

HARRIET WHITE FISHER
A DRIVEN WOMAN

THE ANVIL QUEEN / THE IRON WOMAN



SHE BROKE THE GLASS CEILING
IN 1900
AND NEVER LOOKED BACK

FRANK COMSTOCK

Harriet White Fisher broke the glass ceiling in 1900 and soared through it for the next 39 years. She proved that a woman could do anything a man could do. Running an iron and steel factory and traveling the world -- she did it all.

Harriet White Fisher: A Driven Woman

By Frank Comstock

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://booklocker.com/books/14990.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

HARRIET WHITE FISHER

A DRIVEN WOMAN

THE ANVIL QUEEN / THE IRON WOMAN



SHE BROKE THE GLASS CEILING
IN 1900
AND NEVER LOOKED BACK

FRANK COMSTOCK

Copyright © 2026 Frank Comstock

Print ISBN: 978-1-959621-62-1

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-883-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Comstock, Frank

Harriet White Fisher by Frank Comstock

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026920851

Front Cover: Harriet White Fisher in the garden at her home on Lake Como, Italy, 1913. Courtesy the Brooks Family Collection (colorized).

Back Cover: The Trenton 4 before the start of their around the world driving trip. Harriet White Fisher (left front), Harold Fisher Brooks (right front, driver), Albert Batcheler (right rear), Maria Boggia (left rear). Courtesy the Brooks Family Collection.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	xv
CHAPTER 1: From a Farm Girl to the Anvil Queen	1
CHAPTER 2: The Beginning	9
CHAPTER 3: The Real Story May Be More Interesting Than the Generally Reported Story of Harriet's Past	17
CHAPTER 4: Harriet's Ancestors.....	59
CHAPTER 5: Harriet's First Marriage (The First She Acknowledged)	65
CHAPTER 6: Pittsburgh to Queens – A Rebirth Tinged With Mystery	93
CHAPTER 7: Mark Fisher – Farm Boy to Tanner to Anvil Maker	113
CHAPTER 8: Clark Fisher – Naval Engineer and Scion To An Anvil Empire	147
CHAPTER 9: Clark Fisher – Anvil Maker on the Delaware..	169
CHAPTER 10: A Year of Change, Rehabilitation, And A New Direction	235
CHAPTER 11: Four Years of Preparation to Go Where No Woman Had Gone Before.....	251
CHAPTER 12: Driving Across India.....	273
CHAPTER 13: Wonderful Little Ceylon.....	307
CHAPTER 14: Japan – A Land of Mystery and Delight	321

CHAPTER 15: On American Soil Again	353
CHAPTER 16: Harold Fisher Brooks – A Young Man Who Drove Around the World	403
CHAPTER 17: Fisher & Norris – A Business Built Out of Disaster	449
CHAPTER 18: Harriet White Fisher – The Anvil Queen, The Iron Woman.....	505
CHAPTER 19: Harriet White Fisher – The Final Quarter Century	525
EPILOGUE AND AUTHOR’S NOTE	543

CHAPTER 1

From a Farm Girl to the Anvil Queen

What does it take to be the first female anything? It takes grit, and it takes grace. — Meryl Streep

Harriet White, also known at times as Harriet Lindenthal, Harriet White Fisher, and Harriet Fisher Andrew – with other possible last names shown in detailed stories that will be revealed later – inherited the Fisher & Norris Anvil Works in Trenton, New Jersey, from her husband, Clark Fisher, when he died unexpectedly on December 31, 1903. Harriet – Hattie to her friends and family – had spent many years from her middle twenties to her middle forties as a society woman, entertaining in her large, luxurious homes, involving herself in extensive charity work, and generally making a name for herself.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Harriet White developed a reputation as a great hostess, a woman who cared for others and expressed that care not only with her money, but also with her

time and energy. In March of 1899, less than a year after she married Clark Fisher, her life changed instantly and she had to take on tasks that were foreign to her.

