

*Campaigning in the Western Wilds*

## A WOMAN OF PURPOSE

## Julia B. Nelson

Julia Wiech Lief

JULIA BULLARD NELSON of Red Wing was weary of dragging her long dresses in the mud and manure of the streets. Like her contemporary, Dr. Martha G. Ripley, she considered these fashionable clothes unsanitary and shortened her skirts to hang two inches above the ground. In the late 1880s this daring act shocked many people who exclaimed, "Did you see Mrs. Nelson's short skirts?"<sup>1</sup>

This woman from Red Wing challenged the male-dominated society of her day by lecturing and organizing for woman suffrage throughout the United States. She abhorred racial discrimination and worked zealously to promote equality among blacks and whites. She advocated sex education for young people and horrified her relatives by telling the facts of life to her 10- and 12-year-old nieces. These actions were highly unpopular during the greater part of her lifetime, and she was remembered by a Red Wing editor long after her death as "very

independent in her thinking and her oddities, in view of the customs of her day. She was subjected to unjust ridicule from thoughtless people." The journalist added: "The person who is ahead of the times pays the penalty for being 'radical' until such 'radicalism' is accepted by the people as conservative."<sup>2</sup>

Julia Bullard was born at High Ridge, Connecticut, on May 13, 1842, the second of three children in the family of Edward and Angeline (Raymond) Bullard, whose ancestors emigrated from England to Massachusetts in 1636. Edward Bullard had been a sea captain, but after his marriage he was a farmer. He moved his family to Denmark, Iowa, when Julia was a small child. She attended public school there and then at the Denmark Academy, established by the local Congregational church. In 1857 the Bullard family relocated at Wacouta, Minnesota, not far from Red Wing. Wacouta was first named Bullard's Landing for Julia's uncle, George W. Bullard, who with a partner had set up a sawmill there in 1853. Edward Bullard joined his brother in this business and in building and operating a hotel to accommodate the influx of lumbermen. Wacouta was burgeoning because of the expansion of the lumber industry; it vied

<sup>1</sup>Winton U. Solberg, "Martha G. Ripley: Pioneer Doctor and Social Reformer," in *Minnesota History*, 39:12 (Spring, 1964); author's conversations with her mother, Lorena Bullard Wiech, 1925-1968.

<sup>2</sup>*Red Wing Republican*, August 16, 1934, p. 2; conversations with Lorena Wiech. Unless otherwise noted, the daily editions of the Red Wing newspaper are used in this article.

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*THIS ARTICLE is the fifth in a series of Minnesota Profiles, biographical sketches of interesting Minnesota men and women. Each profile presents the salient facts of the subject's life, attempting to characterize the person and to assess the significance of his or her work.*

with Red Wing for designation as the county seat.<sup>3</sup>

The young Bullard woman matriculated at Hamline University, which was then in Red Wing, and prepared for a teaching career. She was the first person in Goodhue County to receive a first-grade teaching certificate. For six years she taught in Minnesota and in Connecticut, where many of her relatives still lived. Years later she enjoyed reminiscing about the tribulations and fulfillments of her early days of teaching in log school-houses.<sup>4</sup>

Julia B., as she was called most of her life, was a slender, attractive, blue-eyed woman with brown hair parted in the middle and combed straight back in the fashion of the day. Ole Nelson, a handsome young man who was born in Norway, was fascinated by this charming teacher. He had been her classmate at Hamline University and had just returned to Red Wing after serving for three years in the Civil War with Company F of the 6th Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. Ole and Julia were married September 25, 1866, and established their home on his farm in Belvidere near Red Wing. Their son Cyrus was born in August the following year. Cysie, as they called him, was apparently an active and observant baby; his mother recalled that as he crept on a floral carpet, he thought the flowers were real and tried to pick them up. But tragedy struck this storybook marriage. Little Cyrus died just before his first birthday, and five

months later Ole Nelson died in January, 1869, just two weeks short of his 28th birthday. His health had been debilitated by his Civil War service, and although the Veterans Administration did not list the cause of his death, it was possibly malaria. His company had been stationed in Arkansas for some time, and many soldiers were stricken with this malady.<sup>5</sup>

At the age of 26, Julia B. Nelson was a childless widow. Over the years she sadly noted in her diaries the anniversary of her wedding day and the birthdays and death dates of her son and her husband. These two losses within such a short time created a great void in her life. After some contemplation, she decided to return to teaching and "consecrate her life to work among the lowly and down-trodden."<sup>6</sup>

THE AMERICAN Missionary Association (AMA), headquartered in New York City, had issued a call for northern teachers to staff the freedmen's schools, which it had established after the Civil War. The association, an outgrowth of the American Antislavery Society, was organized in 1846 by a group of New School Congregationalists; its members were opposed to the equivocal position on slavery taken by some antislavery groups. A number of Unitarian, Universalist, and Quaker churches worked with this association, which after 1865 was the major educational agency in the South. It paid the teachers and also provided them with housing as northern instructors could rarely secure lodging in the hostile South. In some areas the Freedmen's Bureau, established by Congress in 1865, worked with the AMA.<sup>7</sup>

#### JULIA BULLARD at the age of 24



<sup>3</sup>Edgar J. Bullard, *Bullard and Allied Families*, 10, 13 (Detroit, 1930); *Who Was Who in America*, 1:890 (Chicago, 1942); [Joseph W. Hancock], *History of Goodhue County, Minnesota, by an Old Settler*, 304-308 (Red Wing, 1893); *Goodhue County Republican* (Red Wing), January 18, 1872. The Bullard family has been traced as far back as 1485 in Barnham, Suffolk County, England.

<sup>4</sup>Hamline University Alumni Association, *History of the Hamline University of Minnesota . . . at Red Wing*, 180, 183, 219, 251 (St. Paul, 1907); [Hancock], *Goodhue County*, 306-308; *Who Was Who*, 1:890.

<sup>5</sup>Alumni Association, *Hamline University*, 180, 183, 219, 251; Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, 1:339 (St. Paul, 1890); Julia B. Nelson to Angeline Bullard, January 12, 1872; conversations with Lorena Wiech. Unless otherwise noted, letters cited in this article are in the possession of the author.

