Katherine Bell Tippetts: A Female Voice for Conservation during Florida’s Boom

Leslie Kemp Poole

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol22/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Katherine Bell Tippetts: A Female Voice for Conservation during Florida’s Boom

by Leslie Kemp Poole

At her death in 1950, Katherine Bell Tippetts was remembered as a woman who wore many hats: a St. Petersburg, Florida, businesswoman, clubwoman, community leader, political candidate, writer, mother, and wife. But she was most lauded then—and continues to be now—for her passion and action to save Florida’s birds from the threat of hunters who supplied their plumes to the international millinery trade, farmers who wanted to protect their crops, and roaming cats. In an era when women were just entering community work and seeking political clout in the state, she led campaigns that extended from clubwomen meetings to the halls of the state legislature to national publications, fighting for avian protection and appreciation. “[W]e, today, owe her a debt of gratitude for the no small part she had in making possible, with others, the glorious heritage we now enjoy,” eulogized the Florida Naturalist, the publication of the Florida Audubon Society.¹

Under her leadership, bird sanctuaries were established throughout Florida, laws were enacted to protect a variety of state and migratory birds, and Florida named the mockingbird its state bird. In addition, Tippetts led the national campaign to encourage all states to name state birds. Although her work focused in large part on birds, it also embraced a variety of issues in the budding conservation agenda, including the establishment of parks, protections for imperiled plant species, and pressing the state to empower a game commission to oversee wildlife issues. In many ways, Tippetts planted the seeds for the late-twentieth-century environmental agenda that included concerns about Florida birds and plants, but with a new and more far-reaching threat—habitat loss caused by rampant development. During Tippetts’s

Leslie Kemp Poole is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Florida and an adjunct professor in the Environmental Studies Department at Rollins College in Winter Park.

¹ “In Memoriam: Katherine Bell Tippetts,” Florida Naturalist 24, no. 3 (July 1950): 76.
lifetime, Florida began to change from a wintering ground for rich northerners to a hotbed of suburbia. The state’s unprecedented population growth, from a little more than a half million at the century’s dawn to 2.8 million by 1950, would have resounding impacts on the state’s flora and fauna, resulting in challenges Tippetts could hardly have foreseen.\textsuperscript{2} Conservation and boosterism, seemingly compatible in the early century, would collide decades later as urban sprawl and the environmental problems left in its wake steadily consumed the state.

When they arrived in St. Petersburg from New York in 1902, the Tippetts family was seeking the promises claimed by city leaders—sunshine, health, and commerce. William H. Tippetts, Katherine’s husband, had experienced a career as a European correspondent for several New York papers and had been the editor of the \textit{Lake George (N.Y.) Mirror} for a decade.\textsuperscript{3} William Tippetts was in poor health, and the family hoped the new climate would help.\textsuperscript{4} Although it is unclear what William Tippetts’s health issues were, St. Petersburg, with a population of 1,575, had long been claiming that its location might offer a cure for a variety of ailments, particularly those of the respiratory system.\textsuperscript{5} A booklet published in 1896 offered concurring testimonials from doctors:

Suffice it to say that there seems to be a universal feeling among medical men all over the United States, and, it may be said, all over the world, as to the superior healthfulness of this region, for the clime is practically a specific for consumption and pulmonary diseases.\textsuperscript{6}

A poem at the front of the booklet also touts that in the area, “pleasure and prosperity go hand in hand; Where singing birds and flowers are gay.”\textsuperscript{7}

St. Petersburg was the fifth-largest city in Florida at this time, far smaller than the largest, Jacksonville, with 28,249 residents.\textsuperscript{8} Florida, with a population numbering 528,542, was mostly rural and had the smallest number of residents east of the Mississippi River.\textsuperscript{9} While technological changes were bringing modern industrialization and massive urbanization to many U.S. cities, St. Petersburg relied instead on its natural features to draw business and tourists, according to Raymond


\textsuperscript{4}Grismer, \textit{The Story of St. Petersburg}, 296.

\textsuperscript{5}Stephenson, \textit{Visions of Eden}, 31.

\textsuperscript{6}\textit{Facts and Suggestions for Persons Forced to Seek Permanent or Temporary Homes on the Regarding the Pinellas Peninsula for Relief from Consumption, Chronic Bronchitis, Rheumatism, Gout, Neuasthenia, and Kindred Diseases} (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Co., 1896), 47, William B. Tippetts Jr. personal files.

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{8}Stephenson, \textit{Visions of Eden}, 31.

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid.
“Blessed with an abundance of sun and sea, the city’s major product has always been itself,” he wrote. “Mass culture would eventually make almost all American cities centers of consumption as well as production. But St. Petersburg was consumption from its very beginning.”

