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The Strange Tale of the First Woman to Run for President

Before Hillary Clinton, there was Victoria Woodhull.

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By Carol Felsenthal
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s Hillary Clinton's official campaign announcement nears, expect much more talk about the historical importance of a woman becoming president—it was, after all, a precedent-shattering approach that helped deliver Barack Obama to the White House in 2008.

Despite two women appearing on national tickets—Sarah Palin in 2008 and Geraldine Ferraro in 1984—the nation's highest office remains elusive to the female sex. In fact, with the exception of Clinton, there's not another woman in either party well positioned to win the nomination (face it, progressives, Elizabeth Warren is a pipedream, not a possibility). Clinton owns the glass-ceiling territory, and that's pretty compelling for women voters who happen to constitute a majority of the electorate yet have spent their entire voting age lives choosing between candidates of the other gender.

Story Continued Below

Based on the rhetoric surrounding her historic candidacy in 2008 and, in more recent months, leading up to the 2016 campaign, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Clinton was the first woman ever to run for the nation's highest office. Far from it.

Clinton, as she dropped out of the 2008 presidential race, celebrated the groundbreaking success in her race. “Although we weren’t able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it’s got about 18 million cracks in it,” she told supporters.

Few know, though, the name of the woman who put the first crack in that highest, hardest glass ceiling. That honor belongs to a beautiful, colorful and convention-defying woman named Victoria Woodhull, who ran for the office in 1872, 136 years before Clinton made her first run in 2008. Woodhull, who died nearly twenty years before Clinton was even born, hazarded a path on which no woman before her had ever dared to tread. Even more amazing is that she did it almost 50 years before the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 gave women the right to vote. On Election Day, November 5, 1872, Victoria Woodhull couldn’t even vote for herself.

Although it must be noted that she could not have voted for herself in any case, given the fact that she was incarcerated on Election Day, and for a month or so after, in New York City’s Ludlow Street Jail on obscenity charges. (Details below.)

Woodhull ran under the banner of the Equal Rights Party—formerly the People’s Party—which supported equal rights for women and women’s suffrage. The party nominated her in May 1872 in New York City to run uphill against incumbent Republican Ulysses S. Grant and Democrat Horace Greeley and selected as her running mate Frederick Douglass, former escaped slave-turned-abolitionist writer and speaker. On paper, it was an impressive pick, but not really: Douglass never appeared at the party’s nominating convention, never agreed to run with Woodhull, never participated in the campaign and actually gave stump speeches for Grant.

Victoria Woodhull.

But that’s just one more of many caveats about Woodhull, who, throughout her long life—she died in England in 1927 at age 88—never much cared for rules or regulations of a game she considered egregiously rigged against women. On inauguration day, she would have been just 34 years old. Article 2, Section 1 of the Constitution requires that the president be 35 on the day “he” takes office. In the end, though, her youth was the most moot of moot points, because Victoria received zero electoral votes. (There’s no record of how many popular votes she

received; though we do know that 12 years later, another woman running for president under the banner of the same Equal Rights Party racked up 4,149 votes in six states.)
When to Victoria's ineligibility and lack of votes are added certain other details of her biography—her guttersnipe, vagabond parents, her three marriages, her work as a child preacher, a fortune teller, a clairvoyant and a spiritualist healer—it's not surprising that history has reduced her to a curiosity and a footnote, and characterized her, at best, as a free-thinker and an eccentric; at worst as a scoundrel and a hustler. The full story, as is so often the case, is much more interesting.
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Born in 1838, Victoria California Claflin was the seventh of 10 children who lived in an unpainted wooden shack in Homer, Ohio, a small frontier town in Licking County. Her education lasted less than three years between the ages of eight to eleven. According to Myra MacPherson, Victoria's latest biographer (*The Scarlet Sisters: Sex Suffrage and Scandal in the Gilded Age* was published last year and focused on both Victoria and her younger sister Tennessee), Victoria claimed that she had never spent even one year in a schoolroom. MacPherson, whose look at the sisters' lives is as entertaining as it is sad, writes that their mother, Annie, was a "slattern" who was "described by all who met her in later life as an unpleasant old hag." Their father, Buck, was, if possible, worse: a thief, a child beater, "a one-eyed snake oil salesman who posed as a doctor and a lawyer." The lives of the six surviving children were "filled with Dickensian debauchery." Victoria was forced by Buck to travel in his painted wagon and work as a revivalist child preacher and a fortune teller; Tennessee, with whom Victoria would collaborate closely throughout her life, worked as a "magnetic healer"; and both were made to perform as "faith healers" and "clairvoyants who spoke to the dead." Their lives were tumultuous, impoverished, unpredictable and nomadic.

