



What Minerva Built
Episode 4: Clubwomen
June 2020

Written and Produced by Molly Lester
Produced and Edited by Justin Geller
Music by Justin Geller

Molly Lester: In 1876, Philadelphia was the center of the world for a moment.

From May to November, millions of visitors descended on the City of Brotherly Love to attend the first major world's fair in the United States—and among them was the Parker family. As it marked the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Centennial Exhibition was an extravagant affair, designed to direct the world's attention forward to the future as much as back to the past. It didn't succeed on all fronts, and it was later overshadowed by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, but the Centennial Exhibition did give the world the typewriter. And Alexander Graham Bell's first telephone. And Thomas Edison's automatic telegraph system. And the New Century Club of Philadelphia.

In retrospect, it makes sense that a women's club would emerge in these years, as scores of women and widows like Amanda Parker Maxwell grappled with the realities of life after the Civil War. At the time, though, no one had really heard of such a thing. But by 1877, several women in Philadelphia had made it so.

At first, they met in the parlors of Mrs. J. Peter Leslie on Clinton Street in downtown Philadelphia, somewhat cramped (considering there were nearly 40 of them), but energized to create what they called "an organized center of thought and action among women, for the protection of their interests and the promotion of science, literature, and art." Membership dues were \$5, and within a year, there were already 100 members on the books. They formed standing committees to organize study groups, and lectures, and cooking classes.

When they outgrew Mrs. Leslie's parlor, the club managed to rent two modest rooms on the 1100 block of Girard Avenue, in a dense residential part of the city and just a few blocks from the thoroughfare of Broad Street. There, as one record-keeper wrote, the club set itself to starting a home.

Female Voiceover: One of the members supplied a sofa, and an objectionable grease-spot on the wall was covered by the president's portrait. The uncushioned chairs were a

little stiff, but the members made no objection, and every added bit of brightness was the subject of all-round congratulation.

Molly: The secretary's report at the end of the year acknowledged that the club's headquarters were not "furnished with the luxuries that men possess in their clubhouses." Still, she continued on optimistically, "we find an attractiveness often absent in more expensive establishments."

For nearly ten years, the New Century Club continued to improve its headquarters on Girard Avenue, even as it grew more and more crowded with new members. Eventually, the club decided to move to a larger space on Chestnut Street, but still—the rooms were rented, and club members agreed that the desire for a "home" was strong.

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

Lucky for them, Philadelphia had a homegrown architect who by this time was earning national acclaim and running her own office just a few blocks away.

This is "What Minerva Built," a podcast about the story of architect Minerva Parker Nichols, and a conversation about what she can teach us about the work of architecture, history, and preservation today. I'm your host, Molly Lester, and this is Episode 4: Clubwomen.

[THEME MUSIC ENDS]

Molly: By 1891, Minerva Parker was busy.

Her solo practice was three years old, and she already had over 30 projects to show for it. Her house for Rachel Foster Avery was almost complete, so she didn't need to catch the train to northeast Philadelphia as often to supervise the laborers. She'd wrapped up several houses in Narberth, Pennsylvania, and had a handful of other projects underway—mostly houses, as she stuck with her specialty, but there were a few other commissions in there to mix it up. A hotel in Virginia. A small factory in South Philadelphia for a local pasta company. She'd also taken on some work for speculative developers, drawing up plans for several houses at a time that were popping up in West Philadelphia. What she sacrificed in individuality on these projects, she made up for in publicity.

Because the country had started to notice her, and so had her peers in the architecture profession and building trades. In 1890, the *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* published a full front-page profile of Minerva Parker, praising what they called her "beautiful and artistic homes" and declaring that "words of encouragement and good fellowship have at all times been freely

extended, both by the public in general and her fellow architects.” (The word “fellow” is quite apt in this case.)

Of all the things that the *Builders Guide* declared had been freely extended, though, there is one thing that we have no record of Minerva receiving: membership in any professional organizations. Where her contemporary Louise Blanchard Bethune was inducted into the Western Association of Architects, and then grandfathered into the American Institute of Architects, or AIA (with some resistance, it must be said), Minerva never joined, or was never invited to join, the AIA. In fact, there was a gap of 20 years after Louise Blanchard Bethune’s grandfathered admission before the AIA admitted another woman in 1901. We have no explanation for that gap; it may just be that AIA membership was not yet the norm, so women like Minerva did not seek it out. However, if there was a more reactionary reason for that 20-year break—for example, a backlash to Louise Blanchard Bethune’s membership that kept the AIA from inviting additional women architects for a while—then it’s worth noting that this gap overlaps completely with the most productive period of Minerva’s career.

And this isn’t the only example of Minerva operating outside the normal spaces of networking and professional influence at this time.

