

Creating our  
shared history  
together.

March 2024

# ROBBINSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ROBBINSTON HISTORY CENTER & GRACE CHAPEL

## Community Events Calendar

### **Pancake Breakfast at RHS**

Sunday, March 24  
8:00 – 10:00

**NEW!**

### **Robbinston Stories from the Past**

Sunday, April 21  
2:00 – 4:00

### **Memorial Day Yard Sale**

Friday May 24 from 9:00-4:00  
Saturday May 25 from 9:00-12:00

### **Robbinston Stories from the Past**

Tuesday, June 11  
2:00 – 4:00

### **Robbinston Residents Meet & Greet**

Sunday, July 14  
1:00 – 3:00

### **Robbinston Days!**

Saturday, August 3  
10:00 – 2:00



See you August 3 at  
Robbinston Days!

## **Cleaning Out Your Closets, Barn or Garage?**

**We are accepting  
donations for the  
Memorial Day Weekend  
Yard Sale.**

Please no books or clothes.

**Call either  
Wayne at 207-233-3137 or  
Linda at 508-868-6214**

## Celebrate Women's History Month

### Gail Laughlin

Extracts from Calais Historical Society article

By Al Churchill

[http://stcroixhistorical.com/?page\\_id=466](http://stcroixhistorical.com/?page_id=466)

Both sides of the St. Croix Valley have produced notable national and international figures- U.S. senators, ambassadors and consuls to far flung nations, artists, historians, journalists and several novelists.



One native daughter, however, has rarely been mentioned in our historical record.

**Born Abbie Hill Laughlin in Robbinston** she became known nationally as Gail Laughlin and gained fame as an activist for the right of women to vote. She was also an

early proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment for women which, while enacted by Congress long after her death, has not been ratified by the requisite number of states. Although Gail Laughlin's fame was national, her local roots are deep.

She was born in Robbinston in 1868 to Robert and Elizabeth (Stuart) Laughlin. Robert was from Belfast, Ireland and Elizabeth from St. Stephen. Of their nine children seven survived childhood. Gail or Abbie as she was then known probably attended one of the local village schools in Robbinston. After her father died in 1876 the family moved to St. Stephen where she lived with her mother's family until she was twelve and the family moved to Portland.

She was a brilliant student at Portland High School, a forceful orator and by the age of eighteen a determined advocate for equal treatment of women. When she attained the highest marks in her class but was denied the valedictory honors because she was a woman, she and her brother Frederick challenged the School Committee:

#### **Portland Daily Press September 1886:**

*Mr. Laughlin who was present for the purpose, brought before the board the subject of his sister's*

*rank in the high school for four years and showed by figures very plainly that she was entitled to the first place in the class of 1886. After some explanation by Mr. Chase, the principal, that valedictorians and salutatorians have not always been assigned in the high school for the first and second scholars in their classes, on motion of Colonel Merrill it was voted that after examination of all the papers submitted to the committee, it appears that Miss Abby H. Laughlin was entitled to the first rank in the graduating class of 1886.*

It should be noted that the male student who placed second in the class received a full scholarship to Bowdoin and a pledge to assistance with tuition should he attend law school while it is said Abbie received only the medal. There is some suggestion she was awarded a partial scholarship to Colby but could not afford to attend. She was determined, however, to continue her education and worked at various jobs until she had saved enough to attend Wellesley College. It was at Wellesley in 1890 that she became Gail Laughlin as the admission office objected to the name Abbie and enrolled her as Abigail which she later shortened to Gail. At Wellesley she distinguished herself as an orator and a writer. One of the most significant pieces of legislation before Congress at the time was the Wilson Tariff Bill and her analysis of the bill and speech to members of the Agora Society at Wellesley graced the front cover of one of the most influential economic publications of the day - The American Economist. For a woman to achieve such recognition from academic excellence was unprecedented in this era.

She went to work for the American Economist after graduation and, saving enough for law school tuition, she applied to Cornell. Here again she was nearly frustrated by discrimination against women. She was accepted on the proviso that some male members of the class drop out before classes began and while this happened it must have been frustrating for this brilliant woman to have her fate depend on the decision of other probably less qualified applicants.

It should have surprised no one that Abigail Laughlin was to make her mark at Cornell.

