

ELIZABETH "AUNTIE" STONE

The first white woman to come to Fort Collins, which was still Camp Collins at the time, was Elizabeth Stone, who arrived in 1865 to provide meals for officers at the camp. She came with her second husband, Lewis, who died not long after their arrival. Her cabin, which he built, is now located in Library Park.

EARLY LIFE

Elizabeth Hickok was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1801. She married Dr. Ezekiel Robbins, with whom she had eight children, in 1824. They moved first to St. Louis and then to Chester, Illinois, where Dr. Robbins died of cholera in 1852. In 1857 she married Judge Lewis Stone, and in 1862 they crossed the plains to Denver to settle there. History does not reveal whether any of her children accompanied her.

HOSPITALITY

Elizabeth Stone was experienced in being hospitable. In Langola, Minnesota, they operated a hotel and dining room. In Denver, they opened a restaurant. Then they met Dr. Timothy Smith, the physician and surgeon at the military camp established along the banks of the Cache la Poudre River north of Denver. He persuaded them to relocate to the camp and open a mess hall for the soldiers. Their two-story home at the camp, the first private dwelling in Fort Collins, soon became a boarding house for Army officers.

ANOTHER ANGLO WOMAN

Elizabeth must have been lonely, as the only woman around and the only Anglo woman anywhere in the area. She persuaded her widowed niece, Elizabeth Keays, to come to the fort along with her young son, Wilbur. Henry Peterson, an early settler here, accompanied them on the trip. The upstairs of Auntie's house became a schoolroom, with Elizabeth Keays as the first teacher. But Auntie's niece had not been here too long before she remarried, joining Harris Stratton in the first wedding ceremony held in Fort Collins.

CLOSING OF THE FORT

In 1867, the US government closed the military fort. Undaunted, Auntie opened her home as a hotel for travelers. She also sold pies, bread, milk and butter. A born entrepreneur, she and Peterson launched a new project, a grist mill to convert wheat to flour. They encountered a setback when Henry was accosted and robbed of \$3,000 on his way to buy machinery for the mill, but resilient Auntie Stone raised the money again and sent her partner off once more. This time, he succeeded. The mill was built along the river bank. Not content with that success, Auntie Stone decided to build a brick kiln. The three-story structure was for quite some time the tallest building in town.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TOWN

In 1872, after the government had released the land where the fort had been, Fort Collins became officially a town. Laid out by Franklin Avery, the new town featured north-south streets named for town founders and east-west streets named for foliage. Auntie continued her oversight of the mill and purchased other property in town, becoming a landlord as well as a business owner. She often invited church pastors to stay at the hotel, hoping to encourage them to start churches here.

THE REST OF HER DAYS

Throughout the remainder of her days Elizabeth Stone continued to enjoy visits with family, traveling (including a train ride to Salt Lake City in 1885) and hosting dinners. By 1893 she was confined to a wheelchair but maintained a cheerful outlook on life. When she went to the polls for the first time, in 1894, she said, “I have waited a lifetime for this privilege.” She died a year later, on December 4, 1895. When her casket was put in the ground at Grandview Cemetery, the firehouse bell tolled 94 times to mark her passing. Business was also suspended in the town for two hours.

HER LEGACY

As the first Anglo woman in Fort Collins, Elizabeth Stone opened the door for more women to come to the new town, first inviting her niece, Elizabeth Keays. She was also the first woman entrepreneur, the first female landlord, and the first

woman hotelier. She traveled across the plains in a Conestoga wagon at a time when Native Americans were actively resisting emigration, built the first civilian structure in the town, and offered her hospitality to the lonely soldiers. She was a robust model for women and girls in any era.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think she was fearful for her life on her way to Fort Collins in a covered wagon? Would you have been?
2. Why did she emigrate to the West?
3. Why did the soldiers call her “Auntie”?
4. What was her most outstanding quality?
5. Why should we still remember and honor this woman?
6. Auntie Stone was an advocate for women’s suffrage. Why did it take so long for Colorado to grant women the right to vote?

GLOSSARY

Advocate—one who speaks on behalf of a person or a cause

Entrepreneur—person of business

Hotelier—one who operates a hotel

Hospitable—welcoming

Kiln—a high-heat oven used to solidify bricks, clay sculptures and other suitable objects

Suffrage—the right to vote

TIMELINE

September 21, 1801—born in Hartford, Connecticut

1824—marriage to Dr. Ezekiel Robinson

1828—moved to St. Louis, Missouri

1838—the family of eight children moved to Chester, Illinois

1852—Dr. Robinson died

1857—marriage to Judge Lewis Stone

1862—emigrated to Denver

1864—moved to Camp Collins which became Fort Collins
1866—Judge Stone died
1867—after closure of the fort, opened her hotel to the public
1869—Lindell Mills built
1870—first brick kiln built with Henry Peterson
1870-1881—managed her hotel, sold the brick kiln and the flour mill
1881—helped organize the local chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (part of her campaign for Fort Collins to stay alcohol-free)
1882—at a party celebrating her birthday she danced until 5 a.m.
1894—cast her first vote
1895—death on December 4

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Jennings, Zoe. “Auntie Stone’s cabin: Fort Collins’ oldest building was home to a total badass.” City News online, November 17, 2016.

For more interesting facts about Auntie Stone, see this post written by Alex Ballou on August 28, 2018.

<https://fcmmod.org/blog/2018/08/28/the-founding-mother-of-fort-collins/>