



Librarian, Curator, and Leader

THE TRANSFORMATIVE HARRIET TENNEY

By Valerie R. Marvin

Today, the words “Victorian woman,” “librarian,” and “historian” do not exactly conjure up images of bold innovators who inaugurate change and shake up patriarchal institutions. Yet that is exactly what Harriet Tenney did as Michigan’s first female state officer and state department head. The pioneering librarian, who also founded the first state museum, created a place for both herself and other women in Michigan’s government.

At right: The *Photographic Souvenir of State Officers, and Michigan Legislature, Session of 1881* illustrates the rarity of high-ranking women then working in government. Tenney and the part-time legislative postmistress, Josephine Robinson, are the only two women among the album’s 205 subjects. (Photo courtesy of the Jacob McCormick Collection.)



Born on April 1, 1834, in Vermont to a defrocked minister and a teacher plagued by wanderlust, Harriet Tenney grew up on the move. Her parents, John and Delia (Doud) Edgerton, welcomed four children and moved among four states, including Michigan. Firstborn Harriet Augusta obtained an unusually good education for a girl of her generation. After completing school, she worked as a teacher.

In 1854, she married Jesse Eugene Tenney, a lawyer and educator 18 years her senior. Soon after, the Tenneys moved to Michigan, where they administered and taught at schools in Homer and Marshall. They worked together in both places—a rarity for any Victorian couple.

Early Library Contributions

Jesse—who most often went by his initials, J.E.—joined the new Republican Party and entered the political fray as a writer and political editor for *The Marshall Statesman*. In 1858, he was considered as a possible candidate for state superintendent of public instruction, but the nomination went to John Gregory. As a consolation prize, Governor Moses Wisner appointed J.E. state librarian in 1859.

Although the job was technically J.E.'s, Harriet worked alongside him from the beginning. Together, they expanded the state librarianship into a full-time, professional position. However, since the job did not pay particularly well, J.E. practiced law on the side, held city government offices, and gave political speeches. Harriet staffed the library when he was away.

The Tenneys achieved significant advances. By partnering with Michigan Congressman Dewitt C.

Leach—himself a former state librarian—they arranged to receive copies of all congressional reports, books, and pamphlets. They convinced the 1863 State Legislature to buy \$15,000 in fire insurance and appropriate money for library purchases for the first time since the 1830s. When an addition was put on the second Capitol in 1865, some of the space was allocated for the library.

Ultimately, J.E. served ten years as state librarian—the longest tenure to that point. But, in 1869, rumors swirled that the new governor would not be reappointing him. It was an anxious time for the Tenneys, who stood on the precipice of losing significant income and status.

Harriet responded to the crisis with an audacity uncharacteristic of the era's feminine mores. She penned a letter to Governor Henry Baldwin on State Library letterhead, requesting he appoint her to the position in her own right. Beginning demurely, as Victorian dictates required, she wrote, "Dear Sir: I take the liberty to ask you whether it would be advisable for me to make application for the position of State Librarian."

Then she spent the next two pages doing exactly that. She listed her qualifications; told him she was "perfectly well acquainted with the business of the Library"; refuted that the work was too physically demanding (since it was believed that middle-class women were inherently weaker than men and incapable of certain physical labor); and listed her supporters, including a legislator, a local developer and merchant, and "the Lawyers of the place" who were among the library's steadiest users.

Tenney also noted that women had already proven they could do the type of work required by the State Library: "The Librarian of Minnesota



The Tenneys chose to live in the Potter family's Ottawa Street boardinghouse—freeing Harriet from domestic chores and allowing her a short walk to work. (Photo courtesy of the Forest Parke Library and Archives, Capital Area District Libraries.)



is a Mrs. Smith, she has had charge of that Library for a number of years, also the assistant Librarians of many other states are ladies.”

She went on, “Situating as I am, I need the position, and have been advised by friends to apply for it.” In addition to financial and status-related motivations, she needed the position because she was a curious, ambitious, hardworking woman who had found personal satisfaction in her library work.

Tenney chronicled what happened next in her first biennial report: “By the advice of the Chief Executive of the State, and with the unanimous consent and approbation of the Senate, on the 31st day of March, 1869, this Library was placed in charge of a WOMAN”—emphasis hers.

Work After Appointment

Newspapers across the English-speaking world heralded Tenney’s appointment. “An entering wedge for female suffrage and female office-holding in this State, has been driven, in the appointment by our Legislature last week of Mrs. Tenney to the office of State Librarian,” the *Detroit Advertiser*

and *Tribune* proclaimed. “No other name that could have been placed in nomination would have given such satisfaction to the residents of Lansing,” the *Lansing State Republican* agreed.

Tenney’s appointment made her both famous and infamous. Many erroneously assumed her to be a widow. Some took clear umbrage. “From a letter transmitting State Documents of Michigan to the Executive Department of this city, we see that Mrs. Harriet A. Tenney signs herself State Librarian, and she writes it with a fist that would as soon punch a fellow’s nose as not,” *The Daily Carolinian* informed its readers. Here was a woman in government, bold enough to sign her own name to official correspondence rather than her husband’s—how audacious!

