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KEEP 'EM FIGHTING
CHRIS-CRAFT'S CONTRIBUTION TO WWII
Throughout her life, Elizabeth Sparks Adams served on countless boards and committees that advanced local and state history, but her greatest triumph was the 54 consecutive years she spent serving on the Michigan Historical Commission—making her the longest-serving state appointee in Michigan’s history.

Elizabeth Sparks Adams, c. 1935. (Photo courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, HS5174.)
Elizabeth Sparks Adams was a twentieth-century American historian who worked tirelessly as an advocate for Michigan’s history. Her prevailing interest in government and women’s rights influenced nearly every facet of her active public life as well as the numerous leadership roles she occupied during her career.

Early Beginnings in Southeastern Michigan

Elizabeth was born on December 12, 1911, in Romeo, Michigan. She later moved to Waterford Township, which remained her home for much of her life. Elizabeth graduated from Pontiac High School as valedictorian in 1930. She then attended Eastern Michigan University and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in history in 1934. As an undergraduate, Elizabeth also served as house mother to six other young women who, like her, both worked and attended school.

One year later, in 1935, Elizabeth received a master’s degree in history through a state college fellowship at the University of Michigan. Her master’s thesis was titled “Women in the Antislavery Movement” and illustrated her dedication to studying the role of women in Michigan and U.S. history.

That same year, Elizabeth began work as a historian with the Michigan Historical Collections—now the Bentley Historical Library—at the University of Michigan. After three years as a research assistant under professor and library founder Lewis G. Vander Velde, she was selected to be the collection’s first curator. When she left that post in 1939, the university’s board of regents awarded her the lifetime designation of “Honorary Curator of the Michigan Historical Collections” for her invaluable contributions overseeing the archives in those early years. Elizabeth’s work at the Bentley Historical Library sparked a long tradition of graduate students working at the library as a way to receive on-the-job training in archival and manuscript library techniques.

In 1936, she married Donald E. Adams, a Waterford Township native, who later became an Oakland County judge of probate. The couple shared a passion for serving their community, participating in several organizations centered in Waterford Township and Oakland County both together and separately.

Adams and her husband were similarly passionate about government, and they became active in the Democratic Party at both the local and state levels. Adams was particularly interested in the gubernatorial candidacy of Murray Van Wagoner, who ran for governor of Michigan in 1940. According to her personal papers held at the Bentley Historical Library, Adams was “vitally concerned that we have good public officers” and thought that Van Wagoner would be able to meet that need through his appointments if elected.

One “good public officer” she had in mind was herself. “I myself had an ax to grind,” she wrote in regard to her support of Van Wagoner’s candidacy. “I wanted a job on the Michigan Historical Commission.” Her hard work and wishes paid off on March 20, 1941, when the newly elected Governor Murray Van Wagoner appointed Elizabeth Sparks Adams to the Michigan Historical Commission. She was just 29 years old.

Championing Michigan’s History

Not only was Adams the first woman to receive an appointment to the Lansing-based Michigan Historical Commission, but she also became the first woman to serve as its president in 1946. She would ultimately serve as the commission’s president for a total of 14 years between 1946 and 1983 and its vice president for two years in 1988 and 1989. While her presence on
the commission paved the way for female appointees in years to come, she would not be joined by another woman until the appointment of Ann O. Pratt in 1971.

From the outset of her appointment, Adams was active and enthusiastic. She was unafraid to assert her voice both within and beyond the male-dominated commission. Merely one year after her appointment, she wrote to Governor Van Wagoner expressing her desire for him to select an “aggressive person from either the Upper Peninsula or Detroit” for an open commission position. “Two of us are conscientiously trying to put some life into this particular department,” she wrote, “and with the appointment of one or two more who are sympathetic with us I feel sure more substantial contributions could be made.”

As Adams’ first six-year term wound to a close, it was apparent that others saw her passion and enthusiasm as a boon to the Michigan Historical Commission and its future directions. In May 1947, Randolph G. Adams, longtime director of the University of Michigan’s Clements Library, wrote to Republican Governor Kim Sigler to encourage him to reappoint Elizabeth Sparks Adams for another term on the commission. The Clements Library director praised her “noteworthy work” and described her as “young and active, full of initiative and good, sound ideas.” Randolph Adams’ praise apparently helped, though Elizabeth Sparks Adams’ work with the commission spoke for itself, and in 1947, Sigler reappointed her.

When it came to Elizabeth Sparks Adams, Michigan’s governors clearly agreed that she was a vital component of the commission’s operations. Her dedication to preserving and promoting Michigan’s history resulted in a series of unbroken reappointments by governors of both parties for a grand total of nine terms. Following Sigler, she was reappointed by Democrat G. Mennen Williams in 1953 and 1959, Republican George Romney in 1965, Republican William Milliken in 1971 and 1977, and Democrat James Blanchard in 1983 and 1989.