In the late 1800s, development of the city’s port, which fed into Tampa Bay and then the Gulf of Mexico, became the focus of local business leaders, who expected “industrial growth would surely follow,” Arsenault wrote, adding that the downtown waterfront stayed busy with shipping and a railway line that ended there. However, a decade into the twentieth century, St. Petersburg was still rather isolated, with few paved roads, although the city’s tourism had gained it some visibility.

Into this setting came the Tippetts family, which included three sons and a daughter. The Tippetts, who left behind a devastating house fire in New York, bought the Lake View House hotel in downtown St. Petersburg and renamed it the

11 Ibid., 79.
12 Ibid., 146-47.
Bellmont Hotel in honor of Katherine Tippetts’s family plantation. It would become commonly known as the “Belmont” Hotel.  

Tippetts was born Emily Katherine Bell in Somerset County, Maryland, weeks before the end of the Civil War, and traced her ancestry to one of the signers of the Mayflower Compact. She studied with tutors and at private girls’ schools, majoring in foreign languages, and was fluent in French, German, Spanish, and Italian. She married in 1890 and later traveled in Europe, Asia, and Africa with her journalist husband. In 1892, she used the pen name Jerome Cable to author a novel, *Prince Arengzeba: A Romance of Lake George*, which was published by her husband. The book, which first appeared as an article in the *Lake George Mirror*, is a light romance about “that which is likely to happen to any party of gay young people on the lake,” featuring mistaken identities, the activities of the summering social set, and the landscape of the Lake George area. “Not only the mountain sides, but the vales and banks flaunt their holiday attire and hang close to the crystal waters, as if to catch a glimpse of their finery,” Tippetts wrote. “Lake George thus attired is a roseate paradise.”

Scenes that promote the natural beauty of the area and perhaps show a glimpse of Tippetts’s aesthetic are woven throughout the novel. As one character comments: “I love this lake. It makes one think such noble things, with its impressive grandeur. I think one’s nature becomes warped, surrounded always by brick walls in a city.” The book concludes with an essay titled “Beautiful Lake George,” by W. H. Tippetts, about the natural features and history of the lake and is followed by advertisements placed by Lake George area businesses, including hotels and a steamboat company. W. H. Tippetts identified himself in the book as the editor and publisher of the *Lake George Mirror*, the *Citizens' Line Gazette*, and as the “General Press Representative” of Lake George and the Adirondacks.

When William H. Tippetts died in 1909, Katherine Bell Tippetts took over the hotel operations and real estate interests. She raised her family, sending all four children to college, but never remarried and ran the hotel until her death.
meantime, as many women of the Progressive Era did, she became involved in a number of community projects, earning the moniker “The City’s Queen,” from Scott Taylor Hartzell.23 Her life, wrote Karl H. Grismer, was “one of service to St. Petersburg, Florida and the nation.”24 Lucy Worthington Blackman, a contemporary of Tippetts who served in many organizations with her, wrote: “She has the gift for organization and leadership, not only as it is seen in connection with public offices, but in any sphere of activity. It is significant of the depth of her character that she lives her life in accordance with the highest ideals of charity and human understanding.”25

The year she became a widow, Tippetts charted a new course for herself and her community, founding the St. Petersburg Chapter of the Audubon Society, later named the St. Petersburg Audubon Society (SPAS), at a meeting at the Belmont Hotel. In doing so, she joined the rapidly growing American conservation movement, which began as an effort to use wisely the nation’s dwindling natural resources, according to Samuel P. Hays. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the movement had changed shape and become a moral issue—“an attempt to save resources from use rather than to use them wisely.”26 Americans who had never imagined an end to the country’s natural resources had witnessed the destruction of great forests, threats to water resources, and a dwindling number of native species. The North American bison, whose population was once estimated at 40 to 60 million, was near extinction by the 1880s; the last passenger pigeon, a species that once numbered about 5 billion birds, died in captivity in 1914.27

With religious fervor, conservationists responded by working to preserve acreage across the country. Women were a vital part of this effort, which included creating parks and recreation areas and eliminating advertising billboards. Hays described the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), which organized forestry and park campaigns, and the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), which had a conservation committee, as “especially enthusiastic about conservation.”28

Groundbreaking work in the history of women’s conservation efforts came with Carolyn Merchant’s 1984 article “Women of the Progressive Conservation Movement: 1900-1916.” Although the role of women as environmental protectors “has been rendered all but invisible by conservation historians,” Merchant wrote, women transformed the crusade from an elite male enterprise into a widely based movement. In so doing, they not only brought hundreds of local natural areas under

