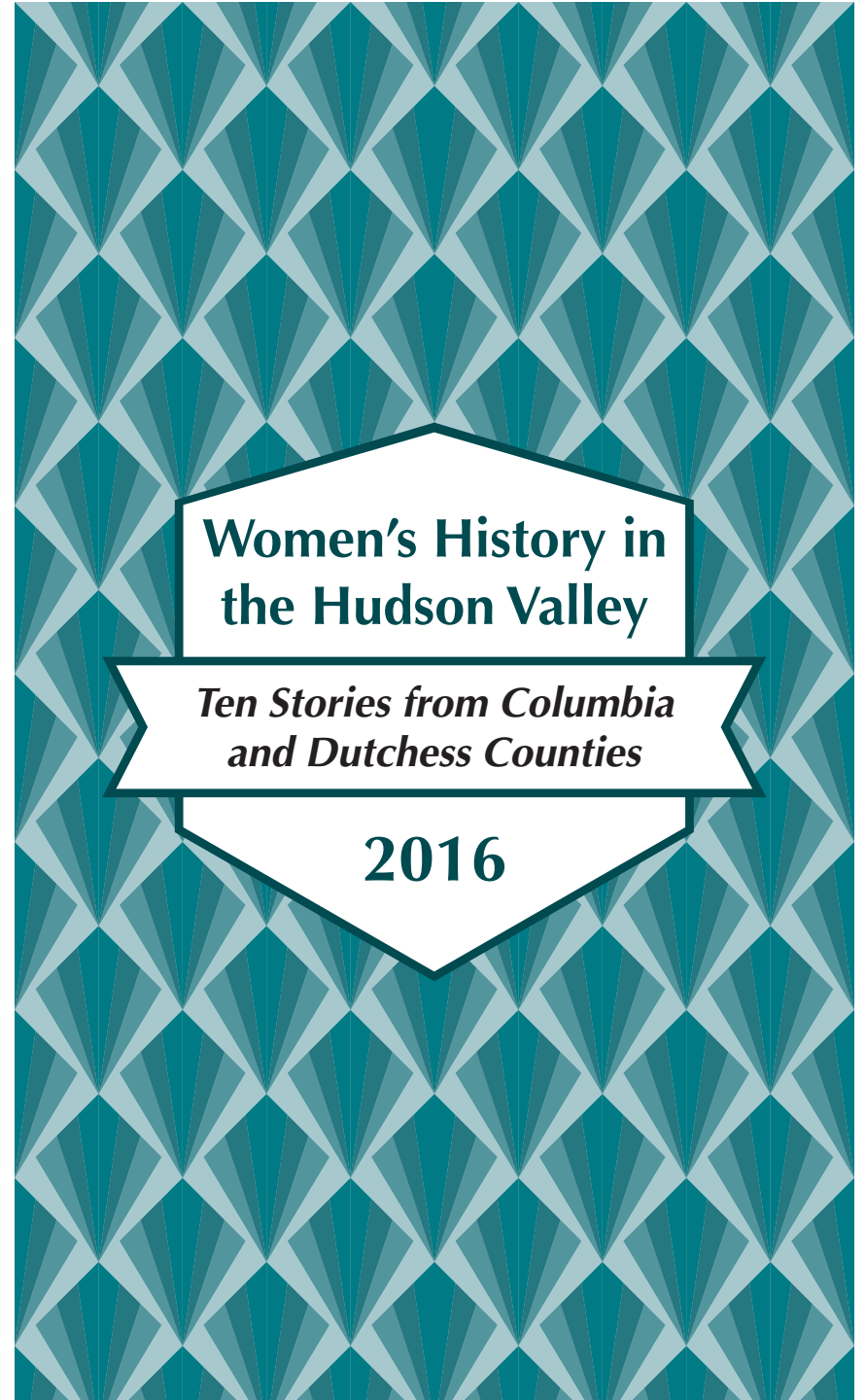


*Courtesy of*

**Assemblymember Didi Barrett**

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**Women's History in  
the Hudson Valley**

*Ten Stories from Columbia  
and Dutchess Counties*

**2016**



Dear Friends,

Girls growing up today have to look hard to discover the stories of girls and women who came before them. Often, primary research is required — seeking out long hidden diaries and letters, interviewing elderly relatives and neighbors, sleuthing over the handwritten notes on the backs of fading photographs. Women’s stories of bravery, dedication and triumph may be shared in family lore, but they rarely make it into history books and official records.