Clark Fisher was taken home from his anvil, vise, and rail joint factory on the banks of the Delaware River in Trenton, where a large office building housing the New Jersey State Department of Labor and Workforce Development sits today at 1 John Fitch Way in downtown Trenton. That building sits a few hundred feet back from the banks of the Delaware River, although some of the buildings that made up Fisher's factory were much closer to the water in Clark Fisher's time. Clark erected walls to contain flooding and filled in marshy land to create more usable land. The factory was located just south of today's Patriot Theater and a short distance north of today's Trenton Thunder baseball park. Clark was taken home due to an outbreak of erysipelas, a skin infection that is now treated with antibiotics, a medicine not available in 1899.

Clark was a hands-on manager and owner of the iron and steel mill, an enterprise he had inherited from his father. He had been a successful engineer with the Navy, although he gave that up when Mark Fisher died leaving Clark responsible for the then small anvil factory. The 1899 illness sidelined Clark immediately and a follow-on infection made it impossible for him to even make decisions during his physical recovery. The Fisher & Norris factory was in trouble and Clark could not be the leader he had always been.

More than one newspaper or magazine article written about Harriet puts the date of her taking over the factory

anytime between 1899 and 1904. There is far more evidence that Harriet took over the factory in 1899 at the time of Clark's first illness after their marriage, and Harriet herself clearly confirmed the 1899 takeover in a 1913 report in the *New York Times* of a speech she gave to the Efficiency Society when she said, "I have been [the] boss for fourteen years."¹

Harriet Fisher, whose previous interest in the factory had mostly been a fascination with seeing how anvils, vises, and rail joints were made, stepped up to salvage what she could. The January 1913 edition of *The World's Work* includes an article by Sarah Comstock (no known relation to the author of this book) which describes Harriet's visit to the anvil works when it was obvious Clark could not resume his duties. Harriet discovered only the foreman and the bookkeeper were still on the job – work had stopped because all the other employees had left. She sent the foreman and the bookkeeper out to find the men who had worked there and then gathered them in the foundry area.

"This plant is going right on," Harriet announced, "and since my husband can't, I'll run it." Her resolution was met with laughter, nudging, and whispering. Harriet responded by pushing a cart to a waiting anvil, lifting the anvil onto the cart, and pushing it off toward the loading dock. She rarely faced any opposition from the male workers after that. She learned every

¹ "Woman Tells Men How to Boss Men", *New York Times*, January 28, 1913, page 6.

job in the factory over the next year, donning a heavy, floor length apron over her dresses.²

The company faced a monetary crisis when the first pay day after Harriet took over management responsibilities. There was plenty of money in the bank, but only Clark Fisher could sign checks and withdraw money from the bank. Facing a potential work stoppage because the men refused to work without being paid, Harriet drew money from her own accounts, paid the men and kept the factory open. The lack of her name on the company accounts was quickly corrected and the company soldiered on, eventually growing under Harriet's leadership until output quadrupled within a few years.³

Another crisis erupted in late March of 1902 when Clark Fisher's right hand was severely injured in a steel saw. Although he did not lose any fingers, he was incapacitated for months. Harriet returned full-time to the factory and once again became a hands-on manager. Clark went to the factory after that only sporadically.

Harriet performed all tasks then done in a steel and iron mill when assistance was needed, often training new men herself. After pouring molten iron into a mold, putting a face on an anvil, or moving anvils to the loading dock, Harriet would head for the factory office, hang her apron on a hook there, and meet with customers, suppliers, local officials, delegations of

² Sarah Comstock, "Mrs. Andrew, Ironmaster", *The World's Work*, July 1913, pages 279 – 285.

³ Comstock, "Mrs. Andrew", pages 279 – 285.

society women, or women interested in educating younger women and integrating them into the industrial workforce.

