Clarina Nichols

The people who lived in the town of Moneka in Linn County, Kansas Territory, had a vision—to give women the vote. Forty-two women and men organized in 1857 to influence the new state constitution and make sure that women’s suffrage was part of the discussion. The group raised funds, collected petitions, and enlisted the help of a newspaper woman to carry their message to the constitutional convention.

As their official representative, Clarina Nichols was permitted to attend the convention in Wyandotte where 52 men were attempting to write a document that would gain Kansas’ admission to the Union. Nichols was not a delegate and could not vote, but she did take every opportunity to try to convince the delegates to consider the rights of women in the new state of Kansas.
Nichols was an appropriate choice to carry the message for the people of Moneka. She had been a newspaper editor and writer in New England, where she was also an abolitionist—there she delivered a speech at a national women’s rights convention.

“Wherever a man may rightfully go, it is proper that woman should go, and share his responsibilities,” she said. “The law which alienates the wife’s right to the control of her own property, her own earnings, lies at the foundation of all her social and legal wrongs.”

She moved to Kansas Territory and became associate editor of an abolitionist newspaper and lecturer on issues of equality for all. In her speeches she used shackles to demonstrate the inhumanity of slavery; a cause she linked with women’s rights.

During breaks in the Wyandotte constitutional convention she encouraged representatives and delegates to remember women. As
a result of her efforts women gained equal rights for child custody. They gained the right to inherit and control property. They were given the right to vote in school district elections, placing Kansas at the forefront of women’s rights.

Nichols helped launch a battle for equality that would continue. Susan B. Anthony and other women’s rights advocates joined Nichols to push even further. The fight took many years; Kansas women were given the right to vote in municipal elections in 1880 and they gained full voting rights in 1912, seven years ahead of the nation.

It was a satisfying victory that began with a group of people back in Moneka, Linn County, Kansas Territory.