<sup>6</sup>Julia B. Nelson diaries, January 9, 1875, 1895, 1899, 1901, 1910, 1913, September 25, 1877, 1898, 1904-07, August 15, 1903, August 1, 1908, in the possession of the author; *Goodhue County Republican*, August 21, 1873; *Red Wing Republican*, December 26, 1914, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 666 (New Haven, 1972); Augustus Field Beard, *A Crusade of Brotherhood: A History of the American Missionary Association*, 19-31, 124, 148 (Reprint ed., New York, 1970).

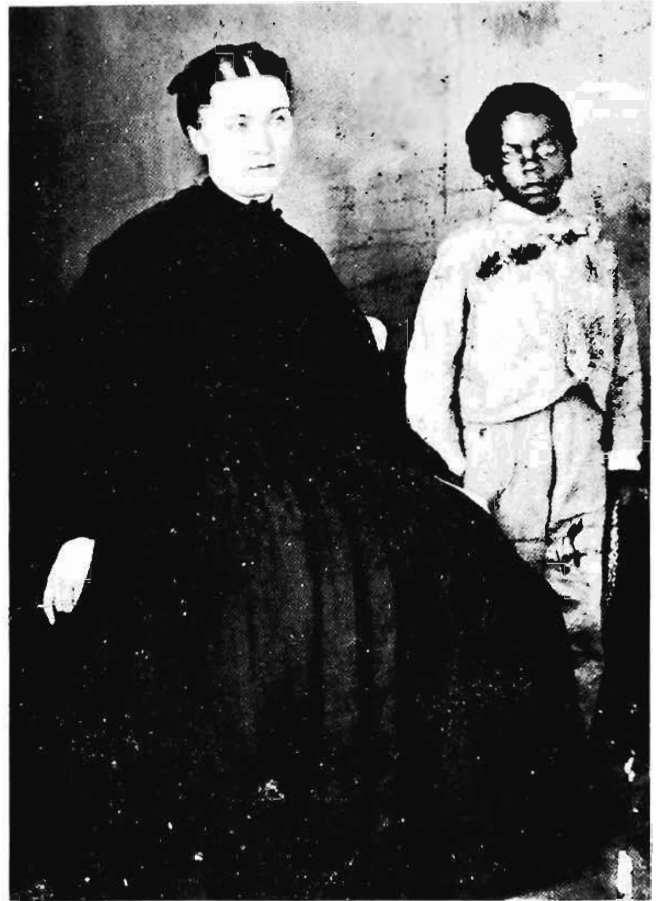
The young widow applied to the association for a position in a freedmen's school and was assigned to Houston, Texas. The reaction of her relatives to her plans was ambivalent. They were impressed with her resoluteness but considered the South too dangerous for a northern woman.<sup>8</sup>

The animating spirit behind Julia Nelson's decision was probably an outgrowth of her childhood experiences in Denmark, Iowa, an important station of the Underground Railroad. There she must have seen many frightened fugitive slaves pass through on their way to freedom in Canada. Her opposition to slavery was reinforced by reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe to whom she had a distant family connection. (Her first cousin, once removed, married Mrs. Stowe's brother, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher.) Furthermore, both the Congregational church the family attended in Denmark and the Methodist church they joined in Red Wing were unalterably opposed to slavery. These factors all apparently influenced her decision.

In a letter to her brother, Julia B. described her departure on the steamboat "War Eagle" in September, 1869. Many of her friends came to bid her a solemn, almost funereal farewell; Dr. [Thomas S.?] Williamson "led in singing a parting hymn and Mr. [John] Kerns prayed." So many people were there that one woman on the boat asked what was going on in Red Wing; she could not understand what brought the crowd to the landing.<sup>9</sup>

Julia B. and two other northern women traveling on the boat encountered some hostility during the trip to New Orleans. She wrote to her mother: "I fell among the Secesh," adding that the three "were eyesores to a few Southern women . . . who took pains to prejudice people against us, even trying to make them believe we were not respectable, but the saying is 'Give a rogue rope enough and he'll hang himself.' . . . Before we reached New Orleans, our fellow-passengers were convinced that we were persecuted."<sup>10</sup>

In New Orleans Mrs. Nelson joined three other northern teachers assigned to Houston. They took a short train ride to Brasher City, Louisiana, then went by steamer across the Gulf of Mexico to Galveston, where



MRS. NELSON and a pupil in Columbus, Texas

they boarded another train for Houston. There a group of black adults greeted them with enthusiasm, and their children flocked to see the new arrivals. But only three days after she began teaching, Mrs. Nelson was stricken with a "Bilious fever." Many black residents were concerned and wanted to visit her, but the doctor forbade any callers. One 83-year old woman walked over a mile three times before she could see the ailing Minnesotan. The regard for Julia B. was typical of the esteem in which white teachers in freedmen's schools were held. She later wrote a Red Wing friend that would-be teachers "will be ostracized by white society [and] loved and trusted by the colored people."<sup>11</sup>

After she recovered, Julia Nelson was sent by the AMA to Columbus, Texas, where at first she was the only teacher in the freedmen's school. Again she met hostility in the community. Only two white women spoke to her during the first year. But the school flourished: its enrollment was between 70 and 80 pupils, so another teacher was transferred to Columbus to assist. The school was used throughout the week and served as a nondenominational church on Sundays, when it was crowded with an average attendance of 170. Unfortunately, the assistant's health failed after two weeks, leav-

<sup>8</sup>Here and below, see conversations with Lorena Wiech; Mrs. H. B. Quinton, "Early Denmark and Denmark Academy," in *Annals of Iowa*, series 3, vol. 7, p. 10 (Des Moines, 1905); Edgar J. Bullard, *Other Bullards*, 14 (Port Austin, Mich., 1928). For an examination of other Yankee teachers' motives, see Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862-1870*, 40-56 (Nashville, 1941).

<sup>9</sup>Nelson to Charles Bullard, September 22, 1869.

<sup>10</sup>Nelson to Angeline Bullard, October 5, 1869.