Aaron Wunsch: It’s worth pointing out that at this moment in the late 19th century, the architecture profession itself is especially bound together by clubs.

Molly: This is Aaron Wunsch, who you’ll remember from earlier episodes is a professor of architectural history in the Stuart Weitzman School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania.

Aaron: Not just where you went to school, because architectural education is still pretty recent in this country, not just whom you apprenticed with or what office—that was the old standard—but also what, what sort of social-slash-professional groups you are an affiliate of. So all of these are overlapping spheres, apprenticeship, education, club membership.

And you know, the biggest ones locally are Penn’s T-Square Club, and apprenticeship with famous architects. She’s, she’s really outside all of them.

Molly: So if professional organizations like the American Institute of Architects and the T Square Club weren’t appealing to Minerva—or weren’t available to her—then where could she cultivate a clientele for her practice?

Lucky for her, Philadelphia had a homegrown women’s club which by this time was looking to build a headquarters and held its meetings just a few blocks away.

BREAK

Molly: In a lot of ways, the pairing of Minerva Parker (not yet Nichols) as architect and the New Century Club of Philadelphia as client was a perfect match. It was certainly mutually beneficial, as both Minerva and the club stood to gain from the project: for Minerva, this was a high-profile project, and an opportunity to scale up her specialization—the commission was for a club *house*, after all. For the New Century Club, the fact that their clubhouse would be designed by a woman was a particular source of pride for the club’s members; as if women’s clubs weren’t rare enough in the country by this time, having a clubhouse designed by a woman was even rarer, to the point of non-existence. Theirs would be the first.

Although the New Century Club of Philadelphia kept its records private in its early years—they were conscious of social disapproval in a relatively conservative city like Philadelphia—the members of these clubs were far from socially objectionable. Quite the contrary, in fact: they were among the most respected women in the city—educated, and in many cases professional, middle-and upper-class women, both single and married. (Here again, though, it is important to note that the club’s membership was certainly all white; it doesn’t matter if this was a matter of policy or de facto practice—in any case, this was a segregated space that the New Century Club was creating.)

For Minerva, who didn’t or couldn’t rub shoulders with the members of the T-Square Club or the American Institute of Architects, the New Century Club was a professional toehold of a different sort. It was significant not only for the design she produced, but for opening doors to a whole new set of clients. Consider this the red-string-on-a-corkboard part of Minerva’s story, as we map the connections between the New Century Club of Philadelphia commission in 1891 and the rest of Minerva’s career, looking forward and back:

- Rachel Foster Avery was a member of the club (and may have introduced her to the club leadership based on Minerva’s work on Mill-Rae—although we can’t be sure);
- Emily W. Taylor was also a member of the club, and is likely the client known as E.Y. Taylor who hired Minerva in 1890 to design a house in Germantown;
- Miss Emily Sartain was in the club as well. The Sartain family was part of Philadelphia’s social elite at this time, and Emily herself was president of the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. The same year that Minerva was hired to design the New Century Clubhouse, Emily Sartain hired Minerva Parker to lecture on architectural ornament at the School of Design for Women, which she did for three years, teaching a new generation of female designers her particular approach to design that prioritized simple lines that would be easier for women to clean.

- Also in the club: Misses Jane and Mary Campbell, two sisters and suffrage activists who not only hired Minerva in 1891 to design a duplex home in Germantown, but also featured her in their suffrage magazine in 1893, amplifying her profile to other potential clients.
- Then there's the New Century Guild, a spinoff organization created by the New Century Club in 1882 to organize education and employment opportunities for working-class women. Minerva used stained glass created by a New Century Guild member in at least one of her projects, and likely more.
- And finally (at least, for now), when the New Century Club of Wilmington wanted to establish its own clubhouse, who do you think they called on? The architect who had done so exceedingly well for their sister club in Philadelphia. Minerva Parker Nichols completed that project in downtown Wilmington, Delaware in 1893.

In fact, when you step back and take a look at all of these pushpins on the metaphorical board of Minerva's career, the commission for the New Century Club of Philadelphia was a real pivot point between her early years of practice and her most productive, publicized works. It was also a natural community for Minerva. The New Century Club of Philadelphia wasn't the most radical of clubs, and it wasn't organized around an activist mission. But its members were also frequently involved in the suffrage movement, a cause that Minerva also supported, and so the club offered both a personal and a professional club to this twentysomething professional woman. A true social network, if you will.

So once again, we have to ask: how did she do? She was an architect, not just a social climber, and it's important to take her architecture seriously. So, was her clubhouse actually...good?

Female V/O: The Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association held its annual convention in the New Century Club House, which is one of the most beautiful and artistic club houses to be found on the continent. It...is entirely unique and satisfactory.

Molly: The Woman's Tribune. 1893.

Female V/O: The whole effect of the interior is striking, yet delicate, homelike, and very harmonious.

