

LEGION

American Legion post for women veterans established in Jefferson City in 1946

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Courtesy of American Legion Post 5

Members of the newly formed Central Missouri Women’s Post 496 pictured in December 1946 in Jefferson City. From left: Margaret Duss, Louise Davidson, Lucille Schwaller, Dr. W.W. Carpenter, Frances Kelly, Kathryn Kelly, Betty Rice and Eleanor Bots.

An American Legion post for women veterans was established in 1946 in Jefferson City. When the American Legion was established in 1919, it offered membership to women who served in various military support roles during World War I, such as those who toiled in Europe as Army nurses. Additionally, wives and daughters of veterans were extended membership in the organization’s auxiliary. In the years that followed, however, groups of women veterans in communities throughout the United States began banding together to form their own American Legion posts.

“The Central Missouri Women’s Post No. 496, The American Legion, held a banquet on Thursday evening at the Governor Hotel commemorating its first anniversary,” reported the Aug. 24, 1947, edition of the Sunday News and Tribune. “This Post, which is composed entirely of ex-service women, was presented its temporary charter in September 1946.”

Records maintained by the American Legion Post 5 in Jefferson City indicate the women’s post held its first meeting Aug. 21, 1946, and, during a ceremony Dec. 11, 1946, installed its first group of post officers. Beulah (Marche) Means, who served as a corporal with the Marine Corps in World War II, became the post’s first commander. Months later, on April 14, 1947, the post received its permanent charter and began holding its monthly meetings at the home of the Roscoe Enloe American Legion Post 5 at 111 Madison St., which is now the site of the Cole County Historical Society Museum.

The Central Missouri Women’s Post 496 was preceded in birth by the St. Louis Women’s Post 404 in St. Louis, which was established in the early months of 1946. Post 404 remains an active organization in the St. Louis community and surrounding areas.

“Miss Louise Davidson, 38 years old, 1109 West Miller Avenue, Jefferson City, was killed Friday when the automobile she was driving struck a machine driven by Harry Leedman ... Webster Groves,” the St. Louis Post-Dispatch noted on March 7, 1954.

Davidson, one of the founders and charter members of Post 496 in Jefferson City, was a native of Hartsburg, a veteran of the Women’s Army Corps in World War II and employed as a clerk with the Missouri Department of Health at the time of her death. In recognition of Davidson’s contributions to the post, state and nation, her fellow veterans submitted a request to the American Legion Department of Missouri to have

the post renamed in honor of their departed friend. On Aug. 6, 1954, approximately five months after her passing, the Central Missouri Women's Post 496 was officially re-designated the Louise E.M. Davidson Post 496.

Throughout the next several years, the post remained actively involved in the community, hosting concerts at the former Simonsen Auditorium with famous recording artists of the period to include Hank Snow and Ernest Tubbs. The women of the post also participated in Memorial Day ceremonies and raised money for such causes as the purchase of crutches for individuals afflicted with polio.

Declining participation and membership, the death knell of many an organization, brought the demise of Post 496 a little more than two decades after its post-World War II origins.

"The Louise E. M. Davidson Post No. 496 ...

voluntarily returned their Charter to Department Headquarters and requested that it be canceled, so that their members would be free to transfer their membership to Roscoe Enloe Post No. 5 in Jefferson City," noted a letter dated Nov. 7, 1967, from Aubrey W. Sullivan, adjutant for the American Legion Department of Missouri.

In the letter, Sullivan further explained to the members of the disbanded post, "The Charter was submitted to, and canceled by, the National Executive Committee, in session, on October 19, 1967."

Many women who were members of the erstwhile post became actively involved in other American Legion posts throughout the Central Missouri area, contributing their talents and efforts to continue to help with initiatives in their communities. A number of years would pass, however, before a woman veteran would lead the organization on the national level.

On Aug. 24, 2017, during the 99th national convention of the American Legion held in Reno, Nevada, Denise Rohan, a U.S. Army veteran from Wisconsin, was elected national commander for the organization's 2 million members.

Although Central Missouri no longer boasts a women's American Legion post, others have sprung up throughout Missouri in recent years to include Heartland Women Veterans Post 1107 in Independence and Women Veterans of Southwest Missouri Post 1214 in Springfield.

Despite the loss of their post due to waning membership, many members of the former Louise E. M. Davidson Post No. 496 in Jefferson City transferred to the local Roscoe Enloe Post 5, bringing with them a dedication to serve and support their fellow veterans, regardless of gender.

In the January 1921 edition of the California Legion Monthly, Minnie Allen penned an article titled "The Women's Work in the Legion." In her writing, she stressed that ex-servicewomen (of World War I) should "make it known to the public that they served and made sacrifices" while also working with their male counterparts to progress the Legion mission of assisting all veterans in need.

"The time is past when women are to have honorary offices only. They must be efficient, active members — alive to their responsibility. It truly behooves every one of us to inform ourselves on the work of the Legion." Allen added, "Look around in your own post and watch for your opportunity to help."

Jeremy P. Amick writes on behalf of the Silver Star Families of America.