Victoria married three times—the first, at age 15, pushed by her grasping parents into the boorish arms of Canning Woodhull, a philanderer, drunk and morphine addict. He kept her in the most pitiful, starving poverty, dressed her in rags—indeed like a character out of Dickens—while he entertained his mistresses with champagne, fine food and gifts of silk and satin. (She kept his last name, Woodhull, throughout her life and two more marriages; her sister kept the family name Claflin.)
Eventually, Victoria, who had two children with Canning, one of whom was brain damaged—she blamed that on her husband's drinking—had had enough and she divorced him. Divorce in those years and for many to follow was a stain on a woman's reputation no matter her social class. Victoria became a single mother, raising both her severely limited son and his younger sister.
She married for a second time around 1866 to Col. James Blood, a civil war hero and ardent spiritualist—one of a large and growing group of believers in the ability to commune with the dead and in the presence of helpful angels in their lives. As MacPherson writes, the Spiritualist movement "transfixed the country from the 1850s through the 1870s" eventually claiming more than four million members. To its adherents, it became a religion, complete with Spiritualist churches, a rebellion against the notion of a Christian wrathful God and an oppressive Christian church.
Blood was a political and social radical—he called himself a "free lover"—who encouraged Victoria's self-education and interest in women's rights. He also encouraged the sisters to move, in 1868, to New York, where he lived at times, and where their lives took shape in a way that no

one who observed them paraded and exploited in their father's "creaking medicine show wagon" could have predicted. What makes those lives so extraordinary is that they managed to emerge from the physical and spiritual abyss of their childhood; Victoria especially, from a poisonous first marriage, transformed into a woman with a mission—determined and fearless in her demands that women have an equal place in the country. It didn't hurt that both she and Tennessee were remarkably beautiful girls and women—perplexing to those who knew the family because of the ugliness, inside and out, of the parents.

In New York, the sisters worked as spiritualists, and deliberately set out to meet and captivate railroad and shipping millionaire Cornelius Vanderbilt, then a widower, who was fascinated by the movement of the day. As MacPherson writes, "he was a perfect catch for them. Victoria held out hope that she could please Vanderbilt's obsessive desire to communicate with his long-dead mother." Over the years, journalists have written that Victoria might have been his lover. MacPherson disputes that, although she writes that Tennessee might have been.

The "richest man in America" set the sisters up in business—the firm Woodhull and Claflin opened on Broad Street in 1870—and they became the first women stockbrokers, and the first women to found and run a Wall Street brokerage firm. Whether they were actually running the numbers in their heads is up for dispute, but what is definitely known is that the sisters were that year's biggest novelty. On they day they opened their offices, dressed in matching outfits calculated to please the male eye, their skirts shockingly short for the times, touching the tops of their boots, MacPherson writes, "thousands of gawkers mobbed them." Newspaper reporters dubbed them "the queens of finance" and "bewitching brokers."

Using money they made in the brokerage business, in 1870 the sisters founded a radical newspaper, *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*. By the next year, Victoria had taken a leadership role in the Karl Marx International Workingmen's Association. The *Weekly*, which operated for six years, published the first version in English of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto*.

That same year, Victoria announced that she was running for president, showing that insatiable appetite for risk taking that marks her as a woman way ahead of her time. The heart and soul of her platform was a society free a government that makes laws which interfere with the rights of any individual, man or woman, black or white, "to pursue happiness as they may choose." She believed that women should be free to find their true love, with or without marriage. Ideally, she lectured, they might remain monogamous, although monogamy was not a realistic goal in most marriages, which, she added, are riddled with "miseries."

She campaigned for "free love"—a phrase that sounds racier than Woodhull intended. She advocated giving women the right to "marry, divorce, and bear children without government interference." She opposed what she termed "sexual slavery": the double standard of allowing married men to be unfaithful, but stigmatizing and ostracizing married women for the same behavior. She advocated legalized prostitution. During a lecture she delivered in Steinway Hall in New York City, she declared, "an inalienable, constitutional and natural right to love whom I may, to love as long or as short a period as I can; to change that love every day if I please."

The next year, Victoria became the first woman to testify before a congressional committee, addressing the House Judiciary Committee on the subject of women's suffrage. Her argument was that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments already guaranteed a woman's right to vote. All that was needed, she said, was for Congress to pass an act guaranteeing those rights. Susan

B. Anthony was so taken with Woodhull's argument that she asked her to repeat it at the National Woman Suffrage Association Convention later that afternoon.
By then, Victoria's eloquence, her charisma and her unconventional past had made her famous. Audiences for her lectures numbered in the thousands. Still, there were many—men and women—who found the unconventional divorcee, who wasn't afraid to talk about sex and religion and race, abhorrent.

