



Government Operations Committee

Governor Daniel D. Tompkins Building
Ithaca, NY 14850

Meeting: 11/01/17 03:30 PM
Department: Tompkins County Legislature
Category: Buildings and Facilities

REPORT OR DISCUSSION ITEM NO. (ID # 7389)

Renaming of the Human Services Building

Elizabeth Beebe pioneered welfare before it had a name

Carol Kammen Published 8:17 p.m. ET Sept. 12, 2014



Elizabeth Beebe in 1874. (Photo: The History Center in Tompkins County Photo)

Story Highlights

- Historian suggests naming county social services building in honor of 19th century safety-net pioneer.
- Elizabeth Beebe was city's first secular, civic missionary.

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“Get a woman to do this job,” was the advice given by Rev. Hawkins. The year was 1879. For two years Rev. Hawkins had tried to bring religion and material and medical aid to people living “in the western part of the city” who did not belong to a church and whose lives were uncertain because of poverty, discrimination, or lack of legal occupations.

Unable to “cope with the unruly element in that vicinity,” and met with suspicion by the men in the area who did not want a man visiting their homes when they were not there, Hawkins left his position and advised that a woman be hired.

The problem was who would that woman be? She would have to be forceful and experienced in the ways of the world and she would have to raise much of the money needed for the mission by her own efforts. A young inexperienced woman would not do; a young woman could not be sent into the area around the Inlet.

Married women on the other hand, had, according to the thinking of the time, duties to perform in their own homes and so they could not take on other work. In some ways, the type of woman needed was just the sort of woman who would have been acceptable as a Civil War nurse just fifteen years earlier: over 35, plain in appearance, widowed, and healthy.

The community turned to Elizabeth W. Beebe, who was appointed the city missionary in 1890 and worked in that position until her death in 1905. Mrs. Beebe was born Elizabeth Westman in Toronto in the 1830s. Around 1860 she came to Ithaca as the wife of Lyman Beebe, a marriage that ended under a “cloud of great domestic affliction.”

She was selected to become the city missionary because of her age, because she was educated and respected, and because she was divorced, a socially awkward position at the time. Being divorced also meant was that she had no home and no family to care for and so was free to take up the city’s work.

The Ladies Union Benevolent Society, made up of churchwomen from around Ithaca, had created the Ladies Home on South Aurora Street for women who were alone, and the Children’s Home, where children could be left for the day or for short times if they could not be cared for at home, and from which a number of children were adopted.

LUBS supported Elizabeth Beebe’s work. She lived in the Children’s Home on West Seneca Street, and ran the Inlet Mission, later called the Beebe Chapel, which provided both religious services and education for women and children.

Beebe’s work, however, was not limited to the Inlet, for she went wherever she was needed, bringing food and clothing, health care, and spiritual enrichment. She had a weekly meeting at the Ladies’ Home, ran the Children’s Home with the aid of a matron, and visited the jail and people around the community. When the money allocated for these works was lacking, Elizabeth Beebe was known to go to local business leaders to request funds, which she usually received.

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It was LUBS that first identified the community need, but it was Elizabeth Beebe who served as our first social worker, stressing that we were all our brother’s and sister’s keepers and that we had a social responsibility to aid others.

Elizabeth Beebe died in 1905. The mission continued through the 1930s but by then many of the duties assumed by Elizabeth Beebe had been taken over by state-mandated social service agencies. The Mission was finally demolished when the flood control channel was erected.

It would be very fitting if our social services building were named in honor of Elizabeth Beebe as singlehandedly - and before the community was really aware of the needs that existed within it or the state began to regulate what was called welfare - she served as our charitable arm offering a helping hand to those in need.

More than 1,000 people attended Elizabeth Beebe’s funeral. The sermon was titled, “She hath done what she could.” An article noted that “the poor had lost their best friend,” yet, “those who could tell of her life,” that is the people she had helped, “were not in the pews” to hear the sermon. She was also an adviser and friend of those who had plenty of the world’s riches and “rejoiced with those who rejoice.”

She is someone we should not forget and perhaps should honor and by doing so recognize all those people who have aided community members in need.