Slowly but surely, Harriet won the support of the men in the factory when they saw she was serious about running the business and that she could do all the jobs they were doing. As her employees gained confidence in her, Harriet expanded her progressive ideas about management and ensured the men were kept employed when business was slow. Harriet also tried to improve living conditions for the men in her employ by working with Trenton officials and by building a model house on reclaimed land behind the factory. She intended building a number of homes there.⁴

It is no wonder Harriet Fisher was known by several nicknames: The Ironmaster, The Iron Woman, and The Anvil Queen. Harriet led the way in her industry in the early days of scientific management and was the first woman to be inducted into the National Manufacturer's Association which apparently accepted her grudgingly by saying "Here is a manufacturer of such achievement that we've got to forgive and forget her sex."⁵ Harriet managed to run her factory while traveling the world and engaging in friendships with leading members of society on several continents.

Harriet worked tirelessly for education of both boys and girls and better living conditions for what was then known as

⁴ "The Anvil Queen", *Hampton's Magazine*, Columbian-Sterling Pub. Co., New York City, NY, March 1909, page 406.

⁵ Comstock, "Mrs. Andrew, Ironmaster", pages 279 – 285.

the 'working class' and was deeply involved with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind. She berated Trenton officials into giving her vacant lots that she turned into small urban farms and gardens nearly a century before such moves became popular and she supported the early 20th century Women's Exchange which worked to provide employment for women who were down on their luck for any reason.

Harriet was a progressive woman at a time when many women were trying to break the mold society had set for them. She drove herself around central New Jersey and occasionally on longer trips. She traveled alone when necessary, she supervised an all-male workforce, she smoked in public when few women did so, and she owned several homes, including a villa on Lake Como in Italy. The one place where she did not espouse progressive beliefs was the subject of women getting the vote – a subject that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 18.

Harriet nearly died in an October 1902 train wreck while traveling with Clark from their Trenton mansion to the mansion she owned on Whitestone Avenue in Queens, New York. She hovered near death for a time and spent many months in rehabilitation learning to walk again – activities which did not diminish her drive to live. That experience taught her she could do anything she wanted to do and when she was better, she set out to prove to the world that she could do just that.

After Clark Fisher's death in 1903, Harriet assumed total control of the anvil factory, increased output by a factor of four and achieved the distinction of supplying all the anvils used by

the United States in the building of the Panama Canal.⁶ Harriet had already traveled extensively in Europe and England, but she wanted to see the world, so in 1909 and 1910 she took a trip around the globe in a car at a time when roads barely existed outside cities. Harriet made a name for herself in the then all-male world of industry and was known and respected throughout the world.

Harriet's childhood was fraught with problems from the time she was a week old, a story to be told soon. She endured a childhood no one would wish on a child and yet she persevered, reinventing herself several times, standing up to the challenges put in her way and finding a way through or around those walls erected to test her resolve.

The journey from Harriet White, a farm girl, to Harriet White Fisher, the leading woman industrialist of the early 20th century, is a story shrouded in mystery. That story, studded with holes large enough to drive Harriet's 1908 Locomobile through, is a story worth telling, even when many things are unknown.

⁶ Comstock, "Mrs. Andrew", pages 279 – 285.

CHAPTER 2

The Beginning

The beginning is always today.
– Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Harriet White often said to interviewers for magazines and newspapers that she was born to Hannah Fisher and Oscar A. White in Pennline, Crawford County, Pennsylvania on March 31, 1861. Records of Oscar's parents are unknown, although he was reported by Harriet to be the grandson of Perry Green White⁷ of Syracuse, New York, but there aren't enough good records to prove that. Harriet said Hannah Fisher was reported to be a descendant of Nathan Fisher who lived in

⁷ The name Peregrine has occasionally been corrupted to Perry Green by those who transcribe old records. A search for Peregrine White in Syracuse at that time was not conclusive. There was a Perry Green White living in the Syracuse area at the time; he moved to Canada at one point (even Harriet mentions this to one interviewer) and records show that Perry Green White returned to upstate New York within a few years of moving to Canada.

Massachusetts in 1700, although she never offered any more detailed information about Hannah and her ancestry.

The best source for birth dates and locations when other records don't exist is often passport applications and that is where Harriet began to sow confusion about her birthplace and birthdate. Passport applications rarely show a person's parents, but they do show birthplace, birthdate, and the location the applicant was living in at the time they asked for the passport. Sometimes, it is possible to trace a person through those facts. Here, though, Harriet confuses us again.