On November 2, 1872, three days before Election Day, the sisters published in the *Weekly* details of the alleged adultery committed by the revered Brooklyn minister Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher had castigated from the pulpit Victoria's views on sex and marriage. In getting her revenge, she explained that she objected, not to Beecher's adultery, but to his hypocrisy. "I am not charging him with immorality—I applaud his enlightened views. I am charging him with hypocrisy."
With her race for president just three days away, she, her sister and Colonel Blood, who wrote many of the *Weekly* articles, were arrested on charges of "indecency," of publishing "an obscene newspaper" and sending it through the mail. The three were found not guilty, but not before Victoria's reputation underwent a major beating in the press. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a particularly harsh critic, labeling her an "impudent witch" and a "vile jailbird."
Having divorced Colonel Blood in 1876, ceased publication of her newspaper that same year, and become, mostly due to harsh criticism over her expose of Henry Ward Beecher, a target of hate and ridicule in the United States, she retreated, in 1877, to London. There she married for a third time to John Biddulph Martin, an Oxford-educated son of a wealthy and proper English banking family. Martin's mother vehemently opposed the marriage. The newlyweds lived on a London estate. After Martin died in 1901, Victoria, who was one of the first women in England to own a car, lived the life of a wealthy widow in a manor house on a 1,200-acre estate in the Cotswolds, outside Bredon's Norton.
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Other women, including Belva Lockwood, have launched runs for the presidency since, but nearly a century passed between Woodhull's run and the first woman to vie for the nomination of a major party. Maine Sen. Margaret Chase Smith tried in vain for the Republican nomination in 1964; New York Rep. Shirley Chisholm tried for the Democratic nomination in 1972, as did Rep. Patsy Mink from Hawaii. In more recent years, Colorado Rep. Patricia Schroeder, cabinet secretary and later North Carolina Sen. Elizabeth Dole, Illinois Sen. Carol Moseley Braun, and Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachman would compete for the nomination of the Republican or Democratic parties. It is, when one thinks about it, astonishing that a woman, in a country in which women are the majority of voters, has never been the nominee of either major party. And in 2016, with some 20 competitors for the Republican nomination, all but one—extreme long shot Carly Fiorina—are men.
Reading about Victoria Woodhull, my thoughts turn often to Hillary Clinton, the woman who, again, seems the "inevitable" nominee of the Democrats. The early lives of Victoria and Hillary couldn't be more different: Victoria's, traced above, and Hillary's, in conventional Republican Chicago suburbia, the daughter of a small businessman, a Methodist, who sold draperies, and of a housewife mother who had, actually, bravely overcome a childhood of serious neglect.
Both Victoria and Hillary married philanders. Hillary stuck with Bill, despite the frequent "bimbo eruptions," for reasons, I believe, that are a mix of love and ambition. Victoria divorced her philandering husband at a time when divorce was difficult for women of any social class. But

she wasn't above targeting Cornelius Vanderbilt for his ability to give her the financial base she needed to pursue her goals of running a newspaper that could transmit her views to the public and allow her to run for the nation's highest office.

Both women, from a young age, had visions of themselves as destined for much more than the lives with which the accident of birth had presented them. From childhood, Victoria claimed a vision of herself as being destined to escape poverty and achieve greatness. Hillary, in her 20s, saw herself following her boyfriend, Bill, into the Oval Office for two terms of her own—not as first lady, but as president.

Hillary is the soul of caution, a woman who plots her every move; Victoria was the opposite. But interestingly, given the many decades that separate their attempts to win the presidency, their issues are remarkably and, depressingly, similar. They both have pushed for universal health care, for children's rights, for, as Hillary puts it, the belief that "it takes a village to raise a child." Victoria's belief reflected an attraction to communal living, as in, "I'll care for you and you'll care for me."

Victoria pushed for issues that can be found in Hillary's stump speeches; support of labor unions, workers' rights, including the eight-hour day, equal pay for equal work, help for working mothers who are raising children, an end to spousal abuse, better public education, legal aid to the poor, opposition to capital punishment, tax reform, sex education in schools, and social welfare programs aimed at ending poverty—a banner at the Equal Rights Party convention, MacPherson writes, called for "GOVERNMENT PROTECTION FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE." Victoria also campaigned to raise the hemlines of women's skirts, to alleviate the burden for women of having to drag their heavy skirts through filthy, muddy streets. She likely couldn't imagine a candidate for president campaigning in pastel pants suits.

Something in the personalities of both women brought out the worst, the most mean and ugly in some opponents. Victoria, labeled "Mrs Satan" by the political cartoonist Thomas Nast, was also, like Hillary, called a "witch," a "harpie."

As much as one thinks of Hillary Clinton as cautious, beneath that scripted, awkward presentation is a woman who, should she announce, as expected, in the next week or so that she's running for president, takes a huge risk of repeating the stupefying humiliation of 2008. Victoria's run was, in a way, less risky, more symbolic. No one, not even her sister, thought she'd be president.

Like Hillary will do, Victoria did give her vision of herself in the White House another go in 1892 under what was left of the Equal Rights Party. The attempt fizzled. By then, she didn't even have the support of the Suffragists, and she and her third husband accepted reality and returned to England.

Hillary's second attempt won't fizzle. The nomination seems hers for the taking, and the general election reasonably well within reach. Hillary's gender might encourage women voters, but it won't much matter otherwise; it cannot any longer as women have moved to the top of every aspect of American life, from university president to Speaker of the House—every aspect, that is, except major party nominee for president.