To celebrate Cleveland’s one-hundredth birthday, the city fathers in 1895 formed the Cleveland Centennial Commission and, at the urging of the energetic Mary Bigelow (Mrs. William A.) Ingham, a separate Woman’s Department of the Commission. As the members of the Woman’s Department began to explore Cleveland’s past, they were dismayed to discover “the prominence given to biographies of men . . . [and] little or no mention of their wives, who doubtless had performed an equal though different part in laying the foundations of future civilization and prosperity. . . . A fitting time had come,” the women resolved, “in which to treat—not of the services, as usual, of our forefathers—but, if the term be admissible, of our foremothers.” Their resolution bore fruit: the Memorial to the Pioneer Women of the Western Reserve was compiled to tell the epic story of these heroic “foremothers” who overcame, and sometimes succumbed to, the great obstacles and hardships of the frontier wilderness. (See Figure 1.)

The several volumes of the Memorial, written by 216 amateur historians scattered throughout the Western Reserve and edited by journalist Gertrude Van Rensselaer (Mrs. Samuel) Wickham, were themselves a heroic accomplishment. To celebrate that accomplishment, this book borrows the Memorial’s purpose and theme: to tell the story of our foremothers and reaffirm their part in the first two centuries of Cleveland’s development.

Because the story of Cleveland women is one chapter in the history of all American women, it is useful to begin with an overview of that larger context. In 1796, when Moses Cleaveland and his surveying party landed at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, the United States was on the verge of sweeping economic and social changes which would transform the lives of American women and men. From the time of the earliest settlements through the eighteenth century, the country’s economy was agricultural. Most farmers produced enough for their own use and bartered or sold the rest. Except for the very privileged, all family members, male and female, old and young, worked: men outside in the fields and forests, and women inside the home, where almost all necessities—food, clothing, medicine, and other household supplies—were produced. Women’s labors at
the spinning wheel and hearth and in the kitchen garden were as essential to the family's well-being and survival as were the labors of men. Women also bore primary responsibility for rearing their large families: seven to nine live births were not unusual because children provided helping hands to the family and the larger community.

Despite these important contributions, even free white women did not enjoy equal status with men. The colonists brought from Europe a family structure in which the husband was the undisputed head of household. Married women could not own property since, according to English common law, wives had no independent legal existence apart from their husbands. Single women were seldom granted land by town fathers. Voting was restricted by property qualifications, which disenfranchised many men, but even propertied women could not vote. These disadvantages were compounded by Christian doctrine which taught that although men and women were spiritual equals, God was male, and therefore women could not become ministers or lay church leaders. Women had fewer opportunities than men to receive a formal education.

The American Revolution, which brought political independence to the colonies and expanded political opportunities for white men, brought neither to women. The end of British rule and restrictions on settlement did encourage the exploration of and migration to territories west of the Appalachians, including the Western Reserve of Connecticut.

FIGURE 1. View of the Woman’s Department of the Centennial Parade, 1896. Cleveland State University Archives
In the earliest decades of the nineteenth century, when Cleveland was settled, the country’s economy began the gradual transition from agriculture to commerce. Small towns such as Cleveland, located near water transportation, developed as mercantile centers. Men increasingly earned their livelihoods out of their homes, in shops, offices, or small manufacturing enterprises. Most white women still played their most significant role within the home and family. These became defined as women’s “sphere,” separate from and morally superior to the harsh realities of the competitive marketplace, as woman herself was supposed to be. Despite this circumscribed definition of womanhood, women in the commercial economy enjoyed greater chances for paid work outside the home, although they also ran greater risks of poverty. Growing towns and cities also created schools, voluntary associations, and especially churches, which provided women with roles outside their homes. Women became the majority of church members, although not ministers in conventional Protestant denominations. Sometimes through church activities and always with evangelical zeal, women joined the various reform movements of the antebellum decades, including temperance, abolitionism, and, less often, the women’s rights movement. In many states, married women gained the right to own property. Although families were still large by today’s standards, the birthrate, especially for middle-class urban women, slowly declined.

During the Civil War, women filled in on farms and in offices for absent soldiers and served both the Union and the Confederacy as army nurses. Northern women aided the Union’s war effort through the United States Sanitary Commission, which raised funds for and ministered to soldiers away from home. Slave women were emancipated, freed to live with husbands and children at last, and often to join the paid workforce to support them.

In the longer run, the rapid industrialization and continuing urbanization of the post-Civil War era would be more transforming than the war itself for native-born black and white women and for the hundreds of thousands of immigrant women who entered the country in the late nineteenth century. In the immediate postwar years, women threw themselves into charitable and benevolent activities and joined dozens of women’s organizations and clubs. Working-class women worked on the assembly lines in factories or behind the counters in department stores. Well-to-do women entered the growing numbers of women’s colleges and coeducational state universities and the professions of nursing, teaching, librarianship, and social work.

During the twentieth century, women’s horizons continued to expand, shaped more by large-scale and unplanned changes than by a purposeful re-visioning of women’s rights and abilities. The reformism of the early twentieth century propelled women into public and political arenas and energized the suffrage movement. Women’s support of the United States entry into World War I provided the political pretext for rewarding women with the vote in 1920.

Now enfranchised, women began new careers as political actors and enlarged their public activism. Also expanded were their work roles, for the hard times of the Great Depression and the military necessities of World War II pushed women, white and black, married and single, into the workforce in record numbers. In the postwar years a revitalized civil rights struggle inspired a new women’s movement, which challenged traditional ideas and roles by the late 1960s and 1970s. Feminist political pressures opened doors in education and employment for many women, at the same time that many others struggled in poverty to raise their children.

In 1897, members of the Woman’s Department of the Cleveland Centennial Commission enclosed memorabilia pertaining to their activities in a casket to be opened in 1996. At this ceremony, Kate Brownlee Sherwood made a bold prediction: “A century
from now the women of 1996 will assemble to celebrate the second century of the city of Cleveland. . . In that great assemblage of educators and statesmen and women of affairs, there will be women governors and ex-governors and senators and legislators, and scientists and divines.” She was too optimistic. (See Figure 2.)

Perhaps because our vision is more inclusive, encompassing working-class and nonwhite women, or perhaps because ours is a more skeptical age, it is difficult to be as hopeful today as those women were a century ago. Women have become physicists and chemists, senators and governors, astronauts and chief executive officers of corporations, succeeding in arenas that our foremothers could not even have imagined. Equal opportunity, however, is still a goal, not a reality, for most women, and women today, like women two hundred years ago, are still among the poorest of the poor.

Nevertheless, as the Woman’s Department presciently foresaw, all our foremothers—whether poor or rich, white or nonwhite, pioneer wife or single schoolteacher, Protestant missionary or Catholic nun, philanthropist or textile worker, politician or nurse—have played their parts in the city’s first two hundred years.

FIGURE 2. KATE BROWNLEE SHERWOOD, member of the Woman’s Department of the Cleveland Centennial Commission, ca. mid-1890s. Western Reserve Historical Society