Putting words on paper gives them life—a fact that book-loving Tenney knew well. As Michigan’s first female state officer, she was the first woman to author and sign state government documents. Furthermore, the widespread distribution of her correspondence, catalogs, and reports meant that people were always learning that a woman was visibly doing good work in government.

As librarian, Tenney increased the number of publications coming in via exchanges with other institutions and state and territorial governments. She obtained books from Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, and France. Constantly seeking quality materials, she worked with prestigious dealers and experts—including Henry Stevens, a collector associated with the legendary British Library.

The State Library was the primary source of data and information for the governor, legislature, and supreme court. As a result, Tenney



As someone who collected images, Tenney understood the power of a strong visual presence. She is both fashionable and confident in this c. 1879 photograph. (Photo courtesy of the Forest Parke Library and Archives, Capital Area District Libraries.)

had to anticipate every topic those state officers might need to know about. She bought books on law, science, exploration, art, politics, finance, and religion.

Her bosses trusted and leaned on her research skills. In 1872, Governor Baldwin asked her if there was legal precedent for suspending a state officer about to undergo an impeachment trial. After combing through numerous publications from other states, she sent him a five-page response containing references to constitutions, laws, and similar situations faced by nine other governments. The governor ultimately took her advice by not intervening.

A newspaper anecdote from 1875 paints a picture of the busy library where Tenney then worked alone: “While the legislature was in session last winter, one of the members...seeing some half dozen men scribbling away at different tables, sharply inquired of Mrs. Tenney, the genial librarian, ‘What



From 1871 to 1878, Tenney worked on the top floor of the State Office Block, which served as a temporary home for government entities between the second and third Capitols. (Photo courtesy of the Forest Parke Library and Archives, Capital Area District Libraries.)

do you keep so many clerks here for?’—‘Oh, they are not clerks,’ replied the librarian; ‘those gentleman are lawyers.’”

Making a Museum

Though appointed by the chief executive, Tenney had to try to keep 132 legislators, her fellow state officers, and the supreme court justices happy. She was savvy enough to know that working in the Capitol often amounted to political chess. There were times to keep quiet and take orders, while other occasions called for making bold moves and lobbying hard for change. For Tenney, the most important change was adding a museum to her library.

In 1872, she wrote to Lyman Draper, the well-respected secretary of the Wisconsin Historical Society, asking for help: “I am trying to make an effort to start a museum or a department in connection with the Michigan State Library that will in time become an historical department. The state has never done any thing in that way and never will until someone makes an effort.”

Someone like me. Tenney did not write those words, but her implication was clear.

She asked Draper if she could exchange some books for objects to spark legislative interest. “I am going to ask for a large appropriation and have no doubt that I shall get it,” she wrote. “I would like to do some thing before then in the way of collecting specimens or relics as I think that it would interest the members.”

Clearly, Tenney knew her audience and argued astutely. During the 1873 session, the legislature voted the State Library a \$5,000 appropriation—its highest yet—and approved Joint Resolution 10. This made it her duty to ask Michigan residents “to deposit in the State

Library...minerals and geological specimens...books, pamphlets, or papers pertaining to the history of Michigan; also any Indian relics and curiosities of any kind.”

Upon receiving donations, the state librarian would “correctly label and classify each specimen or gift” and put them on display in Library cabinets “open for the inspection of all persons, subject to the rules and regulations of the Librarian, during the same hours as are provided for the State Library.”

Suddenly, the state librarian was also the founding director, registrar, and curator of Michigan’s first state museum.

In June 1873, Tenney published a circular soliciting donations in 11 categories: general statistics; books; models of inventions; histories of villages, cities, and counties; the earliest notices of Indigenous tribes; sketches of the lives of remarkable persons; territorial and early state

publications; relics and curiosities; autographs, portraits, and photographs illuminating Michigan arts; natural history specimens; and “everything which will elucidate the civil and natural history of North America.”

Tenney and the Pioneers

Soon, Tenney gained a valuable ally. On April 22, 1874, the Michigan Pioneer Society (MPS) convened in the second Capitol and elected her its recording secretary. That body hoped to collect pioneer reminiscences, histories, and documents for publication in volumes of “Historical Collections.” It was an important step toward preserving the state’s fading early history. The organization also picked up the baton of state history from the Historical Society of Michigan—founded by Lewis Cass, Henry

Harriet Tenney stands proudly at the center of this photo taken during the Michigan Pioneer Society’s 1879 convention—one of the first to be held in the new Capitol. (Photo courtesy of the Forest Parke Library and Archives, Capital Area District Libraries.)





The Lansing Woman's Club, pictured here in 1893, was devoted to improving the education and intellectual pursuits of its members. Tenney, the club's founding president, told her fellow members—some of whom were suffragists—that “the end of education is power.” (Photo courtesy of the Forest Parke Library and Archives, Capital Area District Libraries.)

Schoolcraft, and others—which had become moribund in the 1860s.

MPS organized under Public Act 156 of 1873, which established a legal framework for a system of municipal, county, and state historical, biographical, and geological societies. Each was instructed to send copies of its reports and papers to the state society, which would place the documents in the care of the state librarian.