Molly: Miss Jane Croly Cunningham, 1901.

Female V/O: The New Century clubhouse [in Philadelphia] is a model of comfort and good taste.

Molly: Vogue. 1895.

Minerva's clubhouse design adopted many of her standards of residential design, scaling them up to create a home-away-from-home for the club's many members. The building anchored the corner of 12th and Sansom Streets, in the heart of downtown Philadelphia. With parlors to host discussions, a drawing-room for social gatherings, kitchens, and bedrooms, her plans stitched together many of the same spaces that we find in her residential projects, with the notable addition of a two-story performance hall that could be rented out or used for private plays, balls, concerts, receptions, and benefit programs.

As with her designs for Rachel Foster Avery's house and other clients, Minerva's design took into account the welfare of women—as clients, as club members, and as service staff. She revisited the themes of light and air, and their presumed benefits for public health, with a design that mitigated its hemmed-in urban site by incorporating a light well that extended the full height of the building, supplying sunlight and circulating air to every floor and function in the building. The architectural ornament once again prioritized clean lines over cleaning hassles, and most rooms were connected with large pocket doors that made the space flexible and adaptable: when the doors were shut, the space was ideal for small, intimate gatherings; when they were thrown open, the space expanded to accommodate large, bustling meetings for the hundreds of members of the club.

By the time it was completed in January 1892, the headquarters for the New Century Club of Philadelphia was a particular point of pride for both Minerva and the club itself. The clubhouse was a tangible place that was entirely financed, designed, and occupied by women (although yes, men could cross the threshold as invited guests). These sorts of quasi-public gathering spaces for women were really rare in late-19th century America; until this point, there weren't really any alternatives to private houses, and as the New Century Club learned in its early years, there's only so many people you can accommodate and only so much organizing you can do in your own parlor. Imagine, then, what it must have been like as a woman at that time to walk into the entrance hall of the clubhouse for the first time, to look down the hallway past a library that was for you, a club parlor that was for you, an office that was for you, a *committee room* that was for you. To turn and walk up the stairs to the second floor, pull open a pair of swinging doors, and step into an assembly room for *500 people*. To take your seat among women, to look up in the balcony and see women, to look up on stage and see women speaking and performing and running meetings and giving lectures. To see yourself represented in every fiber of a building.

It's an experience, and a community, and a space that can still be felt today in the building that Minerva designed for the New Century Club in Wilmington, Delaware. It was the second clubhouse in her portfolio, and it's her only clubhouse that still stands.

Donna Swajeski: *I think the building takes everyone's breath away.*

Molly: Donna Swajeski runs the Delaware Children's Theatre out of the building today. Her parents, Marie and John Swajeski, purchased the building when the club sold it in the 1980s. We have both generations of the Swajeski family to thank for the fact that this clubhouse still stands and is remarkably intact—including the auditorium, where the children's theater stages several productions every year.

Donna: *It's so beautiful, and when you're in there—you almost feel like you're in a magical kingdom. It's, it's, it really works well for theater, and to be able to have a beautiful theater with high ceilings and beautiful moulding and just the whole look of it, just helps make a magical sort of experience for kids.*

Molly: And not just for kids. The New Century Clubs in Philadelphia and Wilmington were transformative spaces for women in the late 19th century. Without clubhouses like this, we might not have gotten the 19th Amendment 30 years later, which affirmed women's right to vote (although it was primarily applied to just white women). The New Century Club was not explicitly engaged in the suffrage movement, but the fact is, many of its individual members were, and they needed a place to organize. It took a physical place and a gathering space for Minerva to find her own network, and for suffragists to find their community.

And the kind of community that the New Century Club formed in Philadelphia—the kind of community that Minerva made space for—had ripple effects around the world, inspiring other women who were architects to create similar clubhouses for their own work. In her research into women architects in late 19th century and early 20th century in Berlin, historian Despina Stratigakos found references to the New Century Club in Philadelphia, and to Minerva herself.

Despina: *It was a very international conversation that was happening at that time. And I think it was a way that women could also use developments elsewhere to kind of bolster their, their push to, to create similar institutions in their, in their hometowns or in their countries. So the fact that there was a Women's Club in Philadelphia could be used, you know, to kind of shame people into creating one in Berlin, and it's absolutely see that being used know, in that kind of way as incentive but also a shaming technique in the sense of well, you know, if, if Berlin is truly this global modern city, why don't we have what women have in Philadelphia?*

Molly: So, here's Minerva Parker Nichols in Philadelphia, building a clubhouse with such an impact that it's making the rounds in Germany, spurring women to create their own network, and their own headquarters, 4,000 miles away. Her building made an international case for the power of place in building community and organizing power. So...does this still happen? Is this kind of network still necessary for women

in architecture and the building trades? More on what today's clubwomen look like, after a break.

