public meeting in Sydney on 17 June 1972. The founding members had been involved in childbirth education, women’s health issues, abortion law reform and Women’s Liberation. WEL continues to be an independent, feminist, non-profit lobby group working to protect the rights of all Australian women.

Australian Hall, Elizabeth Street was the site of the Day of Mourning protest held on 26 January 1938. Women, Aboriginal and white, were active in the campaign for full citizens’ rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Salvation Army Young Women’s Hostel for working girls was set up here in 1912 to provide budget accommodation for single women working in the city. In 1924, a new hostel for young women was opened at Moore Park but this building at 348 Elizabeth Street continued to be used as a shelter for destitute women. The building is now a residential rehabilitation service for women, still run by the Salvation Army.
A specialist women’s library was established in 1989, the centenary of Jessie Street’s birth, and named in her honour. The Library is self-funded, supported by the City of Sydney, and staffed by volunteers. It has a large collection of feminist archives, books and posters.

From the 1890s to the 1920s, Bertha ran a radical bookshop and boarding house in Castlereagh Street. One of her daughters married poet Henry Lawson; another married Labor Premier, Jack Lang.

Women’s College, Sydney University, was opened in 1892, 10 years after women were admitted to the university, and was the first university college for women in Australia. Louisa Macdonald was its first Principal. Many distinguished Sydney women have been residents.

Founded in 1922, the CWA has provided women and children with facilities and services, and built a social and cultural organisation with branches throughout New South Wales, as well as advocating on behalf of women, especially rural women, of all backgrounds. The founding president, Grace Munro, believed that improved conditions for country women would come about only by their own efforts.
Discover more of historic Sydney with the other walking tour brochures in this series.

More information can be found at the City’s website:
www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/history
or call the City of Sydney on 9265 9333
We welcome your feedback:
history@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au

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