<sup>11</sup>Nelson to Charles Bullard, October 2, 4, 26, 1869; *Goodhue County Republican*, March 14, 1872. On black attitudes toward the teachers, see Swint, *Northern Teachers*, 70-72.

ing Mrs. Nelson to work alone for the remainder of the year.<sup>12</sup>

While Julia B. Nelson was in Texas, she became a prolific writer. She mailed articles about her work to a number of newspapers in the northern states and took pride in the responses her writing evoked. She told her mother of one reader in Woodstock, Illinois, who commented, "No woman wrote that article. It was written by some man, probably a lawyer." Her style of writing was often convoluted, a fashionable practice at that time. It was also frequently witty, sometimes tinged with sarcasm.<sup>13</sup>

When school closed in June, 1870, Julia B. left Texas to avoid the yellow-fever season. She spent the summer in Red Wing. Black friends and students in Columbus gave her an appreciative send-off. She wrote that she was "escorted by a procession of my colored friends numbering over 200. The 80 day scholars were dressed in their exhibition costumes, 37 of the girls in red, white, and blue representing the States. Two of the tallest boys carried the Grand Old Union flag, and I guess the Rebels thought that John Brown's soul was marching on."

Mrs. Nelson returned to Columbus in the fall of 1870. Northern teachers had to be cautious and alert when they traveled to the South, so from Memphis, Tennessee, Julia wrote reassuringly to her mother that most of the passengers on the boat were northern people, adding inexplicably that *because* a Union flag was flying over the boat they were in no danger of persecution.<sup>14</sup>

By spring the AMA sent two assistant teachers to Columbus. Mrs. Nelson supervised the school besides teaching in both the day and night sessions: 78 "scholars" attended day school, and eight adults came at night. One measure of the teachers' success was the affection shown them by the children. On one day alone the women received 37 bouquets of flowers.<sup>15</sup>

The state of Texas at this time experimented with a free school system which included the seven or eight freedmen's schools. Teachers in these schools were to be paid by the state, but Texas co-operated with the AMA in placing northern teachers in the freedmen's schools. As in other places where federal schools were staffed by various church groups, no one raised objections regarding separation of church and state. Mrs. Nelson and her assistant, Eveleen Green, remained in Texas for the summer and toured the areas around Columbus to ascertain where northern teachers should be assigned.<sup>16</sup>

THE BLACK PEOPLE were ingenious in protecting their white teachers from the Ku Klux Klan. Mrs. Nelson wrote her mother: "The colored people of Hallettsville [Texas] sent an ambulance for us and we started for that place (which is 38 miles from Columbus) and reached there the same night without molestation from

Ku Klux. We got up a fine evening exhibition among the colored children . . . and the next day they had a parade and barbecue. We took a Union flag along with us, and Miss G[reen] taught them to sing 'God Save the Flag' and other songs. I made arrangements to have two Northern teachers come to H[allettsville] to teach the colored children under the free school act. The rebels don't like that much for they like to keep the Yankees out and now that there is money in school teaching, very many of them want to teach . . . [They] apply for white schools if they can get them, and colored if they can't. Of course, every Southern white boy and girl thinks he or she knows enough to teach 'the niggers.'<sup>17</sup>

"While at Hallettsville we had some splendid ponies to ride, but we did not think it prudent to ride off by ourselves to any great distance, as we were almost too shining a mark for guns that might go off accidentally."

During her third and fourth years in Columbus there were six teachers in the freedmen's school, which consisted of three buildings. Two evenings a week Mrs. Nelson taught Latin to a class of three advanced students. Her enthusiasm for her work spilled out in a letter to a church member in Red Wing: "Have enrolled over 400 pupils since opening the Free School last September. Of these, over 100 who did not know the Alphabet when they entered, now read quite well in Independent Second Reader. As many more, who did not know the written letters, now write, and those who are pursuing Arithmetic, Geography, and Grammar are making steady advancement. . . . Our Sabbath School is large. There were 237 present last Sabbath."

The free school was also a community center. Mrs. Nelson continued in the same letter: "Some who have not pleasant homes, who cannot read, or have no books, enjoy coming to a place where there is someone to speak a kind word to them, to read something which will afford food for the mind, to teach them hymns and Sabbath songs (Miss G[reen]'s melodeon plays an important part in the work) and to rest their eyes on pretty things, for

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<sup>12</sup>Nelson to Angeline Bullard, January 9, 1870; *Goodhue County Republican*, March 24, 1870. Research in the papers of the American Missionary Association during Mrs. Nelson's teaching stints both in Texas and later in Tennessee did not turn up any further letters.

<sup>13</sup>Here and below, see Nelson to Angeline Bullard, January 9, June 28, 1870.

<sup>14</sup>Nelson to Angeline Bullard, November 16, 1870.

<sup>15</sup>Nelson diary, March 2, 6, April 21, 1871; Nelson to Angeline Bullard, March 29, 1871.

<sup>16</sup>Henderson H. Donald, *The Negro Freedman: Life Conditions of the American Negro in the Early Years after Emancipation*, 93-97 (New York, 1971); Nelson to Angeline Bullard, August 9, 1871.

<sup>17</sup>Here and four paragraphs below, see Nelson to Angeline Bullard, August 9, October 6, 1871, January 12, 1872; Nelson to E. W. Brooks, May 11, 1872.

we strive to cultivate a love of the beautiful by arranging flowers about the school room, etc. The colored women begin to vie with each other in having beautiful yards. It does us good to see how tenderly they watch over the plants which came from seeds that came from the North.

"If such a school as we have had in C[olumbus] this year could be kept up, the colored youth of this place would soon compare favorably with any young people anywhere."

The northern teachers had difficulty collecting their salaries from the Texas school fund. There was much red tape, besides discriminatory treatment; the teachers had to give an official a commission of 1 per cent for collecting their pay. Toward the end of the academic year, money in the state school fund was almost depleted; there was none with which to pay the teachers. Help came from Gail Borden, a wealthy New Yorker, who learned of their plight and furnished money for teachers of the freedmen's school. He visited the school whenever he came to Columbus, where he and his wife sometimes entertained the teachers in their luxurious winter home.<sup>18</sup>

Another frequent and vexing problem was the lack of stove wood for heating the school buildings. Julia B. told Minnesota friends that if the school taxes were not paid, no wood was supplied. Whenever this occurred, some of the older boys gathered driftwood along the nearby Colorado River until one day a white man chased them away. This forced Mrs. Nelson to purchase firewood with her own money.