Many extraordinary women have lived or traveled through the historic Hudson Valley region, their marks forever inscribed on our nation. In the 18th century, Margaret Livingston bravely carried her family through the Revolutionary War, persevering even when British troops burned her house to the ground. She went on to host President George Washington and First Lady Martha Washington after rebuilding her home.

One of the 20th century’s major literary figures, poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, lived in Austerlitz the last 25 years of her life, and Steepletop, her home and gardens, has become a much-loved destination. Civil rights activist Cecelia Magill fought to end employment discrimination in Poughkeepsie, and Maria Salmon Mitchell blazed trails in the sciences, becoming the first woman astronomer in America and the very first faculty member Vassar College hired.

In celebration of Women’s History Month, I am proud to present these ten short narratives of remarkable women who made their homes in Dutchess or Columbia counties. They were artists, activists, scientists and educators. Their stories are part of our region’s history, New York State’s history and American history. Their stories are our stories.

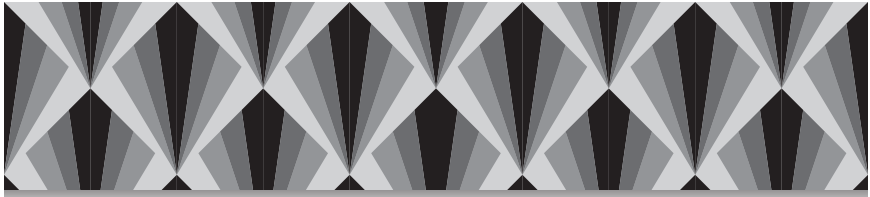
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Didi Barrett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Assemblymember Didi Barrett







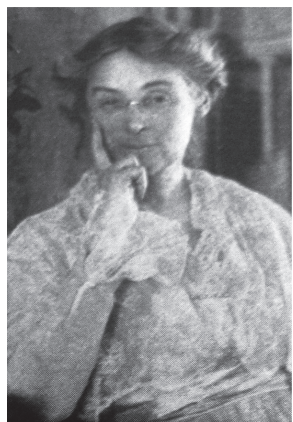
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## May Friend Bennett

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*Village of Millbrook*  
(1863-1921)

### **Educator**

May Friend Bennett was a schoolteacher and founder of the Bennett School for Girls in Dutchess County. She moved her school from Irvington to the spectacular Halcyon Hall in Millbrook in 1907. A nationally known “boarding school of the highest class” set on

a bucolic 22-acre campus, the school “[aimed] to help girls develop into strong broad-minded women...and [sought] to inculcate a sense of personal responsibility and a love of truth,” May Bennett wrote. “It hopes to send into the world young women of deepened sympathies and quickened understanding, able to gain and to give happiness.”

With a golf course, tennis courts, riding stables and an “English hockey field,” as well as academics and arts, Bennett School attracted girls from elite families. It first offered six-year courses of study, including high school and junior college, and later transitioned to two-year degrees, becoming known as Bennett College. The school flourished until



the 1970s when economic challenges and the preference for coed over single sex education led to its closure, its records going to the Millbrook Library.

The building itself, originally a luxury hotel designed in elaborate Victorian Queen Anne style, with more than 200 rooms, balconies, nooks and niches in five stories, joined the National Register of Historic Places in 1993. However, despite this designation, the building was allowed to deteriorate after the shuttering of the school, and it now faces demolition.<sup>1,2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> [tinyurl.com/mayfriendbennettbio](http://tinyurl.com/mayfriendbennettbio)

<sup>2</sup> [untappedcities.com/2015/08/10/inside-the-abandoned-campus-of-the-bennett-school-for-girls-in-millbrook-ny](http://untappedcities.com/2015/08/10/inside-the-abandoned-campus-of-the-bennett-school-for-girls-in-millbrook-ny)



*Madam Brett Homestead*

# Catheryna Rombout Brett

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*City of Beacon*  
(1684-1764)

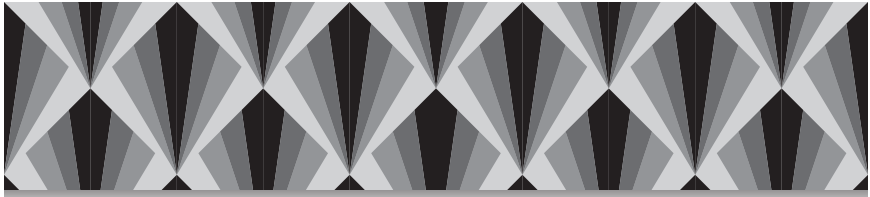
## **Businesswoman**

Catheryna Rombout Brett was a successful businesswoman in the early 18th century, a time when that distinction was almost entirely reserved for men.