### **Boston Globe 1898**

*The "Co-eds" of Cornell have waited long for their triumph. It is no wonder that they look with rapt admiration upon Miss Abigail Laughlin, who vanquished and routed the mere male students who have dared to treat the coeds with disdain and even with contumely. The young woman not only defeated a varsity man in the memorial prize debate, but she had been selected as one of the eight out of 2000 students to make the final Test of Excellence. She is the only woman who has ever gained this distinction in Cornell. The men do not know what to think about it. The idea of a Sage college student being chosen as one of the eight immortals never entered the head of a male student. They would have thought as seriously about putting a girl on the varsity football team or in the crew. Miss Laughlin is a graduate of Wellesley college and a remarkably brilliant young woman. She entered the law department at Cornell and will graduate this year. She founded the debating society "Agora" at Cornell and is speedily commanding respect.*

### **For the record 50 years would pass before a woman was again awarded the Cornell memorial debate prize.**

After Cornell Gail Laughlin moved to New York City where she established a law practice and became immersed in the struggle for woman's suffrage. She was asked to address a meeting of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association by Susan B. Anthony who played a pivotal role in the movement in February 1900.

### **The Portland Maine Evening Express February 21, 1900**

*Gail Laughlin of Portland, a native of Robbinston, the young woman who graduated with such honors from Cornell a year or so ago "completely covered herself with glory at the meeting of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association in Washington a fortnight ago, according to a personal letter just received in the Forest City. Miss Anthony introduced her as a "wage earning woman," which gave no clue to her line of work, so nobody was prepared for what followed. "As she warmed up to her subject," this writer says, "giving facts, figures and detailed statements with such force and accuracy, the audience seemed spellbound interrupted only by applause as she made a telling point. I wish I could describe the*

*pathos with which she set forth the conditions of the wage-earning woman and when she closed the house almost shook with applause After the meeting closed there was a perfect ovation on the platform, men, women and working girls surged up and down to take her by the hand and express their pleasure at her speeches. Miss Burgess, myself and all the Maine women were ready to burst with pride."*

### **Citation from Phyllis Herrick, "'Absolute Equality for Women in Law and Custom"; Gail Laughlin's Fight for Gender Equality in the Maine Legislature" (2010). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1312.**

Gail Laughlin was among the first group of women elected to the Maine Legislature shortly after full suffrage was gained. She served six terms in the Legislature between 1927 and 1941, three in the Maine House of Representatives and three in the Senate. Laughlin was a leading political figure nationally and in Maine and an effective public servant who worked for equality in law for women. Laughlin was born in Robbinston, Maine, in 1868. She graduated from Portland High School in 1886, earned a bachelor's degree from Wellesley College in 1894, and a law degree from Cornell University's Law Department in 1898. Laughlin was licensed to practice law in Maine, Colorado, and California. She was a tireless crusader for women's rights. She was a lecturer for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, a founder and first president of the Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, a leader in the National Woman's Party, and active in myriad local, state, and political and public service organizations. In this paper, I look at the specific bills that Laughlin sponsored to address the issue of gender equity for Maine women. I argue that Gail Laughlin was one of the most involved and effective lawmakers during her terms of service. She made major contributions to Maine law that improved the lives of women. She was informed, determined, confident, eloquent, and courageous in her legislative work. She is a role model today for women who want to enter the political sphere, whether by running for elected office or by serving in organizations, clubs, or in other capacities to further the public good. Gail Laughlin is someone Maine citizens need to know more about in order to take pride in her accomplishments and to understand her contributions to change Maine law.

<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/1312>

## New Event!

### Robbinston Stories from the Past

Sunday, April 21 from 2:00-4:00

Come join Al Churchill and other friends for an afternoon of storytelling and laughter. We want to make sure we have the best stories from the 30's, 40's, and 50's in the archives. The gathering, with refreshments, starts at 2:00. Bring a friend and/or spouse and add your stories to Robbinston's history.

## Archiving Robbinston's History

Are you interested in learning more about Robbinston's history while helping to digitize and create a permanent archive at the history center? Starting in April, the history center will be open most Wednesdays from 2:00 – 4:30 to work on this project. **If you love details and getting things organized this is the volunteer project for you!** Call Sarah at 454-2854 or email her at [sbs4940@gmail.com](mailto:sbs4940@gmail.com)

## What's in your Attic?

We are very curious about what documents, photos, letters you might have stored away in a closet or the attic that will reveal Robbinston's history. Please consider a temporary loan to us. We will organize and scan them for you – keeping a copy for the history center's archives and returning the originals and a flash drive for your use. Individual times can be arranged to drop materials off at the history center. Contact *Louise Beaulieu* at 454-2217

**Please consider a gift to the  
Robbinston Historical Society this year! Thank You!**

**Mail a check to:  
Robbinston Historical Society  
PO Box 133, Robbinston, ME 04671**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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On-line donation site also available.  
<https://www.nfggive.com/home>