AFTER FOUR YEARS of teaching in Columbus, Mrs. Nelson returned to Red Wing to care for her ailing mother. As her mother's health improved, Julia B. spent time during the next two years lecturing and organizing for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. At the WCTU state convention held in Red Wing in 1874, Mrs. Nelson, with Harriet (Mrs. Chauncey) A. Hobart and Elizabeth (Mrs. Asa) Hutchinson (also prominent leaders in the WCTU), spoke for a resolution on woman suffrage; it was adopted.<sup>19</sup>

Despite such successes and the pull of family ties, Julia B. returned to the South in October, 1875. This time she moved to Athens, Tennessee, where she taught



Marking Ballots for 'Freedmen'



Into the Camp of the Ku Klux Klan

<sup>18</sup> Here and below, see *Goodhue County Republican*, March 14, 1872; Nelson to Brooks, May 11, 1872. Borden was a millionaire who had made his fortune by developing the process of condensing milk. On economic conditions, see Seymour V. Connor, *Texas: A History*, 220, 223 (New York, 1971).

<sup>19</sup> Nelson diary, September 3, 1874; Ethel Edgerton Hurd, *Woman Suffrage in Minnesota*, 8, 32 (Minneapolis, 1916). Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 3:652 (Rochester, N.Y., 1886).

for two years in a mission school under the auspices of the Society of Friends (Quakers). There were more than 100 black pupils, many of them men in their early 20's. With the help of an assistant, Julia B. started a night school for adults; she also taught Latin to at least one young man who was preparing to study law.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the classes were conducted by William H. Richards, a black student teacher. Born in 1856 in Athens of free parents, he was orphaned at four and reared by his grandmother, Hannah Richards, a former slave. Although she had been freed about 1855, she was seized, bound, and taken to a cotton plantation in Alabama. She escaped and returned to Athens after a perilous journey. A few years later her four-year-old, orphaned grandson was seized from her, and she was threatened with clubs, dogs, and guns when she tried to rescue him. She finally appealed to friendly white people who were successful in finding him. As a small child William learned the alphabet from white girls in houses where his grandmother was employed as a domestic. He attended the Friends' mission school at Athens and at the age of 17 began teaching school at Mount Harmony near Columbia, Tennessee; two years later he returned to Athens to continue his education.

The poverty of the students that Richards and Mrs. Nelson taught occasioned these words in a letter to Minnesota: "There is much suffering here. So many poor old colored people and fatherless children, and no poor-houses or public provision for any of them. I have to harden my heart to keep from giving away all my wages. The unusually cold weather has demanded so much fuel that many have had to go short of food in order to get wood enough to keep them anywhere near comfortable in their miserable cabins."<sup>21</sup>

Teaching was conducted under primitive conditions. Mrs. Nelson noted in her diary on January 2, 1877, that it was five degrees below zero and that 18 inches of snow lay on the ground; the next day it was 22 degrees below zero. As it had been in Texas, wood was difficult to obtain, and when the temperature dropped, classes were frequently suspended until the weather moderated.

In May, 1877, Julia B. Nelson was transferred by the Quakers 125 miles northeast of Athens to Jonesboro, Tennessee, where she taught at the Warner Institute for the following nine years. Warner Institute was at this time a one-room school with an average attendance of 75 to 100, many of whom were adults. In addition to elementary subjects, classes in Latin, German, algebra, chemistry, and other high-school courses were taught. The schoolhouse served as a church and community center. A literary society met there one night a week debating such topics as: "Should a man obey a law he thinks wrong?"; "Resolved: That intemperance is a greater curse to the world than war"; "Is war compatible with Christianity?"; "Extravagance and intemperance"; "The

intellectual equality of the Negro and the white man"; "Are the stars inhabited?"; "Licensing of uneducated ministers."<sup>22</sup>

Among those accompanying Julia Nelson to Jonesboro was her brilliant student teacher, William Richards, who continued his education at Warner while teaching in the two nearby towns of Johnson City and Greeneville. A year later Mrs. Nelson loaned him money (in installments totaling over \$500) so he could attend Howard University in Washington, D.C. He was graduated from the law school there in 1881, then worked in the United States Treasury Department four years. This enabled him to repay the loan from Mrs. Nelson. He returned to Athens, where he practiced law, was elected alderman for two years, and served as mayor for a short time. In 1890 he was appointed professor in the law school of Howard University, a position he retained until he retired. Richards and Mrs. Nelson remained friends and corresponded for the rest of her life.<sup>23</sup>

Warner Institute became a public school in 1878, a

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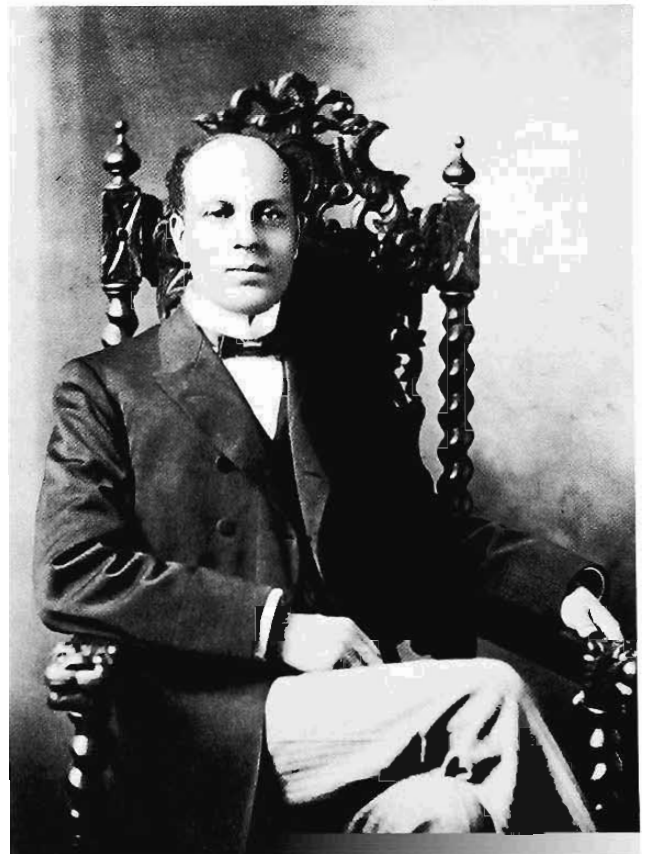
<sup>20</sup> Here and below, see Nelson to Charles Bullard, February 25, 1876; *Goodhue County Republican*, October 14, 1875; Julia B. Nelson, *William H. Richards: A Remarkable Life of a Remarkable Man*, 3-6 (Washington, D.C., [1900]), first published in *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 4, 1900.