Choosing not to remarry after the tragic death of her

husband, she managed her own estate and wealth — a revolutionary choice at the time.

Additionally, she helped organize the first producers' co-operative, acting as an equal partner despite being the only woman out of 22 founders. She raised her three sons on her own and ran her family's homestead. Their expansive property, now known as the Madam Brett Homestead, stayed in the Brett family for nearly 250 years.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> [aauwpoughkeepsie.org/uploads/PDFs/notable\\_women/catharyna%20brett.pdf](http://aauwpoughkeepsie.org/uploads/PDFs/notable_women/catharyna%20brett.pdf)







## Antoinette Doolittle

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*Town of New Lebanon*  
(1810-1886)

### **Shaker Eldress**

Antoinette Doolittle, from New Lebanon, became a Shaker at the age of 14. She had noticed local Shakers, a religious group that practiced simple living, and became curious about their lives. After spending some time with the local Shaker community, Antoinette

asked her father if she could join them. He was reluctant, but allowed her to make the decision. Antoinette went on to become a spiritual leader in the Shaker community, earning the title of Eldress.

Antoinette was an activist and was particularly passionate about women's rights and pacifism. She published many works on a variety of topics, including an 1880 autobiography and writings on American institutions, religion, morality and war. Her writing, which she authored to help the Shaker missionary cause, helped the North Lebanon Shakers become well-known. With the help of Elders Richard Bushnell and Frederick Evans, the group took over the sect's newspaper, The



Shaker, in 1873 and renamed it The Shaker and Shakeress to promote their commitment to gender equality.

Religion played a critical role in Antoinette's life to the end. Her final words were, "It is the gift of God."<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Stein, Stephen J. *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers*. 1994.

<sup>5</sup> [southunionshakervillage.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Shaker-Terminology.pdf](http://southunionshakervillage.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Shaker-Terminology.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Paterwic, Stephen. 2009. *The A to Z of the Shakers*. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press.



## Anandabai Joshee, M.D.

*Town of Poughkeepsie*  
(1865-1887)

### **Doctor**


Anandabai Joshee was born in India to an extremely orthodox Brahmin family that married her at a very young age. After tragically losing a child at only 10 days old, Anandabai was inspired to become a doctor, in part because she believed medical care for women

could have saved her baby's life.

In 1882, a Poughkeepsie woman named Theodosia Eighmie Carpenter read a magazine article about Anandabai and her dream of studying medicine in America. She sponsored the young woman's trip to the U.S. and welcomed Anandabai into her family.

In 1883, Anandabai enrolled in Medical College of Pennsylvania, completing her degree in 1886. The very next year, she returned to India to provide health care to women. She was among the first licensed female doctors in her country.

Anandabai died of tuberculosis in 1887 at the age of 21. She insisted on



being buried in her adopted hometown, and her ashes are interred in the Eighmie family plot at Poughkeepsie Rural Cemetery.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> [poughkeepsieruralcemetery.com/documents/Walking-Tour.pdf](http://poughkeepsieruralcemetery.com/documents/Walking-Tour.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/08/19th-century-women-medical-school\\_n\\_5093603.html](http://huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/08/19th-century-women-medical-school_n_5093603.html)

<sup>9</sup> [india-intro.com/history/historical-figures/879-dr-anandibai-joshi.html](http://india-intro.com/history/historical-figures/879-dr-anandibai-joshi.html)



## Margaret Livingston

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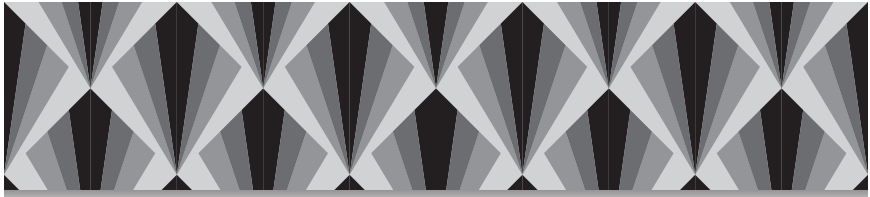
*Town of Clermont*  
(1724-1800)

### **Founding Mother**

Margaret Beekman Livingston grew up in a wealthy and influential family in the Hudson Valley. Her life changed during the Revolutionary War when her husband, Judge Robert R. Livingston, and his father aligned with rebellion troops. The family used their

resources to help supply colonial troops while they battled the British Army in the Hudson Valley. When both men died in 1775, Margaret took over their work, leading her family through the war.