Harriet was born in 1860, 1861, 1862, 1865, or 1869 based on her own reported birthdate on passport applications. The year 1861 seems to be the date most used by Harriet throughout her life when it was necessary to declare her age until 1912 when she began using 1869. Her birthplace, as she noted on the passport applications, was Pennline in Pennsylvania or Madison or Mentor in Lake County, Ohio. Government archives show six passport applications for Hattie or Harriet White (she used both first names interchangeably throughout her life), with all six clearly belonging to our Harriet.

The first application was made in August of 1880 and was processed through the J. W. Hampton Company, a customs house agent for Red Star Steamship Lines. Such agents were used at the time to obtain a passport in less time since the agents worked with both steamship lines and the Department of State. Interestingly, Harriet reported her birthdate as March 31, 1860, on this application which would mean she was 20 years old instead of 19 years old based on an 1861 birth year, as is shown

in most documents. Was this a mistake on her part or was she purposely trying to make herself seem older? Where was she going? Although passport applications asked a traveler to indicate the countries they were going to, the 1880 application is blank in that regard. Of interest here is that she applied under the name Hattie M. White instead of Harriet. Readers should bookmark this passport application in their minds as this story will circle back to that application shortly.

Passport number two was applied for in Philadelphia on March 13, 1886, and issued two days later in that city. She used the name Hattie M. Lindenthal (she was married by this time, and was living in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh on the other side of the state). Harriet's birthplace, written in her own hand on the application, indicates she was born in Ohio, not Pennsylvania, but does not specify the town or county.

Harriet said she was traveling to Cuba and in a note attached to the application she indicated she was traveling with a friend, Mary P. Semple of Pittsburgh. Of far more interest in this application, though, is that the attached note asks the passport office in Philadelphia to send the passports for both women to Mr. Clark Fisher of Trenton, New Jersey.⁸

The third time Harriet applied for a passport was on December 22, 1891, when she listed her residence as Flushing in Queens, New York, a place where we know Harriet White lived

⁸ This is not the only time Clark Fisher's name will appear in this story in the years before he and Harriet married.

in December of 1891. She lists her birth date as October 22, 1862, which should make us question this application. The signature on the application, though, has a distinct similarity to the signatures on other applications that we know were submitted by our Harriet and shows she was living in Flushing, New York. Harriet White was living in Flushing, Queens as early as 1890 at 106 Whitestone Avenue as shown in the City Directory for the Village of Flushing for 1890-1891.

Another application, number four, was submitted on August 30th in 1906 at the Consulate in Milan, Italy. Harriet listed her birthdate as March 31, 1861 (the generally accepted date although information presented later will dispute this). She listed her birthplace as Madison in Lake County, Ohio, not Pennsylvania. The application shows she entered Italy in June of 1905 and intended to stay up to two years, which coincides with a July 1905 article in the *Trenton Evening Times* showing that Harriet had just completed the purchase of a villa in Italy and planned a long stay at her new home.⁹ Harriet showed her home and business addresses on the passport application as Trenton, New Jersey.

The date of the fifth passport application is November 15, 1909, completed again in Milan, Italy, although no reason is shown for applying for a new passport only three years after receiving a passport from that same office. This time, Harriet reported her birth date as March 31, 1861, and her birthplace as

⁹ "Mrs. Clark Fisher Buys Famous Villa on Italian Lake", *Trenton Evening Times*, Trenton NJ, July 18, 1905, page 1.

Pennline in Pennsylvania with home and business addresses in Trenton, New Jersey.

The final known passport, the sixth, for Harriet was issued in 1920 under her then married name of Harriet Fisher Andrew. She still showed her birthplace as Pennline, Pennsylvania, but her birthdate changed to March 31, 1869. Her home address was shown as Bella Vista, her farm in Ewing, New Jersey, just north of Trenton and her business address indicated Trenton. By this point in her life, Harriet had married a younger man and it is probable that she was not truthful with him about her age.