<sup>21</sup> Here and below, see Nelson to Charles Bullard, January 22, 1877.

<sup>22</sup> Here and below, see Nelson diaries, May 4, 13, 21, 31, June 6, July 11, August 6, September 21, 1877, January 18, 28, February 8, 18, April 12, 19, 1878, February 3, 4, 1879.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson, *William H. Richards*, 7-9; Nelson financial records, entered at the back of her diaries, 1878-1881.

WILLIAM H. RICHARDS in Washington, D.C.



change that was not without problems. A year later Mrs. Nelson took legal action against "a rascally county superintendent" of schools on the grounds of corruption, specifying that he had been using school funds intended for the black people in his own business. To her mother she wrote: "if I had not got after him, made him give up his ill-gotten gains, Warner Institute would before now have been levied upon for debt. There was a note secured as a lien upon the property which he ought to have paid long ago out of funds paid to him for that purpose. I made him pay the note, and I expect to make him pay my lawyer before I get through with him."<sup>24</sup>

A program produced by the school at the end of the term attracted many people from the community. Apparently in that area of Tennessee there was less prejudice among the white residents toward the northern teachers than had existed in Columbus, Texas. Julia B. described the occasion in a letter to her mother: "All Jonesboro and the surrounding country turned out to our last exhibition (March 28). The house would not have held all the white people that came, to say nothing of the crowd of colored people. The house was jammed full, and as many more of both white and Black had to go away being unable to find even standing room. Rebel Colonels and Captains with their wives and daughters were crowded in with the colored folks, and the daughters and granddaughters of one Confederate General were thankful for an opportunity to sit with the scholars."

MRS. NELSON took a leave from Warner Institute in 1881 and spent the next two years in Red Wing tending to various family real estate and business transactions that had devolved upon her as a result of her acumen in such affairs. In September, 1881, women from various parts of the state met at Hastings and organized the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association, an auxiliary of the national body. Julia Nelson was a charter member and was elected vice-president of the Minnesota association.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of her leave in 1883, Frederick Douglass,

the renowned orator and abolitionist and a friend of Julia Nelson, wrote: "I am almost sorry to have you leave [home] . . . for a life of conflict at the South — but somebody must go there and suffer there as you have before." Undeterred, however, Julia B. returned to Jonesboro in September, this time as principal of Warner with three assistant teachers. The school, now under the auspices of the AMA, had been enlarged physically and consisted of a large brick building, a couple of frame buildings, and several dormitories. Courses ranged from primary grades through a standard high-school curriculum with preparation for teaching. Each year at Christmas, church groups from the East and North sent the school barrels of clothes, blankets, and towels. One little black girl, whose father taught in the state of Virginia while she and her mother attended the institute, finished the first reader and was ready to start the second reader before the age of four.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to her work at Warner Institute Mrs. Nelson organized a Congregational church in Jonesboro, where she frequently preached; she also worked for prohibition in the eastern part of the state. She was by then 44 years old, plump, and prematurely white-haired.<sup>27</sup>

During a spring vacation in 1886, Mrs. Nelson attended the national convention of the Woman Suffrage Association in Washington, D.C., where she accompanied a delegation to a United States House of Representatives judiciary committee hearing on woman suffrage. Here she made an eloquent statement: "What are the obligations of the Government to me, a widow, because my husband gave his life for it? . . . As a law-abiding citizen and taxpayer and one who has given all she could give to the support of this Government, I have a right to be heard. I began teaching freedmen when it was so unpopular that men could not have done it. . . . A woman gets for this work \$15 per month; if capable of being a principal she has \$20. A man in this position receives \$75 a month. There must be something wrong, but I do not need to explain to you that an unrepresented class must work at a disadvantage. If I am capable of preparing citizens, I am capable of possessing the rights of a citizen myself. I ask you to remove the barriers which restrain women from equal opportunities and privileges with men."<sup>28</sup>

In 1888 Julia Nelson returned to Minnesota, where she spent the next two years as a paid organizer for the state WCTU. Each trip was a grueling two-month tour, traveling under adverse conditions, with a different stop almost every day, and speaking two or three times in one town. Her diary indicated the hectic pace of her tours. One typical day described going "To Etna . . . [for] afternoon meeting. A full house at night. Horses stuck in the snow on the return to Spring Valley." Three weeks later, she "Rose at 4:40 [A.M.]. Went to Spring Grove on 6 o'clock morning freight train. Hired a team to go to

<sup>24</sup> Here and below, see Nelson to Angeline Bullard, April 15, 1879.

<sup>25</sup> Hurd, *Suffrage in Minnesota*, 9, 17; Stanton *et al.*, eds., *Woman Suffrage*, 3:657.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick Douglass to Nelson, August 25, 1883; Warner Institute catalog, 1884-85, in the possession of the author; Nelson to Angeline Bullard, December 25, 1885, and to Laura [Lorena] Schunk, February 3, 1886. On Douglass, see his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, Conn., 1882).

<sup>27</sup> Nelson diary, February 19, 20, March 5, 6, 13, 1887; conversations with Lorena Wiech.

<sup>28</sup> The speech is quoted in Susan B. Anthony and Ida Hustad Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, 4:79 (Rochester, N.Y., 1902). See also Nelson diary, February 20, 1886.



Riceford. . . Addressed school. . . Lectured at night."<sup>29</sup>

Her oratorical ability stood Mrs. Nelson in good stead from 1890 to 1896 when she worked as a paid lecturer for the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). In 1890 she spent six months in South Dakota, where she lectured and organized many Equal Suffrage clubs comprised of both men and women. This campaign was not without its hardships, for the state had the hottest and driest summer on record. Frequently the speakers, including Julia B., had to travel 20 miles by horse and buggy between the afternoon and evening meetings. Many in the audiences came from as far as 30 miles away. In Amherst (30 miles northeast of Aberdeen), a large audience had gathered to hear Mrs. Nelson speak at 7:30 P.M. Her train was three hours late, but the people waited patiently, prompting her to write: "The sight of that brave audience was enough to revive the weariest traveler."<sup>30</sup>

The *Red Wing Argus* reprinted the comments of a South Dakota newspaper, the *Seneca Sun*, on Julia B. Nelson's speech in that community. "Those who assembled at the school house last evening to listen to Mrs. Nelson's lecture on Equal Suffrage, were given one of the finest treats of the season. Not only did the lady handle her subject in an able and masterly way, but her style of delivery was such that no one could listen to her voice and not feel an interest in the subject."