23 Ibid., 44.
28 Hays, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency, 142-44.
legal protection, but also promoted legislation aimed at halting pollution, reforesting watersheds, and preserving endangered species.29

The progressive spirit inspired female conservation work. Upper- and middle-class women's increasing interests in “botanizing, gardening, birdlore, and camping,” along with a “growing consciousness of the panacea of bucolic scenery and wilderness, coupled with the need for reform of the squalor of the cities,” drove them into the crusade.30 Of particular note is Merchant’s brief history of the Audubon movement that joined men and women together to stop the large-scale killing of birds that were used to adorn ladies’ hats. Together they pressed for federal, state, and local bird protection legislation. Women held leadership roles locally and made up more than half of Audubon’s membership by 1915, and also exerted pressure through women’s associations. Although the national conservation movement slowed by the 1920s, women’s interests continued, manifested in parks and bird protection, according to Merchant.31

Much of the female conservation work was born of an aesthetic love of birds and reports of the devastation left behind by hunters seeking bird plumes for the latest fashions. Women had begun wearing hats and clothes adorned with bird wings,

30 Ibid., 58.
31 Ibid., 69-73, 79-80.
heads, and bodies in the post–Civil War era. By the 1880s, these fashions had led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of birds, particularly waterbirds such as flamingos, ibis, roseate spoonbills, and egrets that display showy plumage during nesting season. These birds nested in large numbers in Florida’s swampy rookeries, making them easy targets for hunters who shot them and left the birds’ bodies and crying chicks behind. The greatest horror was the destruction in the late 1800s of a southwest Florida rookery that sheltered an estimated 1 million birds. Feathers and bird parts gathered by hunters were shipped to northern markets for processing and big profits in the $17 million a year industry that included trade with European countries.32

Although there had been some early efforts to curb the plume trade by an Audubon Society that survived only two years, public pressure for legislation and protection was not largely effective until the Audubon movement was revived in the late 1890s. Of particular note was the Massachusetts Audubon Society, founded in 1896 by Harriet Hemenway, a wealthy Bostonian. Its goals were to encourage bird protection and to “discourage the buying and wearing, for ornamental purposes, of the feathers of any wild birds,” according to the Audubon historian Frank Graham Jr.33

A number of Audubon Societies were formed in different states, with Florida’s organized in 1900 during a meeting in Maitland, a suburb of Orlando. The Florida Audubon Society (FAS) founders, six men and nine women, assumed a variety of duties that included writing and distributing articles and information about birds, developing school classes, encouraging the development of local chapters, and fighting for state bird-protection laws.34 From its 1909 inception, SPAS became a dominant chapter in the state, setting the example for others about how to win protection for birds.

Tippetts was the founding president of SPAS and would remain in that leadership role for the next thirty-three years, guiding a number of efforts and joining with FAS in statewide initiatives. Her passion for birds had begun before her move to St. Petersburg, according to a 1910 article she wrote for a local newspaper describing the founding of the group and its first year of work.

“To be sure, I had been spending my summers studying bird life on an island in the north peculiarly fitted by nature to attract both land and aquatic birds, and where the people looked upon them as one of the charms of the place, along with the flowers, the sunsets across the tinted marshes and the glorious downs,” she wrote. “When I was

destined to spend a summer in the South I still kept up my bird notes."35 Although Tippetts does not identify the island, in a December 1909 article for Bird-Lore, the national Audubon magazine, she describes a birding trip to Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, in which she and another “bird student” sought and found the heath hen, whose numbers were imperiled.36 Thirty years later, while speaking about rare birds at a 1936 SPAS meeting, A. E. Hylan, associated with the Massachusetts Audubon Society, recalled stalking the heath hen with Tippetts and noted that the bird had since become extinct.37

In her article about the SPAS founding, Tippetts describes at length the numerous birds (and their songs) that she discovered in the South, and an incident that led to the group’s genesis. One day she saw a boy shoot a cardinal and when she reached him, she found four additional birds that had been beheaded and skinned. “Five beautiful song-birds killed in one short afternoon and no means of redress,” she recalled. “It was at this crises (sic) I resolved

35 Katherine B. Tippetts, “What Has the Local Audubon Society Accomplished?” (likely the St. Petersburg Times or the St. Petersburg Independent), handwritten date of Summer 1910, scrapbook of St. Petersburg Audubon Society, 18-19, Florida Audubon Society, Maitland, Fla.
to organize the Audubon Society if only two persons could be induced to help me. I may not have talked to the right persons, for although I met with sympathetic attention I found no one willing to undertake the experiment.”³⁸