In 1777, the English army burned down Margaret's estate. There was almost nothing left, but she persevered. She became involved in politics and her influence grew. In 1782, after overseeing reconstruction of her estate, Clermont, she entertained General and Martha Washington in her new home. Her son Robert went on to serve in the Second Continental Congress and helped draft the Declaration of Independence.<sup>10, 11</sup>



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<sup>10</sup> [clermontny.org/the-clermont-estate](http://clermontny.org/the-clermont-estate)

<sup>11</sup> [clermonstatehistoricsite.blogspot.com/2011/02/finding-old-lady-margaret-beekman.html](http://clermonstatehistoricsite.blogspot.com/2011/02/finding-old-lady-margaret-beekman.html)





Photo provided by the Poughkeepsie Journal

## Cecelia Magill

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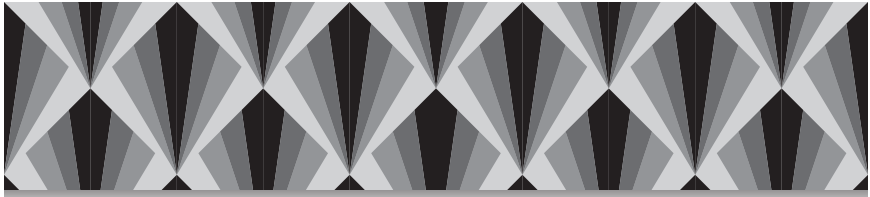
*City of Poughkeepsie*  
(1918-2003)

### **Activist**

Cecelia B. Magill was an activist from Poughkeepsie who helped create opportunities for African-Americans in her city. She was inspired to help end employment discrimination after the Schatz Federal Building Company refused to hire her because of

her race. She joined forces with the Catharine Street Community Center to petition officials in Washington, and in 1942, the federal government stepped in to end the company's racist hiring policies.

Cecelia went on to get a job she loved at the Hudson River Psychiatric Center, where she worked for 31 years. She was celebrated for her dedication to patients. Her intense involvement in community organizations, such as the Dutchess County Historical Society, CSEA Grievance Community and Catharine Street Community Center, continued throughout her life.<sup>12, 13</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> [death-records.mooseroots.com/d/n/Cecelia-Magill](http://death-records.mooseroots.com/d/n/Cecelia-Magill)

<sup>13</sup> [poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/news/local/2015/02/26/african-american-history-month/24093777](http://poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/news/local/2015/02/26/african-american-history-month/24093777)







## Edna St. Vincent Millay

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*Town of Austerlitz*  
(1892-1950)


### Poet

Edna St. Vincent Millay, one of the most respected American poets of the 20th century, originally wanted to be a concert pianist. After a music instructor discouraged her because of her petite hands, she chose

to pursue writing instead. Edna was only 20 years old when she penned one of her most famous poems, "Renascence."

The public embraced her passionate recitations, which often expressed controversial opinions on politics and women's issues. In 1923, Edna won the Pulitzer Prize for her fourth book, *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*, in which she coined the phrase, "My candle burns at both ends." She was also a successful playwright and penned the popular opera, *The King's Henchman*.

Edna married Eugen Boissevain, a Dutch businessman and self-proclaimed feminist, in 1923. He gave up business to manage her literary career.



The couple later resided in Austerlitz, New York, on the 700-acre farm and modern-day national historic landmark called Steepletop. Millay died on Oct. 19, 1950, in her Austerlitz home. She is buried on the grounds.<sup>14, 15</sup>



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<sup>14</sup> [poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edna-st-vincent-millay](https://poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edna-st-vincent-millay)

<sup>15</sup> [millay.org/aboutus.php](https://millay.org/aboutus.php)



# Maria Salmon Mitchell

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*Town of Poughkeepsie*  
(1818-1889)


## Scientist

Maria Salmon Mitchell was an accomplished astronomer, educator and activist who blazed trails for female scientists. Maria collected a number of impressive “firsts” throughout her lifetime:

she was the first woman to become a professional astronomer in the United States, the first woman to be elected to the Academy of Arts and Sciences and the first person Vassar College hired to its faculty.

Upon discovery that she was being paid a lower salary than her less-experienced male colleagues, Maria fought for and won pay equity. She even discovered a comet, which is known as “Miss Mitchell’s Comet,” and received the Cometary Prize Medal from King Fredrick VI of Denmark for her achievement.