JULIA NELSON once wrote that before she read John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* "I was only a believer in equal rights," but from that time on she realized that "the ballot is the weapon with which to defend whatever rights we have." During her tenure as president of the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association from 1890 to 1897, Julia Nelson petitioned for women's right to vote at every state legislative session. In 1891 a bill to allow women to vote in municipal elections was introduced in the House at the request of Mrs. Nelson and Mrs. A. T. Anderson, chairman of the executive committee of the state association. Mrs. Nelson spent several weeks at the Minnesota State Capitol, collecting petitions from all parts of the state, lobbying legislators, and distributing literature. The bill was reported out of the committee on elections, but action on it was postponed indefinitely by the full House meeting as a committee of the whole.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1893 legislative session Mrs. Nelson conferred with Senator Ignatius Donnelly, then leader of the People's (Populist) party, concerning the suffrage bill. He thought the Senate Republican leader, John Day Smith, should introduce it, since the Republicans were in the majority. Smith agreed but asked Donnelly to speak in support of it. The bill asked for "Municipal Suffrage for women with educational qualifications."

Since men could vote without such criteria, this legislation was discriminatory, but the pragmatic suffragists considered the bill better than none at all. Mrs. Nelson and Donnelly were among those who spoke for it at a Senate judiciary committee hearing, and Mrs. Nelson also gave an evening lecture entitled "The Road to Freedom." A substitute bill to submit a constitutional amendment to the voters was passed by the Senate but failed to get on the House calendar.<sup>32</sup>

In the spring of 1894 the NWSA sent Mrs. Nelson to southern Kansas and western Missouri on a two-month lecturing and organizing tour. She stopped at a different community nearly every day, usually speaking in Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, or Baptist churches, but sometimes in school buildings, halls, council chambers, or courthouses. The audiences were generally large. Whenever she was heckled during her speeches, she was imperturbable; she always had an answer. Once someone said women should not vote because they could not bear arms. "Women don't bear arms," she retorted, "but they bear armies."<sup>33</sup>

Shortly after Mrs. Nelson returned from the tour, she spent a month lecturing and visiting almost all of the woman suffrage societies in Minnesota. At Murdock she addressed an audience in the town hall, where the seats were made of planks resting on beer kegs. This was ironical, for many of those attending were teetotalers.

For a brief time Mrs. Nelson worked with the newly formed People's party, which espoused the cause of woman suffrage as being "clearly in line with the Populist doctrine." At the party's county convention held at Zumbrota in October, 1894, she was nominated for Goodhue County superintendent of schools. Learning this, her former student, Professor Richards, wrote his "Dear Friend" that he had "just received a copy of a Red Wing paper containing an account of your nomination. It

<sup>29</sup> Nelson diary, January 14, February 6, 1889.

<sup>30</sup> Here and below, see Nelson diary, March 31 through June, 1890; Nelson to Lorena Schunk, July 19, October 27, 1890; Anthony and Harper, eds., *Woman Suffrage*, 4:555; *Red Wing Argus*, May 1, 22, 1890; Minnesota Climatology Office, *Climatic Summary of the United States*, 37-3 (St. Paul, 1890).

<sup>31</sup> Nelson to Theresa B. Peyton, June 23, 1913, in Theresa B. Peyton Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul; Nelson diary, February 9, 11, 18-28, March 1-5, 26, 1891; Minnesota, *House Journal*, 1891-92, pp. 217, 514, 520, 862, 946; Anthony and Harper, eds., *Woman Suffrage*, 4:775. For more information on Minnesota legislation, see Marilyn Ziebarth, "Woman's Rights Movement," in *Minnesota History*, 42:226 (Summer, 1971).

<sup>32</sup> Nelson diary, February 6-11, 20-28, March 1-22, 27-31, April 1-19, 1893; Minnesota, *Senate Journal*, 1893-94, pp. 209, 290, 292, 388, 407, 431, 432, 436, 464, 487; Anthony and Harper, eds., *Woman Suffrage*, 4:776.

<sup>33</sup> Here and below, see Nelson diary, February 28 through June, 1894, especially May 22, June 4, 7, 11-28; *Red Wing Republican Eagle*, March 12, 1960, p. 7.



ter and splendid services in many lines and give you an overwhelming majority of votes [so] that you cannot be counted out."<sup>34</sup>

Mrs. Nelson campaigned throughout the county. One meeting at the Red Wing Opera House occurred on a dark, rainy night, but 700 people came to hear her; she was the only candidate speaking that evening. She was unsuccessful in her bid for office, however, receiving only about 28 per cent of the vote against the male Republican incumbent. The prevailing opinion was that she would have been elected if women had turned out to vote for her, since they could vote in school elections. It is possible that many voters understandably believed that she would have been only a part-time superintendent, because she was still an organizer for the NWSA.<sup>35</sup>

In 1896 the NWSA again sent Mrs. Nelson on a speaking and organizing tour — this time for four months in New Mexico and Oklahoma. She visited 15 cities and towns in New Mexico and 23 in Oklahoma, gave two or three lectures at each place, and organized many clubs. These long tours were exhausting but successful.<sup>36</sup>

During the 1897 Minnesota legislative session, Julia B. Nelson spoke at a meeting of the Senate committee on taxes and tax laws in favor of the "Abbott bill," which provided tax benefits for widows and unmarried women. (Because men could have escaped taxation by putting their property in their wives' names, married women were not included in this bill.) In her 1,400-word statement she declared: "We believe the time will come when the methods of Robin Hood and his merry men in collecting from travelers enough to supply their needs and carry out their plans will be deemed no more reprehensible than the present custom of collecting taxes from women to make public improvements about which they have neither vote nor veto. Women should either have all the privileges of citizens or be exempt from all the burdens of citizenship, and if they are to be sheltered and protected, let those who stand alone and unrepresented be sheltered from the tax collector."