Upon her return from a trip to the North, Tippetts learned of another person interested in Audubon, John E. Ennis, and together they organized SPAS in November 1909 and formally met the next month at the Belmont. “Special invitations had been given for this first meeting, and many interested citizens came in to learn more about the new society; many pledged their support; public sentiment was awakened, and a love of birds, and a desire for their protection instilled,” she wrote, adding that the group worked diligently during the winter with “an untiring striving for results, and they came.”³⁹ In its inaugural year, SPAS posted summaries of state bird laws that warned against “killing songbirds, or game-birds out of season” and listed penalties.⁴⁰ The group wrote to a Chicago publisher of a Sunday school paper, *Boys World*, successfully urging him to remove air-gun advertisements from the same. Its members suggested that wandering cats be euthanized or their owners taxed. SPAS fought for protection of the meadowlark and the robin and encouraged its members and local boys to build birdhouses.⁴¹

In the same article, Tippetts also signaled a coming fight against agricultural interests that had been seeking to rid their fields of birds they considered nuisances and whose fields deprived birds of natural nesting spaces. “The sooner the up-to-date farmer learns to leave a corner of his domain in the natural state to attract the birds, the sooner he will derive the benefit accruing from their invaluable aid, for ‘the birds are the natural allies to agriculture, forestry and fruit growing as has been proved’,” she wrote.

This is not an appeal to the aesthetically-minded, but a plain statement of facts, given to all in the hopes that it will be read with thought and will induce an awakening of public sentiment toward making St. Petersburg known for its myriad song birds. I long for the time to come when the passion for bird-protection will have become so commonplace for that state only can be reached when all humanity assists in the work.⁴²

The article also links Tippetts’s concerns about birds to the growing conservation movement in the United States and in Germany. “The inception of conservation of our own resources: forests, lands, mineral and water, [illegible] one of the three things for which the [President Theodore] Roosevelt administration will probably be longest remembered,” she wrote, wondering “why birds were not included in this practically new movement of his in this country.”⁴³

³⁸ Tippetts, “What Has the Local Audubon Society Accomplished?” 18.
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid.
⁴¹ Ibid.
⁴² Ibid., 19.
⁴³ Ibid., 18-19.
By 1912, SPAS was deeply involved in efforts to get state laws to protect the robin. FAS developed a bill outlawing the killing or capture of the bird, punishable by a misdemeanor charge for each bird harmed. At the time, Tippetts wrote in a St. Petersburg Times article, SPAS had sent many letters in favor of placing the robin on the state list of protected birds. She argued that the robin had agricultural value as “a destroyer of injurious insects” and argued for their aesthetic value as well, citing literary and musical sources. “We, the Audubon societies of Florida, feel it our special privilege to create public sentiment through the Press, the clubs and individual work, by appealing to the citizens, the school children and tourists who make Florida their winter home, asking them to put their names to a petition for robin protection” for presentation to the state legislature, she wrote, adding that she hoped the petition would be so full of signatures “that our representatives there will need no further argument to prove the wisdom of protecting the robin.” Tippetts did just that. A photograph, hand-dated March 1913, in the SPAS scrapbook shows Tippetts with three other women and two elementary school girls, all in long white dresses, holding a 70-foot petition and signatures that were sent to the state legislature to support robin protection, which passed two months later. That same legislature also passed a law, at the urging of FAS and Tippetts, to establish the Florida Fish and Game Commission.

Concerns about local bird populations also led SPAS to press for municipal ordinances to control St. Petersburg’s stray cats. By 1915, SPAS had engaged legal help in drawing up an ordinance that would include taxing cat owners, making the city the second in the world to do so. The ordinance was on its third reading when the city changed the format of its governing body from council to commission and in the process the “cat ordinance was lost and nothing was accomplished,” Tippetts told the local newspaper in 1921 at the announcement of a renewed effort to enact the measures. “This year we will wage the campaign seriously as it is really a serious question.” Tippetts said winter visitors often adopted and later abandoned cats, which became a nuisance “carrying disease and destroying the birds of the city.”

45 Ibid.
47 Hartzel, Voices of America. 45; “Ask Commissioner for Florida Game: Resolution Passed for Appointment of State Official to Protect Wild Life,” Miami Herald, February 20, 1921.
48 Ibid. “Activity of the Audubon Society Spells Death for Vagrant Cats Slinking about Saint Petersburg; Berlin First City in World to Take Initiative in Taxing of Cats; This City Second to Attempt It,” headline from St. Petersburg Daily Times, January 10, 1915.
49 “Death for All Alley Cats Sought by Audubon Society,” St. Petersburg Times, October 9, 1921.
50 Ibid.
This photograph, dated March 1913, shows Katherine Tippetts, three unidentified women and two unidentified school-age girls with the seventy foot long petition urging the state legislature to support the protection of robins.
or the wild game birds in Florida will be as scarce as the Dodo.”