It appears all the applications are from the same person even if birthdates and birthplaces do not always agree. The signatures on these applications are similar and the 1920 application includes a picture which clearly shows Harriet Fisher Andrew as she appeared at that time. Business and home addresses on the applications coincide with the places she lived and the timing of the applications is tied to trips known to have been taken by Harriet.

Harriet gave an interview to a reporter for a newspaper called the *Daily Gazette* (location of the paper and date of the interview are unknown, but there was a *Daily Gazette* in Cleveland in that time frame, as well as a *Daily Gazette* in Trenton) where she said she was born in Pennline in Pennsylvania in 1865. She reported that her parents died when she was young and she was sent to live with relatives in Ohio who arranged for her early education and then sent her to Germany when she was 14 for further education. On the

surface, a German education seems plausible because several sources say Harriet was fluent in German, French and Italian. She certainly would have been exposed to the German language at a German school and it is likely she would have learned French there. Fluency in Italian could have come from that school or Harriet might have picked up the language later in life after she bought a home in Italy.

An entry in the *American Bibliographical Library* shows that Harriet received her Ohio education at Cleveland's Young Ladies Classical Seminary¹⁰ before being sent to Hildesheim in Germany where she allegedly studied for four years before going on to Gottingen in Germany for another two years of schooling. If we assume the *American Bibliographical Library* entry is correct, it looks like Harriet was in Germany from 1875 (when she turned 14 based on a birthdate in 1861) until at least 1881. The question, then, is how did she apply for a passport in Philadelphia in 1880 if she was supposed to have been in Germany? Equally, how does she show up in the 1880 census for Philadelphia as a married woman if she was in Germany at the same time? That question will get answered – or at least addressed – in the next chapter.

As late as 1926, Harriet was still saying she had been educated in Hildesheim based on a wide-ranging interview she

¹⁰ A search of schools in Cleveland in the 1800s does not show a school named Young Ladies Classical Seminary. The word Seminary was often associated with private schools before 1900 and there was a school named Cleveland Seminary for Girls in Cleveland from 1871 to 1883; a previous version of that school existed under a different name.

gave to the *Trenton Sunday Times-Advertiser*, a newspaper published under the aegis of the *Trenton Evening Times*. The reporter stated Harriet had been in Hildesheim for schooling as a young girl in 1898, a year in which Harriet was much older.

Cleveland was a city Harriet returned to on more than one occasion during her life, so it might seem reasonable to assume the information about her family and her education could be correct. As we will see in later chapters, that assumption would be a mistake and some other information may be in question. For instance, as a defendant in an 1887 court case, it was alleged Harriet had worked at the 1876 Centennial Philadelphia Exposition, which would not have been possible if she had been studying in Germany at the same time. That court case also alleged other travel and actions within the United States during the years when she was supposed to be in Germany.

Pennsylvania – assuming Harriet was right about being born in Pennsylvania – did not require birth registration until 1893, although Crawford County did experiment with birth registrations for a short period in the 1850s. County information shows that no one has been able to find the records from that 1850s experiment and it appears those registrations ended at least five years before Harriet might have been born.

With that, the curtains have closed on what is known about the early life of Harriet White as told by Harriet. Is the story she told the truth, part of the truth, none of the truth, or somewhere in between?

The truth appears to be different from all the dates Harriet reported. Harriet must not have realized someone would dig into the available records and she obviously could not have imagined electronic databases where old records are scanned and available for inspection. Let's examine many hours of research in census enumerations, court records, state birth, marriage, and death records, and family genealogies to see if the curtains can be spread a little wider.

HARRIET WHITE FISHER
A DRIVEN WOMAN

THE ANVIL QUEEN / THE IRON WOMAN



SHE BROKE THE GLASS CEILING
IN 1900
AND NEVER LOOKED BACK

FRANK COMSTOCK

Harriet White Fisher broke the glass ceiling in 1900 and soared through it for the next 39 years. She proved that a woman could do anything a man could do. Running an iron and steel factory and traveling the world -- she did it all.

Harriet White Fisher: A Driven Woman

By Frank Comstock

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://booklocker.com/books/14990.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**