IN 1897 Mrs. Nelson went into partnership with Jerry Patterson, a black who had lived in Red Wing with his wife and family for a number of years. They opened the Equal Rights Meat Market in a store Mrs. Nelson owned at 5th and Plum streets. This venture lasted only a few months. The main reason for its failure was that Mrs. Nelson did not have time to be active in it. In addition to lecturing and organizing, she was occupied with the management of the extensive residential real estate she bought in Red Wing after selling the farms she inherited from her parents and husband. It is also possible that the name of the butcher shop alienated potential customers.<sup>37</sup>

has been many a day since I have read in a newspaper anything that pleased me so much. You would make an ideal superintendent and will prove to be an attractive candidate but whether you can bring in the Populists with all of their hallucinations remains to be seen. But I hope and pray that the good people of Goodhue county may see only your noble endowments, exalted charac-

<sup>34</sup> *Advance Sun* (Red Wing), October 10, 31, 1894; John D. Hicks, "The Persistence of Populism," in *Minnesota History*, 12:5 (March, 1931).

<sup>35</sup> Nelson diary, October 29, 1894; *Advance Sun*, November 21, 1894; C[hristian] A. Rasmussen, *A History of the City of Red Wing, Minnesota*, 147 (Red Wing, 1933).

<sup>36</sup> Here and below, see Nelson diaries, March 26–July 21, 1896, March 25, 1897; *Minnesota House Journal*, 1897–98, pp. 32, 170–172, 185, 208, 303, 345, 359, 833, 847, 1023, 1034, 1095, 1116, and *Senate Journal*, 1897–98, pp. 212, 234, 371, 378, 415, 423, 437, 449, 481, 636; Anthony and Harper, eds., *Woman Suffrage*, 4:777, 835, 886; *Red Wing Republican*, April 7, May 10, 1897.

<sup>37</sup> Nelson diary, May 1, 5, 1897. *Red Wing Republican*, May 10, 1897. See also *Red Wing Republican Eagle*, May 21, 1957, p. 1.

From 1902 to 1906 Mrs. Nelson edited some issues of the *Minnesota Bulletin*, the quarterly publication of the state WSA, but her chief work was as the editor and business manager of the *Minnesota White Ribbon*, the official monthly paper of the state WCTU. It was published in Red Wing and had a circulation of 4,000. Her editorial comments were not limited to temperance. She remarked about a variety of subjects: "It is no uncommon thing for a man to shoot a young woman who refuses to marry him," she declared. "Such a murder is sometimes said to be the result of a love affair, but to us it looks like a hate affair." In another issue she wrote, "Some people boast of having blue blood in their veins. It is vastly better to have red blood in the arteries and gray matter in the brain." And frequently she contributed poems to the paper.<sup>38</sup>

But the chief thrust of the *Minnesota White Ribbon* was not ignored. Mrs. Nelson argued that "Licensing saloons and dealing out the severest penalties to those who are ruined by them is like exposing one's children to measles, scarlet fever and small-pox and spanking them for taking those diseases." She commented on the case of a man convicted of a murder committed while he was drunk. The relative of the victim "argued that it was better for the soul of the man that he be hung rather than spend years amongst convicts. I confessed that I had never considered hanging a means of grace, and even if it were, questioned the right of sending people to heaven to free them from the temptations of a wicked world. Wouldn't it be better to remove the temptations?"<sup>39</sup>

Although the editorship of the paper occupied much of her time, she still attended most of the state and national suffrage and temperance conventions. She noted in her 1904 diary:

- October 3 Worked till 2 o'clock at night reading proof for Oct. White Ribbon.
- October 4 Rose at 5 A.M. Took 6:03 train for Anoka. Suffrage Convention in M. E. Church.
- October 5 Busy writing resolutions. Left Anoka at 4:35 P.M. Home at 9:35.
- October 6 At work on White Ribbon.

Many of the WCTU statements about the evils of liquor traffic seem simplistic today. The organization maintained that people would stop drinking liquor if temptation were removed — that is, if saloons were closed and the sale of liquor outlawed. The prohibition fiasco disproved this theory. Nevertheless the WCTU, despite its name, was not a one-issue organization. It supported and campaigned for woman suffrage; it worked for bills outlawing child labor; it called for public health measures, such as education on the causes and prevention of venereal diseases and the banishment of

public drinking cups and roller towels; and it urged the establishment of physical education classes for girls and women.<sup>40</sup>

JULIA NELSON did not limit her activities. She became involved in various local issues. In 1909, for example, she had received a letter signed "Anonymous" which deplored the lack of public transportation in Red Wing. Her answer, printed in the local paper, advocated the establishment of a streetcar system in Red Wing, maintaining that while the rich could ride in automobiles, the working men and women could not afford cars or horses and had to walk home after a hard day. She closed by saying: "Regards to Mrs. Anonymous and the children, not to forget the baby, the only aristocrat in the family, who rides while the others walk." Streetcars were never used in Red Wing, but a jitney was put into operation a few years later.<sup>41</sup>

She cared about her community and she cared about her family. With no children of her own, Julia B. gave considerable financial aid to her relatives. When her sister was widowed, Mrs. Nelson took the two youngest of the 11 children (11 and 12 years old) to Red Wing to live with her. She supported these two nieces, and they remained with her until they were adults.

In the fall of 1913, Mrs. Nelson, then 71 years old, was advised by her physician to winter in Florida in the hope of clearing up recurring attacks of bronchitis. On her way south in December, she attended the NWSA convention in Washington, D.C., where leaders of the movement such as Anna Shaw, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Jane Addams spoke. After attending a temperance demonstration she wrote: "I was one of a large delegation of woman suffragists representing every State in the Union to call on the president [Woodrow Wilson].

Dr. Anna Shaw asked him to suggest the appointment of a standing Committee in the House of Representatives to which all petitions and questions relating to woman suffrage should be referred, instead of referring them, as now[,] to the Judiciary Com[mittee].

"President Wilson said it would be an impertinence

<sup>38</sup> *Minnesota White Ribbon*, August, 1903, p. 2; Hurd, *Suffrage in Minnesota*, 29. A typical poem, first published in *Woman's Tribune* (Washington, D.C.), April, 1892, appeared in the state *White Ribbon*, August, 1904, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Minnesota White Ribbon*, November, 1905, p. 2, December, 1905, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Weekly edition, *Red Wing Republican*, August 16, 1911, p. 10; Helen E. Tyler, *Where Prayer and Purpose Meet: The WCTU Story, 1874-1949*, 262-267 (Evanston, Ill., 1949). Mrs. Nelson was franchise superintendent in charge of WCTU suffrage work for a number of years, Bessie L. Scovell, *Yesteryears with the Minnesota Woman's Christian Temperance Union*, 220 (St. Paul and Minneapolis, 1939).