Tippetts and SPAS also were leaders in the move to create bird sanctuaries in Florida. By 1920, Pinellas had eleven cities declared bird sanctuaries, “a banner achievement in the United States,” according to Blackman. Among her other efforts for SPAS and FAS, Tippetts helped support the federal laws to protect migratory birds; worked to stop a “bounty being placed on the head” of black and turkey vultures; crusaded to save the pelican (fishermen claimed they were competing with their business); and stopped the use of the pied-billed grebe (also known as the Hell-diver) in water sports (a St. Petersburg hotel wanted to give prizes to children who could catch one in its pool). SPAS also helped fund a warden to protect bird colonies in local islands until they received federal protection in 1921. For several years, Tippetts also served on the FAS executive committee and was vice president in 1920, when, in recognition of her work and leadership, she was elected the first FAS woman president.

“Conservation was the watchword of her administration,” summarized Blackman. She “emphasized the municipal and private sanctuary movement in Florida, and her familiarity with legislative requirements and her close touch with National conservation groups made her a very valuable leader for the Audubon Society.” By 1921, there were twenty sanctuaries in Florida, a number that would grow to thirty by Tippetts’s third year of leadership, and Volusia County had become the first countywide sanctuary in the United States. Tippetts also was aware of issues beyond bird life. In a letter to Tippetts, her friend May Mann Jennings, who was involved in women’s club and conservation issues in the state, worried about the enforcement abilities of local game wardens and suggested that hunting season should be closed for turkey and deer, “otherwise, in a few years more we will not have any of either.” She also expressed concern about disappearing forests: “You know as well as I do that we are right up against it as far as our forests go. Our orange and truck crops are increasing each year and the forests are decreasing. In twenty years where are we going to get the box material with which to ship these fast increasing crops?” Three days later, Tippetts replied, noting proposals involving the state game commission and bird laws: “Of course I am looking out specially for Bird Protection-
FAS placed a large emphasis on bird studies in schools, engaging speakers to visit schools, and persuading the 1923 legislature to make bird study required in public education. In order to prepare teachers, FAS offered college courses with credits.60 In 1924, Tippetts resigned from FAS to become vice president at-large of the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs (FFWC).61 Here she would continue her conservation interests and enlist the state’s activist women in the bird and conservation cause.

FFWC had a lengthy history of interest and activism in state conservation and had many committees that focused on different related topics, making it an important player in state issues. Many women joined the group because of its “strong and effective” response to the state’s “environmental issues,” which included committees and campaigns directed at bird preservation, forest conservation, and tree planting, wrote the FFWC historian Jessie Hamm Meyer. “Their efforts intensified as they witnessed the future degradation of Florida’s natural beauty and resources.”62

By the early twentieth century, women’s organizations were gaining in status and political clout throughout the United States. As Anne Firor Scott notes, many women of the era found this arena offered new opportunities to redefine their place in the world and move into the public sphere. “Within this network, women learned how to conduct business, carry on meetings, speak in public, manage money,” according to Scott.63 She notes that most club leaders were “mothers of several children” and being “widowed or divorced often set a woman on the road to achievement,” a description reflecting the circumstances of Tippetts’s life. “Able, ambitious women gravitated to voluntary associations where they could create impressive careers,” stated Scott.64

“My children come first, my business second and my club work is my recreation,” Tippetts told a historian in 1923, adding her firm belief that club activities should address wide issues. “The day is past when the up-to-date woman considers purely social or cultural clubs. She deals in social and civic betterment, in educational methods leading to health and mental attainment. This is not as mechanical as it sounds, for the vision is implanted in all movements which call for ideals, and thus the task never becomes drudgery.”65 The Tourist News, which dubbed her “The Busiest Woman in St. Petersburg,” stated that Tippetts and “an ever increasing army

59 Katherine Bell Tippetts to May Mann Jennings, dated Feb. 21, 1921, Box 17, File: 1921: February-April, May Mann Jennings Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.
60 Blackman, *The Florida Audubon Society*, 33-34.
61 Ibid., 34.
64 Ibid., 155.
of club woman, is making what was once nobody’s business theirs, working without pay—often without thanks—that more people may enjoy the good things of life.”

The FFWC, founded in 1895, gathered thousands of women like Tippetts and those described by Scott and created a powerful force for change in the state. By 1927, there were fifty-eight clubs in the association, and its leaders regularly knocked on the doors of state politicians, who often endorsed and passed their proposed legislative bills.