BREAK

Nicole Dress: I started a group and I started it way too late. I should have started at year one.

Molly: Nicole Dress has been a practicing architect for the last 30 years. I talked to her about the experience of being an architect who is a woman, in a profession that doesn't always make space for women.

Nicole: We called it Leaders who Lunch group, and just talk about not only being the only one, because it is very lonely.

I would encourage anyone who feels like you're the only one to go out there and get a few people together for breakfast or for lunch, who are also in the same situation because trust me, they are also feeling lonely and different.

Molly: In a way, that's just what Angela Cacace did. She comes at the architecture profession from another angle, as a general contractor, designer, and advocate for women in the building trades. In a way, she follows most closely in Minerva's footsteps, having learned her craft through apprenticeships. And like Minerva, she needed to find her clubwomen. Just a heads-up about this audio, I spoke to Angela while she was on-site at a construction job, fittingly enough.

Angela Cacace: There's a missing piece.

Which is kind of interesting, as it sounds like this is just a problem that women have had for hundreds of years, for whatever reason, have not been able to find each other.

Molly: I met Angela after reading a 2019 article in the *Washington Post* about women in the building trades who were responding to sexism and isolation by establishing their own networks. (The *Post* actually referred to these women as a "new wave," but as we've learned from Minerva's story, women have been working in and around the trades for over 100 years now.) Anyway, the *Washington Post* profiled Angela and other contractors in an effort to understand how they are building their own networks to support each other and advance their careers.

Angela: We want to find each other, but like, it's very hard to find each other. So yeah, at this point, more locally where I am in North Carolina, women are kind of, we're all kind of getting together, and it's kind of like this—if we build it, they will come.

Molly: So, much like the New Century Club of Philadelphia did, and much like Nicole did, Angela and other women are taking matters into their own hands. They've launched

a social network called Move Over Bob, or MOB (a reference to the children's show Bob the Builder), to highlight the stories and promote the experience of women in the building trades, all in an effort to, as Angela puts it, find each other.

Angela: I had shown up—so the first day of class, I was thinking in my head, 'Oh god, like prepare yourself, you're gonna be surrounded by a bunch of dudes, and you know, I got there, and there was a class of 12 people, and six of them were women.

All of us were in shock, like, I can't believe that we're actually half of this class. Like, it was just the weirdest thing, and it did spark something in me of going, like, okay, like, clearly, I'm obviously not alone.

And so then from there, I thought, you know, I want to find more women that have been paving the way, and like, figure out a way to thank them.

I thought Instagram was a really good way to just try to find the image and normalize the image, since people seem to be so surprised to hear that women in construction exist.

Molly: That kind of normalization remains necessary, so long as we keep shortchanging the trajectory of women in the design professions.

Now, three years after founding the M.O.B. initiative, Angela and her clubwomen are going one step further. Together, the M.O.B. women have financed and purchased a plot of land, developed a design, and started construction on a physical headquarters to gather, organize, and offer resources to each other.

Sound familiar?

Angela: Yeah, we're actually building, like a MOB skills shop.

Because every person [word is garbled] when they hear about it are like, 'Oh, I want to teach a class there, or I want to do this, or man, I've been wanting to recruit more women for my business,' and blah, blah, you know. And so it's just going to be a really fun collaborative project.

Molly: If you're in an underrepresented, overlooked community and exist outside the normal spheres of privilege and influence, clubs matter. Club houses matter. 143 years ago, the New Century Club of Philadelphia formed with the mission to create an "organized center of thought," and both the organizing and the center were vital to that mission.

One would hope that a century and a half later, we wouldn't need modern equivalents of the New Century Club. But that's not how centuries of power and professional practice work. Now, women like Angela walk in Minerva's steps in more

ways than one—with a foot in design, and a foot in the building trades, and a hand in a whole lot of professional organizing for women who want to find each other, get organized, get together, and get to work.

In 1891, while she was designing the clubhouse for the New Century Club, Minerva Parker met and began to court Rev. William Ichabod Nichols, a Unitarian minister in Philadelphia. On December 22 of that year, the two were married at the Spring Garden Unitarian Church (a building for which Minerva had already designed some alterations, by the way).

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

The wedding was featured in the *New York Times*—probably thanks to Minerva’s national profile, more than her husband’s—and the guest list was huge: over 1,500 invitations were sent out, with guests in attendance that included several of Minerva’s clients and members of the New Century Club of Philadelphia. Their clubhouse was almost, but not yet, complete, so Minerva did what any self-respecting early-career professional on deadline and looking to prove herself to her peers would do: she postponed her honeymoon to supervise construction of her building.

We’ll hear more about that skill set in the next episode.

CLOSING CREDITS