"That it is the will of our Lord to make use of the exertions of women...."

Women had no official role in the early American Presbyterian church with all denominations initially barring women from leadership positions. After the Revolutionary War, women worked to expand their role and formed female voluntary associations to further religious and educational causes. And by the 1830s and 1840s, women began serving as missionaries for the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) in foreign countries and in the American west.

During the post Civil War era, the visibility and influence of Presbyterian women increased dramatically. The PCUSA was first to sanction a national-level women’s organization, the Woman’s Executive Committee of Home Missions, in 1878. Ordained ministry, however, remained solely a male preserve. The Nolin Presbytery of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC) was the first to ordain a female minister in 1889. But the denomination’s General Assembly did not officially approve the ordination of women as deacons, elders, and ministers until 1921.

Other Presbyterian denominations slowly removed the restrictions against women’s ordination over the course of the twentieth century. The UPCNA ordained women deacons beginning in 1906, and the PCUSA followed suit in 1923. Seven years later, the PCUSA General Assembly approved the ordination of women as ruling elders, and in 1955, the denomination opened ordination to the ministry to women. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (PCUS) approved the ordination of women as deacons, elders, and ministers in 1964. To quote the 1811 PCUSA General Assembly minutes, “we hope the spirit which has animated the worthy women of whom we speak, will spread and animate other bosoms.”

Presbyterian Historical Society
Making Clothes for Ministerial Students.
The first Women’s Missionary Society, Chartiers, Pennsylvania, 1785.
From a painting by M.W. Bonsall.

Isabella Graham (1742-1814), established schools for girls in Edinburgh and New York and led the formation of female benevolent associations after the Revolutionary War. (RG 414)

The Constitution of the Female Bible Society … New Castle.
January 14, 1822. (RG 301-31-4)

New York Female Union Society Report.
New York: J. Seymour, 1819.

Map of Narcissa and Marcus Whitman’s trail west. From *The True Story of Marcus Whitman, a Historical Romance in Five Chapters.* (RG 305-29-20)

First women’s missionary society organized in state of Idaho, February 8, 1891. The society worked mainly with the Nez Perce Indians. (RG 303-4-8)

Narcissa Whitman (1808–1847), missionary to the Cayuse Indians in Oregon. (RG 414)
Louisa Lowrie (1809-1833), missionary to India. “It is now my purpose, if the Lord permit, to go to heathen lands. This undertaking does not appear distressing to me, but awfully responsible.” Journal of Louisa Wilson (Lowrie), Oct. 20, 1832, from Memoirs of Mrs. Louisa A. Lowrie.

Mary Mattoon (d. 1885), missionary to Siam. (RG 360)

Dr. Laura Lang (b. 1911), working with a student nurse in the woman’s dispensary at the Memorial Hospital, Fatehgarh, U.P., India. (RG 223-3-16)

Dr. Mary H. Fulton (1854-1927), in Canton, China, with her two hospital Bible-women – one of whom is blind, June 1914. (RG 414)
Map of mission stations in Mormon country (southern Idaho and Utah) and listing of missionaries at each station.

Margaret Towner (1925– ), the first woman ordained by the PCUSA, 1956, to the ministry of the word and sacrament. [RG 414]

Louisa Woosley (1862–1952), the first Presbyterian woman ordained to the ministry of the word and sacrament in 1889 by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.


Rachel Henderlite (1905–1991), the first woman ordained to the ministry of the word and sacrament in the PCUS, 1965. [RG 414]