

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH – HARRIET HEMENWAY AND MINNA B. HALL

Back in the late 1800s and early 1900s, one of the most “fashionable” things a woman could wear was a hat with birds on it. Millions of birds were killed for their feathers.



Some hats like the one above featured whole birds who'd been killed and preserved through taxidermy. (Eww, eww, and eww!)

Songbirds and egrets were particularly popular, but more than 50 North American species of birds were in danger.

A *Good Housekeeping* report in the winter issue of 1886-1887 stated: "At Cape Cod, 40,000 terns have been killed in one season by a single agent of the hat trade."

Women conservationists began to rally against the deaths of so many birds, concerned if something wasn't done to stop the craze, many species would become extinct.



Harriet Hemenway

In 1896, one of the pillars of Boston high society, Harriet Hemenway, happened upon an article that described, in graphic detail, the effects of a plume hunter's rampage— dead, skinned birds, clouds of flies, the stench, starving young birds left to die in the nests. Appalled that the terror visited upon the poor birds was because of a fashion dictate, Harriet decided to do something about it. She took the article and marched across the street to the home of her cousin, another upstanding member of Boston' society, Minna B. Hall.

Over tea, the two women began to develop a strategy to put a halt to harvesting of birds for their feathers. Harriet and Minna went through *The Boston Blue Book*, which contained the names and addresses of members of Boston society. They made a list of women most likely to wear feathers on their hats then planned a series of tea parties. Women in feathered hats were invited and when they came, over delightful refreshments, Harriet and Minna would do their best to encourage, petition and coerce them into swearing to never wear plumes again.

After numerous teas, the two women established a group of 900 women who vowed to discourage the buying and wearing of feathers and to protect the birds of America, boycotting milliners who used feathers in their hats. Harriet and Minna organized the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the first of many Audubon societies formed in more than a dozen states, setting the groundwork for what would become the National Audubon Society.

Voices across the nation repeated the chorus of “Protect the Birds” and soon milliners across the country were boycotted.

In 1903, President Teddy Roosevelt signed an executive order protecting Pelican Island in Florida as a federal bird reserve, the first of many.

And it all started with two women determined to make a difference.