The 1914-17 FFWC president May Mann Jennings, wife of former Florida governor William Sherman Jennings, had been a driving force in this movement, earning the title of “Mother of Florida Forestry,” and her leadership of FFWC made her one of the state’s most powerful women. Jennings’s FFWC tenure, during which membership numbered more than nine thousand women, was highlighted by the preservation of Royal Palm Hammock located on south Florida’s Paradise Key. The hammock, which was under threat from nearby railroad and highway development, would be renamed Royal Palm State Park under the auspices of FFWC and later was included in Everglades National Park.

For many years Tippetts served in local women’s clubs and organizations, including the Woman’s Town Improvement Association, which had planted numerous trees in St. Petersburg. She also had worked with Jennings in state club efforts, at FAS, in sales of World War I savings stamps, and joined with her in founding the Florida Legislative Council, a group of women (Jennings was president, Tippetts vice president, and the FFWC was a member) dedicated to fighting for legislation of interest to women. Together they were part of what Samuel Proctor called an “old-girl” network that worked on many public issues such as education, conservation, suffrage, and Seminole Indian welfare. The women’s club movement and its networks throughout the state helped raise awareness of these issues and produced activists for change. During her 1926-28 tenure as FFWC president, Tippetts dealt with a number of conservation issues, including a hurricane that hit Royal Palm State Park and badly damaged the lodge that had been erected there. The next year, the state legislature provided ten thousand dollars to help restore the park and lodge.

73 GFWC Florida Federation of Women’s Club Past Presidents 1895-2006, 18, publication of FFWC, at FFWC Archives, Lakeland, Fla.
women, this is your park, and we have every reason to feel proud of the possession of such a rare hammock of tropical growth,” Tippetts wrote in her presidential message to FFWC members.74

During Tippetts’s presidency, the FFWC had a Standing Committee for the park as well as a Department of Conservation, with divisions focusing on forestry and wildlife refuges; parks and natural scenery; birds and flowers; and state beautification.75 A 1927 report from the conservation chair noted that at the previous session of the legislature a bill was passed with “the efforts of our own Mrs. Tippetts” for protection of certain wildflowers and ornamental trees and shrubs, in particular hollies, which apparently were in demand during the Christmas season.76 A year later, the FFWC pushed for protection for more plants including the magnolia, sweet bay, and wild crab apple, reminding its members that it was their duty “to create public sentiment for the enforcement of this law.”77 During Tippetts’s reign, two other noteworthy laws were enacted: the orange blossom was designated the Florida state flower and the mockingbird its state bird, the latter largely as the result of her Audubon work.78

Tippetts and SPAS came up with the idea for a state bird and in 1927 secured “an overwhelming vote through schools and organizations of all kinds for the mockingbird,” which she described as having a “matchless melody not only by day but in the moonlight, along the very edge of silence.”79 Tippetts then took her campaign to the nation, using her role as the chairman of the Division of Conservation for the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), the national umbrella of clubs throughout the country, to press states and women’s groups to name state birds. She chaired this GFWC committee from 1928 to 1932, having previously served as GFWC chair of the Nature Study and Wild Life Refuges from 1924 to 1928.80 In its April 1932 issue, Nature Magazine included a large pamphlet titled Birds of the States, penned by Tippetts. The booklet, with eight pages of colorful illustrations of birds, documents different birds and state flowers that were designated as state emblems and those under consideration. The booklet later was expanded to sixteen pages and sold by special order and promoted as “of special value in connection with school Nature Study and Geography work.”81 “Tippetts noted:

The mere fact that these bird emblems have been chosen is not important so far as the emblem itself is concerned. What is significant is that which led

75 Year Book of the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1926-1927, 13-14, publication of FFWC, at FFWC Archives, Lakeland, Fla.
76 Ibid., 105.
77 Year Book of the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1928-1929, 22, publication of FFWC, at FFWC Archives, Lakeland, Fla.
78 Ibid.
80 Grismer, The Story of St. Petersburg, 296.
up to the selection; the discussion, study, and thought that it required: the very real educational service that it performed. And the result is that affectionate interest has been thus aroused in all birds and their protection.82

While leading the women's clubs, Tippetts also ran the Belmont, developed some real estate interests, and was involved in a number of community activities, including the continuing SPAS presidency. She helped found the local Boy Scouts in 1910 and was involved with a host of groups, including the Pinellas County Board of Trade, the state Chamber of Commerce, the Crippled Children's Hospital, and the Florida Educational Survey Commission; and was also a director of the National Camp Fire Girls and a member of the national board of finance for the YWCA. Her conservation work included the National Park Association, the St. Petersburg Park Board, and the American Forestry Association, where she was vice president. Tippetts was a national flower commissioner “who [helped] select, by national vote, the National Flower, the wild rose.”83 Her efforts were recognized in a number of state and local histories that featured prominent community leaders. One historian stated that Tippetts's name was “known in every hamlet throughout Florida and neighboring states.”84

