

AAUW-Rockford: The war years and beyond

The tumultuous decade of the 1940s dawned with the US postal service issuing a 10-cent stamp honoring the towering figure of Jane Addams.

Addams, a Rockford Female Seminary (now Rockford University) graduate and Nobel Peace Prize winner, was a founding member of the Chicago branch of the Association of University Women. She was known as the “mother” of social work as co-founder of Hull House in Chicago in 1899. She was also a leader on issues related to women's suffrage and world peace.

Addams' life work and AAUW's mission closely aligned in a decade that would see profound change for women around the world and in the United States.

Throughout the 1940s, AAUW would advance gender equity for women and girls through research, education and advocacy as it had done since its founding in 1881.

Women in the workforce

Frances Perkins, a longtime AAUW member, served as US Secretary of Labor (1933 to 1945) under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The longest to serve in that position and the first woman appointed to the US Cabinet, Perkins was an early champion of women in the workforce, advocating for shorter hours and higher wages.

Closer to home in the early 1940s the Rockford branch of AAUW supported the Bill for Federal School Aid, equal pay for women teachers, and the employment of married women teachers in the Rockford school system.

In 1945 AAUW supported the first federal pay equity legislation, a concern since an AAUW study in 1907.

AAUW women in wartime

In 1940, AAUW began to raise money through its War Relief Fund to assist European scholars and university women displaced by the war and unable to continue their work. AAUW efforts helped many women find teaching positions at schools and universities in the US. and, more importantly, saved many lives.

With the US entry into World

War II, AAUW supported establishment of women's units of the armed services and advocated for equal pay and rank for women in the military. AAUW, nationally and locally participated in all civilian and military wartime activities.

Women and education

By 1940, despite the Depression of the preceding decade, the national AAUW, with the help of state and branch affiliates, had largely reached its ambitious goal to establish a \$1 million Marion Talbot Fellowship Endowment to support higher education for women.

Despite the consuming conflict abroad and the war effort at home, AAUW continued its laser focus on education. In 1943, scientist Florence Siebert won the first AAUW Achievement Award for her invention of the first reliable tuberculosis test and the improved safety of intravenous injections.

By 1943 the Rockford branch awarded two \$100 scholarships, one each to a female graduate of East Rockford and West Rockford high schools, the only city high schools at the time, for study at what was then Rockford College. A \$100 scholarship in 1943 is equivalent to over \$1,400 today.

AAUW and the United Nations

In response to the horrors of World War II, the United Nations was formed, in large part, to maintain international peace and security. AAUW, a vocal advocate for the UN's establishment, was granted permanent UN observer status in 1946.

Eleanor Roosevelt, admitted to AAUW on the basis of her many honorary college degrees, served as the chair of the UN Human Rights Commission. Her legacy was the 1948 charter of liberties, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Sheryl Hall is an AAUW member and past president. AAUW-Rockford Branch is celebrating its 90th anniversary in 2019. It is a nonpartisan organization and open to both women and men with at least a two-year college degree. For more information, visit <https://rockfordarea-il.aauw.net>