

## Lewis, Helen Morris <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Lewis, Helen Morris

By A. Elizabeth Taylor, 1991

**7 Dec. 1852–19 Aug. 1933**

Helen Morris Lewis, pioneer in the [woman suffrage](#) <sup>[2]</sup> movement in the South and organizer of the first woman's rights association in North Carolina, was born in the Vander Horst mansion on Chapel Street in Charleston, S.C. The daughter of John Williams and Anna Raven Vander Horst Lewis, she was the third of ten children borne by her mother between 1850 and 1865. She was the great-great-granddaughter of Lewis Morris, of New York, a signer of the [Declaration of Independence](#) <sup>[3]</sup>; great-granddaughter of [Arnoldus Vander Horst](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, governor of South Carolina (1794–95); and granddaughter of Elias Vander Horst, a signer of the South Carolina Nullification Ordinance of 1832. She spent her childhood in privileged and affluent circumstances, dividing her time between her grandparents' home in Charleston and her father's rice plantation, Ravenwood, on the Ashepoo River.

The outbreak of the [Civil War](#) <sup>[5]</sup> disrupted her mode of living. She remained in Charleston and vicinity until January 1865, when she fled to Columbia with her mother, grandmother, four sisters, a brother, and a faithful family servant. When [General William T. Sherman's](#) <sup>[6]</sup> troops arrived in Columbia, she witnessed the burning of the city. Her mother, advanced in pregnancy, died there after giving birth to a son. The grandmother, Anne Elliott Morris Vander Horst, returned to Charleston to seek aid, leaving the children in the care of a black woman. Fearing to remain in Columbia, however, the woman took the children to Aiken where they had cousins. According to family tradition, they walked all of the way.

Some months later, the Lewis children returned to Charleston where their grandmother assumed responsibility for their upbringing. Helen received her education in the local schools and at [St. Mary's Junior College](#) <sup>[7]</sup> in [Raleigh](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, N.C. She often accompanied her grandmother on extended visits to relatives in New York and frequently vacationed in the mountains of western North Carolina.

During the 1890s Helen Morris Lewis and her younger sister, Raven (1862–1940), established residence in Asheville where they taught music and ran a boarding-house. There, in 1894, she sponsored a public meeting on woman suffrage, the first ever held in the state. On 15 November a large audience of "ladies, businessmen, professional men, and people in every walk of life" heard speeches by Miss Lewis, Miss Floride Cunningham of South Carolina, and Asheville mayor Thomas W. Patton. On the twenty-second an equal suffrage association was organized with Helen Morris Lewis as president.

During the decade that followed, Miss Lewis was the motivating force in the woman suffrage movement in North Carolina. She traveled throughout the state, often addressing audiences that numbered in the hundreds. She brought to North Carolina such lecturers of prominence as Elizabeth Upham Yates of Maine, Laura Clay of Kentucky, Belle Kearney of Mississippi, and Frances Willard of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

In 1896 she was surprised to learn that she had received five votes for the office of representative in the U.S. Congress. Although she was not a candidate for that or any other post, five men, for reasons undisclosed, voted for her. Three years later, in 1899, she announced her candidacy for the position of superintendent of waterworks for the city of [Asheville](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, and, thereby, became the first woman in North Carolina to seek an elective office. She did not expect to win the post and doubted that she, "a disfranchised creature," would have been allowed to fill it had she won. She ran against eight men and received a total of four votes.

Her crusading zeal sometimes took her to other states. In 1895 she was one of a group of women who toured South Carolina in behalf of "votes-for-women." During the same year, she attended the annual convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in Atlanta. In 1896 she represented North Carolina at that organization's convention in Washington, D.C. While there, on 28 January, she spoke at a hearing of the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage. On this occasion she pointed out that many existing laws were "detrimental" to women and urged that they be given the ballot so that they could protect "their interests." Enfranchisement would contribute to the "betterment of the wives, mothers, and daughters" of the land. It would not make them less feminine, she said. Instead, it would stimulate their educational and personal growth and bring a "fresh dignity and respect to the home."

In spite of her efforts, the doctrine of votes-for-women won little acceptance in North Carolina. The suffrage association failed to gain new members, and, as old ones drifted away, its ranks became decimated. By 1899 the organization was

showing signs of disintegration, and Miss Lewis expressed concern about its future. Early in the twentieth century it became inactive. The suffrage movement then entered a dormant phase which lasted more than a decade.

In 1906 the Lewis sisters gave up their home in [Asheville](#) <sup>[9]</sup> and returned to Charleston. In 1912 they established the Squirrel Inn in nearby Summerville. This resort inn, which catered to winter visitors, became known for its hospitable atmosphere and distinctive cuisine.

In 1923 Helen Morris Lewis bought a house in Asheville where the sisters spent their summers during the next decade. She died in [Asheville](#) <sup>[9]</sup> of cancer and her remains were taken to Charleston for burial in St. Lawrence Catholic Cemetery.

In appearance, Helen Morris Lewis was tall and stately. A contemporary described her as a woman of "queenly beauty and grace." She was an accomplished public speaker who often received standing ovations from her audiences. She was also a talented musician and a writer of some local reputation who often published articles in the *Charleston News and Courier*. She never married and left her entire estate to her sister and lifelong companion, Raven Lewis.

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## Authors:

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## Origin - location:

[Buncombe County](#) <sup>[14]</sup>

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