Maria’s Quaker upbringing instilled in her a fierce sense of equality, and she often



took stands on issues she cared about. She stopped wearing cotton clothing in protest of slavery and, as a supporter of the women's suffrage movement, helped co-found the American Association for the Advancement of Women. She retired from her life's work in 1888 and died one year later at the age of 70.<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> [sheisanastronomer.org/index.php/history/maria-mitchell](http://sheisanastronomer.org/index.php/history/maria-mitchell)



## Lorraine Roberts

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*Village of Wappinger Falls*  
(1930-2015)


### **Educator**

Lorraine Marie Pettie Roberts was born in 1930 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An influential and inspiring figure in the City of Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County for 50 years, Lorraine was an educator, historian and activist.

Intensely dedicated in the classroom, she taught in the Poughkeepsie City School District for 30 years. The school district created the Lorraine M. Roberts Academy of Business and Public Service Ten Week Exploratory Course for Sophomores in her honor.

Lorraine was also passionate about community involvement, volunteering for many organizations, including the local United Way, the Catharine Street Community Center, the YMCA, the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill, the Girl Scouts and the Dutchess County Historical Society.

She received the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Medal award in 2011 for her continued service to the



community, as well as numerous other local awards and honors.<sup>17, 18</sup>



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<sup>17</sup> [poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/opinion/editorials/2015/02/24/lorraine-roberts-leaves-endearing-legacy/23950255](http://poughkeepsiejournal.com/story/opinion/editorials/2015/02/24/lorraine-roberts-leaves-endearing-legacy/23950255)

<sup>18</sup> [hvpress.net/news/125/ARTICLE/14764/2015-03-04.html](http://hvpress.net/news/125/ARTICLE/14764/2015-03-04.html)



## Klara Sauer

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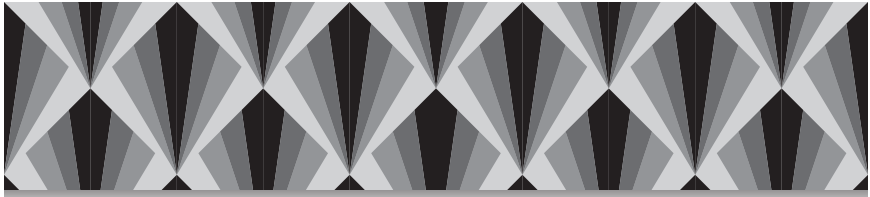
*Town of Rhinebeck*  
(1935-2015)

### **Environmentalist**

Klara Sauer was a native of Germany who grew up in Canada and moved to the United States when she married her husband, Heinz Sauer. During her more than 50 years as a resident of Dutchess County, Klara dedicated much of her time to planning for the Hudson Valley's future. She worked

as a senior planner at the nonprofit Mid-Hudson Pattern for Progress, which focuses on research, advocacy, planning and policy to help grow the local economy sustainably.

In 1979, she became executive director at another nonprofit, Scenic Hudson. There, Klara helped protect more than 15,000 acres of land in 10 counties, and her dedication resulted in the creation of many preserves, 19 public parks and hundreds of miles of local recreational trails.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>



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<sup>19</sup> [legacy.com/obituaries/poughkeepsiejournal/obituary.aspx?pid=175149646#sthash.LacioALc.dpuf](http://legacy.com/obituaries/poughkeepsiejournal/obituary.aspx?pid=175149646#sthash.LacioALc.dpuf)

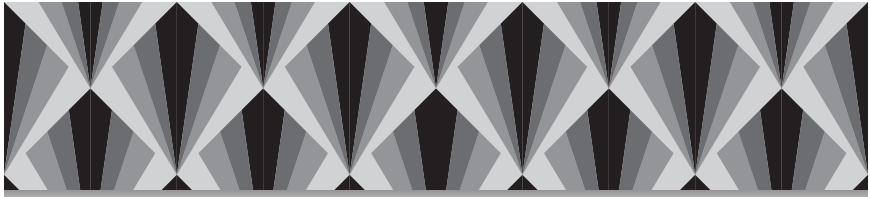
<sup>20</sup> [scenichudson.org/news/article/scenic-hudson-pays-tribute-klara-sauer/2015-06-23](http://scenichudson.org/news/article/scenic-hudson-pays-tribute-klara-sauer/2015-06-23)

<sup>21</sup> [pattern-for-progress.org/about-pattern/mission](http://pattern-for-progress.org/about-pattern/mission)









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