The first and most direct result of the State Library-MPS partnership was the extensive compilation of objects, documents, and images that fill the collections of multiple modern institutions, including the Archives of Michigan, Library of Michigan, Michigan History Museum, and State Capitol. The items that Tenney and MPS collected and preserved are still studied, exhibited, and admired 150 years later.

The second—and no less significant—contribution of the partnership was the compilation, publication, and distribution of the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*. The anthology of personal narratives, biographical sketches,

local histories, and reprinted documents remains a key source for state historians at all levels.

The process of forming those collections while continuing to grow and improve the State Library consumed much of Tenney's career and personal life—providing her with great fulfillment. “I am completely in love with my work,” she wrote to Michigan Supreme Court Justice Thomas Cooley in 1882. Yet, like many high achievers, she was never satisfied with what she or those around her attained.

When Professor John Holmes, a friend and MPS colleague (who was also involved in the earlier historical society), asked Tenney to name a gift she would like in 1880, she replied with a beautiful, idealistic letter about a marble palace for the Pioneers. It would be a three-story edifice, containing broad reception rooms; an audience room for programs and meetings; a museum; and “a Library, containing a copy of every book, pamphlet, and newspaper, etc. ever published containing any thing illustrating Michigan history.”

“And I,” she told Holmes, “well I would be queen of all.”

Continued Service

Holmes and MPS never managed a three-story marble building. But, in late 1878, Tenney did move into the third Capitol, where the new, three-story State Library filled almost a whole wing. Designed to hold approximately 100,000 books in 100-plus custom-made walnut cases, the library stretched 100 feet from north to south, 45 feet from east to west, and 59 feet tall. In a building where space often equaled power, it was a remarkable testament to the State Library's place in government.

Moving in the fall of 1878 was an arduous, exhausting process. Once settled and unpacked, Tenney began one of her final great efforts: creating a modern card catalog. The process—then a cutting-edge library organizational method—would take her and her staff nearly a decade to complete.

By the 1880s, Tenney had established a busy rhythm of library duties and MPS work. Her biennial reports cite consistent appropriations, which allowed her to continually expand the library's collection and better meet

officials' requests. She continued to collect objects, artifacts, and ephemera and was a vital member of the committee of historians who compiled and edited the *Pioneer Collections*. In total, she worked on 18 of its 40 volumes.

And, with every action, she forged a path for other women. From MPS's inception, Tenney made sure the society welcomed female members. She solicited women's written contributions and hired women to assist in compiling and editing the *Collections*.

Her presence in Michigan's Capitol made it possible for other women to seek and obtain government jobs. By 1879, there were more than 40 women working part- or full-time for the state. That trend was mirrored in several other state capitols, where a growing number of women held library appointments.

Upon convincing the legislature to fund an assistant position, Tenney hired a series of increasingly talented women for the post. The fourth, Mary Spencer, became Tenney's professional heir, serving as state librarian from 1893 to 1923.

A Legacy Lives On

Year after year, success after success, Tenney made it acceptable—even desirable—for women to work in government. Justice James Campbell affirmed that in his *Outlines of the Political History of Michigan*: "Governor Baldwin...ventured upon what was then the untried experiment, of appointing a lady, Mrs. Harriet A. Tenney, to be State Librarian... the choice has been abundantly justified by the result...The wisdom of choosing a competent woman to such an office has been recognized in some other libraries in the State... no one doubts that such places furnish appropriate and legitimate scope for feminine tact and accomplishments."

Through dedication, tenacity, and good, hard work, Tenney retained her library appointment for 22 years—from 1869 to 1891. She served seven different administrations, having been appointed by governors of two different political parties. Her tenure ended when Governor Edwin Winans decided he wanted a more partisan appointee.



After serving as the president of the Lansing Ladies Aid Society throughout the Civil War, Tenney led the effort to erect a war monument in Mount Hope Cemetery in 1877. (Photo courtesy of David Marvin.)

Perhaps it mollified her slightly to know that her replacement was another woman.

Tenney died eight years later, on January 20, 1899. Newspapers mourned her as one of Michigan's best-known women—her name long synonymous with the State Library and MPS.

Today, she is largely forgotten outside of the Michigan Capitol and State Library. But her legacy is manifest in the Historical Society of Michigan—the modern name of MPS and publisher of *Michigan History* magazine. It also lives on in the countless objects and books she collected and the documents she sent around the world—and in the thousands of women working in government in Michigan and across America. 🍷

Valerie R. Marvin serves as the historian and curator of the Michigan State Capitol, a National Historic Landmark. She thanks the Library of Michigan for its generous support of and assistance with this article.



Above left: Tenney had an excellent view of the new State Library from her desk, located across from the main entrance. This c. 1878 image shows the bookcases, curio cabinets, and artwork she saw every day. Above right: Two cast-iron galleries wrapped around the library between the second, third, and fourth floors. Only Tenney and her staff could access those spaces via spiral staircases, since the library had closed stacks. (Photos courtesy of the Craig Whitford Collection.)