The numerous organizations that included Tippetts reveal the growth, change, and problems that had hit Florida and St. Petersburg in the early decades of the century. By the 1920s, a boom had resounded across the peninsula, born of real estate speculation, rising population, improved infrastructure and transportation, and the state's growing reputation as a tourist and retiree mecca. Mangrove swamps and salt marshes were filled to become Miami Beach; Tampa and St. Petersburg were connected with a toll bridge; islands were dredged from the bottom of Hillsborough Bay; and cities grew in the state's Panhandle region.85 By 1920, the state had 968,470 people; by 1930, that number had reached almost 1.5 million.86 All of it was compounded by the tourist influx into the state, estimated at 2.5 million in 1925 alone.87 Real estate subdivisions sprung up across the state and with them a number of questionable deals and outright fraud. A series of economic problems, culminating with the stock market crash of 1929, led to the bottom temporarily falling out of Florida's economy.88

In St. Petersburg, the boom had brought a 183 percent increase in population by 1930, to a total of 40,425 residents.89 After a hurricane damaged the city in 1921,
Katherine Bell Tippetts

Portrait of Katherine Tippetts. She continued to work on behalf of animals throughout her life. At the time of her death, she was widely regarded as a leader among both men and women in the field of environmental conservation.
city leaders, worried about its impact on the city’s image, tried to downplay it, but it was needless concern and the boom continued. “The weather was beautiful, and the sale of lots was brisker than ever now that St. Petersburg had demonstrated that it was impregnable to the forces of wind and water,” wrote Arsenault.90 City leaders concerned about preserving the natural beauty of the area considered enacting extensive planning for the city, but ultimately discarded the plans, believing they would be too expensive. Instead they put their hopes on free enterprise. “A city of dreams in the heart of Eden did not need to plan for the future; its destiny was certain,” wrote R. Bruce Stephenson.91

It was in the midst of this boom period that Tippetts, Jennings, and the clubwomen of Florida worried about the impact of growth on natural resources, particularly birds and forests. Their determination to create and preserve Royal Palm State Park in the midst of the swampy Everglades stands out as even more visionary against the dredge-and-fill mentality of the era. And with their newly won right to vote, these women set out to make their voices louder.

In 1922, Tippetts and Myrtice McCaskill, of Taylor County, became the first women to run for the Florida legislature, unsuccessfully seeking seats in the House of Representatives.92 It is uncertain why Tippetts chose to run in the Pinellas race as one of four candidates, particularly since she left the city during the campaign to serve as a state delegate at the Palisades Inter-Park meeting in New York.93 Certainly her business acumen and activist work played a role. In a speech at a St. Petersburg Democratic rally held days before the vote, a Col. J. S. Davis spoke on her behalf, noting that Tippetts was “a business woman and widely experienced in public affairs.”94 On primary election day, the St. Petersburg Times reported, “Women are expected to vote in large numbers” as a result of her candidacy.95 For years, women’s groups had been lobbying the legislature for a broad number of conservation and social issues that spanned from bird protection to prison reform to welfare. With this election, voting women had the opportunity to push their interests and elect like-minded candidates.

Allen Morris states that nothing in the Tippetts files explained her run for office but it could be inferred from her 1921 remarks to the Pinellas County Federation of Women’s Clubs that she believed she could do a better job than a male legislator, an insight gained from her frequent trips to visit legislators in Tallahassee:

The first great shock to the women new to the methods of the Halls of the Legislature is the fact that during the first weeks of the session the men

90 Arsenault, St. Petersburg and the Florida Dream, 192.
91 Stephenson, Visions of Eden, 85.
93 “Mrs. Tippetts in Race for Legislature,” St. Petersburg Times, April 16, 1922.
94 “State and City Vote Today; Candidates Address Meeting,” St. Petersburg Times, June 6, 1922.
95 Ibid., 1.
assembled to thrash out the grave problems of the state act like a bunch of boys kept unwillingly in school. The slightest mention of invitations to picnics or fish fries calls for the motion to adjourn to attend same, and it is not ‘til visions of continuous House and Committee meetings loom menacingly that the older and stricter Members are able to hold the boys in check, some of whom had rather vote to adjourn for picnics, seemingly, than for their favorite bill.96