During her 54-year tenure, Adams helped develop some of the Michigan Historical Commission’s most ambitious programs and activities. She was involved in the creation of the Michigan Centennial Farm program in 1948, which honors family farming traditions in Michigan. The program still persists to this day, now operated by the Historical Society of Michigan. Adams also assisted in establishing the Michigan Historical Marker program, the purpose of which was to “tell the story of Michigan and the rich history of its people.” The official commemorative marker program was enacted by the Michigan state legislature in 1955, and its rigorous standards have been maintained by the commission ever since.

**Other Historical Endeavors**

A committed officer on the Michigan Historical Commission, Adams was concurrently involved with several other groups focused...
on Michigan’s history, U.S. history, and her Waterford Township home throughout the decades. One of her earliest appointments occurred in 1943, when she was elected justice of the peace in Waterford Township.

In 1954, she began her first of two terms on the Waterford Township Board of Education, for which she served as president for two years. On that board of education, Adams chaired a committee responsible for naming new schools in the area and guaranteed that other notable women, such as Eliza Seaman Leggett and Della Lutes, were suitably recognized for their contributions to Michigan’s past by naming Waterford Township schools for them.

Adams also served on the board of directors for the Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society, which worked to preserve former Michigan Governor Moses Wisner’s home in Pontiac. She was a board member for 50 years, 14 of which were spent as president. Furthermore, she was elected as the first female president of the Historical Society of Michigan’s board of trustees, serving from 1950 to 1951.

Some of Adams’ many other accomplishments included her active roles with the Pontiac Historical Commission, Pontiac Young Women’s Christian Association, Waterford Township Recreation Board, Commins Restoration Association, Oakland County Chapter of the Michigan Society for Mental Health, Lawyers Wives of Michigan, Oakland County Bar Association Auxiliary, Society of American Archivists, Daughters of the American Revolution, and Navy League. She served on the Committee on the Impact of the Civil War upon the Lives of Women in Michigan during the Civil War Centennial from 1961 to 1965 and was a member of the Oakland County Bicentennial Commission during the United States’ bicentennial in 1976.

Throughout her impressive and lively career of public service, Adams continued to write and publish works that advanced the cause of Michigan’s history, contributing to the Encyclopedia Britannica; the Biographical Directory of the Governors of the United States; and The University of Michigan, an Encyclopedic Survey. Furthermore, she led the subcommittee of the Oakland County Bicentennial Commission that published Out of Small Beginnings, a Bicentennial Historical Sketch of Oakland County, MI, 1815-1976.

In 1995, Adams wrote to Governor John Engler to request that he not reappoint her for another term on the Michigan Historical Commission. At the age of 83, she had by then spent more than half of her life serving in that unpaid volunteer position. In her correspondence with Sandra Sageser Clark, director of the Michigan History Center, Adams included a copy of the letter she had written to Engler. “It was hard to write,” Adams told Clark, “but the time has come.”

Engler responded to Adams’ request by issuing her a Certificate of Special Tribute on May 17, 1995. The tribute noted her “integrity, honor, and scholarship” in her service to the state of Michigan and its people and recognized her as “Michigan’s longest serving appointee.” Nearly 25 years later, Adams still holds that title.
The certificate from Engler was one of many acknowledgments that Adams received from the state government, having also been recognized in House Concurrent Resolution 450 in 1972 and House Concurrent Resolution 496 in 1991. Her state senator and representative issued her a Special Tribute in May 1988, and Secretary of State Candice Miller granted her a Michigan Week award in 1995 for her outstanding volunteer work.

A Legacy of Service to the State

Elizabeth Sparks Adams passed away on October 11, 2007, at the age of 95. Her legacy as a female historian is extensive, and several of the groups she so loyally served have chosen to honor her by establishing awards bearing her name. The Michigan Historical Commission’s Milliken/Adams/Kelley Award—named also for Governor William G. Milliken and Attorney General Frank J. Kelley—was created in 2013 as a way to recognize “significant contributions to the preservation, understanding, and promotion of Michigan’s history.” In addition, Eastern Michigan University’s Elizabeth S. Adams Memorial Endowed Scholarship supports students pursuing undergraduate education in the field of history.

The Historical Society of Michigan and Michigan Historical Commission jointly nominated Adams to the Michigan Women’s Hall of Fame for her noteworthy achievements in government, history, and women’s rights. She was inducted in 2016. Her legacy is also preserved through the personal files she and her husband gifted to the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan in 2002.

In a 1999 letter housed at the Bentley, Adams wrote, “The contributions of women over the years have always been of special interest to me.” Indeed, for all the positions she held in her active public life, Adams did not waver in her commitment to recognize past women for their oft-unrecognized and underappreciated roles in shaping the course of Michigan and U.S. history and, in that way, became just like the women she so esteemed. Adams endures as an exceptional example of female leadership in Michigan, and her all-consuming love for history remains historical in its own right.

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