<sup>41</sup> *Red Wing Republican*, October 6, 1909, p. 7.

to suggest *anything* (after all the suggestions he has made about all sorts of things!!) but that when a Member of the House asked his advice, he had said that such a Committee as we asked for ought to be appointed.

"On Wed[nesday], December 10, I marched along with thousands of WCTU women and Anti-Saloon men to the Capitol where they filled the steps and the portico and made it look like a Presidential Inauguration. I was fortunate enough to stand on the portico on the edge of the crowd so I could get out and go into the rotunda to warm my feet by the register which I did whenever there were speakers who could not make themselves easily heard. as a cold wind was blowing that day I took cold. [and was] laid up for repairs."<sup>42</sup>

After her sojourn in Florida Mrs. Nelson's health improved, and she was able to resume suffrage and temperance activities. Before the fall election she campaigned for woman suffrage for two weeks in North Dakota, often speaking two and three times a day. But her health was undermined by the strenuous tour, and within a few weeks she developed acute pneumonia. She died on December 24, 1914. Several hundred persons attended her funeral and many beautiful and impressive eulogies were delivered by representatives of the organizations she had led. William Richards traveled from Washington to attend his mentor's last rites, and the news of his visit appeared in the Red Wing newspaper.<sup>43</sup>

The day after the funeral, the terms of Julia Nelson's will were headlined on the front page of the *Red Wing Daily Republican*: "Remembers Negro Lawyer in Her Will." Modest bequests were made to her elderly sister, to the First Methodist Church, and the national and state woman suffrage associations; her niece, Lorena Bullard Wiech, was bequeathed \$1,000 to be paid three years after Mrs. Nelson's death. If Mrs. Wiech died before the three-year period expired, the money was to go back to the estate. "All the residue [of the \$17,000 estate] . . . I give, devise and bequeath to my former pupil, William H. Richards of Washington, D. C., who has cheered my lonely life with such sympathy and affection as a son should render to his mother."

Now the gossips' tongues started wagging. Surely Professor Richards was either Mrs. Nelson's son or her



JULIA B. NELSON in 1903 when she was editor of the *Minnesota White Ribbon for the WCTU*

lover! There was no evidence that he was either. Pressure was put on Lorena Wiech to contest the will. A notice that she was challenging it appeared in the newspaper, but Mrs. Wiech decided not to proceed. She said that her aunt had always been lucid, that the terms of her will should be carried out as stated in her last testament. It took courage for Mrs. Wiech to withstand the demands of some of the disinherited relatives, who had tacitly disapproved of Mrs. Nelson's active public life — an attitude Mrs. Nelson was aware of during her lifetime.<sup>44</sup>

Julia B. Nelson was thus considered a fallen woman in Red Wing. Her name was no longer mentioned and her accomplishments were ignored. Had Richards been a white man, would people have reacted this way? Pos-

<sup>42</sup>Nelson diary, November 30, December 1–10, 1913; Nelson to Sylvia Heglund, December 19, 1913, *Minnesota White Ribbon*, January, 1914, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup>Here and below, see *Red Wing Republican*, December 26, 28, 30, 31, 1914, all on p. 1; Julia B. Nelson will, April 10, 1910, Probate Court records, Red Wing, photocopy in the possession of the author.

<sup>44</sup>Here and below, see *Red Wing Republican*, February 2, 1915, p. 4; Rasmussen, *History of Red Wing*, 176, 295; conversations with Lorena Wiech.

sibly not. Perhaps they would have said, "How nice of her to have remembered him!" Professor Olaf O. and Susie Stageberg were acquainted with both Richards and Mrs. Nelson; Stageberg was the administrator of her estate. Susie Stageberg stated that Julia B. Nelson had no romantic interest in Richards; he was so much younger than she.<sup>45</sup>

Both Richards and Julia Nelson were ahead of their time, and both were lonely people. He was a surrogate son to her and apparently perceived in her the same tenacious qualities of his grandmother. Their financial transactions were meticulous. Richards bought some of Julia B.'s real estate, and her diaries record every payment. Occasionally she borrowed money from him before she went on a lecture tour, and her diaries indicate that she repaid the notes with interest. The Christmas gifts they gave each other were usually books.

If Julia Nelson was "a prophet without honor" in Red Wing, she was honored elsewhere as a national figure. The Minnesota WSA placed a memorial tablet in the Woman Citizen Building on the state fair grounds in St. Paul; *Who's Who in America* listed her name from 1908 on. A national executive committee member of the NWSA, she had worked for such notable leaders of the suffrage movement as Susan B. Anthony, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who called Julia "a woman who has a purpose in life." Historians of the movement regarded her as "the rock on which the effort

for woman suffrage has been founded" in Minnesota, and a full-page syndicated feature article that appeared in a number of newspapers called her "The Last of the Grand Old Women of Suffrage."<sup>46</sup>

Today the cloud of imagined scandal no longer obscures the name of Julia B. Nelson. Her house at 221 East 5th Street, Red Wing, has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. There is now recognition of and appreciation for her pioneering struggles for woman's rights, racial equality, and other social causes.

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<sup>45</sup> Author's conversation with Susie Stageberg, November 15, 1953, notes in author's possession. On financial transactions and other exchanges between Richards and Nelson in the paragraph below, see Nelson diaries, 1896–1913, especially February 3, 1896, August 12, 1898; Nelson, *William H. Richards*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Dillon Foster, comp., *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women*, 374 (Minneapolis, 1924); Anthony and Harper, eds., *Woman Suffrage*, 4:772, 6:322. The syndicated article appeared in newspapers such as the *North American* (Philadelphia), *Syracuse (N.Y.) Sunday Herald*, and *Portland (Ore.) Sunday Journal* on January 5, 1913; copy in Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association Papers, MHS.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS used in this article are in the possession of the author, copies in MHS; the drawings on pp. 302, 307, and 311 are from the Philadelphia *North American*, January 5, 1913, copy in Minnesota Woman Suffrage Papers, MHS.

*THE JULIA B. NELSON HOUSE in Red Wing; Mrs. Nelson is second from the right.*





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