Tippetts added, “The time is not far distant when a generous sprinkling of women will grace the two houses, to use a time-honored phrase, not as spectators, but as the people’s representatives, so let a woman with such aspirations fit herself to represent intelligently her constituents.”97 Tippetts finished second in the race to M.W. Ulmer and had to wait seven years before she saw a woman join the state legislative ranks.98 Tippetts never ran for office again, instead concentrating on community duties, many involving birds and conservation. She led SPAS until 1942, a time period that spanned many changes in Florida and St. Petersburg.99

Although this era was marked by economic depression and slower growth rates, Florida’s population continued to grow, reaching almost 2.3 million by 1950.100 By the 1930s, tourism was touted widely as the state’s biggest crop, with 2 million people visiting in 1935.101 By the 1940s, the state was experiencing a strong economic recovery, and the coming of World War II would bring a need for more agricultural production, real estate development, and beefed-up military installations. The influx of military personnel and their families would also change the face of the state in a postwar suburban boom of sprawl.102 By 1950, St. Petersburg had a population of more than 100,000 people—a number that would increase by more than 50 percent in the coming decade. City leaders continued to grapple with the growth, declaring a “planning crisis” and establishing a blue-ribbon panel to study where development should occur.103 The city’s sizable debt and unpaid taxes were symptoms, according to Stephenson, of its lack of planning.104 Still, a mix of natural areas and limited building since the 1920s made the area “one of the most unusual and biologically diverse natural environments in the United States,” wrote Stephenson, adding that clean bays and intact wetlands conveyed the Edenic qualities its early founders

96 Morris, Women in the Florida Legislature, 9-10. Tippetts’s grandson William B. Tippetts Jr. reports that her files have since been misplaced or discarded (William B. Tippetts Jr. to the author, e-mail, October 24, 2007).
97 Ibid., 10.
98 Ibid., 9-11; Morris, Women in the Florida Legislature, 9.
103 Stephenson, Visions of Eden, 106, 117.
104 Ibid., 113.
described. By the late 1940s, with a surge of postwar residents, the city experienced a housing shortage that was relieved through sales of tax-delinquent properties and marked the end of city efforts to try to contain growth within certain boundaries. Now the city would join the rest of Florida in a boom of suburban development that created monotonous mass-produced housing tracts and replaced natural areas, leading to the environmental issues of the next half century: air and water pollution, traffic congestion, loss of wetlands and bays through dredge-and-fill operations, and decreasing groundwater supplies. Birds no longer were in danger of being killed by hunters--the greater threat was habitat loss.

Although she witnessed the beginning of these issues and had fought some early problems through her battles for bird and plant protection and conservation of natural resources, Tippetts did not live to see them reach crisis proportions. On December 20, 1950, she died of respiratory failure at age eighty-five, at her home in Pinellas Point, where she had spent most of her last decade, residing in winter months at the Belmont with guests from the North. She was buried at Royal Palm Cemetery.

In her two-story stucco home trimmed with native coral rock, Tippetts would read, attend to correspondence, and enjoy the myriad bird life on the half-acre site, which included tropical plants, flowers, and a small fishpond, recalled her grandson William B. Tippetts Jr. of St. Petersburg. Katherine Tippetts had built the home in 1925 for $125,000, choosing the site several miles from downtown St. Petersburg because of its proximity to the waters of Tampa Bay and the nearby woods, long since developed into housing. Her mobility was limited by arthritis in her legs, the result of a 1920s car accident in downtown St. Petersburg. But at her home Tippetts could still enjoy her beloved avian neighbors: owls that hooted at night outside her bedroom window and birds that came every day to eat seed scattered on the sidewalk in the backyard.

“She loved to be quiet and listen to other people talk,” recalled the younger Tippetts, who was a teenager when she died. “She was always pleasant and cheerful to be around. She was not a complainer. The only time she talked about people was when she had something good to say. A love of birds and nature would give her a compassionate heart. Her life and her qualities earned her the respect she received.”

105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 117.
107 Ibid., 118-22.
“The influence of such a woman can not be overestimated,” wrote H. G. Cutler in 1923. “In fact, it is not likely that the full measure of her usefulness will be ascertained until it is viewed in retrospect by future generations, and in the light of developments now only dimly foreshadowed.”113

At her death, Katherine Bell Tippetts was lauded as a pioneer clubwoman and influential Audubon activist. Using her writing and speaking skills, her savvy as a businesswoman, and her network of women’s club contacts, she raised the local, state, and national awareness of bird preservation and became an important player in the conservation movement, laying the foundation for activists who would follow in her footsteps in confronting Florida’s environmental woes.

113 Cutler, History of Florida, 363.